The Liberal Interpretation

Methodological Assumptions

● The Liberal interpretation is ideological: American Founders were motivated by their belief system, not necessarily economic self-interest.
● Essentially, the Liberal interpretation argued that ideas mattered and ideas were the basis of their ideology.
● Also, ideas were the main motives for all behavior; people were self interested (must understand these interests)

Substantive Teachings

● American political system and culture are based off of John Locke’s key ideas, enhanced by the fact that Locke’s ideas were incorporated into the Declaration of Independance.
● All men are created equal
● Equality = political equality; everyone is born with natural rights, no being is dominant to another (no need for governed consent)
● Locke’s unalienable rights
  ○ Life
  ○ Liberty
  ○ The pursuit of happiness
● Only took as much as was needed = no waste
● Inequality is achieved by advancements. Once, farmers used apples as currency; no greed was present because hoarded apples would rot. When currency became everlasting with precious metals, people could continue to achieve money for however long they pleased. Therefore, inequality developed. Despite inequality, Locke believed that this dramatically increased efficiency and improved overall standard living.

Thus,

● Government is to protect the inalienable rights (nothing else)
● Men were expected to want precious metals and gems therefore making the framers believe that their self interest would lead to the prospering of the capitalist economy and make a common good for all
● Private property, economic individualism, and democracy are the dominant liberal values.
To a liberal, there is nothing wrong with self-interest; it is instinctive in people and it’s no use to try and suppress it. Liberty is not about government protection, but avoiding the government’s invasion on people’s lives.

*THE GOV. is like the DENTIST* - you need it to be there without it you lose liberty, it’s not really something you want to do but you need to do it.

Liberalists believe that most important role of the government is to protect natural rights of the individual, not of communities. Therefore, they argue that the liberalist founders would be against taxes, believing that the government takes a person’s property. Since their earnings from working is taken from them, the person is essentially a slave.

○ The Declaration uses the term “slave” as one with no political freedom.

**Political Implications:**

● American Exceptionalism: belief that natural abundance and settlement of the US leads to the spread of liberalism around the world
  ○ showing American dominance: “city upon a hill”
  ○ our way of life is exceptional (modern approach)