

On Principle” Thoughts on American Democracy
Introductory Segment

[FADE UP SOUND BANNER]

HOST: Today OPB launches a new month-long series: On Principle: Thoughts on American Democracy. The Oregon Council for the Humanities and independent producer David Welch have been asking Oregonians to think and talk about core principles of American democracy: individual freedom, justice, economic opportunity, equality, and civic engagement. More than two hundred years ago these ideals were central to the founding of our country. Can they still bind us together as a nation in the twenty-first century? That’s precisely the question On Principle hopes to answer. Christopher Zinn, O-C-H’s Executive Director, explains.

ZINN: On Principle started with a simple idea: citizenship is an active process that requires an open mind and thoughtful ears. In the coming weeks we want to test our hypothesis that Americans have important things to say to each other about these principles. To do this, we’ll ask people from around the state fundamental questions. Questions like, “What does it mean to be an American today?”

SMITH: “Being an American really is a commitment to the ideals of liberty and fundamental freedoms that we, as a nation, decided were important to us in when we decided that King George was, uh, was not going to be our king anymore. That’s really the embodying spirit of America that we are the source of our rights, not the government.”

MCCORMICK: “And when you think of what does it mean to be an American, I think like the big Mac is kind of a perfect analogy in many ways. You know, this food product which isn’t very good for you, just winds up getting you fat and giving you heart problems. And yet, we can’t seem to stop eating them; and in the process, leaving this huge wake of destruction in its path.”

ZINN: Taking our cue from the Constitution, we’ll begin by asking people about individual freedom. Do demographic lines, the political spectrum, or even Oregon’s challenging geography affect how we understand our rights and privileges as citizens?

REEVES: “The freedom to make choices about your life, whether you want to go to school or not, whether you want to choose your profession, your religion—just that broader freedom of being able to make those choices in your life.”

ZINN: We’ll ask Oregonians about the traditional image of Lady Justice, the blindfolded woman who carries the scales of justice in one hand and the sword of righteousness in the other. In

courthouses across America, she symbolizes the fairness of our legal system. We want to know if people still believe that justice is blind.

AYO: “I think that this whole thing that we’ve been going through in this country about orange alert and like terrorism at home is really stupid because from my experience, as a person of color, terrorism at home is really quite familiar. You know, and I feel like I live on orange alert pretty much all the time.”

BLOOMFIELD: “I think that when people feel that authority is trying to dampen their ability to express themselves, they become violent. Now, I don’t, I’m not ascribing all the violence in our society to that. But, uh, I do think that when, uh, protesters are handled the way they have recently been handled in this country, it is almost an invitation to violence.”

ZINN: In school most of us learned that America is the land of economic opportunity. On Principle will ask Oregonians if they believe it’s still possible to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, turn a dime into a fortune, and offer their children a better life. Can we achieve our dreams through hard work?

ALDRICH: “I grew up in Union, Oregon, a little Northeastern corner of the state in between the Blue Mountains and the Eagle Cap Wilderness—beautiful, beautiful place. I’d love to be back there, but tough to make a living there. It was a great place to grow up, though.”

SCOTT: “Well, there’s no question that economic opportunity depends a lot on where you live. I think most people in urban Oregon are really unaware of how devastating that the changes have been in rural Oregon.

AYO: “You know, we don’t value the people who clean our buildings. That’s hard work. I don’t really understand what the hell we value in this country. It doesn’t make any sense to me whatsoever.”

ZINN: We’re especially curious to ask Oregonians about equality, a principle full of dynamic tensions. How can we square the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that all men are created equal, with the Constitution’s failure to enfranchise women and people of color?

BLOOMFIELD: “I think that we’ve been having a public debate ever since the Declaration of Independence on exactly what equality means. Uh, we know that all people are not born equal in the opportunities that are open to them to develop whatever, uh, capacities they have. I often have asked myself, so, wherein lies this equality?”

CLARK: “People treat me with deference now because I’m, I’m a, you know, I’m older, I’m retired mayor, and, and all that sort of thing and, and I’m recognized often. But it pisses me off when people don’t treat everybody the same way. Why don’t we treat everybody the same way? I mean, I’ve been in business and I’ve tried to treat everybody equitably until proven otherwise.”

ZINN: We’ll also ask Oregonians about civic engagement. Do Americans still seek opportunities to join together to address community issues? Or, in an era when sound bites tend to trump nuance, are we unsure about just how much we can accomplish as citizens?

ENGLERT: “If we really want to have faith, uh, in our government as a democracy, then what that means is that really that the government belongs to everyone and that our government is only as good as the ideas that each of us as a citizen can bring to that. That all of us are impoverished if the educational system isn’t educating us as citizens to be able to, kind of, see issues clearly, to think about things critically and to solve the problems, uh, that we have.”

WALKER: “I feel a disconnect. If the government was, in fact, my government and the government of the people that I think like then we wouldn’t be at war right now. We wouldn’t be experiencing the level of classism, sexism, racism. There would be a much more clearly defined separation between church and state. Now, a lot of people would say, you know, well then, get out of America. Well, it’s, you know, I can stay here because I’m an American and I can say what I want because the Constitution guarantees that.”

ZINN: Individual freedom. Justice. Economic opportunity. Equality. Civic engagement. These principles address the heart of the American experience. How do they affect our own lives? Do they play out differently in the lives of our neighbors? In the coming weeks we invite you to join us as *On Principle* paints a portrait of who we are and what we value.

[HOST CONCLUSION OVER MUSIC]

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