

**American Character – A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good.**

By Colin Woodward (author of *American Nations*).

Viking Press, 2016.

From the jacket cover – “the author . . . examines the history of and solution to the key American political dilemma: How do we best reconcile individual liberty with the good of the community?”

Chapter 1 – Maintaining Freedom

Woodward opens his narrative with the challenge facing the passengers aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620.

Describe that challenge in your own words.

---

---

---

The *Pilgrims* and their fellow travelers created the *Mayflower Compact* “modeled on an English town charter” (2) to achieve what end?

---

---

---

Woodward argues that in so doing the signatories of that compact anticipated the political ideas of \_\_\_\_\_ and that then and now Americans celebrate the survival of the Pilgrims and their ideals in a feast on the national holiday of \_\_\_\_\_.

Today, nearly four centuries later, Americans, such as *Rush Limbaugh*, contest the meaning of that holiday and the broader political narrative of the Pilgrim story. For Limbaugh, Plymouth was a “\_\_\_\_\_”. (3) According to his interpretation, the Pilgrim’s initial struggle and ultimate survival illustrates the failure of \_\_\_\_\_ and the success of \_\_\_\_\_ as a system for organizing human activity. What policy change shows proof of Limbaugh’s claim? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

Woodward wonders how *John Locke* and *Edmund Burke* would apply the terms “*conservative*” and “*liberal*” to today’s *Democrat* and *Republican* parties. (6) Briefly describe these two individuals.

*John Locke* \_\_\_\_\_

*Edmund Burke* \_\_\_\_\_

Woodward argues that the fundamental conflict in American political life is not between *Democrats* and *Republicans*, but over competing definitions of \_\_\_\_\_ (7) and that the differentiation comes from how people answer what question? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

Woodward suggests that for much of American history, and certainly from 1945 to 1979, the continuum ranged from the ideology of *Thomas Jefferson* to that of \_\_\_\_\_. Farther apart on each end of the spectrum are:

**libertarians** who believe \_\_\_\_\_  
and the **social democrats** who believe \_\_\_\_\_.

Woodward believes that the appeal of **Laissez-faire liberalism** rose in the period from the **Civil War** through the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that the **Progressivism** of both **Theodore Roosevelt** and **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** “dabbled in social democracy” during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (8)

“America, as we shall see, is far too \_\_\_\_\_ to tolerate **social democracy**, let alone **socialism**.” (8)

In the main paragraph on page 8 Woodward first describes the “farthest extremes” and “tyrannical realms” of the political spectrum. Here he contrasts “**radical libertarians**” such as **Ayn Rand** with “**radical collectivists**” such as the leaders of **Nazi Germany** and the **Soviet Union**.

**ALERT.** Then Woodward goes further and identifies the “greatest present threat to individual freedom and America’s . . . experiment with liberal democracy.” What key word or phrase reveals Woodward’s attitude toward “radical libertarians”? \_\_\_\_\_. What does his use of this term reveal? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

In the last paragraph from page 8 to page 9 Woodward presents his thesis about how to **sustain liberal democracy**. Summarize the four main points of his thinking in this crucial paragraph.

- 1 – “requires” \_\_\_\_\_,
- 2 – “if you sacrifice (liberty)” \_\_\_\_\_,
- 3 – “if you sacrifice (community)” \_\_\_\_\_,
- 4 – “reasons go deeper” \_\_\_\_\_.

Review the phrase “the *freedom* of the community”? What does he mean? Is there a better word?

Woodward argues that the “underlying ideas . . . about how to achieve human freedom come from a handful of English political thinkers.” (9) You’ve described John Locke previously, so who are:

**Thomas Hobbes** (include his famous phrase describing life in the state of nature) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

**Adam Smith** (include his famous phrase about the “benevolence of the baker” and our daily bread) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Note that Smith published his most famous work in the same year as the **Declaration of Independence** (1776), what basic ideas do these two iconic works share? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Review your notes about the **Declaration of Independence** concerning:

- the **natural rights** of man \_\_\_\_\_
- the **purpose of government** \_\_\_\_\_
- the basis of **legitimate authority** \_\_\_\_\_
- and the **right of revolution** \_\_\_\_\_

What made the ideas of **Hobbes, Locke, Smith** and **David Hume** (threw a new one at you there) “radical notions”? What ideas about “the human condition and their implication for government” existed previously?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

Woodard then introduces the scholarship of **Edward O. Wilson** to resolve the debate over whether human nature is fundamentally individualistic or fundamentally collectivist? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What do you make of Wilson's observation that "Selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, while groups of altruistic individuals beat groups of selfish individuals"? (11) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Wilson claimed that "pursuing the common good isn't some imagined ideal but one of the essential qualities that has always defined our species." (12) Furthermore the "**medieval model**" persisted until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Then it was challenged by **Hobbes** and **Locke**. Review your notes from *The Road from Runnymede* to deepen your understanding of the fundamental conflict between the **Stuart loyalists** – particularly over the source of political authority and the nature of human nature.

Note that Woodward makes a subtle, but significant distinction, about the nature of the conflict in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Different classes of people viewed the role of the state differently – for some elites, **John Stuart Mill** among them, the state threatened their rights, for others the state protected them from **oligarchy**. (14)

What does Woodward mean by the contrast between a "**liberal democracy**" and a "**liberal autocracy**" (14)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What region of America reflected the ideals of **liberal autocracy**? \_\_\_\_\_

In a complex section of abstract analysis Woodward then suggests that **classical liberalism** fails because the struggle is not "bilateral, but instead trilateral." (14) Who are the three participants? \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

What does Woodward mean when he suggests that "a weak state does not necessarily ensure freedom, as it typically ushers in a **tyranny of the oligarchy**" (15)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How can private power pose as much of a threat to individual freedom as the oppressive state? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Woodard offers three examples of proof for his statement about the triangular struggle and the role of government: Hamilton in Federalist 17, Madison in Federalist 51 and John Adams reflections on government. Which is, perhaps surprisingly, most sympathetic to the power of the monarchy/governor?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Woodward finishes this section by quoting the preamble to the US Constitution as proof that the purpose of government was to accomplish what end? \_\_\_\_\_

As you read that same passage, what phrase could be cited as proof that the purpose of government reflected the Lockean/Jeffersonian ideal? \_\_\_\_\_.

Woodward opens his second to last section with a discussion of how **liberal democracy** is not a natural state of being, but an intentional work that strives to balance the “freedom (power?) of the government, the powerful (the oligarchs in waiting), and the people.” (19) He argues that the English began this process in 1215 with the \_\_\_\_\_ and continued the struggle through the **Glorious Revolution** of 1688. Yet, he argues the society that revolution produced was a “liberal state, but not a \_\_\_\_\_ one.” (19) The **American Revolution** and French Revolution each attempted to create a “populist democracy”, but where one succeeded the other offers a “cautionary tale”. What does Woodward mean by that statement? \_\_\_\_\_

What is an **illiberal democracy** and what countries illustrate that concept? \_\_\_\_\_

Read closely the second paragraph on page 20. Write an SPA paragraph in response to this question. What kind of citizens provide the basis for sustain a **liberal democracy**?

S – According to Colin Woodward a liberal democracy requires citizens who \_\_\_\_\_

P – For example, Woodward writes “\_\_\_\_\_”

A – This passage means/shows \_\_\_\_\_

Do you agree with Woodward? How does his prescription relate to the ideas expressed by Leaned Hand in “the Spirit of Liberty” and/or David Souter in his address to teachers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWcVtWenrO>

According to **Alexis De Tocqueville** what institution “supplied the **social capital** that enabled them [New England states and New York] to govern well.”? (21) \_\_\_\_\_

What “habits of the heart” outline the paradox described by **John Stuart Mill**? \_\_\_\_\_

In the final section of the chapter Woodward makes three points. First, that each nation needs to find its own “balance of individual liberty and the common good.” (22) Second, that by many measures the US is an outlier compared to other countries throughout the world – and yet, not pre-eminent in either economic freedom or human development. (23) Finally, that the US faces a particular challenge due to its history and its federal system of government. (23-24) **ALERT**. Woodward seems almost apocalyptically pessimistic about the American prospect in the paragraph on the “balkanized nature of our federation.” (24) Whether you share his concern as deeply, or at all, try to put into your own words what he means in the quoted passage.