



## The American Experiment: Principles in Action Seminar What to Expect

### INTRODUCTION

From its inception, the Aspen Institute has sought to foster a deeper understanding of the principles and institutions underlying the theory and practice of American democracy. Robert Hutchins, Chancellor of the University of Chicago and one of the founders of the Aspen Institute observed that the demise of the American Experiment would not be the result of “assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”

The American has always been the mixture of: a) a set of competing principles; b) a collection of rival institutions; and, c) a way of living forged in habits of critical dialogue. A well-functioning polity requires that its members have a better understanding of those principles, a sense of the functions of our institutions, and a greater facility in political and social discourse.

### GOALS

This Seminar aims to challenge participants to clarify their understanding of American principles and institutions, and to cultivate habits of informed dialogue which foster a more perfect union. The seminars do not aim to teach, but rather to explore and test the tensions among our principles and institutions, and to develop habits of discourse which allow us to build bridges across the competing ideas of America which at once unite and divide us.

### APPROACH

To this end, this Seminar aims to be:

- a) Informative: The seminar offers a curated primer in the values tested and contested in American history. What are the key ideas, texts, and moments in our history that define America?
- b) Formative: The seminar offers a space to clarify one’s own values in the company of those whose experiences and values (or prioritization of values) are different. How do those ideas and ideals shape who we (as individuals and communities) are and want to become?
- c) Transformative: The seminar builds trust, common ground, and habits of dialogue which can help build bridges of understanding and cooperation across political and other divides. How can we better practice habits of values-based dialogue which can foster a more united and inclusive polity?

Readings will be drawn from among fundamental texts in the American experience, from the colonial and founding periods to the near contemporary. Authors range from Washington and Lincoln to Mary Antin and Sojourner Truth, from Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Luther King to Ronald Reagan and John McCain. Broadly, our journey includes:

#### **Session 1: A City on the Hill? | October 26, 1-4PM EST**

*What are the tensions among various values inherent in the colonial and founding ideas of America? What is the balance between individual liberty and state power? How can the many also be one?*

#### **Session 2: The Struggle for Equality | November 2, 1-4PM EST**

*How are we to understand the tension between liberty and equality? What are the key elements of the struggle for gender and racial equality? What is the promise of America to immigrants and to the disenfranchised?*

#### **Session 3: Leadership, Character, and Courage | November 9, 1-5PM EST**

*What are the components of character and leadership? What is character? What is courage? What are the educational arrangements most conducive to a democracy?*

#### **Session 4: American Ideals: Raising Our Sights | November 16, 1-4PM EST**

*What is America’s role in the world? How do our domestic and international responsibilities intersect? What is our individual role in sustaining and refining the American experiment with liberty and justice for all?*

Please direct all questions to your relationship manager or to us directly at [community@standtogether.org](mailto:community@standtogether.org).