

STUDY GUIDE

THE IDEA OF AMERICA

OUR VALUES. . .OUR LEGACY. . .OUR FUTURE

The Idea of America Seminar is an adult educational and action-oriented program whose primary goal is to enable citizens to discuss and debate some of the critical issues our communities and our nation currently faces. The basic premise of the seminar is that America is unique in being founded on certain ideals and values that protect the rights of all individuals to life and liberty, that promotes the attainment of our individual happiness, that seeks the common good of all, and above all respects the worth and dignity of each of us as human beings.



The seminar is built upon eight values that historians have identified as core values shaping our nation—law, ethics, freedom, equality, unity, diversity, private wealth, public wealth. Throughout our history we have debated and struggled to find a common ground between sets of these values which are frequently in tension. Termed the "tension value model" we have debated and compromised on law vs. ethics, freedom vs. equality, unity vs. diversity, private wealth vs. public wealth. It is not an issue of right vs. wrong in debating the tension in our values, but recognizing that there are many different meanings to our values and as a democracy we the people determine how tensions between certain values will be resolved as we seek the common good of all.

When our nation was founded, many of the values that we embraced in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were available to a limited few. Slavery existed. Women had few rights. Males without property were largely excluded. But fortunately, certain individuals

had the courage to forge change and expand our fundamental values to more Americans. It has been a long and frequently bitterly fought struggle, and the struggle continues today. But we must never lose faith in the importance of our values and what it means to be an American. We must continue our legacy of expanding rights and freedoms to all Americans regardless of race, creed, sexual orientation or any other social-economic status. We are all entitled to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness as Americans and as human beings.

At a time when we appear mired in political gridlock, growing economic inequalities, unprecedented global and environmental challenges and a lack of civility in our public discourse, it is urgent that we reclaim the values and the legacies that made our nation great. It is also the goal of this seminar to encourage action on the part of all to promote the common good of our communities and our nation. It is becoming obvious that change will begin at the level of our local communities as has been true throughout much of our history. As civic-minded Americans, we must not lose faith in ourselves as a people and a nation. We have overcome great challenges in our past. We must do so again as we shape our future.

So let us begin.

The seminar is structured in three major segments:

Part One: Our Values

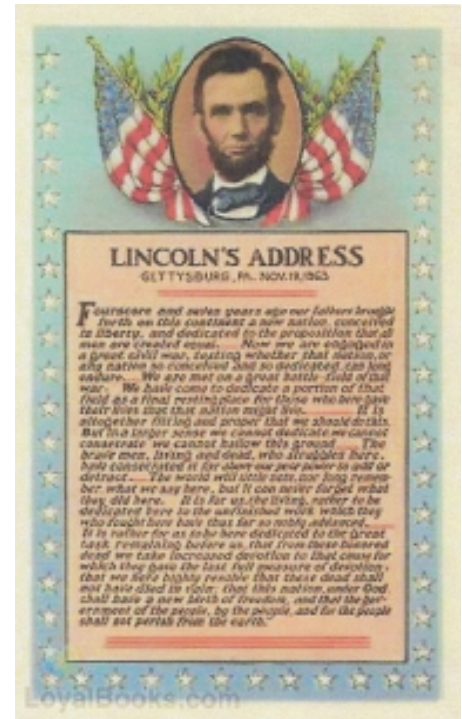
Part Two: Our Legacy

Part Three: Our Future



In Part One, we will examine our values. What is the meaning and the tensions inherent in these values? Each of us have our own understanding of our values. Not everyone will agree on what is law or ethics or freedom or equality or unity or diversity or private wealth or common wealth. Each value means something different to each of us as Americans. How do we define them? What are the tensions not only between our values, but also within each value? And are these values relevant in the world we live in today?

In Part Two, we will explore our legacy. How have our values been reshaped by events and leaders throughout our history? We will focus on "three men and one courageous woman" who have given voice to our values and have deepened our understanding of American values. Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. and Elizabeth Cady Stanton each were able to express, in their words and their actions, certain ideals and thoughts that "were in the air" at the time that expanded our values to be more inclusive of all Americans. What is this legacy from our past? How is this legacy shaping our nation today? And how will this legacy form our future?



In Part Three, we will study and debate our future. What are the major challenges we face as a nation and as individuals living in our communities? We will focus on three specific challenges that we currently face.

Case Study One: Our Economy: A Legacy of Growth and Opportunity

Case Study Two: Education: The Great Equalizer

Case Study Three: We the People: A Nation of Immigrants

In all of these case studies, we will meet other men and women who have given voice to our values and expanded our founding values to be more inclusive--such persons as Jane Adams, Cesar Chavez, Upton Sinclair, John Dewey, Horace Mann, Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, Ronald Reagan, Edwilda Allen Issac, a high school student in Virginia who led a strike by 400 African-American students in 1951 protesting unequal schools and the shabby conditions of their building and supplies. This was an important precursor of the *Brown v. Topeka* Supreme Court ruling ending "separate but equal."

The Study Guide will provide participants with suggested reading assignments for each session.

It is important that all participants read the material in advance of each session in order that the facilitator can guide the discussion and debate so that each of us will be able to participate as engaged citizens. This is not an academic seminar, but an interactive discussion and debate by all participants.

The "case studies" will provide background for each of the three challenges we will discuss and debate. Each case study will suggest certain questions that each seminar might use. But the questions are only suggested--not mandated. We hope each group and their facilitator will feel free to pose their own questions for discussion and debate. Thus, we encourage each participant to come to the session with their own issues and concerns.

Finally, we want to emphasize that the success of the seminar will be greatly determined by the extent to which all of us as participants do our "homework," come to each session prepared to discuss and to debate, and that we respect the views of all others. As *The Idea of America* challenges us:

We are grateful for our nation's long history of lively civil discourse and applaud the strength and tenacity with which Americans debate our values. We urge all citizens to join the debate, for such active engagement is the only way to assure that our democracy will be sustained.

SESSION TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Note: All pages refer to primary text: John Oliver Wilson, *The Idea of America: Our Values, Our Legacy, Our Future* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2017)

Session One: Introduction: Our Founding Values
Facilitator will introduce the course and briefly discuss our founding values and the "tension value model"

Session Two: The Idea of America and Our Values
Reading: Wilson, Part One, pp. 7-40

Session Three: The Idea of America and Our Legacy
Reading: Wilson, Part Two, pp. 42-70

Session Four: The Idea of America and Our Future
Reading: Wilson, Case Study One, Our Economy:
A Legacy of Growth and Opportunity
pp. 73-100

Session Five: The Idea of America and Our Future
Reading: Wilson, Case Study Two, Education:
The Great Equalizer
pp. 101-127

Session Six: The Idea of America and Our Future
Reading: Wilson, Case Study Three: We the People:
A Nation of Immigrants
pp. 128-158