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Exchange Club

Youth of the Year Essay

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### The Ideals of 1776

Etched into solid Indiana limestone a few feet from Pennsylvania Avenue lies two statues, one masculine and wise, the other feminine and thoughtful, each bearing selectively chosen inscriptions. While facing the National Archives Museum, to the left lies the dome of Capitol Hill, to the right and around a small bend in the infamous Avenue resides the pillars of the White House. One of the statues is named *Future*, the elegant lady carved into limestone with an open book in her lap, sitting atop Shakespeare's quote from *The Tempest*, "What's Past is Prologue". To her right stands her opposite, *Past*, as he stares straight ahead, the book of history closed forcefully under his palm in absolute finality. His inscription is an axion paraphrased from the works of Confucius, "Study the Past". Together, these two towering sculptures guard the works of old that dwell in the National Archives Museum.

Defining and learning how to exemplify the ideals that construct the American citizen is a debate rooted in antiquity and sealed by ink on parchment in 1776, 1787, and 1781. These years represent the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Three documents, written by some of the brightest and most enlightened minds of human history, forever altered the course of human events and shaped the ideas of individual freedoms and liberties. The story of America and consequently the values of the American citizen are found in the book under *Past's* heavy hand and its legacy continues to be written, with an invisible hand

as the words slowly appear in the pages under *Future's* eyes. To tell this story I must begin in two historic locations: Jerusalem and Athens.

The story of the West begins steeped in religious thought and the Acropolis of Athens. From Jerusalem came the idea that mankind has a moral purpose in life, and by using our abilities we can better understand the world around us and thus, according to Judeo-Christian thought, find God in scientific endeavors. Later, Protestantism taught work ethic, individualism, and a fervent necessity for literacy and education. From Athens, we learned Greek natural law, reason, and that humans have the capacity to rationalize the world around them. Democracy and the scientific method sprang from Athens, shaping how the humans viewed the natural world and the role of the citizen in government. Many years passed when seemingly no progress was made following the collapse of the Roman empire, but behind the walls of the monasteries, reason and moral purpose were gathering connectivity. Best exemplified in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the scholastic movement bolstered their work in the thirteenth century. However, society prior to the seventeenth century was still lacking one intellectual and philosophical movement: the Enlightenment.

The merging of Jerusalem and Athens was the Enlightenment, and America's founders simply baptized these Enlightenment ideas by fire. But as the years continue to pass in the complex world of modernity, growing secular movements in the West have begun denying the influence of one of the two symbolic cities that built America: Jerusalem. Academia is willing to ignore the influence of religious history in the Enlightenment; to skim their eyes over the importance of moral purpose in creating a free society. But even from an objective, non-religious view, Thomas Jefferson's adaptation of the words of John Locke is groundbreaking. "We hold

these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” Jefferson states in the Declaration of Independence.

From these words arises the American citizen. Thus, one must acknowledge the presence of both Athens and Jerusalem when meditating on the ideas of the citizenry. I detail the history of America as my thesis for creating the ideal model of a citizen in order to exemplify the ideas that make the United States what it is, a progressive power pushing each day for equality and liberty for all, because in order to live out America’s objectives one must first understand her founding. We take for granted our history classes and D.C. field trips because we are so blissfully inundated with freedom that we are unable to recognize the beauty of the country underneath our feet. The two statues guarding the National Archives Museum I find symbolic for the nation. *Past* and *Future* stand side by side because neither one can exist without the other. If we so desire to continue writing the American story then we must understand the past, her founding, and her blunders. Inside the National Archives building also lies the Magna Carta, one of the original four drafts from 1297. America is a nation of new ideas built upon the foundation of the parts of history that have produced great leaps forward. The American experiment might have officially begun in 1776, but we are built upon a few thousand years of tradition that cannot be ignored.

Living as a responsible American citizen has a wide range of definitions. From the basic rules of society taught in elementary school to complex American philosophy taught in graduate schools, each member of the United States can choose for him or herself what harnessing American ideals means. As for myself, I believe that living as a responsible American means

being informed and educated on America's history and the traditions that culminated in her founding. Believing in the forces of free markets, of individualism, of personal liberties, of equality and justice, and of the virtues of a moral population leads to the creation of an exemplary citizen. These principles are simple, yet it was not until the drafting of the Constitution that these simple notions of the individual rights of man were written with ink and implemented successfully.

Furthermore, if the notion of the ideal citizen is rooted in the natural rights of man, rights that exist in nature in the absence of government, these rights are associated with a duty. John Locke expressed the importance of rights coupled with duties. The right to life is accompanied with a duty not to kill; a right to property is coupled with a duty not to steal, and so forth. So while the American citizen can uphold the natural rights, the individual must also satisfy the duty associated with a particular right in order to uphold the true value of living in a free society. Personally, I have spent many hours reading works of past thinkers, many of whom focused on the importance of the citizen in a democratic society. As I edge closer to entering adulthood I continue to realize and understand the veracity and significance of all of these aforementioned sentiments in daily life. My zeal for understanding America and her history has led me to a decision to study political science in college with the intent on studying Constitutional law after obtaining my undergraduate degree. Politics is history in the present, and all are surrounded by the question of how to be an upright American citizen.