

The American Testament, by Mortimer J. Adler and William Gorman. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975, 160 pp., \$7.95.

The American Testament seeks to rediscover the political ideas underlying the United States through a commentary on the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. Its premise is that these documents present with inspired brevity a coherent political doctrine, the product of sustained reflection and grave political deliberation. Its authors, Mortimer J. Adler and William Gorman, read the documents to discover a true political teaching. They try to understand what is said rather than merely to learn about the documents, the circumstances in which they were written, or the motivations of their authors. The great merit of this book is that it leads its readers to reflect on what the United States fundamentally stands for, through a disciplined reading of her most profound public statements.

The authors are well known as editors of the *Great Books of the Western World*. The commentaries in *The American Testament* are the outgrowth of a conference on the three documents chaired by the authors and sponsored by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies and the Institute for Philosophical Research. The book is written for the general educated public, whether in school or out.

The three commentaries differ somewhat in scope and interest. The essay on the Declaration follows in general the view offered by Carl Becker in his well-known book. The commentary on the Preamble to the Constitution is perhaps the most comprehensive of the three and does an excellent job of elucidating the Preamble's few short phrases. The commentary on the Gettysburg Address focuses on the final phrase of the Address.

The authors tend to assume, rather than to show, that the three documents are in perfect harmony with each other, and in a similar fashion, tend to assume that there is an unbroken philosophical tradition from Plato to Locke to which one can refer to establish the meaning of disputed phrases. But one could find many worse, and but few better, starting points than these commentaries for reflecting on American politics.

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