the IDEA of AMERICA
How Values Shaped Our Republic and Hold the Key to Our Future

President’s Message
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From its inception, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has been guided by the noble aspiration of its founder, John D. Rockefeller Jr.: “That the future may learn from the past.”

It is this principle that led Rockefeller to restore an entire town to its eighteenth-century appearance. It is this principle that led us to introduce our Revolutionary City programming, inviting our guests to experience the events of the Revolution and relive the stories that unfolded on the streets of Virginia’s capital. It is this principle that led to Colonial Williamsburg’s emergence as a center for history and citizenship, where we ask citizens to rededicate themselves to the American ideals first articulated in Williamsburg during the tumultuous years of revolution. The stories we tell in our programs—are relevant to every citizen—are the links between our past, our present, and our future.

This same principle led us to develop The Idea of America, first as a digital program for students, then as a digital program for the general public, and now as a book. The premise of The Idea of America is that Americans embrace values that are often in tension. These tensions—law vs. ethics, freedom vs. equality, unity vs. diversity, common wealth vs. private wealth—are at the heart of a great debate that began with the Founders and continues today. By examining how these value tensions played out throughout our history, this book demonstrates the continuing relevance of our founding ideals.

Journalist Max Lerner wrote in 1957, referring to a divided America, that “one may see in these polar impulses the proof that American life is deeply split. One may prefer to see them as contradictory parts of a bewildering puzzle. Or one may see them as signs of an effort, on a grander scale than ever in history, to resolve the conflicting impulses that are to be found in every civilization but each of which occurs here with a strength and tenacity scarcely witnessed elsewhere.”

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.