AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

HOLIDAY SEASON
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As educators, we often look to historical figures as role models from whom we can learn. But what truly makes someone a role model? Is it their contributions to society, the writings that sparked movements and progress, or the sacrifices they made for others? Some are celebrated for their virtuous character traits and the way their interactions helped elevate their spheres of influence toward the betterment of humanity. But does one need to be exemplary in all areas to serve as a role model? Are there aspects of their lives or actions that disqualify them?

In a broader sense, what about entire societies? Can they be considered models, even when they have made mistakes along the way?

As we approach the holiday season, the theme of "lights" becomes central to many of the celebrations around us, as seen in holiday displays and decorations. What does it mean to be what John Winthrop referred to upon his arrival at Massachusetts Bay in 1630 as "A City upon a Hill"? This image was later echoed by JFK and Ronald Reagan, who referred to America as "A shining City upon a Hill." How did they see America as an exemplar nation? What can our students aspire to create in their own spheres of influence?

This holiday season, as we see the glimmering lights of Menorahs in windows and public squares, or the Christmas trees and homes glittering with festive spirit, let us reflect on how we, too, can be a light for our communities. How can we help our nation shine from the inside out, in the fullest sense of civic empowerment and influence? The accompanying resources and activity can help generate this discussion about illumination and influence.

Source 1: John Winthrop. "A Model of Christian Charity." 1630. Excerpt.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. "Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil," in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does Winthrop mean by the phrase 'We shall be a city upon a hill'? How does this phrase reflect his vision for the Puritan community?
2. How does he envision creating a model society according to the text? What qualities or actions does he believe are necessary?
3. What are the key features of a model community, based on Winthrop's vision? Do you agree with his view of what makes a society exemplary?
4. What challenges might Winthrop's vision face in practice? Are there any potential contradictions in his call for unity and individual self-sacrifice?

Source 2: Abraham Lincoln. "Second Inaugural Address." 4 Mar. 1865. Excerpt.

"With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Questions for Discussion:

1. According to Lincoln, what are the necessary components for the nation to heal and achieve lasting peace? How do his ideas about unity and compassion contribute to the nation's greatness?
2. In what ways does Lincoln's vision of healing and unity align with Winthrop's idea of a 'model' society? What are the key similarities and differences in their views on community and moral responsibility?

Source 3: Ronald Reagan. Farewell Address. 11 Jan. 1989. Excerpt.

And that's about all I have to say tonight, except for one thing. The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the "shining city upon a hill.'' The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Reagan build upon John Winthrop's idea of America as a 'City Upon a Hill'? In what ways does Reagan's vision expand on this concept?
2. What key elements make up Reagan's 'Shining City Upon a Hill'? How does his vision of America as a beacon of hope shape his ideals of freedom and opportunity?
3. What responsibilities does Reagan believe come with America's role as "a beacon and magnet for all those who seek freedom"?

Classroom Activity: Crafting Your City Upon A Hill

I: Group Discussion:

- What would be needed to create a model society from scratch?
- What aspects of the American model would you adopt? What would you change or modify?

II: Societal Blueprint: Create a visual, digital, or written representation of your society and include the following key elements:

- Values: What core principles is your society committed to?
- Government: How would the government be structured?
- Community: How would individualism and social responsibility be balanced?

III: Group Presentation:

- What common values or ideas did the groups share?
- How do the visions differ, and what are the core differences?
- How do they reflect the versions shared by Winthrop, Lincoln, and Reagan?

Governor John Winthrop, born June 12, 1587. Burn, K. H. (between 1860 and 1880). Library of Congress.