

AP United States History

Summer Reading Assignment - 2016



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The Americas to 1620

by Christopher L. Miller



Petroglyphs in Petrified Forest National Park (NPS photo)

At the end of the first millennium, most people in the Eastern Hemisphere had a firm sense of how the world was arranged, who occupied it, and how they had come to be where they were. Various sacred texts as well as long-standing folk beliefs suggested a virtually eternal order of things, instilling a sort of reassuring confidence in a stable and entirely predictable existence. However, forces were emerging that would open up new possibilities and engender a new restlessness that would shatter provincial confidence and stability as a new more cosmopolitan world emerged. A new era of American history was about to spring from the most unexpected of places.

This part of the story began, not in the Americas, nor in Europe, but in the Middle East. Carrying the message of the new prophet Mohammed out of the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims began making major inroads into western Asia and northern Africa in the seventh century, eventually encroaching on Europe's southern and eastern frontiers. In 1095, Pope Urban II responded to a request for aid from the Byzantine emperor, whose dominions were under attack by Muslim invaders, launching the era of the Crusades. For two centuries, European-based Christians battled with Muslims in the Holy Lands and elsewhere. For the elite classes who engaged in crusading, provincialism died away, replaced by new information and contacts in the wider world. Soon Europeans would begin turning this new knowledge and these new tools against the people from whom they were appropriated.

Iberians led the way, launching a *Reconquista*, an effort to break Islamic rule on the peninsula. With the aid of crusaders, Portugal attained independence in 1147. By 1380 Portugal's King John I had united that country's various principalities under his rule. In Spain, unification took much longer, but in 1469 Ferdinand and Isabella, heirs to the rival thrones of Aragon and Castile, married and forged a united Spanish state. Twenty-three years later, in 1492, the Spanish subdued the last Moorish stronghold on the peninsula, completing the *Reconquista*. At the same

time, other European states were also waking up to new realities. Consolidation began in France in around 1480, when Louis XI took control of five rival provinces to create a unified kingdom. Five years later in England, Henry Tudor and the House of Lancaster defeated the rival House of York in the Wars of the Roses, ending nearly a century of civil war. As in Spain and Portugal, the formation of unified states in France and England opened the way to new expansive activity.

Europeans had learned through their crusading experience that Muslim merchants had access to enormous trading networks that brought volumes of valuable goods into their markets. To the east, Muslim caravans carried silks, spices, and precious metals out of India, China, and Central Asia along the Silk Road, an arduous and expensive route. And to the south, North African Berbers had taken advantage of contacts with fellow Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula to introduce camels that allowed regular trading ventures across the forbidding Sahara Desert. From such remarkable cities as Timbuktu, the capital of Mali, merchants returned with gold, ivory, beautifully worked copper, and, significantly, slaves.

During the thirteenth century, Italian merchants sought to break into these monopolies. With convenient ports on the Mediterranean Sea, Italian city-states like Venice and Genoa gradually edged their way into the broadening trading world, attaining a virtual monopoly over the European consumer market for exotic goods. Coming into their own, however, the newly emerging consolidated states in Europe were not satisfied with dependence on Mediterranean merchants and sought their own access to exotic markets. Portugal's John I encouraged exploration by establishing a school of navigation on his kingdom's Atlantic shore. By the 1430s, the Portuguese had discovered and taken control of islands off the west coast of Africa, and within thirty years had pushed their way to Africa itself, opening relations with the Songhai Empire.

The Songhai Empire was typical of the sub-Saharan trading states that emerged through Muslim contacts. Its capital, Gao, was a key trading hub where African and Islamic influences met. From Gao, Songhai traders had shipped valuable trade goods across the Sahara by caravan. The Portuguese, however, offered speedier shipment and higher profits by carrying trade goods directly to Europe by sea. By the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese navigators had gained control over the flow of prized items such as gold, ivory, and spices out of West Africa, and Portuguese colonizers were growing sugar and other crops on the newly conquered Azores and Canary Islands. Meanwhile, the Portuguese sought to divert the Silk Road traffic by rounding the Cape of Good Hope and sailing on into the Indian Ocean.

England, Spain, and France were also interested in finding a short, cheap, and safe sea route between Europe and Asia. As latecomers, Spain and England could not afford to take Portugal's conservative approach to exploration. One ambitious sailor from the Italian port city of Genoa, Christopher Columbus, approached several European governments looking for support for a voyage westward, across the Atlantic, where he was convinced he would reach the East Indies. Initially he found no one willing to take the risk. Finally, in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella's successful reconquest of Spain provided Columbus with an opportunity. Having just thrown off Islamic rule in the coastal province of Granada, the joint monarchs were eager to break into overseas trading. Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to equip three ships in exchange for a new route to the Orient. After more than three months at sea, Columbus finally made landfall. He thought he had arrived at the Indies, but in fact he had reached the islands we now call the Bahamas.

England, too, was jealous of Portugal's trade monopoly, and in 1497 Henry VII commissioned another Italian mariner, Giovanni Caboto, to search for a sea route to India. John Cabot, as the English called him, succeeded in crossing the Atlantic. Shortly thereafter, another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, sailing under the Spanish flag, sighted the northeastern shore of South America and sailed northward into the Caribbean in search of a passage to the East. Finally, in 1524, Giovanni da Verrazano, sailing for France, charted the entire Atlantic coastline of North America. It was by then apparent that this was not Asia, but an entirely new world. And the people there were not Asians; they were an entirely new people, though in their ignorance the newcomers insisted on calling them Indians, a name that stuck.

At first, European monarchs greeted the discovery of a new world as bad news: they wanted access to the riches of Asia, not contact with some undiscovered place. But gradually Europeans learned that the new land had attractions of its own. Columbus found gold on his voyages, leading to the suspicion that the wealth in the New World might dwarf that of the Indies. Ambitious adventurers from Britain, France, and Iberia also began exploring the fertile fishing grounds off the northern shores of North America. As the Indians and the fishermen came to know each other, they began to exchange goods. Apparently the trade grew quickly. By 1534, when Jacques Cartier made the first official exploration of the Canadian coast for the French government, he was approached by party after party of Indians offering to trade furs for the goods he carried. He could only conclude that many other Europeans had come before him.

The presence of explorers such as Verrazano and Cartier and of unknown numbers of anonymous fishermen and part-time traders had several effects on the native population. The Mi'kmaq, Hurons, and other northeastern Indian groups approached the intruding Europeans in friendship, eager to trade and to learn more about the strangers. In part this response was a sign of natural curiosity, but it also reflected some serious changes taking place in the Native world of North America. Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, the climate in North America underwent significant cooling. As the climate grew colder, both hunter-gatherers like the Mi'kmaq and agriculturists like the Iroquois had to expand their subsistence territory, and in doing so they came into conflict with their neighbors. As warfare became more common, groups increasingly formed alliances for mutual defense—systems like the Iroquois League and Powhatan Confederacy. And Indians found it beneficial to welcome European newcomers into their midst—as trading partners bearing new tools, as allies in the evolving conflicts with neighboring Indian groups, and as powerful magicians whose shamans might provide explanations and remedies for the hard times that had befallen the Indians.

The existence of America—and even more the presence of people there—further challenged European provincialism, though as the newcomers came to understand that America was a new land and that the Indians were a new people, they attempted to fit both into the cosmic map outlined in the Bible. To Columbus, for example, Indians represented mankind before the fall of Adam, noble savages of whom he wrote, “Of anything that they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no; on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it.”[1] Vespucci, in contrast, found them to be the most fallen of all mankind, true savages who “marry as many wives as they please,” and among whom the “son cohabits with mother, brother with sister, male cousin with female, and any man with the first woman he meets.”[2] Such portrayals, which were repeated over and over again by explorers and early

settlers, established a sort of dichotomous mythic identity for American Indians that continues to affect non-Native perceptions of them through the present day.

In some ways, the arrival of Europeans may have been easier for American Indians to understand and explain than the existence of Indians was for Europeans. To Indians, the world was alive, animated by a spiritual force that was both universal and intelligent. Social ties based on fictive kinship and reciprocal trade linked all creatures—human and nonhuman—together into a common cosmos. These connections were chronicled in myth and maintained through ritual, which often involved the exchange of ceremonial items believed to have spiritual value. In the pre-Columbian trading world, such prized goods passed from society to society, establishing a spiritual bond even if the two groups never met. Europeans and European goods slipped easily into this ceremonial trading system. The trade items that the Europeans generally offered to American Indians on first contact—glass beads, mirrors, brass bells—resembled closely the items that the Indians traditionally used to establish friendly spiritual and economic relations with strangers. The perceived similarity of the trade goods offered by the Europeans led Indians to accept the newcomers as simply another new group in the complex social cosmos uniting the spiritual and material worlds.

Europeans, to the contrary, perceived such items as worthless trinkets, valuing instead Indian furs and land. This difference in perception became a major source of misunderstanding and conflict. To the Indians, neither furs nor the land was considered “property”; according to their beliefs, all things had innate spirits and belonged to themselves. Beavers, for example, gave their fur to people in exchange for spiritual gifts, and when the Native Americans passed the furs along to Europeans they were simply extending the social connection that had brought the furs into their hands in the first place. Similarly, the land was seen as a living being—a mother—who feeds, clothes, and houses people as long as she receives proper respect. When Europeans offered spiritually significant objects in exchange for land on which to build, farm, or hunt, Indians perceived the offer as an effort to join an already existing social relationship, and not as a contract transferring ownership.

Another source of tension stemmed from the fact that the natural environments of the Old and New Worlds were different, and the passage of people, plants, and animals among Europe, Africa, and North America instigated profound changes in all three continents. This long-term process has been labeled the Columbian Exchange.

From Africa, exotic plants such as bananas, sugar cane, and rice were imported to Iberian-claimed islands such as the Canaries and eventually to America, where, along with cotton, indigo, coffee, and other imports, they would become cash crops on European-controlled plantations. European plants such as wheat, barley, and rye were readily transplanted to some areas in North America, as were grazing grasses and various vegetables, including turnips, spinach, and cabbage. North American plants also traveled from west to east. Leading the way in economic importance was tobacco, a stimulant used widely in North America for ceremonial purposes and broadly adopted by Europeans and Africans as a recreational drug. But two American plants were of world-altering significance: corn and manioc. These were immediately transplanted from South America and the Caribbean into Africa, where they helped lead to a population explosion that funneled millions of Africans into the slave trade.

The most tragic trade among the three continents was literally invisible: bacteria and viruses wreaked havoc among populations that had never been exposed to them before. It appears that Europeans acquired a New World bacterium that evolved into syphilis, infecting thousands. And, it would appear, Africans brought various bacteria to the New World that developed into different strains of malaria. Africa, itself, was largely spared from new diseases because most contact with Europeans was sporadic in the early days. But in the Americas, where sustained contact occurred from the very beginning, the impact of both European and African diseases was devastating. There is no way of knowing the full impact of imported diseases among Native Americans, though some studies have found that the death rate during the first century of contact was over 90 percent.

The ecological changes and the creation of markets brought about by the Columbian Exchange would drive Atlantic enterprise for nearly three hundred years following Columbus's geographical blunder. While exchanged diseases were killing many millions of Indians and lesser numbers of Africans and Europeans, the transplantation of North American plants significantly expanded food production in what had been marginal areas of Europe and Africa. At the same time, the environmental changes that Europeans wrought along the Atlantic shore of North America permitted the region to support many more people than it had sustained under Native cultivation. The overall result in Europe and Africa was a population explosion that eventually spilled over to repopulate a devastated North America.

As Europeans struggled to wrest a profit from a rugged, and now underpopulated, New World, they found the prospect of enslaved African labor irresistible. Europeans equipped aggressive tribes on Africa's western coast with firearms and encouraged large-scale raiding deep into the Niger and Congo river regions. These raiders captured millions of prisoners, whom they herded back to the coast and sold to European traders to supply labor for mines and plantations in the New World. In exchange, they received more firearms and other weapons as well as manufactured goods from Europe crafted largely from raw materials imported from the Americas. They also received rum made from the sugar grown by Africans for Europeans in the Caribbean, converted into alcohol in both North America and Europe, and then exchanged for more slaves to be fed into the cane plantations. Tobacco followed the same route with the same results. This never-ending circle of trade followed the natural course of wind and ocean currents that, until steam power revolutionized shipping in the mid-nineteenth century, dictated patterns of motion and commerce in the Atlantic World.

At any given location in this great wheel of activity, conditions on the ground could vary significantly. The Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, British, and other exploiters of the newly emerged Atlantic World each had their own style and strategies for extracting resources, exploiting natives, and making profits. Indigenous peoples from Africa to the Atlantic archipelagos to the Caribbean and all the Americas also adopted unique strategies for dealing with these invaders. But for more than half a millennium, the great wheel itself continued to spin and the patterns set down in the first era of American history continued to drive it.

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[1] Christopher Columbus, “A Letter sent by Columbus to [Luis de Santangel] Chancellor of the Exchequer [of Aragon], respecting the Islands found in the Indies, enclosing another for their Highnesses,” in *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus: with Other Original Documents, Relating to His Four Voyages to the New World*, trans. & ed. R. H. Major, 2nd ed. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1870), 7.

[2] Amerigo Vespucci, *Vespucci Reprints, Texts and Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1916), 5:6.

Colonization and Settlement, 1585–1763

by John Demos



The mid-Atlantic colonies with an inset of New Amsterdam from a 1682 map. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

American colonial history belongs to what scholars call the early modern period. As such, it is part of a bridge between markedly different eras in the history of the western world. On its far side lies the long stretch we call the Middle Ages (or the “medieval period”), on its near one the rise of much we connect with modernity. It holds the root of modern science (epitomized by Sir Isaac Newton), of modern political thought (Thomas Hobbes, John Locke), of modern capitalism (the first large joint-stock corporations, including some which financed transatlantic “discovery”), of modern state formation (“nations,” roughly as we understand the term today), of urbanization (most especially, London and Paris, but also colonial cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston), and even of what scholars now refer to as “proto-industrialization” (the earliest factory-style modes of production). Yet for the great mass of European—and American—humanity, the flavor of life at ground level remained highly traditional, including an almost exclusive reliance on subsistence agriculture; immersion in small-scale, face-to-face patterns of social life; and a code of behavior shaped by age-old religious beliefs and folk nostrums.

The colonization by Europeans of the two great American continents expressed both sides of the bridge. Its animating source was the clash and competition of European empires—a distinctly modern element. Yet the motivation for such endeavor also involved extending Christianity to “heathen lands,” and locating rich sources of gold and other precious metals—twin ideas of ancient provenance.

THE PEOPLING OF NORTH AMERICA

Portugal and Spain, having launched the so-called Age of Discovery at the end of the fifteenth century, laid claim to most of what is today Central and South America. The

British, and others from northern Europe, were latecomers to the imperial contest. As a result, their entry, beginning around 1600, was channeled toward what was left—chiefly, the Caribbean islands and the cold, apparently hostile and frightening, coastline of North America.

At first, their plans mirrored those of the Spanish and Portuguese. For example, the Puritan founders of Massachusetts were strongly bent on converting native “savages”—hence their adoption of an official seal with the image of an unclothed Indian saying, “Come Over and Help Us.” Meanwhile, the first settlers of the region around Chesapeake Bay, starting with Jamestown, Virginia, and its environs, looked more toward material gain; when Captain John Smith arrived there, he found them frantically searching for “gold, gold, gold.”

These contrasting interests would shape the development of the two earliest British colonies for several successive generations. Massachusetts—begun at Boston in 1630, following a beachhead made a decade before by the “Pilgrims” at Plymouth—retained a deeply religious orientation through most of the colonial era. Its compact towns and villages were organized around largely autonomous “Congregational” churches; ministers played a key role in the local culture; and Protestant moral strictures framed many aspects of everyday life. Farming was the focus of productive effort, and most of what was raised went straight to household kitchens and dinner tables. To be sure, after about 1660 a growing class of merchants would create new lines of private enterprise, some of them extremely far-flung, while attaining high levels of wealth and developing a genteel lifestyle to match. This trend, which would not reach its apex until well into the eighteenth century, is nicely encapsulated in the phrase “from Puritan to Yankee.”

Virginia, founded in 1607, was from the start a cog in the commercial system of empire. Having failed in their quest for gold, and also in their attempts to raise silk, citrus products, and other potentially lucrative cash crops, Virginians turned after 1620 to intensive tobacco-cultivation. The same was true of those who founded Maryland, around 1635, as a refuge for Catholics fleeing the rising pressure of Puritanism in old England. This focus lay behind the distinctive settlement pattern of the Chesapeake colonies—where numerous, more or less isolated, “plantations” lay stretched out along rivers and ridgelines, with little in the way of village-style contact among them. Tobacco exhausted soil fertility so rapidly that individual planters felt obliged to engross large quantities of land simply in order to maintain consistent levels of production; when, after a few years, one field would no longer bear a good crop, cultivation was moved to others. Moreover, the same planters needed ready access to the ships that would carry their harvest to market; hence a host of little wharves and docks sprouted at intervals along the shoreline. Both factors—crop and marketing requirements—worked to disperse settler populations across a broad expanse of coastal and interior land (the Tidewater and the Piedmont, in local parlance).

In the meantime, other European groups were joining the settlement process: the French in what is now Canada, the Dutch in New Netherlands (founded in 1626 and Anglicized four decades later, with its name changed to New York), scattered bands of Finns and Swedes along the mid-Atlantic coast (in the 1630s and '40s), the Spanish in Florida (as early as 1565) and also in the far southwest (today's New Mexico; 1607). Eventually, all except the

small Spanish outposts would be absorbed into a single, English-controlled sphere of colonization.

There would be additional English settlements as well. Thus several new settlements spun off from Massachusetts: Connecticut (1636); Rhode Island (1644); and New Hampshire (1679). Further down the coast came New Jersey (1670s); Pennsylvania, founded (1681) by English Quakers but thereafter populated largely by German immigrants (misnamed the “Pennsylvania Dutch”); Delaware (1704); Carolina (1663, later to be divided into two colonies, North and South); and Georgia (1732). Considered as a whole, English men and women constituted more than 90% of seventeenth-century colonists. But the following century would bring an extraordinary shift toward multiethnic, multicultural diversity, as Germans, Scots-Irish, and, most especially, Africans arrived in increasingly large numbers. By the time of the American Revolution, scarcely half the population could claim descent from “English stock.”

Of course, there were also Indians, the land’s original occupants and birth-right stakeholders. This group—perhaps 10 million strong, continent-wide, when the first European settlers stepped ashore—would play an ambivalent role in colonization. On the one hand, Indians often served as helpers and teachers of the struggling, sometimes overmatched, newcomers. (For example: Squanto really did show the Pilgrims how to plant corn, just as legend declares.) On the other, Indians were quick to realize the threat posed by settlement to their lives and livelihoods. Thus, as early as 1622 in Virginia—and then in many other locations throughout the remainder of the colonial era—“Indian wars” would shed the blood and despoil the lands of both sides. Indians won some of the battles, but not the ones that counted most. Moreover, their losses in wartime were hugely compounded by their vulnerability to epidemic diseases carried from overseas in the boats and bodies of the colonizers; by the 1700s their numbers had been reduced by a factor of ten. (No less was true in many parts of Portuguese and Spanish America; there, too, disease combined with warfare to produce a staggering demographic catastrophe.)

THE SETTLEMENT PROCESS

At the outset the settlers faced stark odds of survival. They arrived, in many cases, weakened by illness or sheer fatigue after their long sea journey. The supplies they brought were barely enough to last through their first months ashore. Their hopes for profitable trade would take years, if not decades, to realize. And their unfamiliarity with the New World environment placed them at an immediate, across-the-boards, disadvantage.

Indeed, nearly everything they encountered seemed strange and puzzling. Most of them had no prior experience of a wooded landscape. The forests of their homeland had largely disappeared many years before—hence the American “wilderness” was bound to strike them as darkly menacing. Nor were they much familiar with human difference (people of different race, different culture, different language); in this regard, too, they would undergo a severe jolt upon encountering the native population.

In short, they had to endure psychological stress as well as physical privation. Some gave up: retreated into private despair, failed to look after themselves, and died, as one report put it, “of melancholy.” But most managed to cope, by adjusting their lives as best they could—and simply hanging on. Fortunately, the “starving times” they knew in the immediate aftermath of arrival did not, by and large, recur; within a few years, and given occasional (and invaluable) assistance by Indian neighbors, they were able to sustain themselves.

Meanwhile, too, they sought to overcome the unnerving strangeness of the land by remaking it in the image of home; at every point they sought to replicate English ways. The very names they gave their surroundings expressed this impulse: Boston, Cambridge, Exeter, Portsmouth, Northumberland, Middlesex, and many others, all transferred from places they remembered and cherished in the mother country. (There were also some to which the modifier “new” would be directly attached: for example, New Bedford, New Hampshire, New Kent, New Brunswick, not to mention New England itself.) All this was part of convincing themselves that they had not lost their essential, long-treasured identity as English. It was, in effect, a strategy of denial; and, for the most part, it worked.

DEVELOPING THE LAND

At the core of colonization, throughout the seventeenth century and on into the eighteenth, lay a development problem—or, in their own words, the problem of transforming a “wild” countryside into a “pleasant garden.” Land and other resources were present in great abundance (especially whenever and wherever Indians were not found standing in the way). The challenge was to convert these into suitably finished “goods,” whether for immediate consumption or for sale in domestic and foreign markets.

The sheer scale of it was enormous. Forests must be cleared, soil prepared for cultivation, housing constructed (along with barns and other outbuildings), roadways, fences and walls lined out, boats and wagons prepared for use in transport, tools and furnishings fashioned from whatever lay at hand. Who would do all this work? Under what conditions and with what inducements? In fact, the pool of readily available workers was dwarfed by the size of the task; the development problem was, first and foremost, a problem of labor scarcity.

It was the same everywhere but the responses varied widely. In the Chesapeake region, the main response during the first several decades was indentured servitude: in short, the contracting of mostly indigent young men and women to work for a particular “master” for periods of up to seven years. (After that he or she would become “free” and independent.) In the Carolina country, somewhat later on, the response would be slavery: the use, and ownership, of African bondsmen imported *en masse* in transoceanic tradeships. Many of the slaves in the first contingent came from those parts of West Africa where rice-growing was important; hence they were in a fortuitously good position to assist—or even to instruct—their owners, as Carolina developed its own rice-based economy. In New Netherlands/New York, a major response was tenancy: the parceling out of small plots, within the estates of large landholders, to renters on a long-term basis. In the middle colonies of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the response was a combination of tenancy and servitude. To be sure

nearly everywhere landowners and their families added their personal efforts to the mix. In New England, however, that was virtually the whole story. Lacking a cash crop, New Englanders did not have the actual or potential resources to invest in any form of bound labor. Instead, they did the work themselves—with each household making full use of its own members, especially grown sons. (This could mean delaying the age of marriage, and thus of personal independence, until the late twenties or older.)

Notably, all these responses to labor scarcity, save the last one, involved some degree of unfreedom; and even New England's family-based work-force was beholden to aging patriarchs who controlled inheritance. Take bound labor out of the picture, and colonial development would have proceeded very differently—more slowly, less profitably for those in charge, and with much less strain and suffering for the laborers themselves. In this regard the colonies stood in marked contrast to Europe, especially England, where a free-labor market was rapidly maturing.

Even at its best, the colonial labor system fell short. Simply put, there frequently weren't enough workers to do the job right; thus, at an everyday level, productive arrangements showed a certain sloppiness. Chesapeake planters, for instance, were notoriously careless with their lands and livestock; English visitors deplored their neglect of draining and manuring their fields, and their willingness to let cattle run free in the woods. New England, despite its culture of personal discipline and "steady habits," did little better; outsiders often commented on the scruffy, untidy look of the countryside. Local records from the region (and elsewhere, too) are full of notations about fences that fell down leaving pigs to roam free in nearby vegetable plots, sheep that were lost because of negligent herding, animal hides that were tossed out to fester by the wayside instead of being sent to a tannery for processing into leather, bridges that collapsed because of inadequate maintenance, houses that caught fire from poorly built chimneys—the complaints went on and on.

There were, moreover, other difficulties that worked to cramp productive effort. Capital seemed always to be scarce; what there was of it came largely from—and then quickly returned to—the mother country. Cash, in particular, was hard to come by. Thus, at the local level, most exchange of goods and services involved barter or personal credit; household account books from the period contain page after page of debts owed between neighbors. The ships that carried colonial products to market overseas were almost entirely English-made and English-owned. Insurance and other financial services were in the hands of English merchants. Hard goods, like firearms, stoves, and iron cookware, were also obtained from England. Even clothing and other textiles might well be imports. All these factors, taken together, imposed a heavy charge on colonial producers. As a result the colonial American economy remained deeply in the thrall of the mother country; in present-day terms, it was a sphere of underdevelopment.

ORGANIZING THEIR LIVES AND COMMUNITIES

A different but related set of problems involved social and political organization. At first, the very idea of creating new human communities in far-off lands seemed strange and

perplexing. What defined a colony? What shape should it have, and what relation to the metropole? Who would be its on-site personnel? How should it be governed? These were, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, all open questions, for which the promoters and founders had somehow to find answers. The English monarchy left them largely to their own devices, offering high-sounding charters but little in the way of direct support and guidance. Some colonies were designed and funded by joint-stock operations, others by wealthy proprietors (either singly or in small groups). All were expected to be revenue-producing. And all would supposedly be ruled, in top-down fashion, by boards of officials in the mother country.

But expectations were one thing, outcomes another. Distance and the unforeseen difficulties of life on the colonial ground threw most of these founding plans off-track. Within a generation or two, effective governance had migrated, along with the settlers themselves, to scattered venues across the “new” continent. In Massachusetts, in Virginia, and later in New York and Pennsylvania, home-grown legislative bodies sprang into being and assumed an increasing measure of control. Indeed, the same decentralizing process developed even at the local level, as individual counties and towns took charge of their own affairs. This process, like the heavy reliance on unfree labor, seemed to reverse prevailing trend-lines in England—where, especially after 1660, the governing center (the monarchy) was gathering more and more power to itself.

Decentralization and local autonomy did not, however, mean democracy in any modern sense. Virtually everywhere the reins of power were held by elites. This was most obviously true in the southern colonies, where a small pool of “gentlemen” dominated the membership of county courts, and thus controlled a wide range of both administrative and judicial affairs. Typically, these courts would handle taxes, land titles, estate probates, poor relief, militia training, and many other matters of everyday concern. New England’s system of town-meeting government offered wider scope for popular participation; leaders were chosen annually by vote, and policy was decided the same way. Still, voting itself was limited to a certain portion of townspeople—in the earliest years, church members only (in short, a religious test); later on, those who exceeded a specified level on the tax-list (a property test). Either way a majority might well be excluded. And since these possibilities concerned men only—nowhere in colonial America could women vote—the limiting process was effectively doubled.

Still other constraints were culturally determined. The aim of voting, where and when it might occur, was to reach a unanimous outcome (a consensus); conversely, majoritarian rule—deciding policy by head-count, for and against—was disapproved. Seventeenth-century colonists had no concept of a loyal opposition; to the contrary, political opposition meant *disloyalty*, possibly treason. (To be sure, this attitude began to weaken in the eighteenth century, as the actual workings of colonial politics became increasingly fragmented and factionalized.) Last but hardly least, deference was a core principle of political, no less than social, life. Communities were thought to consist of “superiors” and “inferiors,” of the “gentle” and the “common,” or the “high-born” and the “low.” Ordinary people were closely attuned to cues emanating from their “betters,” whose opinions should always carry decisive weight.

The weakest point in this system was the position of the elites themselves—not in their authority over ordinary folk, but rather in their relation to each other. The process of settlement and community-building had created a certain openness at the topmost level. Social credentials, like family pedigree, counted for less on this side of the ocean than on the other. And sudden opportunity—a bonanza tobacco crop, a market success in a rapidly expanding town or county—might push a few men far up the local wealth scale, and embolden them to claim a commensurate political role. In short, leadership might become contested to a degree rarely seen in the more firmly established communities of the Old World.

Conflict among rival elites peaked in a sequence of violent events during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia (1675–1676) was a case in point. Though partly an "Indian war"—Virginian frontiersmen versus the native Susquehannocks—this was also a power struggle between two of the colony's "great men." William Berkeley, the governor, faced a direct challenge from Nathaniel Bacon, a "high-born" planter and self-styled champion of the rebels. A dozen years later a similar dynamic helped energize an uprising in New York, generally known as Leisler's Rebellion. As with the Virginia case, this event took the name of its leader, Jacob Leisler, a wealthy merchant and militia officer who chafed at his exclusion from the highest levels of the colony's government. Both rebellions came near to success, but ultimately failed. There were similar, though smaller, disturbances in Maryland and Carolina at around the same time. And in Massachusetts, the existing government was overturned in response to the so-called Glorious Revolution in England (the ousting in 1688 of the Stuart line of monarchs, and its replacement by King William and Queen Mary). Taken as a whole, this cluster of conflicts showed deep fault lines in the domain of leadership.

But it was a passing phase. As one century yielded to the next, colonial society attained a more solid and settled shape. The position of the leaders seemed increasingly secure, within and without their own ranks. For "common" people, too (excluding those on the frontier, and Indians and blacks) life had become less precarious and more predictable, if still quite modest in its rewards.

NORTH AMERICA IN 1770

A bird's-eye view of the entire landscape, as of 1770, might have disclosed the following:

- Thirteen separate English colonies in varying states of growth and development (The French had been ousted from their hold in Canada, while the Spanish remained thinly entrenched in Florida and the southwest.)
- A nearly continuous wedge of settlement between the Atlantic shore and the Appalachian mountain chain, extending north and south from what is today central Maine to the lower border of Georgia
- A white population of slightly more than two million, with about a quarter in New England, nearly half in the Chesapeake and Lower South, and the rest in the middle colonies and so-called back-country

- An Indian population greatly reduced in size and pushed well back from the coast, but still a substantial presence through several inland regions—the Iroquois in central New York, the Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws in the southeast
- A rapidly growing, African-born (or derived) population of close to half a million, almost all of them slaves, and heavily concentrated in the Chesapeake and Carolina.

And if the bird's eye were able to peek as well into their thoughts and feelings, what else might have been discovered? What were their chief goals, their most cherished values, their abiding concerns? How did they think about the meaning of their lives? The Indians and Africans are unknowable at that level, but about the colonists somewhat more can be said.

Most of them gained a measure of fulfillment in two ways. First, by achieving what they called a "competence"—a sufficiently good result from farming, or craft production, or, in a few cases, professional activity (ministers, doctors, midwives) to support themselves and their families as fully independent citizens. Dependence on others was anathema to them—what they wished, most of all, to avoid. And, second, by attaining "godliness"—if not as a clear inner reality, then at least as a matter of reputation. Good reputation was always, for these folk, a pre-eminent aim.

Their cosmology, their way of being in the world, was still deeply tradition-bound and, in the literal sense, conservative. They expected always to conserve what the past had bequeathed them—not to innovate, not to experiment, not to improve on the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Experience came to them in circular form, indeed as an endless round of cycles: the diurnal cycle, day followed by night; the lunar cycle, the waxing and waning of the moon; the annual cycle, spring, summer, autumn, winter; and—this most important of all—the life cycle, birth, childhood, youth, full manhood or womanhood, old age, death. Everything would return eventually to the point from which it had started out: in the Biblical phrasing, "ashes to ashes, and dust to dust." In this way of thinking—and of living—continuity was preferred and novelty viewed as dangerous.

Yet they, the colonial Americans, had *not* entirely come round to the same starting-point as countless generations of their forebears. And some parts of their lives were novel indeed. Without explicitly acknowledging it, they (or their parents or grandparents) had left the familiar track in order to chart a new course. No matter how often—no matter how fervently—they declared themselves to be forever "English," they could not quite avoid seeing the arc of their difference. There was much they still shared with their cultural kin across the ocean, yet their experience no longer fit the same pattern. They were reminded of this every time they met an Indian, walked in the "wilderness," ate cornmeal for supper, or heard the howl of a wolf at night. They were changed, inwardly as well as outwardly, and at some level they knew it.

The question then became: Why? Was it all for good? or for ill? None could say with certainty—but this much was clear: America was different from other lands; and the lives they lived within it were exceptional, were "remarkable" (a word they often used) by the standard of their time. Perhaps, therefore, they had been marked—singled out—chosen—to fulfill some special destiny. This understanding, though still quite inchoate as a new era

dawned, would be passed on to their descendants, would be sharpened and owned and cherished, and would inform the American story for generations yet unborn.

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The American Revolution, 1763–1783

by Pauline Maier



"The Bloody Massacre": Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The British colonists of mainland North America had great hopes for the future in 1763, when the Peace of Paris formally ended the Seven Years' War. Since the late seventeenth century, their lives had been disrupted by a series of wars between Britain and the "Catholic Powers," France and Spain. Now, however, a triumphant Britain took title to Spanish Florida, French Canada, and all of Louisiana east of the Mississippi. With the British flag flying over so much of the North American continent, the colonists looked forward to a time of uninterrupted peace, expansion, and prosperity. Deeply proud of the British victory and their own identity as "free Britons," they neither wanted nor foresaw what the next two decades would bring—independence, revolution, and yet another war.

INDEPENDENCE

The Seven Years' War had left Great Britain with a huge debt by the standards of the day. Moreover, thanks in part to Pontiac's Rebellion, a massive American Indian uprising in the territories won from France, the British decided to keep an army in postwar North America. Surely the colonists could help pay for that army and a few other expenses of administering Britain's much enlarged American empire. Rather than request help from provincial legislatures, however, Britain decided to raise the necessary money by acts of Parliament.

Two laws, the Sugar Act (1764) and the Stamp Act (1765), began the conflict between London and America. The Sugar Act imposed duties on certain imports not, as in the past, to affect the course of trade—for example, by making it more expensive for colonists to import molasses from the non-British than from the British West Indies—but to raise a revenue in America "for

defraying the expense of defending, protecting, and securing the same.” The Stamp Act levied entirely new excise taxes (like sales taxes) in America on pamphlets, almanacs, newspapers and newspaper advertisements, playing cards, dice, and a wide range of legal and commercial documents. Those accused of violating the Stamp Act would be tried in Admiralty Courts, which had no juries and whose jurisdiction normally pertained to maritime affairs. The colonists protested that provision because it violated their right to trial by jury. Above all, however, they insisted that both acts levied taxes on them and that, under the old English principle of “no taxation without representation,” Parliament had no right to tax the colonists because they had no representatives in the House of Commons.

British spokesmen did not question the principle but argued that the colonists, like many Englishmen in places that could not send delegates to Parliament, were “virtually” represented in Parliament because its members sought the good of the British people everywhere, not just of those who chose them. That made no sense to the Americans, who lived in a young society where representation was generally tied to population and voters expected their representatives to know and defend their interests. A legislator could not represent people who did not choose him, they argued. It was as simple as that.

Several colonies unsuccessfully petitioned Parliament against the Sugar and Stamp Acts. A Stamp Act Congress of delegates from nine colonies met in New York in October 1765, passed resolutions asserting their rights, and petitioned the king, the Lords, and the Commons for redress of their grievances. What else could the colonists do? Allowing the Stamp Act to go into effect would create a precedent for new taxes, which Parliament would surely approve again and again because every tax on the Americans relieved them and their constituents of that financial burden.

Boston led the way. On August 14 and 15, 1765, a popular uprising there forced the Massachusetts stamp collector, Andrew Oliver, to resign his office. That meant there was nobody in the colony to distribute stamps or collect the taxes. With a minimum of force, the Stamp Act had been effectively nullified in Massachusetts. Soon other colonies’ stampmen resigned to avoid Oliver’s fate. In the end, the Stamp Act went into effect only in remote Georgia for a brief time. In the spring of 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, but it also passed a Declaratory Act that said Parliament had the right to bind the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.”

As if to affirm that right, in 1767 the new chancellor of the exchequer, Charles Townshend, persuaded Parliament to pass an act levying new duties on glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea imported into the American colonies to help pay for the colonies’ defense and also to pay royal officials who had previously been dependent on provincial assemblies for their salaries. Those “Townshend duties” sparked a second wave of opposition. In an effort to avoid further violence within America, the colonists organized non-importation associations to build pressure for repeal of the duties among those manufacturers and merchants in Britain who suffered from the decline in exports to America. Only men signed the associations, but women often supported the effort by making homespun cloth to replace British textiles and seeking alternatives to imported tea. Exports to America declined enough that in 1770 Parliament repealed most of the Townshend duties, retaining only the one on tea.

That led to a third crisis in 1773, when Parliament passed a Tea Act to help the financially strapped East India Company (EIC) sell its surplus tea in America. The Tea Act did not impose a new tax. It refunded to the EIC duties collected in Britain and allowed the company to sell tea in America through its own agents (or “consignees”) rather than through independent merchants. The king’s minister, Lord North, who proposed the act, thought that the Tea Act would allow the EIC to price its tea low enough to compete with smugglers of cheap Dutch tea. The act also gave the EIC a monopoly of the American market, which caused discontent among colonial merchants cut out of the tea trade and others who feared that more monopolies would follow if this one became established. More important, Lord North insisted on retaining the old Townshend duty on tea. He did not anticipate how much opposition that would provoke from colonists determined to resist all taxes imposed upon them by Parliament.

The first tea ship, the *Dartmouth*, arrived in Boston on November 28, 1773. For several weeks thereafter, a mass meeting of “the Body of the People,” whose members came from Boston and several nearby towns, tried unsuccessfully to get the consignees to resign and to secure permission from customs officials and the royal governor for the ships to leave the harbor and take their tea back to England. (In Philadelphia and New York, the consignees resigned and the tea ships were successfully sent back to England with the tea chests still on board.) Finally, on December 16, the night before the tea became subject to seizure by customs men, to whom the consignees would surely pay the duty, a group of men disguised as Indians threw 342 chests of tea into the harbor.

An angry Parliament responded to the “Boston Tea Party” in 1774 by passing a series of Coercive Acts that the colonists soon called the “Intolerable Acts.” They closed Boston Harbor (the Port Act); nullified the Massachusetts Charter of 1691 and instituted a new government with greater royal control (the Massachusetts Government Act); and allowed royal officials accused of committing felonies while executing their offices in Massachusetts to be tried in England (the Administration of Justice Act). The fourth Coercive Act, a new Quartering Act, facilitated housing troops where they could be used against colonial civilians. Soon the king appointed General Thomas Gage, head of the British army in North America, as governor of Massachusetts, and essentially put the province under military rule.

If the Coercive Acts were meant to isolate Massachusetts, they failed; the other colonies rallied to its defense. A Continental Congress met in Philadelphia (September 5–October 26, 1774), adopted a statement of rights, demanded the repeal of several acts of Parliament including the “unconstitutional” Coercive Acts, advised the people of Massachusetts to act in self defense, and approved a comprehensive program of economic sanctions against Britain (the “Continental Association”) that would be enforced by elected local committees. It also called a second Continental Congress to meet on May 10, 1775, if the Americans’ grievances had not yet been redressed. By then, however, war between provincial and regular soldiers had begun at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts (April 19, 1775).

The Second Continental Congress again petitioned the king for redress of grievances and assured him of the colonists’ loyalty. Nonetheless, in a proclamation in August and again in a speech to Parliament in October 1775, King George III said that the Americans were seeking independence. Their professions of loyalty, he claimed, were “meant only to amuse,” that is, to mislead. He had already decided that only force could end the conflict. In November, Lord

Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, offered freedom to slaves who fled to the British lines. That further alienated white planters. And in December, the king signed a Prohibitory Act that put American shipping on the same status as that of enemy nations, effectively putting the American colonists outside his protection. Soon he began negotiating with German princes to hire soldiers to help put down the American “rebellion.” Those actions drove more and more Americans toward the independence that the king sought to prevent.

Some colonists—roughly 20 percent of the population—remained loyal to the Crown. Those “loyalists” included farmers and artisans of modest means as well as wealthy merchants and planters. One group, however, was represented among loyalists out of proportion to its incidence in the population as a whole: British officeholders, from sheriffs to royal governors. Other loyalists lived in areas cut off from the flow of information, and so were not driven by events to reconsider their allegiance, or they had reason to think their liberty and interests would be better served under the Crown than in a government controlled by the majority of their white male neighbors. Many members of the Church of England who lived in Congregationalist Connecticut drew that conclusion. So did the unassimilated members of several ethnic minorities and those slaves who flocked into British lines.

By the spring of 1776, however, even many reluctant colonists thought they had no choice. They could declare their independence and secure foreign help, probably from France, Britain’s old enemy, or they would be crushed. On July 2, Congress, confident that it had the support of the people, approved a resolution that “these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States,” then spent much of the next two days editing a draft declaration of independence. On July 4, it approved the text by which the United States claimed a “separate and equal station” among “the powers of the earth,” free of that allegiance to the Crown and state of Great Britain that had for so long been a cause of profound pride among the British colonists of North America.

REVOLUTION

The Declaration of Independence asserted the right of the people to “alter or to abolish” a government that failed to secure their rights and to adopt another in a form they thought most likely “to effect their safety and happiness.” For that purpose, the Americans rejected not only British rule but also monarchy. The governments they founded would be republics—that is, governments without any hereditary rulers, in which all power came directly or indirectly from the people. In the eighteenth century, that was revolutionary.

It might also have been foolhardy: all the republics of past times had failed. But with a resolution and radical preface approved on May 10 and 15, 1776, well before declaring independence, Congress had called on the states to establish new governments in which “every kind of authority” under the British Crown was “totally suppressed” and all authority was exerted “under the authority of the people.” In 1776, ten states wrote new constitutions (the world’s first written constitutions) or, in the case of Connecticut and Rhode Island, made appropriate changes in their colonial charters. New York and Georgia followed in 1777, along with Vermont, which was trying to win its independence from New York. Finally, in 1780, Massachusetts wrote the last of the first state constitutions. Soon states began to replace their first constitutions, building on their experience and the example of constitutions created in other states.

The state-based institutional experiments between 1776 and 1780 shaped the future of American government. At first, the states placed most power in their legislatures, which in most colonial governments had been the only institution elected by the people. Gradually, however, the states moved toward dividing power, first among the executive and two houses of the legislature (like the king, Lords, and Commons of Britain’s unwritten constitution), and then among the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of government (separation of function). As a result, the Articles of Confederation (which Congress sent to the states for ratification on November 15, 1777) seemed old-fashioned by the time the document was ratified in March 1781. The Articles made a worthy effort at dividing power between the states and the nation but put all of the central government’s power in one institution, Congress. In 1787, the Federal Convention in Philadelphia decided that the Confederation could not safely be given more power unless that power was divided among different branches of government. In that regard, as in others, the federal Constitution grew out of the earlier development of constitutions within the states.

The state constitution-writers also realized that constitutional or fundamental laws had to be distinguished from ordinary laws, which could be enacted and then easily revised by state legislatures. Massachusetts solved that problem in 1780 when it adopted a state constitution that had been—by popular demand—drafted by a specially elected state convention, then ratified directly by the sovereign people in the towns. Henceforth constitutions, including the federal Constitution, would be a direct act of legislation by “We the people,” a phrase that, in 1787, the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia took directly from the 1780 Massachusetts constitution and inserted into the federal Constitution. Ordinary laws remained the work of legislatures. That distinction remains fundamental to the American legal system.

These critical institutional advances were achieved relatively quickly and remain part of the Revolution’s legacy. Other changes took more time. The ideals of the Revolution, especially the notion that “all men are created equal” and have God-given rights, and that all legitimate authority comes from consent, were incompatible with the institution of slavery. Some states understood that and passed gradual emancipation laws or laws that facilitated private manumissions. Often, slaves freed themselves by running away—repeatedly if necessary. Women, too, began to ask why the laws treated them differently than men. In truth, even the idea of equality among white men faced resistance in a society where educated and propertied white men saw themselves as the country’s natural rulers. But just raising the issue of what equality implied made clear that colonial America was gone forever, and that the Revolution would, in time, bring changes far beyond what its most prominent advocates anticipated.

WAR

The war was not the Revolution, but without military victory the Revolution—that is, the fundamental changes that revolution brought—would have failed. Even a negotiated settlement with Britain would have brought the Americans back under the British Crown, ending the republic, the constitutional experimentation, and the social transformations begun in 1776.

At first, the Americans did remarkably well against the king’s troops. General Gage arrived in Boston expecting, as did the king and ministers in Britain, that a modest number of regular soldiers could arrest local troublemakers and restore royal authority in Massachusetts. That expectation proved to be wrong. Insurgent colonists throughout the colony forced men appointed

to the new provincial Council under the Massachusetts Government Act to resign or flee to the protection of the royal army in Boston. Then the provincials imposed heavy casualties on the regular soldiers retreating toward Boston after the battles at Lexington and Concord, and again two months later, on June 17, 1775, at the Battle of Bunker (or, more exactly, Breed's) Hill. Soon after, General George Washington took charge of the Massachusetts Provincial Army, which became the Continental Army, camped in Cambridge. The king's soldiers remained under siege across the Charles River in Boston, then a peninsula connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway. After the Americans fortified Dorchester Heights, threatening British control of the harbor, General William Howe, Gage's successor, decided to evacuate, which he and his army did on March 17, 1776.

If the king's troops were conducting not a local police action but a war, the place to be was in or near New York City, an island at the base of the great Hudson River. And there, in late June and early July, as the Continental Congress in Philadelphia bravely declared independence, the British assembled more than 30,000 experienced soldiers and sailors, the greatest military force ever seen in North America. At the end of June, Washington had only 19,000 troops, most of whom had been in active duty only a few months. By contrast, privates in the British infantry units averaged nine years of service. Similarly, the king's generals averaged thirty years of military experience, while their American counterparts had only two. It took no genius to see that the provincials were not only outnumbered but also seriously outclassed.

Washington lost the Battle of Brooklyn Heights on nearby Long Island (August 27, 1776), but managed to transfer his remaining men to Manhattan that night. He retreated up the island and crossed onto the mainland, fought a battle at White Plains in Westchester County, New York, on October 28, then slipped down through New Jersey, where the people were busy trying to save their necks by signing loyalty oaths to the king. Even Washington feared the war was lost. But he crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania on December 11, then re-crossed it and stopped the downward spiral by winning critical battles at Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey, on December 26, 1776, and January 3, 1777. Then he took his army into winter quarters as irregular troops in New Jersey, angered by British soldiers' abuses of civilians, put the king's forces on the defensive.

The year 1777 was a turning point in the war. General John Burgoyne led a major campaign from Canada down the Richelieu and Hudson Rivers, but the Continental Army, reinforced with New England militiamen, forced him to surrender at Saratoga, New York (October 17). After hearing the news, the French opened negotiations for an alliance. On February 6, 1778, the French and American negotiators signed a treaty of military alliance and another of amity and commerce, which Congress ratified the following September. Once France entered the war, Britain had to defend its homeland and its possessions in the West Indies, not just fight the Americans. Moreover, it had to face a powerful French navy on the world's waterways. That made the war much harder for Britain to win.

As a consequence, the British evacuated Philadelphia in 1778, which General Howe had taken the year before (when he might better have relieved Burgoyne). Leaving a base on Manhattan, they concentrated their attention on the southern colonies, as if to save a part of their American empire, while waging secondary battles on the western frontier and making scattershot attacks on New England ports. The British took Savannah in December 1778, then Charleston, where the

American General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered his army in May 1780. A second American army under General Horatio Gates fell to the British at Camden, North Carolina, in August.

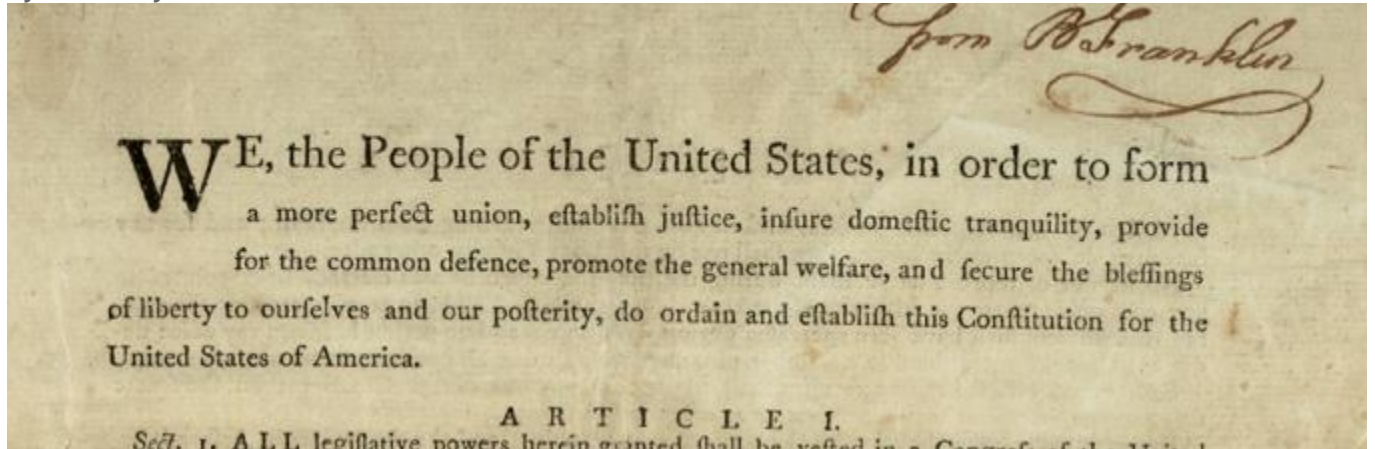
Even without an American army in the field, the fighting continued. The British organized loyalist militias to maintain control over conquered territory, but once the British army left, guerrilla bands emerged from hiding and the war in the South became a nasty civil war, neighbor against neighbor. Meanwhile, a third southern army, under General Nathanael Greene, nibbled away at the British army until its commander, Lord Charles Cornwallis, retreated northward into Virginia. Finally Cornwallis settled in at Yorktown on the Chesapeake Bay waiting for reinforcements from New York. That was a big mistake: the French fleet under Comte François de Grasse sealed the bay off to British ships while Washington and the French General Rochambeau marched south and mounted a siege that forced Cornwallis to open negotiations for a surrender (October 17, 1781). The British still held New York City and Charleston, but Lord North understood that the war was over when he heard the news. Parliament would not replace Cornwallis's army. It had thrown enough good money after bad.

Thanks in part to the skill of the American negotiators, the Peace of Paris (1783) was very favorable to the United States. Great Britain recognized American independence, as France had done in 1778, and the United States gained all the land east of the Mississippi between Canada, which Britain retained, and Florida, which returned to Spain. The future of the American republic remained uncertain, but it would at least be in the hands of its people, a people who had, with considerable help from the French, won their independence from the most powerful nation in the world.

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The New Nation, 1783–1815

by Alan Taylor



Preamble of the US Constitution, printed by Dunlap and Claypoole, September 17, 1787. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The leaders of the American Revolution made three great gambles. First, they sought independence from the powerful British Empire, becoming the first colonies in the Americas to revolt and seek independence from their mother empire. Second, they formed a union of thirteen states, which was also unprecedented, for the colonies had long histories of bickering with one another. Third, the revolutionaries committed their new states to a republic, then a radical and risky form of government. In a republic, the people were the sovereign—rejecting the rule of a monarch and aristocrats. Today we take for granted that governments elected by the people can be stable, long lasting, and effective. But the Americans in the new nation were not so sure, given the lessons of history. In 1789, the United States was the only large republic in the world; the others were a handful of small city-states scattered in Europe, and none of the larger republics in the history of the world had lasted very long. Like the ancient republic of Rome, they had collapsed and reverted to some form of tyranny, usually by a military dictator.

Any one of those three gambles was an enormous risk. The miracle was that the revolutionaries pulled off all three of them, winning their war against the British, and securing a generous boundary in the peace treaty of 1783: west to the Mississippi, south to Florida, and north to the Great Lakes, with the Atlantic Ocean as the eastern boundary.

During the mid-1780s, however, the new nation seemed about to collapse as quickly as it had been created. The first constitution of the United States was the Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1781. It proved too weak to control the powerful state governments. Unable directly to tax people, the confederation lacked its own revenue and could not afford an army or a navy,

or even to pay the interest on its massive war debt. American Indians defied the confederation, and the Europeans insisted that no republic could endure on such a big geographic scale.

Plus the states were roiled by social conflicts between the wealthy gentlemen and the common people over issues of credit or debt. Gentlemen faulted the state governments for pandering to common voters by offering to relieve debtors at the expense of their creditors, those gentlemen who had loaned them money and goods. The gentlemen concluded that the state governments were too democratic, which meant too responsive to public opinion. And when a rare state government did favor the creditors, it provoked resistance from armed farmers.

In 1787 alarmed gentlemen gathered in Philadelphia for a constitutional convention meant to shift power away from the states in favor of the nation. After a heated political debate between the Federalists (in favor of the Constitution) and the Antifederalists in state ratification conventions, eleven of the thirteen states ratified the new Constitution in 1787 and 1788. The laggard two would join within the following three years, once promised a bill of rights to amend the Constitution.

Brief and often vague, the US Constitution left much to the interpretation of the leaders who implemented the new government. Today, we celebrate the Constitution as if it put the nation on autopilot to greatness. In fact, the new federal government would rise or fall, become strong or remain weak, depending on the decisions made by the leaders and voters.

In 1789 the new American republic seemed to teeter between future greatness and imminent collapse. Unlike present-day Americans, the leaders of the early republic could not comfort themselves with a long and successful history of free and united government. Although endowed with an immense potential, the United States was then a new and weak country in a world of more powerful empires deeply suspicious of republican government.

The American experiment in independence, union, and republicanism seemed especially unstable because the thirteen states were so different. The commercial states of the North contrasted with the agricultural South, and the new settlements west of the Appalachians feared domination by the old eastern communities of the Atlantic seaboard. Many observers expected the union and republic would eventually but inevitably collapse in some civil war either between the North and South or between the East and West.

When the newly elected Congress and President gathered to implement the Constitution, the federal government benefitted from extraordinary leadership at the top. The dignified president, George Washington, was revered for commanding the Revolutionary army to victory over the mighty British. His vice president, John Adams, had a genius for political theory. The new Cabinet included Alexander Hamilton, high-strung but the leading financial genius in the nation, as well as the mercurial Thomas Jefferson, who served as the secretary of state. The primary author of the new Constitution, James Madison, became the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Madison, Washington, and Jefferson came from Virginia, the largest state in territory, population, and wealth. Adams hailed from Massachusetts and Hamilton from New York.

But the new leaders soon divided into rival political parties, a development that shocked them all, for they had designed the Constitution to discourage organized partisanship. Washington, Adams, and Hamilton claimed the name of Federalists, while Jefferson and Madison organized an opposition known as the Democratic-Republicans, or Republicans (which should not be confused with the Republican Party of today).

The two parties polarized over four big issues: political economy, foreign policy, how to interpret the Constitution, and the proper nature of a republic. First, the Republicans sought to preserve the nation's agricultural economy out of a conviction that it alone could sustain a relatively simple and equal class structure for white men. The Federalists, however, hoped to accelerate industrial development, which might enrich the nation as a whole but produce greater extremes of wealth and poverty, power, and powerlessness.

Second, the two parties divided over how to react to the renewed warfare between the two superpowers of the age: France and Britain. After the French Revolution created a radical republic, the Republicans favored France, while the Federalists preferred the more conservative government of Britain.

Third, the two parties disagreed over whether the Constitution should be read narrowly or broadly. Federalists insisted that the document contained broad *implicit* powers that would enable the federal government to subordinate the states. But the Republicans insisted on a limited and literal interpretation that reserved to the states all of the powers not specifically assigned by the Constitution to the federal government. This clash of interpretations appeared in 1791, when Hamilton proposed a national bank to manage the economy. The Republicans opposed the bank as a measure that would strengthen the federal government at the expense of the states, and they could find no specific authorization for a national bank in the Constitution. In this case, Hamilton prevailed.

Fourth, the two parties clashed over the proper definition of a republic. Republicans supported a democratic vision of the republic where the public opinion of common men guided their leaders. The Federalists, however, defended a more traditional republic, where the common people deferred to the judgment of wealthier and better-educated gentlemen. They asserted a subtle but important distinction between a republic, which they supported, and a democracy, which they feared. A Massachusetts congressman, George Cabot, described the ideal republic as “a perfect whole in which the general harmony is preserved, each one learning his proper place and keeping to it.” In the Federalists' republic, the common men were supposed to vote for the right sort of people—the wealthy and well born—and between elections the people were supposed to keep quiet and stay home, permitting the elected to govern as they saw fit.

Where Federalists spoke of themselves as “Fathers of the People,” the Republicans preferred the more egalitarian identity as “Friends of the People.” While the Federalists offered social stability, the Republicans promised social mobility. During the 1790s, most Americans preferred stability, but the majority would swing at the start of the new century.

Like the Federalist leaders, the prominent Republicans were well-educated gentlemen, but they felt more comfortable with appealing to common voters. The Federalists denounced the leading Republicans as rogue gentlemen, as unprincipled “demagogues” who pandered to the common

people with flattery and hollow promises. Such demagogues sought power by warning the common people to reject the Federalists as British-style aristocrats who wanted to ruin the republic so that they could install a king. Of course, the Federalists insisted that they defended the republic against the lies and the greed of the demagogues.

The Republicans cared primarily for the rights of free white men, who alone could vote in most of the states. The Republicans catered to the desires of common white men to preserve their legal rights over their wives and their slaves. And the Republicans promised to provide farms for the next generation by taking western land from the American Indians. The paternalism of the Federalists led them to offer a little more protection to the rights of free blacks and a little more room for women to express themselves in politics. Because free blacks generally voted Federalist, they usually lost the franchise when Republicans rewrote state constitutions. The same happened to widows in New Jersey, the one state in which women could vote until the Republicans came to power there. And, although the Federalists shared the national goal of western expansion, they proceeded more cautiously and slowly, treating the Indian nations with a little more diplomatic respect and generosity than did the Republicans.

Each party saw the other as bent on destroying the republic. In their bitter conflict with one another, they might have done so. Hostile to the concept of political parties, neither group accepted the legitimacy of the other. Both the Federalists and the Republicans believed that their party alone represented the public will and defended the public good. Consequently, their opponents had to be insidious conspirators determined to destroy both freedom and union. The partisans were so shrill because the stakes seemed so high: nothing less than the survival of free government in the United States, deemed the last, best hope for liberty in the world.

THE UNITED STATES IN 1790

In 1790 the federal government took the first census of the new country. The census takers found a population of four million people: fewer than the superpowers of the day, for the British had nearly fifteen million people and the French numbered twenty-six million. One-fifth of the Americans (800,000) were African Americans held in slavery. The small US population was dispersed over the eastern third of an entire continent, for the nation stretched 1,000 miles east-to-west, from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, and about 2,000 miles from Florida, on the south, to the Great Lakes, on the north.

This vast country had only five cities (Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Charleston) that exceeded 10,000 people, and the largest, Philadelphia, had barely 50,000. More than 90 percent of the people lived in the countryside on scattered farms and plantations. Thoroughly agricultural, the nation lacked much manufacturing except for a few small ironworks and many shipyards. Americans exported their surplus farm produce to pay for manufactured goods imported from Britain, which had industrialized. Most American farms barely supported the large families that lived on them. Along the Atlantic coast, the land seemed well cultivated, but in the hilly hinterland the settlements became small and stumpy pockets in a heavily forested land. The settlers slowly cleared away the forest with hand tools: axes, hoes, and shovels.

Because the best-built and largest houses tend to survive (while the typical small houses are torn down or rot away), we imagine that the early Americans led lives of gracious leisure among

future antiques. In fact, the large families of the early nation crowded into tiny, unpainted houses of log or clapboard, measuring 18 by 20 feet, with two rooms on the ground floor and a sleeping loft overhead. Few people enjoyed any privacy. Glass windows and stone chimneys were luxuries. Of course, the houses had no electricity, no plumbing, and no heating except for what an open fireplace could provide. Keeping those fires going meant long hours cutting and hauling firewood. Insects swarmed through the doors kept open for ventilation in the warm months. Calls of nature meant a walk to a crude, wooden privy.

The good news was that almost everyone, except the slaves, had plenty to eat, although the diet depended heavily on salted meat (usually pork) washed down with whiskey made from corn. Americans took immense pride in how much they could eat, how fast they could eat it, and at the amount of salt and of animal fat that they could consume.

By law, a married woman was a “femme covert,” which meant subordination to her husband, who owned any property that she brought into the marriage. Married women could not sue or be sued in the courts. They could not draft wills, make contracts, or buy and sell property. If they earned any wage, the money legally belonged to their husbands. Even if a husband absconded for a time, his wife remained bound by coverture, and so he could claim any business she conducted or money she earned during his absence.

It was more than law and custom that denied women political and social equality; it was also the long and exhausting work that left them little time and energy. Women tended chickens, milked cows, made meals for their large families, and cleaned houses that kept filling with dirt trekked in from the fields. They had to make by hand most of the clothing worn by the family and wash that clothing by hand with soap they also had to make from scratch. Because there was virtually no artificial birth control, married women spent the first fifteen to twenty years of their marriages either pregnant or nursing.

But the Revolution did generate some new ideas that began, very slowly, to open new opportunities for women to escape the constrictions of the traditional household. Abigail Adams and other thoughtful women articulated a new concept of women as Republican mothers. They noted that the republic depended on a virtuous citizenry of men. Virtue meant an ability to put the public good ahead of self-interest. Women noted that a young man’s character depended on his rearing by his mother, who instilled the values of virtue. In 1791, Judith Sargent Murray wrote that God had “assigned the care of making the first impressions on the infant minds of the whole human race, a trust of more importance than the government of provinces and the marshaling of armies.”

Republican motherhood offered a larger place for women in society, but it also reinforced their domestic position. The promoters of Republican motherhood continued to think that women should only work in and around the home. Rather than seek the right to vote, they primarily wanted respect for their contributions to their families. Consequently, women claimed a right and a duty to speak out on public issues that affected their children, so that they could better raise virtuous sons. To that end, they sought greater legal protections from abusive and drunken husbands, and eventually the right to own property and to speak in public.

THE CONTENTIOUS ISSUE OF SLAVERY

In 1776, slavery was legal and present in every state, but far more slaves lived in the South, where they had become essential to the plantation economy. Raising tobacco, rice, and indigo depended on slave labor. Cotton joined that list after 1793, when Eli Whitney invented his cotton gin, which improved ten-fold over hand labor the pace of removing seed husks from the cotton balls. Thereafter cotton cultivation and slavery expanded rapidly in tandem across the South.

The Revolution led some leaders, including Jefferson, Madison, and Washington, to discern the hypocrisy of preaching liberty while practicing slavery, but they felt stymied by the economic importance and political popularity of slavery to most white southerners. The founders recognized that the southern states would accept no union without at least implicit protections for slavery—a position embraced by the federal Constitution. Congress did bar slavery in the Northwest Territory (north of the Ohio River), but allowed it in the Southwest Territory. Congress also abolished the importation of slaves from abroad, but did not do so until 1807. The federal government did nothing to stem the much larger interstate trade in slaves and had no authority to abolish slavery in the states.

The federal impotence on slavery left the issue to the states. During the 1780s and 1790s, the northern states gradually began to abolish slavery. State court decisions freed the slaves in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, but most of the northern states eliminated slavery gradually and by legislative enactment. For example, in 1799 New York stipulated that freedom would come to slaves once a woman reached twenty-five years and a man twenty-eight years.

It was relatively easy to abolish slavery in the northern states, where slaves comprised only 5 percent of the population. But slaves accounted for 40 percent of the southern population. No southern state would emancipate the slaves for fear that abolition would damage the plantation economy and that free blacks would seek revenge for their long sufferings under slavery. Thomas Jefferson insisted, “We have a wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale and self-preservation on the other.”

During the early 1780s, Virginia and Maryland did allow owners individually to free slaves through a process known as manumission. Consequently, the free black population in those two states grew from almost none in 1775 to 94,000 in 1810. Most African Americans, however, remained enslaved in Virginia and Maryland, and the other southern states discouraged manumissions.

White southerners dreaded a deadly uprising by their slaves. Their nightmare nearly became reality in and around Richmond, Virginia, in 1800. A blacksmith named Gabriel recruited at least 500 fellow slaves to seize arms from the state arsenal and dictate emancipation to the governor. They planned to strike on the night of August 30, 1800, but a thunderstorm suddenly flooded roads and bridges, making it tough to assemble the rebels. Tipped off, the white authorities rallied the militia and hunted down the rebel leaders. Virginia hanged twenty-seven rebels including Gabriel. A traveler reported that one of the rebels (unnamed in the record) declared, “I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer had he been taken by the British and put to trial. I have adventured my life in endeavouring to obtain the

liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause.” It chilled white southerners to hear their Revolutionary rhetoric turned against them.

Rather than reconsider slavery, the Virginians decided that they had been too soft on their slaves and had allowed them too much leeway to move around without proper passes. The leaders concluded that free blacks set a bad example, inspiring slaves to think that they could and should be free as well. In 1806 the Virginia legislature required any newly freed slave to leave the state, which discouraged further manumissions. Rejecting the libertarianism of the Revolution, southern leaders gradually adopted an aggressive defense of slavery, which insisted that blacks were racially inferior and unfit for freedom.

Only the most liberal of the southern planters could imagine some plan of gradual emancipation, but even they would not allow freed blacks to remain in America. Deporting freed men and women to Africa was prohibitively expensive, however, and the plantation economy was too profitable for most slaveholders to forsake. Finally, almost all the slaves had been born in America, spoke English, and had, over the generations, developed an African American culture. Despite the racism of American life, few wanted to risk an uncertain future on a distant continent. Richard Allen, a black Philadelphia minister, insisted, “This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood is now our mother country.” African Americans wanted to be free and equal in America.

Because the South rejected any program of emancipation, slavery expanded westward into Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and (after 1803) Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. The slave population nearly doubled from 676,601 in 1790 to 1,165,405 in 1810. The United States became divided into two regions, a North characterized by the absence of slavery and a South staunchly committed to slavery. But the racism of white supremacy prevailed in both regions, enabling a political union to survive despite the regional differences.

THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES AND THE AMERICAN INDIANS

To the west, the fertile soil beckoned, but the wretched roads over the mountains discouraged westward migration of people and the eastward flow of trade from the new settlements. The settlers found it easier to float their produce in boats down the western rivers to the Mississippi and on to the port of New Orleans, which then belonged to Spain. Consequently, easterners feared that the western settlers might soon break away from the new country to seek some association with the Spanish, a prospect promoted by Spanish agents.

American Indian nations resisted the expansion of the United States. Although relatively few—about 70,000 in the territory between the Great Lakes, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Mississippi—the Natives were skilled at the guerrilla warfare of the frontier. During the 1780s the nations north of the Ohio River created a confederacy pledged to sell no land and to attack any settlers who crossed that river. The Indians obtained guns and ammunition from the Spanish in Louisiana and from the British, who kept forts along the Great Lakes, some of them within the American boundary in defiance of the peace treaty that ended the Revolutionary War. By helping

the Indians, the Spanish and the British hoped to keep the American settlements small, weak, and on the defensive.

Indian resistance threatened the fiscal solvency of the new United States, which needed to sell western lands to raise revenue. Since speculators would not buy land where it was too dangerous for settlers to live, the United States also needed to defeat the Indians to impress the western settlers. If the federal troops failed, the settlers might reject the union as irrelevant and try to govern themselves or submit to the Spanish or British. If the national leadership could wage and win the western war, however, they could turn the West into the republic's greatest asset rather than its worst menace.

After suffering heavy defeats in 1790 and 1791, the US Army routed the American Indians at Fallen Timbers, Ohio, in 1794. Disgusted by a lack of British help at the critical moment, the Natives dissolved their confederacy and made peace as separate nations. The United States acquired two-thirds of Ohio and the right to establish forts in the rest of the western country. Meanwhile the British agreed in the Jay Treaty of 1794 to surrender their forts within the American line. The transfer came during the summer of 1796 and further strengthened the American hold over the western country.

In 1795, the Americans also negotiated a favorable deal with the Spanish. Fearing a British attack on New Orleans, the Spanish suddenly sought improved relations with the United States and allowed Americans to export their goods through New Orleans without paying any duties. The Spanish also withdrew from their forts within the American boundary line. As trade down the Mississippi to New Orleans boomed, more settlers moved west to exploit the fertile lands. Federal land sales soared, generating revenues for the federal government. In sum, between 1794 and 1796, the United States dramatically gained control over its long western frontier.

Rather than treat the western territories as colonies, the United States steadily integrated them into the union as new states admitted as the equals of the original states. During the 1780s Congress had adopted two ordinances to regulate the process. The Northwest Ordinance of 1785 set up the ground rules for settling the land. The federal government would employ surveyors to divide the frontier land into a grid of square townships subdivided into 640-acre sections for sale to land speculators, who would make profits by reselling the lands to small farmers in smaller lots: usually 160 acres, a good size for a farm. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established rules for making western territories into future states. Once a federal territory reached 60,000 people, it could hold a convention to frame a state constitution. If approved by Congress, the territory became a state, a status achieved by Ohio in 1803. Many more western states would follow.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DEBATE

During the angry politics of the 1790s, the Republicans gradually proved the best match for American society. They insisted that a republic needed vigorous debate and public criticism of its leaders. Madison reminded Congress that in a republic “the censorial power is in the people over the government, and not in the government over the people.” The Republicans despised the Federalist efforts to suppress political dissent outside of the halls of Congress, particularly by private clubs and newspapers. Possessing less confidence in the judgment of uneducated voters,

the Federalists feared that unregulated political criticism would undermine respect for the government and lead to a violent anarchy that would destroy the republic.

During the early 1790s, western settlers violently resisted a new federal excise tax levied on whiskey stills. Washington and Hamilton regarded the resistance as a critical test of the new government's credibility. In 1794 the Washington administration sent 12,000 militiamen into western Pennsylvania to suppress the so-called "Whiskey Rebels." Declining to fight, most ran away and hid, enabling the federal government to enforce the new tax. The President angrily blamed the tax resistance on a set of Republican political clubs known as "the Democratic Societies," which he declared "the most diabolical attempt to destroy the best fabric of human government and happiness." The Federalists denounced the societies as "self-created," in contrast to the government, which had a constitution ratified by the people. The Federalists dreaded any political activity by privately organized groups outside of the constitutional structure. Of course, the Republicans disagreed, for they had much greater faith in the ability of common white men to make rational decisions if they had free access to political information.

The debate over free speech became more heated and dangerous in 1798, during a foreign policy crisis with France. Irritated by the growing American trade with Great Britain, the French seized American merchant ships on the high seas. Adding insult to injury, the French demanded bribes and tribute from American diplomats in Paris, in a controversy known as the XYZ Affair. Exploiting popular outrage, the Federalist-dominated federal government prepared for war and denounced the Republicans as French sympathizers. Congress criminalized dissent, particularly when expressed by newly arrived immigrants. Most came from Ireland and supported the Republicans, who shared their hatred of the British Empire. To reduce their political influence, Congress extended the period for naturalization as a citizen to fourteen years from the previous five. Congress also authorized the President to expel any unnaturalized alien deemed "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States."

Congress also passed a Sedition Act, which applied to citizens as well as aliens. The Sedition Act made it a federal crime to utter or publish "any false, scandalous, and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States or the President of the United States, with intent to defame . . . or to bring them into contempt or disrepute." The government pressed seventeen sedition cases, primarily against the editors of Republican newspapers. Ten resulted in conviction and punishment.

The Alien and Sedition Acts outraged the Republicans as further proof that the Federalists meant to stifle debate and dissent. In late 1798 the Republican-dominated state governments of Kentucky and Virginia adopted resolutions written by Jefferson and Madison respectively. Those resolutions denounced the Alien and Sedition Acts as unconstitutional. They further hinted that states could nullify enforcement of such laws within their bounds. The other state legislatures, however, blanched at the doctrine of nullification and rejected the Kentucky and Virginia resolves.

Instead, the election of 1800 would decide the fate of the federal republic and of its union. If the Federalists retained power, Jefferson threatened that Virginia and Kentucky would "sever ourselves from that union we so much value, rather than give up the rights of self government

. . . in which alone we see liberty.” He valued the union but only if led by Republicans, whom he saw as alone dedicated to freedom and states’ rights.

In the election, the Republicans prevailed because the Sedition Act and federal taxes proved so unpopular. After a heated race Jefferson won the presidency by seventy-three electoral votes to sixty-five for the Federalist John Adams. The Republicans captured control of Congress as well. In subsequent elections, the Republicans would build their majority, as the Federalists faded. The Friends of the People had triumphed over the Fathers of the People. But their people were white: Jefferson’s new postmaster general fired all the free blacks working in his department.

Because the election of 1800 swept the Federalists from power, Jefferson called his victory the “Revolution of 1800.” His victory vindicated the principle that the republic’s rulers should attend carefully to public opinion and should avoid preaching deference to the common people. The Sedition Act expired and Jefferson pardoned prisoners convicted under that law. Congress also appealed to immigrants by reducing the period of naturalization from fourteen years back to just five. In practice, however, Jefferson and his fellow Republicans proved inconsistent as civil libertarians. In 1804 the new president explained, “While we deny that Congress have a right to controul the freedom of the press, we have ever asserted the right of the states, and their exclusive right to do so.” Indeed, Jefferson urged Republican governors to prosecute the Federalist editors in their state courts.

Jefferson also rejected the more regal style of the Federalist presidents, Washington and Adams, who had staged elaborate rituals, worn expensive clothes, and held fancy receptions. The Federalists believed that shows of power helped to build public respect for the government. Of course, the Republicans insisted that these displays sought to dazzle the people into gradually accepting a monarchy and an aristocracy.

As president, Jefferson eliminated most of the rituals and receptions. He sold the presidential coaches, horses, and silver harnesses. On public occasions, he walked to Congress, and he often wore drab, simple clothing. The British ambassador felt insulted when the President received him wearing a bathrobe and slippers. Although quite wealthy, Jefferson made a show of his common touch, setting a tone followed by later presidents.

Jefferson’s symbolic reform benefitted from the relocation of the national capital, just before his election, from the cosmopolitan city of Philadelphia to a woody new town on the Potomac—Washington, DC. Jefferson regarded this rustic setting as perfect for the weak federal government that he desired, for he sought to decentralize power by reducing the power of the federal government to give a greater share to the states, which he saw as more democratic because they were closer to the people. Jefferson rejected the Federalist vision of a powerful and centralized nation, like those in Europe.

To weaken the federal government, Jefferson sought to pay off and eliminate the national debt, which Hamilton had regarded as an essential bond of the union. The Republicans cut the national debt in half, from \$80 million in 1800 to \$40 million in 1810. At the same time, Jefferson reduced taxes and eliminated the hated whiskey tax. Jefferson accomplished this goal, in part, by reducing federal government to a bare minimum, and by cutting back on the Army and the Navy. He limited the American foreign service to just three countries: the ambassadors to France,

Spain, and Great Britain. But he primarily reduced the debt thanks to a great increase in federal revenue from two sources: a surge in imports increased the funds generated by the tariff, and an acceleration of western migration enhanced the sale of federal lands.

Jefferson sought to provide frontier farms for a growing American population that doubled every twenty-five years. He insisted that a republic needed a broad distribution of property in the hands of many small farmers. Only by taking more land from American Indians could the Republicans prolong America's relatively egalitarian social structure (save, of course, for slavery).

Jefferson expected American migration to overwhelm the Spanish empire, which claimed Florida and the immense territory west of the Mississippi known as Louisiana, but the Spanish threatened that vision by selling Louisiana to the French in 1800. A ruthless general, Napoleon Bonaparte, had seized power in France, and he meant to build a global empire.

Fortunately for Jefferson, military setbacks persuaded Napoleon to sell Louisiana to the United States in 1803 for the bargain price of \$15 million. Although the Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the size of the United States and averted war, it contradicted Jefferson's commitments to reduce the federal government through frugality. The purchase added to the national debt that he had vowed to reduce. It also violated his very strict and literal construction of the federal Constitution, which did not explicitly authorize the purchase of new territory. You can imagine Jefferson's outrage if a Federalist president had made such a deal. Rather than lose the prize, Jefferson set aside his constitutional scruples and, with the support of the Senate, ratified the purchase treaty.

Jefferson also expanded federal power to wage an overseas war—something far beyond the ambitions of the Federalists, who had clung to neutrality in the conflicts on the other side of the Atlantic. By paying protection money, the Washington and Adams administrations had bought peace with the Barbary emirates of North Africa, which deployed pirates against the ships of non-Muslim nations. Determined to cut the federal budget, Jefferson cancelled the payments, which reaped a war with Tripoli. That war proved far more expensive than tribute, and it compelled Jefferson to keep the small deepwater navy that he had wanted to dissolve.

Jefferson expected a quick, easy, and cheap victory in “the Barbary War.” Instead he got four years of frustrating war in the first American conflict in the Islamic world. Making the most of their shallow waters and heavily fortified seaport, the Tripolitans fended off the larger American warships, and Americans reaped a logistical and financial nightmare trying to sustain a blockading fleet in the distant Mediterranean. In 1805 the ruler of Tripoli made a face-saving treaty with the Americans. In return for \$60,000, he released his American prisoners and promised to leave American ships alone, without any future payments. Americans celebrated the Tripoli war as a great school for naval heroes and as a great victory for liberty over a land of slavery for white men. But within a few years, the pirates resumed attacking American ships, and did so with impunity because the United States had been sucked into another war with Great Britain.

To pay down the national debt, the Jefferson administration relied on a great surge in American overseas commerce, which enhanced the tariff revenue. Between 1793 and 1805, trade increased as American merchant ships exploited their neutral status to take trade away from the two great

belligerents, France and Britain. American seaports and shipyards boomed. The tonnage of American shipping tripled and the value of trade soared from \$43 million in 1790 to \$246 million in 1807.

The booming American trade appalled the British, for it rescued the French economy from a British blockade and, as the premier commercial power in the world, the British resented the rise of the United States as a formidable rival. So in 1805 the British began to seize American merchant ships that carried goods from France or any of the French colonies. British naval captains aggressively enforced the new hard line, for they received a share in the auctioned value of confiscated ships and cargo. To fill vacancies in Royal Navy crews, the captains also seized sailors from the American ships, a practice known as “impressment.” The British insisted that the sailors were runaway Britons, while the Americans claimed they were American citizens. Often the sailors were immigrants from Britain, but the British refused to recognize any American right to naturalize British subjects. Between 1803 and 1812 the British impressed over 6,000 sailors who claimed to be American citizens.

For want of a larger navy of expensive ships, the United States could do little to resist the British seizures of American merchant ships and sailors. In June 1807, a British warship attacked and captured an American warship to impress some of its sailors. Still Jefferson balked at an overt war with the British. Instead, he settled for an “embargo” that ordered all American merchant ships to stay in port, barred from trading anywhere in the world. Jefferson reasoned that the British needed American trade more than America needed to trade with them. As an industrializing country with many workers, the British depended on importing food from, and exporting manufactures to, the United States.

Jefferson was mistaken. The British managed to get enough food elsewhere and to find new markets for their exports in Latin America. Indeed, they were delighted to see the United States suppress the very shipping that the British resented as unwanted competition. The embargo hurt the Americans far more than the British. It threw sailors and laborers out of work, bankrupted many merchants, and left farmers with surplus crops that they could no longer export. The economic pain revived the dying Federalist Party in the Northeast, the region hardest hit by the embargo. The Federalist comeback spooked the Republicans in that region. They pressured their colleagues in Congress and in the administration to abandon the embargo. Congress did so in March of 1809 just as Jefferson left the presidency and its troubles to his friend and successor, James Madison.

To no good end, the embargo had violated Republican principles that sought to protect liberty by limiting government’s power. The great proponent of minimal government, Thomas Jefferson, trapped his administration and party in a massive contradiction. He had dramatically expanded federal power to criminalize, for more than a year, the overseas commerce essential to national prosperity. By enforcing that misguided policy, Jefferson threatened thousands of Americans with financial ruin while rewarding smugglers with windfall profits. The two parties had reversed their positions. Jefferson used executive power against citizens, while the Federalist governors and state legislatures in New England threatened to nullify national laws.

The failure of the embargo left many Republicans feeling humiliated at their inability to protect American ships and sailors. A group of Jeffersonian congressmen known as War Hawks insisted

that there was no alternative but to declare war on Great Britain. But how was the United States to wage war on a maritime superpower like Great Britain? The United States had only seventeen warships compared to the 1,000 of the Royal Navy.

The War Hawks favored attacking the British colonies in nearby Canada by marching overland from the United States. This could be done cheaply, without the cost of building a large navy or even, they believed, of organizing a large, professional army. The War Hawks boasted that the civilian-soldiers of the state militias would suffice to conquer Canada. After all, the population of the United States exceeded Canada's by a ratio of 25 to 1. Caught up in this enthusiasm, Jefferson insisted that the conquest of Canada was "a mere matter of marching." However, the War Hawks were not clear about how losing Canada would force the British to make concessions about maritime issues. In June 1812, Congress and President Madison declared war on Great Britain anyway.

Waging war with a militia proved even more of a disaster than the embargo had been. Because so many militiamen deserted to avoid combat, the British and their Indian allies repeatedly repelled the invaders, while the American professional army was too small and too badly led to make a difference. Ironically, the little American Navy did much better, defeating several British warships in battles on the high seas. These unexpected naval victories boosted American morale and frustrated the British, who were used to always winning at sea. But a few small-scale naval victories did little to reduce the vastly superior number of British warships.

The war took a further turn for the worse in 1814, when the British and their European allies crushed Napoleon's France, freeing up thousands of British troops for deployment against the United States. During the summer and fall of 1814, British forces went on the offensive, invading the United States from multiple directions. They captured eastern Maine and briefly occupied and partially burned the national capital, Washington, DC—a great humiliation for the Madison administration. But, in general, American forces fought better defending their own country than they had as invaders of Canada. In September, the Americans fended off British attacks on Baltimore, Maryland, and Plattsburgh, New York.

Weary of the war, British diplomats offered the Americans generous terms in a peace treaty concluded at Ghent in Europe in December. The British agreed to withdraw from the lands they had occupied in eastern Maine, northern Michigan, and western New York. The treaty said nothing about the maritime issues that had led to war. Having failed to conquer Canada or compel British maritime concessions, the Republicans redefined national survival as victory. James Monroe, the Secretary of State, assured the Senate that "our Union has gained strength, our troops honor, and the nation character, by the contest."

In early February, the myth of the glorious war got a boost with the arrival, on the East Coast, of dramatic news that American troops had won a sensational victory near New Orleans. On January 8, in the war's most lopsided battle, General Andrew Jackson's army had routed 6,000 British regulars. At a cost of only thirty minutes and seventy-one casualties, the Americans had killed 290 Britons, wounded 1,262, and captured 484.

In mid-February, news of the great victory merged with the ratification of peace to shape the American memory of the war. Americans concluded that their one big victory on land had forced

the British to abandon the war. The New Orleans and the Ghent news also coincided with the arrival in Washington of a delegation of New England Federalists bearing the demands of a convention they had held at Hartford, Connecticut, to denounce the war and to demand amendments to the Constitution. Ignored by Congress and the President, the delegates returned home in a disgrace inflicted by the unanticipated events at New Orleans and Ghent. Thereafter, the Hartford Convention became a synonym for treason, and its bad reputation destroyed the Federalist revival in the Northeast, that party's last bastion.

So a war that had exposed the republic's weaknesses became, in memory, a war that had proven its strengths. Only a few Republicans wished to look back in sorrow. In 1816, John Quincy Adams soberly (but privately) remarked, "my countrymen . . . look too intently to their Triumphs & turn their eyes too lightly away from their disasters." He felt that Americans were "rather more proud than they have reason [to be] of the War."

But illusions often prove paradoxically valuable. The new confidence in the republic enabled Americans to accept the persistence of British Canada as innocuous. The northern border also seemed more secure as the British withdrew from supporting the American Indians within the United States. The ultimate legacy of the war was that the empire and the republic could safely share the continent along a border more generous to the Americans and more confining to the British—but most ominous to the Indians.

Although the Federalist Party died, its goals proved surprisingly vibrant within the ostensibly Republican nation. The Republicans had hoped to prolong the United States as an agricultural nation of small farmers. Yet they unwittingly and ironically did more to promote industrialization than the Federalists had. Their policies of embargo and war had interrupted the importation of British manufactured goods, which created opportunities for American investors to build factories to fill the consumer demand for textiles. After the war, the Republican congressmen from the North defended the new industries with a protective tariff that discouraged imports from Great Britain. That protective tariff hurt the farmers and planters of the South, who relied on exporting their produce in exchange for British manufactures. By 1860 the American Northeast resembled Hamilton's vision of an industrialized country rather than Jefferson's vision of a land of small farmers.

And although the Republicans prevailed in electoral politics, the Federalists endured within the federal judiciary, the third branch of the government. As the founders intended, the judiciary was not a democratic institution, for federal judges were not elected, and they served for life terms. The power of the federal judiciary belies any notion of the United States as thoroughly democratic in the wake of the Jeffersonian triumph.

In 1801, while Jefferson became president, a Federalist became the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. The lame-duck Federalist president, John Adams, had appointed John Marshall, a Virginian who despised his cousin, the new president. While Jefferson served as president for eight years, Marshall remained chief justice for thirty-five years, longer than anyone else in the history of that court. Marshall maintained his influence over the Court over the years despite the fact that most of his colleagues soon became Republican appointees. Marshall's charm and brilliance soon won most of them over to his perspective.

Marshall participated in more than 1,000 Supreme Court decisions, writing over half of them, far more than any other justice. Those decisions came at a critical period in the development of the nation and its economy. Marshall consistently favored four great Federalist principles. First, he asserted that the Supreme Court had the power to review the acts of Congress and of the President and to declare them unconstitutional; we call this “Judicial Review.” Second, he favored federal supremacy over the state governments by extending the right of federal judicial review to state laws. Again we now take this for granted, but prior to Marshall this was not an established principle. Remember that many Republicans preferred the doctrine of the Kentucky and Virginia resolves, which held that the state legislatures had the right to review and nullify federal laws. Third, the Marshall Court followed Hamilton rather than Jefferson in insisting that the Constitution implied broad powers for the national government. Fourth, Marshall repeatedly defended business interests against state laws by invoking the Constitution’s protection for contracts. During the nineteenth century, these four legal principles became widely accepted, ensuring that our inheritance from the early republic owes as much to the Federalists as to the Republicans.

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National Expansion and Reform, 1815–1860

by Joyce Appleby



"Stump Speaking," by George C. Bingham, 1856. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

A good way to understand the men and women who created America's reform tradition and carried it across the Mississippi in the years before the Civil War is to look at the political heritage their parents and grandparents left to them. The very idea of generations resonated with new meaning after independence. The conveyance of social responsibility from one generation to another is always a fascinating interplay of the inherited and the novel, but the American Revolution was a social and political rupture that clouded the future for young Americans. Together they faced a new way of life in a new nation.

While this attachment within the generation that inherited the Revolution weakened traditional loyalties, it also held out the promise of creating a new political will that would extend across the continent. The Revolutionary leader Gouverneur Morris expressed this hope when he wrote that a "national spirit is the natural result of national existence; and although some of the present generation may feel colonial oppositions of opinion, that generation will die away, and give place to a race of Americans."^[1]

Fighting a war for independence had not unified Americans. Rather it created the problem of unity—an imperative to hang together once the actual fighting ended and peace had been secured. The states were held together by a loose confederation. Much of the land Americans claimed still remained part of the ancestral domain of American Indians. The commonalities that did exist among the states—those of language, law, and institutional history—pointed in the wrong direction, back to the past when they were still part of the British Empire.

The Declaration of Independence with its charged statements about equality and "certain unalienable rights" proved far more divisive than unifying. The flagrant contradiction between

slavery and the principle of equality led to the first emancipation movement as one after another of the northern states abolished slavery in the waning years of the eighteenth century. With these remarkable acts, the Mason-Dixon boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania became the symbolic division between freedom and slavery, an ominous development at a time when Americans were working to strengthen their union.

The Constitution created a national government along with the new responsibility of being an American citizen for white men. Most of those who George Washington invited to serve in his administration were social conservatives who believed that the world was divided between the talented few and the ordinary many. They endorsed individual freedom and equality before the law, but believed that members of the upper class should govern, restricting the common man to voting. Thomas Jefferson, chafing at this elitist doctrine, organized an opposition to the Federalists based on the contentious issues of popular participation, free speech, and equal opportunity. Two raucous presidential campaigns permanently disrupted the electoral decorum that the Federalists had hoped to impose with the new constitutional order. Jefferson's presidential victory in 1800 opened the way for the next generation to fashion the world's first liberal society.

The embrace of personal liberty as a defining feature of American politics gave concrete grounds for the hope that slavery would end. The number of free blacks, swollen by northern emancipation, southern manumissions, and greater scope for self-liberation, led to the formation of African American communities. Their success gave the lie to slaveholders' dismissive claims about the abilities of African Americans. After the Revolution, whites and blacks mingled in churches and shops, on the frontier and in the cities of the Upper South and the North, along with persistent racial prejudice. Despite the campaigns to abolish slavery in the northern states, African Americans figured on the margins of political life, and the existence of slavery in the "land of the free" continued to exacerbate sectional tensions.

During this time a French countess planted the seeds of a powerful idea—American exceptionalism—in a letter to Jefferson on the eve of the French Revolution: "The characteristic difference between your revolution and ours," she wrote, "is that having nothing to destroy, you had nothing to injure, and labouring for a people, few in number, incorrupted, and extended over a large tract of country, you have avoided all the inconvenience of a situation, contrary in every respect." Then she added, "Every step in your revolution was perhaps the effect of virtue, while ours are often faults, and sometimes crimes." [2]

This view of the United States as exceptional was echoed among reform-minded Europeans. "They are the hope of the human race, they may well become its model," Anne Robert Turgot told the pro-American English minister Richard Price. The famed editor of the *Encyclopedie*, Denis Diderot, proclaimed the new United States an asylum from fanaticism and tyranny "for all the peoples of Europe."

The new nation appeared exceptional to such Europeans because, in their view, its healthy, young, hard-working population had won a revolutionary prize—what was seen as an empty continent upon which to settle its free-born progeny. America was exceptional because the familiar predators of ordinary folk—the extorting tax collector, the overbearing nobleman, the persecuting priest, the extravagant ruler—had failed to make the voyage across the Atlantic. Natural abundance, tolerance, exemption from Old World social evils—these were among the

materials from which the European reform imagination created the exceptional United States. This view ignored the new nation's reliance on slavery and its displacement of Native peoples, who did not figure in the romanticized view of a New World, where the evils of the Old World could be eradicated.

America's ordinary citizens took up this view, celebrating what was distinctively American: its institutional innovations, its leveling spirit, above all, its expanded opportunities for common people. To them the idea of American exceptionalism had enormous appeal, for it played to their strengths. Taking up western land could become a movement for spreading democratic institutions across the continent. Being exceptional established a reciprocity between American abundance and high moral purposes. It infused the independence and hardiness of America's farming families with civic value, generating patriotic images that could resonate widely without addressing the question of slavery.

The Fourth of July rhetoric of the *hoi polloi* made clear that American exceptionalism freed them from the elite's embrace of European gentility. To be genteel, one had to accept the cultural domination of Europe. For ordinary Americans the country's greatness emerged in a lustier set of ideals—open opportunity, an unfettered spirit of inquiry, destruction of privilege, personal independence.

During the nineteenth century, ordinary white Americans ignored the insignificance of their country on the world stage and propelled their republic discursively into the march of progress, a resonant new idea in Western culture. What might be construed elsewhere as uninterestingly plebian was elevated to a new goal for mankind. America was the only nation, Richard Hofstadter wryly commented, that began with perfection and aspired to progress. And American history was written to explain how this could be.[3]

Three themes of American exceptionalism came into play: the clean slate with its implicit rejection of the past, the autonomy of the individual with its accompanying disparagement of dependency, and the commitment to natural rights with the corollary that democratic governance could best protect them. The metaphor of a clean slate helped create the illusion of a frontier emptied of human inhabitants—a virginal continent—an image that drew a veil over the violent encounters with the indigenous peoples that actually paced the westward trek of Americans. The autonomous man enjoyed the freedom to be the designer of his and his family's life unaided or impeded by others, and the republic drew its worth from protecting individual rights. Democratic rhetoric likewise drew a veil over the severe limits that existed for those whose race or sex had already been assigned a value at birth.

This idea of being exceptional didn't really become the core of national identity until those who fought for independence and wrote the Constitution had retired from public life—as the Virginia dynasty of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, gave way to men such as John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Then a new generation of Americans took possession of their legacy and wrapped their imagination around the idea of a special role in world history for their nation. The tensions between the ideal and reality generated the reform movements that flourished in antebellum America. Activists became agents of change in an era of change, brought about by the convergence of political revolutions, intellectual ferment, and social turbulence.

During these same years, America entered into a period of commercial expansion that promoted the construction of roads, the extension of postal services, and the founding of newspapers in country towns. A dense new communication network amplified the resonance of partisan disputes. The control over information and opinions once exercised exclusively by an elite had been wrested away by the articulate critics of that elite. A strong consensus quickly formed that American democracy required a broad base of educated people and literacy became widespread for both men and women, promoted by religious and commercial demands. Reading became a necessity, met by a thriving print culture. European visitors expressed astonishment that those who lived in the rural areas were as well informed as city dwellers.

Land lured men and women westward. By 1810 a third of the American population lived in a new settlement. The conclusion of the War of 1812 added another push towards the frontier as soldiers got paid in land bounties. The fertile lands of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys beckoned, giving ordinary men a chance to capitalize their family's labor. All this movement thrust the nation into sustained warfare against the native inhabitants.

Urbanization grew apace; population in the older cities more than doubled, though three-quarters of Americans still lived on farms or rural towns on the eve of the Civil War. Within a decade, merchants, freed from British restrictions, sent ships across the Pacific and into the Indian Ocean. Baltimore became the fastest growing city in the United States, benefitting from its access to both the Atlantic and the hinterland for the raw materials and customers for its flourishing flour-milling industry. Yankee ingenuity displayed itself in manufacturing and retailing. In the rural Northeast where there were plenty of rivers, entrepreneurs tapped into waterpower. Both men and women sought liberation from the drudgery of farm work in the hundreds of factories that sprang up along the waterways of Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Enterprise moved out to the countryside and down the social ladder as a market emerged that matched the nation's geographic and public reach.

Antebellum economic growth undulated through boom and bust cycles, the busts being remembered as the Panics of 1819, 1837, and 1857. The European demand for cotton created most of the booms—though the discovery of gold in the newly acquired California in 1848 was the most spectacular. Cotton, however, tied the American economy to slavery at the very time that the first emancipation movement created the portentous division between free and slave states. Profits from cotton coursed through the whole American economy. Southern specialization meant that plantation owners looked north for wood products, tools, and some foodstuffs, while they imported their luxury items from Europe.

As northern states used their impressive communications network to spread their values, southerners—that is, the planter elite—began to perceive themselves standing against the nation, straining at the bonds of union as they drew closer to one another through shared political goals and intense sociability. Enslaved men and women, whose numbers ranged from 30 percent to 60 percent of each slave state's population, formed ties with slaves on neighboring plantations, though they all lived in fear of being sent to the southern frontier of Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Poorer whites clustered in the small communities of the hill country.

The Bill of Rights and the steady, if slow, expansion of the suffrage for white men and a few free black men kept the democratic torch burning. Equally significant was the disestablishment of

colonial churches. Between 1786 and 1833, Virginia, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts replaced their established churches with religious freedom, like those of the other states. Their leaders could have approved multiple established churches, but they opted to disentangle religious and political institutions, mirroring at the state level that “wall of separation between church and state” which Jefferson wrote about in 1802. This move particularly benefitted Baptists and Methodists, which were the fastest-growing denominations in the nation. Neither had enjoyed state support and both had suffered discrimination from the established churches.

Although the majority of Americans were nominally Christians, many of them lived without places of worship, especially those who had moved to the frontier. Paying for clergy, church buildings, and seminaries now depended upon voluntary contributions, and without state support, many churches struggled to survive. Yet the separation of church and state paradoxically strengthened religion in America, for it permitted a hundred spiritual flowers to bloom, and bloom they did. Ministers began experimenting with new methods designed explicitly to revive Christianity in America.

In the early 1800s revivals passed in waves over the country’s villages, towns, and cities. They could be scheduled or impromptu, held in church buildings or out in the open at great camp meetings lasting many days. Charismatic preachers exhorted men and women to confess their sins and accept the grace extended to them through Christ. Many achieved fame for their persuasive ability. The astute French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville commented wryly that every time he was told he was going to meet a priest, he met a politician.[4] To be born again became the core religious experience. While some churches continued to accept the doctrine of predestination associated with Calvin, an increasing number believed that good works contributed to a Christian’s claim on heaven.

These revivals transformed American culture and the nature of Protestant Christianity in the United States. Ministers, responding to the “call to do the Lord’s work,” would pack their Bibles in their saddle bags and set off to find a field of souls to harvest. The Methodist Church organized circuits for their ministers to ride to extend their reach. The revivalists’ stress on personal salvation led to the neglect of other elements of Christian dogma and of the learned clergy to explicate them. They also encouraged personal commitments that went far beyond conventional service attendance. Critics within America’s older churches—Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal—found much to find fault with in this new movement. They considered its theology shallow and disliked what they saw as manipulative appeals to the emotions, but the evangelicals were astoundingly popular.[5]

Reliance upon the Bible led to differing interpretations and new denominations. Every contested meaning had the potential of inspiring a new group of worshippers. Upstate New York was called “the burned over district” in reference to the intense passions aroused by the revivals as well as their frequency. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sprang from this soil, while the Disciples of Christ began as an effort to bring all the denominations together and ended by adding to the proliferating array. Without a formal hierarchy, the Baptists were particularly prone to splintering over doctrinal differences.

After a long period during which many Christians had drifted toward a more rationalist understanding of divinity and others had been set adrift by the turmoil of two wars, the disestablishment campaigns, and westward movement, the revivals successfully re-pietized America. While Evangelicals may have constituted a minority, they successfully imposed their mores upon the public.

The new denominations educated members in democratic practices as well. Forming new churches required volunteers to raise funds, build organizations, and participate in decision-making. Women, blacks, and the poor, often excluded from voting, learned about democratic governance in their churches. With a strong wind at their back, Evangelical Protestants sought to fill in the empty canvas of the American continent, assured by their success and their confidence in the fresh footings of the US Constitution.[6]

The zeal generated by the revivals fueled an extensive missionary movement, at home among the American Indian tribes and abroad. In the early nineteenth century, the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missionaries sent young missionary couples to Asia, a field opened up by American commerce to Ceylon and India.[7] Evangelical associations like the Bible Society, the Peace Society, and the Sunday School Union followed in quick succession. The General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Sabbath was organized to ensure the sanctity of Sundays. They exerted pressure on storekeepers to show respect for the day of rest and worship, but lost the battle to close post offices or stop the flow of water into the Erie Canal where rowdy boatman shattered Sabbath tranquility.[8] The network of Evangelical organizations became known as the Benevolent Empire, a term that captures their proponent's aspiration to rise above denominational differences to join forces for proselytizing and educating, wherever needed. Scarcely a social ill escaped the attention of these men and women.

In 1827 a perceptive observer was struck by the constant churning of people in the United States. He concluded that if "movement and the quick succession of sensations and ideas constitute life, here one lives a hundred fold more than elsewhere; here, all is circulation, motion, and boiling agitation." He continued, "Experiment follows experiment; enterprise follows enterprise." [9] A British naval officer more laconically commented that "the Americans are a restless, locomotive people: whether for business or pleasure, they are ever on the move in their own country, and they move in masses. . . . Wandering about seems engrafted in their Nature," he added; they "forever imagine that the Lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled." [10] These observers saw the novelty of a society directed almost entirely by the ambitious dreams that had been unleashed by their exceptional situation.

In all this mobility lay the seeds of the many social problems Evangelicals addressed. The decline of traditional ordering mechanisms had led to deteriorating standards of personal behavior. Anyone who wasn't a reformer usually needed reforming. In 1820, Americans fifteen years and older drank more liquor than ever before or since. Artisans in most shops took a whiskey break every morning and afternoon. Children could easily encounter alcoholic teachers; heavy drinking punctuated most public celebrations. Gambling and ritualized violence figured prominently in public life as well, and mobs formed easily. The lightly governed, newly settled communities in the West had their urban equivalent in the older cities where the decadal doubling of population created entirely new neighborhoods.

Efforts to stop alcohol consumption were largely a top-down affair until Lyman Beecher, one of the stars of the revival movement, launched the American Temperance Society in 1826. He shifted the focus from the hopeless drunkard to the social drinker and made abstinence, not moderation, the goal. Fanning out to the West and the South, Beecher's group swept up Methodists and Baptists who had long deplored the pervasive drinking. His temperance tracts reached 100,000 readers at a time when the biggest paper in the country had a circulation of 4,500.[11]

In the 1840s, a new group, the Washington Temperance Society, garnered a membership of half a million in three years. Formed by working-class men in Baltimore, the Washingtonians campaigned to secure local-option prohibition laws. Harking back to the Revolutionary heritage, temperance workers claimed that they had liberated themselves from a tyranny worse than Britain's. Changes in American drinking habits came swiftly; consumption was cut in half in the ten years between 1835 and 1845, but the campaign to make the sale of alcoholic beverages illegal persisted through the century.[12]

Many Catholics immigrated to the United States during the Irish potato famines of the 1840s and 1850s. Less censorious about drinking—they picnicked with beer in public parks—Catholics drew the ire of temperance leaders. They also suffered persecution from nativist groups who feared and defamed their religion. Joined by emigrating Germans, the Catholics soon built their own churches, parochial schools, and seminaries. When John Hughes became Archbishop of New York in 1842, Catholics acquired a forceful champion who publicly exposed every insult and injury that Catholics sustained. Americans slowly came to realize that their respect for religious freedom meant more than tolerating diversity within the Protestant fold.

The two most significant reform causes of the antebellum period called for the end of slavery and full citizenship for women. In the afterglow of the Revolution, anti-slavery societies agitated for cures for this poisonous thorn in the body politic. State legislatures, including Virginia's, debated schemes for emancipation. Free African Americans were particularly active in keeping the issue alive with petitions to legislatures, legal suits, pamphlets, newspapers, and acts of self-liberation.[13] They were particularly eager to undermine colonization societies, which attempted to solve the problem of racial prejudice by sending freed slaves to Africa. The Quakers, first in the anti-slavery field, helped establish the so-called underground railroad to ease southern slaves' flight from captivity. The fear of slave revolts, after the successful one in Haiti, haunted white southerners. The 1820 census showed that the slave population had almost doubled in twenty years.[14]

The increasing profitability of cotton gradually stilled anti-slavery voices in the South, and it took some dramatic developments to stir much concern about southern slavery in the North. Missouri applied for admission to the Union as a slave state—the first state carved from the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. New York Congressman James Talmadge, railing against the extension of such “a monstrous scourge,” tried to tack on a gradual emancipation provision to the enabling act. Finally, under the Missouri Compromise of 1820, Missouri came in as a slave state with the promise of no further extension of slavery, in essence pushing the problem off to an uncertain future and energizing some new opponents to slavery.

William Lloyd Garrison brought the full force of evangelical fervor to the abolition movement. A newspaperman by trade, he started the *Liberator* in 1831 and founded, with others, the

American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. His statement in the *Liberator's* first issue gives a sense of his fierce determination: "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD." Abolitionists followed his lead by abandoning gradual and ameliorative measures and demanding "immediate and complete emancipation." [15] This position provoked the wrath of southerners and the scorn of many in Garrison's native New England.

Congress was intent on containing, not enflaming, the conflict over slavery. Despite the clear right of Americans to petition Congress, they adopted a gag rule to prevent anti-slavery petitions from being read. This issue rankled as no other, until abolitionists were able to persuade Congress to change it. Senator and former Vice-President John Calhoun said this repeal put the states on an irreversible path towards conflict over slavery. [16] Not until the new Republican Party in 1854 articulated its opposition to any extension of slavery into the western territories did anti-slavery northerners find a unifying, rallying position.

Mobilizing people against slavery triggered a movement to secure greater political participation for women. Sarah and Angelina Grimke, who championed both abolition and women's rights, were forceful advocates from the South. With Garrison, they proved to be the fulcrum for the entwined efforts. Propertied women had voted in New Jersey for thirty-three years after the Revolution, but they lost that right as citizenship became less defined by property and more by independence, which the law denied women. At the same time American popular culture defined woman's role as the presiding domestic presence and nurturer of male citizens. [17] When the American Anti-Slavery Society encouraged women to take an active part in its outreach, some men broke away to form an anti-slavery society that did not admit women. This kind of response intensified the determination of a handful of pioneers—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Lucretia Mott—to pursue the struggle for equal rights for women. It would be hard to exaggerate how radical this movement was in the 1840s and 1850s, yet the work these women had done in anti-slavery work and the temperance movement made it seem quite natural to them that women should be active in the public sphere.

Stanton came from a prominent New York family. She not only received an excellent academy education, she also learned about the law from her father's law clerks. Strong willed and talented, she studied and then rejected the legal system that so thoroughly subordinated women, especially wives, to men. [18] She and her abolitionist husband honeymooned in London, where they attended the Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. Mott, a charismatic Quaker feminist, also attended. When the men voted to deny women participation in the conference, Stanton and Mott forged a bond. Mott, like two other women's rights leaders, Lucy Stone and Susan Anthony, had awakened to the discrimination against women when she discovered that male colleagues where she was teaching earned four times more than she did.

Stone was the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree; she was also unique in refusing to take her husband's name. Stanton said that Stone "was the first person by whom the heat of the American public was deeply stirred on the woman question." [19]

Through temperance and abolitionist work, many women learned the organizational skills that were to stand them in good stead when they turned their heads and hearts toward eradicating the laws and mores subjugating women because of their sex. In 1848, Stanton and Mott threw themselves into organizing the Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Drawing 300 activists, among them forty men, the convention endorsed Stanton's Declaration of

Sentiments, which was based on the Declaration of Independence. Delegates at the convention passed a number of resolutions, including an audacious claim for the right to vote. Leading newspapers, in an attempt to ridicule the proceedings, published in full the Declaration of Sentiments with its description of an aristocracy of sex “exalting brute force above moral power, vice above virtue, ignorance above education, and the son above the mother who bore him.” The publicity was an attempt to scandalize the public, but Stanton shrewdly observed the widening of their of readership as a result.

Learning about the Seneca Falls convention drew Susan Anthony to active participation in the women’s rights movement. Her Quaker father was both a cotton manufacturer and an abolitionist who undertook her education after he discovered that her primary school limited the subjects it would teach girls. In 1851, Anthony met Stanton, and the two of them founded the first women’s temperance society. After that they traveled together on speaking tours, which became forays into hostile territory punctuated by insults and battery. Stone, who was also an indefatigable speaker, reported occasions when she was hit by ice, rotten fruit, eggs, and a hymnal.[20]

Many women were turned into agitators for women’s rights because of negative reactions to their participation in the reform movements that were sweeping the North in the antebellum period. They felt compelled to seek the liberty, equality, and independence that Americans extolled as a national legacy and overcame any personal timidity to do so. After the Civil War, they continued to campaign for the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment that abolished slavery. But the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 giving newly freed African American men the voting privileges that the women had so long sought became a bitter pill to swallow.[21]

Defending slavery through the decades placed the southern states in opposition to the experimental thrust of northern life. Increasingly northerners and southerners construed their differences as implicit challenges to one another. Emancipation had given those in the North a deceptive sense of their political convictions. The opening up of opportunities to move, to innovate, to express personal opinions defined for many what it meant to be an American. In making the ideal American a restless, ingenious, and accomplishment-centered person, northerners characterized the nation in a way that made southern differences ever more apparent. Over time southern states coalesced as the South, a separate society from that of the rest of the nation. Its leaders no longer apologized for slavery as they had in the Revolutionary area; instead they defended it as the basis of a truly genteel, American, civilization.

Conflict became inevitable when northern voters rallied around Abraham Lincoln and supported the Republican Party’s adamant opposition to the extension of slavery in the presidential election of 1860. Lincoln’s victory drove southern leaders to secede rather than accept the containment of slavery. With the firing of cannon on Fort Sumter, the federal redoubt in Charleston harbor, on April 12, 1861, they took up arms to defend their way of a life.

The ardent reform campaigns had given ordinary northerners a sense that their country was what Turgot had called the “hope of the human race.”[22] As European countries retreated from democracy, the United States seemed more and more exceptional as a self-governing people dedicated to securing inalienable rights for all.[23] Northern soldiers fought to save the union as described in the Declaration of Independence. Halting the extension of slavery had unified them; abolishing slavery came about through fighting the war. Evangelical Christians with their intense

reforming zeal supplied the energy for the reform movements of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. Fusing the social ideals of liberty and equality with the personal ones of seeking redemption, they had narrowed the scope for compromise. They had also fortified Northerners to fight for their values as keenly as those in the South fought for theirs.

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- [2] *Les Amities Americaines de Madame d'Houdetot, d'apres sa correspondance inedite avec Benjamin Franklin et Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Gilbert Chinard (Paris: Daupeley-Gouverneur, 1924), 56.
- [3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*(London: Verso, 1983), 15. I have borrowed Anderson's phrase.
- [4] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 1:304–307.
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- [6] Sidney Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History* 23 (1954); Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 180-188.
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- [13] Joseph Yannielli, "George Thompson among the Africans: Empathy, Authority, and Insanity in the Age of Abolition," *Journal of American History*, 96 (March 2010):986ff.
- [14] Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, 247
- [15] Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 225.
- [16] Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.
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[20] Elinor Rice Hays, *Morning Star: A Biography of Lucy Stone, 1818–1893* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), 72-73; Sally Gregory McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81. See also Rebecca J. Mead, *How the Vote Was Won: Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868–1914*. (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[21] Ann D. Gordon, ed. *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton & Susan B. Anthony* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 2:567.

[22] Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *The Life and Writings of Turgot: Comptroller-General of France, 1774–6*, ed. W. Walker Stephens (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1895), 303.

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Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861-1877

by Eric Foner



"The Battle of Mill Spring, Ky., January 19th, 1862," by Currier and Ives, New York. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

In 1877, soon after retiring as president of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, embarked with his wife on a two-year tour of the world. At almost every location, he was greeted as a hero. In England, the son of the Duke of Wellington, whose father had vanquished Napoleon, greeted Grant as a military genius, the primary architect of Union victory in the American Civil War. Parading English workers hailed him as the man whose military prowess had saved the world's leading experiment in democratic government and as a Hero of Freedom who had helped secure the emancipation of America's four million slaves. Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Germany, welcomed Grant as a nation builder, who had accomplished on the battlefield something—national unity—that Bismarck was attempting to create for his own people.

As the reaction to Grant's tour demonstrates, contemporaries recognized the Civil War as an event of international significance. The various meanings imparted to it offer a useful way of outlining why the Civil War was so pivotal in our own history. The war changed the nature of warfare, gave rise to today's American nation-state, and destroyed a slave society unprecedented in the modern world. In its aftermath, during the era of Reconstruction, Americans struggled to come to terms with these dramatic changes and, temporarily, established biracial democratic government on the ashes of slavery.

In the physical destruction it brought to the South, the economic changes it produced throughout the nation, and the new ideas it spawned, the Civil War altered the lives of several generations of Americans. The war produced a loss of life unprecedented in the American experience. The 620,000 combatants who perished nearly outnumber those who died in all other American wars combined. For those who lived through it, the Civil War would always remain the defining experience of their lives.

The Civil War is sometimes called the first modern war, although what constitutes "modernity" in warfare is a matter of debate. It was the first war to bring the full impact of the industrial

revolution to bear on the battlefield. Railroads transported troops and supplies, and railroad junctions such as Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Petersburg became major military objectives. The telegraph made possible instantaneous communication between generals and between the battlefield and home front. The war took place soon after a revolution in arms manufacture had replaced the traditional musket, accurate at only a short range, with the more modern, and deadly, rifle and bullet. This development changed the nature of combat, emphasizing the importance of heavy fortifications and elaborate trenches and giving those on the defensive—usually Southern armies—an immense advantage over attacking forces. The rifle produced the appalling casualty statistics of Civil War battles. At Gettysburg, there were nearly fifty thousand dead, wounded, and missing. Total wartime casualties numbered well over one million, in an American population of around thirty-two million.

The Civil War began as a conventional contest of army versus army but by the end had become a war of society against society, with slavery, the foundation of the southern social order, becoming a target. In such a contest, civilian morale proved as crucial to sustaining and winning the war as events on the battlefield, and the population's will to fight became as much a military consideration as armies in the field. Historians have long debated whether the Union's victory was inevitable. Certainly, the Union overshadowed the Confederacy in manpower and economic resources. But the Union also had a far greater task. It had to conquer an area as large as western Europe, while the Confederacy, like the American patriots during the War of Independence, could lose battle after battle and still win the war, if their opponents tired of the conflict. Thus, political leadership was crucial to victory, and Lincoln proved far more successful than his Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis, in mobilizing public sentiment. One historian has suggested that if the North and South had exchanged presidents, the South would have won the war.^[1]

Northern victory consolidated the American Union. In this sense, the Civil War forms part of the nineteenth-century process of nation-building. But Lincoln's Union was rather different from the nations being constructed in Europe. It was conceived as neither the reclamation of ancestral lands nor the institutional embodiment of a common ancestry, language, or culture. Rather, as Lincoln himself insisted, the nation was the incarnation of a universal set of ideas, centered on political democracy and human liberty. These principles, of course, had been enunciated by the Founding Fathers, but only with the destruction of slavery could the United States seriously claim to represent to the world the idea of human liberty.

It is easy to forget how decentralized the United States was in 1861, and how limited were the powers of the federal government. There was no national banking system, no national railroad gauge, no national tax system, not even reliable maps of the areas where the war would take place. The army in 1861 numbered 14,000 men, the federal budget was minuscule, and nearly all functions of government were handled at the state and local level. The Civil War created the modern national state in America. It also profoundly altered the federal government's relationship to the American economy. To mobilize the North's economic resources, the Lincoln administration instituted the first national banking system and national currency, the first national taxes on income, and the first highly protective tariffs, and laid the foundation for the first transcontinental railroad. Whether the war retarded or encouraged economic growth in the short run remains a point of debate among historians. But the economic policies of the Union forged a long-lasting alliance between the Republican Party, the national state, and the emerging

class of industrial capitalists. The transfer of political power in Washington from southern planters to allies of northern industrialists and merchants created the political conditions under which the United States emerged by century's end as the greatest economic power on earth.

Central to the war's meaning was the abolition of slavery. Slavery lay at the root of the political crisis that produced the Civil War, and the war became, although it did not begin as, a struggle for emancipation. Union victory eradicated slavery from American life. Yet the war left it to future generations to confront the numerous legacies of slavery and to embark on the unfinished quest for racial justice.

The destruction of slavery—by presidential proclamation, legislation, and constitutional amendment—was a key act in the nation-building process. A war begun to preserve the old Union without threatening slavery produced one of the greatest social revolutions of the nineteenth century. The old image of Lincoln single-handedly abolishing slavery with the stroke of his pen has long been abandoned, for too many other Americans—politicians, reformers, soldiers, and slaves themselves—contributed to the coming of emancipation. In 1862, with military success elusive, Radical Republicans in Congress and abolitionists clamoring for action against slavery, and slaves by the thousands fleeing the plantations wherever the Union Army appeared, Lincoln concluded that his initial policy of fighting a war solely to preserve the Union had to change. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, profoundly altered the nature of the war and the future course of American history. It was the Proclamation, moreover, more than any other single wartime event, that transformed a war of armies into a conflict of societies. Although it freed few slaves on the day it was issued, as it applied almost exclusively to areas under Confederate control, the Emancipation Proclamation ensured that Union victory would produce a social revolution within the South and a redefinition of the place of blacks in American life. There could now be no going back to the prewar Union. A new system of labor, politics, and race relations would have to replace the shattered institution of slavery.

Before the Civil War, the definition of those entitled to enjoy the “blessings of liberty” protected by the Constitution was increasingly defined by race. In the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that no black person could be a citizen of the United States. The enlistment of 200,000 black men in the Union armed forces during the second half of the war placed black citizenship on the postwar agenda. From the war emerged the principle of a national citizenship whose members enjoyed the equal protection of the laws. That principle, which we know today as “civil rights,” originated in the Civil War and the turbulent era of Reconstruction that followed.

With Union victory, the status of the former slaves in the reunited nation became the focal point of the politics of postwar Reconstruction. In a society that had made political participation a core element of freedom, the right to vote inevitably became central to the former slaves' desire for empowerment and autonomy. As soon as the Civil War ended, and in some parts of the South even earlier, blacks who had been free before the war came together with emancipated slaves in conventions, parades, and petition drives to demand suffrage and, on occasion, to organize their own “freedom ballots.” Radical Republicans in the North supported black male suffrage both as an act of justice and as the only way to prevent former Confederates from dominating southern political life.

However, Andrew Johnson, who succeeded the martyred Lincoln as president in April 1865, inaugurated a program of Reconstruction that placed full power in the hands of white southerners. The new governments established during the summer and fall of 1865 enacted laws—the notorious Black Codes—that severely limited the rights of former slaves in an effort to force them to return to work as dependent plantation laborers. In response, the Republican majority in Congress in 1866 enacted its own plan of Reconstruction. In the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, they permanently altered the federal system and the nature of American citizenship.

For the first time, the national government assumed basic responsibility for defining and protecting Americans' civil rights. The Fourteenth Amendment enshrined in the Constitution the ideas of birthright citizenship and equal rights for all Americans. The Amendment prohibited states from abridging the "privileges and immunities of citizens" or denying them the "equal protection of the law." This broad language opened the door for future Congresses and the federal courts to breathe meaning into the guarantee of legal equality, a process that occupied the courts for much of the twentieth century. Later, the Fifteenth Amendment barred the states from making race a qualification for voting. Strictly speaking, suffrage remained a privilege rather than a right, subject to numerous regulations by the states. But by the time Reconstruction legislation had run its course, the federal government had taken upon itself the responsibility for ensuring that states respected the equal civil and political rights of all American citizens. Reconstruction radicalism, however, had its limits. The right to vote, expanded to eliminate the barrier of race, was still restricted to men, despite the demands of the era's woman suffrage movement. And no steps were taken to provide an economic underpinning for African Americans' new freedom—the "forty acres and a mule" former slaves insisted would guarantee them economic independence from their former owners.

Nonetheless, Reconstruction witnessed a remarkable political revolution in the South. In 1867, African American men in the defeated Confederacy were given the right to vote and hold office—a radical departure from pre-Civil War days, when blacks could vote only in a handful of northern states. A politically mobilized black community joined with white allies to bring the Republican Party to power throughout the South, and with it a redefinition of the purposes and responsibilities of government. The region's first public school systems were established, and efforts were made to rebuild and diversify the shattered economy. For the first time in American history, black men held positions of political power, ranging from the US Congress to state legislatures, and local sheriffs, school board officials, and justices of the peace. The Reconstruction ideal of interracial democracy and color-blind citizenship eventually succumbed to a counterattack from violent organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the progressive abandonment of the principle of equality in the North and the idea of federal intervention to protect the rights of the newly freed slaves. Not until the "Second Reconstruction"—the civil rights revolution of the 1960s—would the United States once again seek to come to terms with the political and social consequences of the destruction of slavery.

With the overthrow of biracial state governments in the South and the withdrawal of the last federal troops from the region by President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877, the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction came to an end. But conflict continued in the arena of historical interpretation and public memory. In the North, the Grand Army of the Republic, the organization of war veterans, became a fixture of Republican politics and a presence in every

northern community. Even as the Republican Party abandoned its earlier idealism, the loyalties created by the war helped it retain national dominance well into the twentieth century. In the South, the Confederate experience came to be remembered as the Lost Cause, a noble struggle for local rights and individual liberty (with the defense of slavery conveniently forgotten).

By the turn of the century, as soldiers from North and South fought side by side in the Spanish-American War, it seemed that the nation had put the bitterness of the 1860s behind it. But the road to reunion was paved with black Americans' shattered dreams. With northern acquiescence, the Solid South, now uniformly Democratic, effectively nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and imposed a new racial order based on disenfranchisement, segregation, and economic inequality.

Historical accounts of Reconstruction played an important part in this retreat from the ideal of equality. For much of the twentieth century, both scholarly and popular writing presented Reconstruction as the lowest point in the saga of American history. Supposedly, Radical Republicans in Congress vindictively fastened black supremacy upon the defeated Confederacy and an orgy of corruption and misgovernment followed, presided over by unscrupulous "carpetbaggers" (northerners who ventured south to reap the spoils of office), "scalawags" (white southerners who cooperated with the Republican Party for personal gain), and ignorant and childlike freed people. After much needless suffering, the South's white community banded together to restore "home rule" (a euphemism for white supremacy). Originating in the political propaganda of Reconstruction's opponents, this interpretation rested on the assumption that African Americans were by nature incapable of participating in democratic government and that black suffrage was the gravest error of the Civil War period. This quite inaccurate "memory" of Reconstruction was invoked for decades as a potent defense of the South's racial status quo in the era of segregation and disenfranchisement. More recently, in the wake of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, scholars have taken a far more sympathetic approach to Reconstruction, viewing it as an effort, noble if flawed, to create interracial democracy in the South. The tragedy was not that it was attempted, but that it failed.

Overall, the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction raised questions that remain central to our understanding of ourselves as a nation. What should be the balance of power between local authority and the national government; who is entitled to American citizenship; what are the meanings of freedom and equality in the United States? These questions remain subjects of controversy today. In that sense, the Civil War is not yet over.

[1] David Potter, "Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat," in *Why the North Won the Civil War*, ed. David H. Donald (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 93–114.

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The Rise of Industrial America, 1877-1900

by Richard White



Girls working in a box factory in Tampa, Florida, photographed by Lewis Hine, ca. 1912. (National Archives and Records Administration)

When in 1873 Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner entitled their co-authored novel *The Gilded Age*, they gave the late nineteenth century its popular name. The term reflected the combination of outward wealth and dazzle with inner corruption and poverty. Given the period's absence of powerful and charismatic presidents, its lack of a dominant central event, and its sometimes tawdry history, historians have often defined the period by negatives. They stress greed, scandals, and corruption of the Gilded Age.

Twain and Warner were not wrong about the era's corruption, but the years between 1877 and 1900 were also some of the most momentous and dynamic in American history. They set in motion developments that would shape the country for generations—the reunification of the South and North, the integration of four million newly freed African Americans, westward expansion, immigration, industrialization, urbanization. It was also a period of reform, in which many Americans sought to regulate corporations and shape the changes taking place all around them.

THE END OF RECONSTRUCTION

Reforms in the South seemed unlikely in 1877 when Congress resolved the previous autumn's disputed presidential election between Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes on the backs of the nation's freed blacks. A compromise gave Hayes the presidency in return for the end of Reconstruction and the removal of federal military support for the remaining biracial Republican governments that had emerged in the former Confederacy. With that agreement, Congress abandoned one of the greatest reforms in American history: the attempt to incorporate ex-slaves into the republic with all the rights and privileges of citizens.

The United States thus accepted a developing system of repression and segregation in the South that would take the name Jim Crow and persist for nearly a century. The freed people in the South found their choices largely confined to sharecropping and low-paying wage labor, especially as domestic servants. Although attempts at interracial politics would prove briefly successful in Virginia and North Carolina, African American efforts to preserve the citizenship and rights promised to black men in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution failed.

THE WEST

Congress continued to pursue a version of reform in the West, however, as part of a Greater Reconstruction. The federal government sought to integrate the West into the country as a social and economic replica of the North. Land redistribution on a massive scale formed the centerpiece of reform. Through such measures as the Homestead and Railroad Acts of 1862, the government redistributed the vast majority of communal lands possessed by American Indian tribes to railroad corporations and white farmers.

To redistribute that land, the government had to subdue American Indians, and the winter of 1877 saw the culmination of the wars that had been raging on the Great Plains and elsewhere in the West since the end of the Civil War. Following the American defeat at the Battle of the Little Bighorn the previous fall, American soldiers drove the Lakota civil and spiritual leader Sitting Bull and his followers into Canada. They forced the war leader Crazy Horse to surrender and later killed him while he was held prisoner. Sitting Bull would eventually return to the United States, but he died in 1890 at the hands of the Indian police during the Wounded Knee crisis.

The defeat of the Lakotas and the utterly unnecessary Nez Perce War of 1877 ended the long era of Indian wars. There would be other small-scale conflicts in the West such as the Bannock War (1878) and the subjugation of the Apaches, which culminated with the surrender of Geronimo in 1886, but these were largely police actions. The slaughter of Lakota Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee in 1890 did bring a major mobilization of American troops, but it was a kind of coda to the American conquest since the federal government had already effectively extended its power from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The treaty system had officially ended in 1871, but Americans continued to negotiate agreements with the Indians. The goal of these agreements, and American land policy in general, was to create millions of new farms and ranches across the West. Not satisfied with already ceded lands, reformers—the so-called “Friends of the Indians” whose champion in Congress was Senator Henry Dawes—sought to divide reservations into individual farms for Indians and then open up most or all of the remaining land to whites. The Dawes Act of 1887 became their major tool, but the work of the Dawes Commission in 1893 extended allotment to the Creeks, Cherokees, Seminoles, Chickasaws, and Choctaws in Indian Territory, which became the core of the state of Oklahoma. Land allotment joined with the establishment of Indian schools and the suppression of native religions in a sweeping attempt to individualize Indians and integrate them one by one into American society. The policy would fail miserably. Indian population declined precipitously; the tribes lost much of their remaining land, and Indians became the poorest group in American society.

IMMIGRATION

Between 1877 and 1900 immigrants prompted much more concern among native-born white Americans than did either black people or Indian peoples. During these years there was a net immigration of approximately 7,348,000 people into the United States. During roughly the same period, the population of the country increased by about 27 million people, from about 49 million in 1880 to 76 million in 1900. Before 1880 the immigrants came largely from Western Europe and China. Taking the period between 1860 and 1900 as a whole, Germans comprised 28 percent of American immigrants; the British comprised 18 percent, the Irish 15 percent, and Scandinavians 11 percent. Together they made up 72 percent of the total immigration. At the end of the century, the so-called “New Immigration” signaled the rise of southern and eastern Europe as the source of most immigrants to America. The influx worried many native-born Americans who still thought of the United States as a white Protestant republic. Many of the new immigrants did not, in the racial classifications of the day, count as white. As the century wore on, they were increasingly Catholic and Jewish.

Immigrants entered every section of the country in large numbers except for the South. They settled in northeastern and midwestern cities and on western and midwestern farms. The Pacific and mountain West contained the highest percentage of immigrants of any region in 1880 and 1890.

The immigrants forged networks that shaped how and where they migrated and the kinds of communities they established. Chain migrations linked migrants to prior migrants. Early arrivals wrote home to bring family, friends, and neighbors to the United States. Over large swaths of Minnesota, the Dakotas, and elsewhere German was the primary language of daily life. Tensions between immigrants and the native born over the language to be spoken in public schools, Sunday closures of businesses (sabbatarianism), and temperance reform often put cultural issues and practices at the center of local and state politics.

Taken together, immigration and the end of Reconstruction triggered an anti-democratic movement to restrict access to the ballot box. By the 1870s proponents of restricting suffrage, having defeated an early push for women’s suffrage, were calling democracy a mistake. They advocated restrictions on voting as a way to check corruption, elevate political culture, and marginalize those—they had in mind immigrants and blacks—whom they thought incapable of meeting the obligations of republican politics. They sought political changes that would make it far more difficult for the poor and immigrants to vote. Over time, through poll taxes, residence requirements, literacy requirements, and more, they would succeed. The mass politics and high voting rates characteristic of late nineteenth-century America would not outlive the era.

Attempts to restrict suffrage were part of a strong political and social backlash against immigrants that developed over the course of the century. The United States welcomed immigrants because they were essential to its growing economy, but nativists opposed immigrants as antithetical to American culture and society. They thought of immigrants as exotic and inassimilable. In certain situations, however, nativists had allies who were immigrants or the children of immigrants. Workers, both immigrant and native born, often feared that corporations were using contract labor—workers recruited abroad at lower wages than those paid American workers—to undermine American working conditions and the American family, which they

defined as a working man whose wife maintained the home. They opposed certain kinds of immigration. One of the forgotten reforms of the period, the Foran Act of 1885, outlawed contract labor, but the law proved difficult to enforce.

Alliances of some native-born Americans with some immigrants against other immigrants proved most effective in the case of the Chinese. Roughly 180,000 Chinese immigrated to the United States between 1849 and 1882, and they became the personification of both the inassimilable immigrant and the contract worker. Although the Chinese came as free laborers, they were often branded as coolies: abject semi-slaves, whose low standard of living allowed them to thrive on wages that could not support white families.

Racists had previously claimed that superior Anglo-Saxons would inevitably replace “inferior” races. But in the West, while Sinophobes saw the Chinese as exotic and inferior, they also thought the Chinese would triumph over the supposedly superior white men because they were efficient workers. Immigrants and the native born formed mobs that attacked the Chinese at Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885 and expelled them from Tacoma, Washington, in 1885 and Seattle in 1886. Congress passed ten-year restrictions on Chinese immigration in 1882 and 1892 and a permanent exclusion act in 1902. Late in the nineteenth century, those who opposed immigration from Italy, Hungary, and elsewhere compared those groups to the Chinese.

Some immigrants could wrap themselves in the mantle of Americanism if they were “white” and Protestant. Protestant immigrants, particularly Scandinavians and Scots-Irish, joined the American Protective Association in 1887 to restrict Catholic immigration as it rode a larger wave of anti-Catholicism that swept over the country. Aimed initially at Irish and Catholic schools, anti-Catholicism increased its range as new Catholic immigrants began to arrive.

AGRICULTURAL, COMMERCIAL, AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

Although not all of them intended to stay, most immigrants came to the United States for economic opportunity. Cheap land and relatively high wages, compared to their home countries, were available regardless of citizenship. The Homestead Act did not require that settlers filing for land be American citizens, and the railroads not only sold their land grants cheaply, they advertised widely in Europe.

The results of this distribution of fertile and largely accessible land were astonishing. Everything in the late nineteenth century seemed to move faster than ever before. Americans brought more land under cultivation between 1870 and 1900 (225 million acres) than they had since the English first appeared at Jamestown in 1607 (189 million acres). Farmers abandoned small, worn-out farms in the East and developed new, larger, and more fertile farms in the Midwest and West. They developed so much land because they farmed extensively, not intensively. In terms of yields per acre, American farmers ranked far below Europe. Maintaining fertility demanded labor, which was precisely what American farmers were bent on reducing. They invested not in labor but in technology, particularly improved plows, reapers, and threshers. With westward expansion onto the prairies, a single family with a reaper could increase acreage and thus production without large amounts of hired labor. Arable free lands grew scarcer during the 1880s, forcing more and more land seekers west into arid lands beyond the 98th meridian. In

many years these lands lacked adequate rainfall to produce crops. “In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted” written on the side of a wagon cover by a family abandoning its homestead summed up the dangers of going too far out onto the semi-arid and arid plains.

The expansion of agricultural lands led to what superficially seems a paradox: the more farmers there were—and the more productive farmers became—the smaller was agriculture’s share of the economy. Farmers had the largest share of the dollar value of American economic output until 1880 when commerce’s 29 percent of the gross national product edged out their 28 percent. In 1890 manufacturing and mining at 30 percent share of the GNP both exceeded agriculture’s 19 percent share. During the same period, the percentage of workers employed in agriculture fell. A majority of the nation’s workers were farmers or farm laborers in 1860, but by 1900 the figure had declined to 40 percent.

Such statistics seemed to reflect a decline in the importance of farming, but in fact, they reflected its significance and efficiency. Farmers produced more than the country could consume with smaller and smaller percentages of its available labor. They exported the excess, and the children of farmers migrated to cities and towns. Where at the beginning of the century exports composed about 10 percent of farm income, they amounted to between 20 and 25 percent by the end of the century. What farmers sold abroad translated into savings and consumption at home that fueled the nation’s industry. Migration from rural to urban areas dwarfed both foreign migration and westward migration. American agricultural productivity allowed it to remain the world’s greatest agricultural economy while it became the world’s largest industrial producer.

The rise of industrial America, the dominance of wage labor, and the growth of cities represented perhaps the greatest changes of the period. Few Americans at the end of the Civil War had anticipated the rapid rise of American industry. For the first time in the nation’s history, wage earners had come to outnumber the self-employed, and by the 1880s these wage earners were becoming employees of larger and larger corporations. As the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics and Labor declared in 1873, wage labor was universal: “a system more widely diffused than any form of religion, or of government, or indeed, of any language.”^[1]

Skilled workers proved remarkably successful at maintaining their position through the 1880s, but they had to fight to do so. The relatively high wages for skilled workers led employers to seek ways to replace skilled with unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Mechanization provided the best tactic for deskilling work and lowering wages. Many of the bitterest strikes of the period were attempts to control working rules and to maintain rather than raise wages. Beginning with the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, through the Great Upheaval of 1886 that culminated in the slaughter at Haymarket Square, then through the Homestead Strike (1892), Pullman Strike (1894), and more, the largest confrontations often involved violence and the intervention by state or federal governments to repress the strikes.

RAILROADS

Many of these strikes involved the railroads; the whole economy seemed to revolve around the railroads. At the end of the 1870s the railroads renewed their expansion. With a brief break in the 1880s, expansion continued at a reckless pace until 1890. At the end of 1890 more than 20 percent of the 161,000 miles of railroad in the United States had been constructed in the previous

four years. By the end of the century the railroad corporations rivaled the United States government in size. In 1891 the Pennsylvania Railroad had 110,000 employees, almost three times the number of men in all the armed forces of the United States. Its capitalization of \$842 million was only \$150 million less than the national debt. Nationally, 418,957 people worked for railroads in 1880 and nearly 800,000 in 1890: about 3 percent of the entire work force of the nation. By 1900 roughly one-sixth of all capital investments in United States were in the railroads.

The railroads powered the industrial economy. They consumed the majority of iron and steel produced in the United States before 1890. As late as 1882, steel rails accounted for 90 percent of the steel production in the United States. They were the nation's largest consumer of lumber and a major consumer of coal. They also distributed these commodities across the country.

At times, however, railroads threatened to haul the American economy into the abyss. Rail corporations overbuilt, borrowed recklessly, and were often atrociously managed. They ricocheted wildly between rate wars and the creation of pools to fix prices, and they encouraged other industries to follow. Wheat, silver, timber, cattle, and other commodities flooded the market, sent prices tumbling, and dragged many producers into bankruptcy. The signal of every economic collapse in the late nineteenth century was the descent of railroads and the banks associated with them into receivership.

THE ECONOMY

The railroads were typical of the economic contradictions of the era. Over the period as a whole, American industry advanced rapidly. By 1900 the United States had one half the world's manufacturing capacity. At the end of the century, it had overtaken Great Britain both in iron and steel production and in coal production. The United States made such great gains because it was the fastest runner in a relatively slow race. The entire period from 1873 to the turn of the century became known as the Long Depression in western Europe. The United States grew faster than European economies, although no faster than nations with similar British colonial backgrounds—Australia and Canada. It actually grew more slowly than Argentina. None of these economies, however, were remotely as large.

The growth was not even. Periods of prosperity alternated with deep downturns in a boom/bust pattern. The economy came out of the depression following the Panic of 1873 at the end of that decade, lurched into a short, sharp depression in 1882–1883, and then fell into a much more severe depression from 1893 to 1897. Until the 1930s this was known as the Great Depression.

Such fluctuations in the American economy were linked to the larger world economy. Important sectors of the American economy globalized, putting American businesses and farmers in competition with other places in the world. One result was a steady downward pressure on prices. The Republican policy of maintaining tariff protection for American industry mitigated deflation on the domestic market, but the return to the gold standard with the Resumption Act of 1875, which later became a major political issue, created compensatory deflationary pressure that contributed to the general decline in prices. This benefitted workers only as long as they were able to maintain their wages.

Economic changes manifested themselves in rates of immigration (which rose during good times and declined during bad), urbanization, types of work, family organization, and more. Social and cultural patterns, in turn, affected the economy by determining who held certain jobs, how those jobs were valued, and where and how work took place. The cumulative effects of these changes were staggering, and many Americans worried that immigration, urbanization, wage labor, and the rise of large corporations undermined values that they thought defined the country itself.

SOCIAL CHANGE

The Civil War had seemed to secure the triumph of a world of small producers and the values of free labor, individualism, and contract freedom. Many Americans desperately wanted to believe that those values survived and still ensured success within the new industrial society. Sometimes they attached the old values to new theories. Herbert Spencer, the British writer and philosopher, had many American disciples, of whom William Graham Sumner of Yale was probably the most prominent. Spencer and his disciples tried to understand human social change in terms of Darwinian evolution, utterly obfuscating the mechanisms of biological evolution in the process.

Other Americans simply tried to portray the new economy as essentially the same as the old. They believed that individual enterprise, hard work, and free competition in open markets still guaranteed success to those willing to work hard. An evolving mass print culture of cheap newspapers, magazines, and dime novels offered proselytizers of the old values new forms of communication. Horatio Alger, whose publishing career extended from the end of the Civil War to the end of the century, wrote juvenile novels that reconciled the new economy with the old values of individualism. In his novels, an individual's fate was still in his hands.

POLITICS

Many other Americans did not think so. They formed a diffuse reform movement contemporaries referred to as antimonopolism. Antimonopolists, including farmers, small businessmen, and workers in the Knights of Labor and other organizations, agreed on the problem, but often differed on the solution. They lamented the rise of large corporations, which to them were synonymous with monopoly. They worried about the dependence on wage labor, the growth of unemployment, particularly during the frequent panics and depressions, the proliferation of tramps as the poor who wandered in search of work were known, and the decline of individual independence. In the 1870s Walt Whitman lamented the human casualties of the new economy. “If the United States, like the countries of the Old World, are also to grow vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations such as we see looming upon us of late years—steadily, even if slowly, eating into us like a cancer of lungs or stomach—then our republican experiment, notwithstanding all its surface successes, is at heart an unhealthy failure.”^[2]

Antimonopolists agreed that the purpose of a republican economy was to sustain independent and prosperous republican citizens, but how to restore the economy to that condition was the problem. Some, probably a majority in the 1870s, sought government intervention to restore competition. Others, who grew in numbers in the 1880s and 1890s, accepted the inevitability of large corporations but desired that they be more tightly regulated. By the 1890s, the Populists, an

antimonopolist third party centered on the South and West, advocated government ownership of the railroads and the telegraphs.

In many ways the antimonopolists were successful. They comprised large factions within both the Democratic and Republican Parties and created new third parties from the Greenbackers (1874–1884) to the Populists of the 1890s. In 1896, the climactic election of the period pitted the antimonopolist William Jennings Bryan against the Republican William McKinley. Bryan lost, but many of the reforms antimonopolists advocated would be enacted over the next twenty years.

Many others were already in place. The inevitable compromises involved in passing legislation left a contradictory reform legacy. Some measures sought to restore competition by breaking up trusts or holding companies while others accepted the existence of large corporations but enforced regulations to restrain them. The Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 initiated a movement to break up the largest trusts. State railroad commissions, the most effective of which were in Iowa and Texas, and the Interstate Commerce Commission created in 1887 represented attempts to regulate corporations.

SYMBOLS OF THEIR AGE

Certain people became better known and better remembered than the presidents of the period because they came to represent both the economy itself and people's ideological views of it. Thomas Edison emerged as perhaps the most admired American of the age because he seemed to represent the triumph of individualism in an industrial economy. He built his famous lab at Menlo Park, New Jersey, in 1876. The public regarded Edison as the “wizard of Menlo Park,” but it was ironically the lab—a cooperative enterprise—that produced the inventions from a workable electric light to the phonograph and more. And when in 1890 Edison merged his lab and other businesses into General Electric, the man who was a symbol of economic individualism became the head of a large corporation. That the corporate form captured Edison was not surprising because large corporations that first arose with the railroads before the Civil War were coming to dominate the American economy during the Great Merger movement of the 1890s.

John D. Rockefeller symbolized the darker view of the economy. His Standard Oil became the best-known and the best-hated corporation of the day. Rockefeller ruthlessly consolidated a competitive oil industry, absorbing rivals or driving them out of business. He was unapologetic, and he had only disdain for those who still thought of the economy as depending on individualism and competition. Organization and consolidation was the future. “The day of the combination is here to stay,” he proclaimed. “Individualism has gone never to return.”^[3]

What was also gone was the United States as a purely continental nation. In many ways, the American acquisition of an overseas empire was a continuation of its continental expansion at the expense of American Indian peoples. But with the annexation of Hawaii (1898) and the subsequent annexation of the Philippines and Puerto Rico following the Spanish American War (1898), the United States extended its military and governmental reach beyond its continental boundaries. The war, like so many things, marked the vast changes that took place in a neglected era.

[1] Quoted in Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 62.

[2] Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 330.

[3] Allan Nevins, *John D. Rockefeller* [1959], 1:622.

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The Progressive Era to the New Era, 1900-1929

by Daniel T. Rodgers



Members of the National Woman's Party picket the White House, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-31799 DLC

We should not accept social life as it has “trickled down to us,” the young journalist Walter Lippmann wrote soon after the twentieth century began. “We have to deal with it deliberately, devise its social organization, . . . educate and control it.” The ambition to harness and organize the energies of modern life of which Lippmann spoke cut through American economy, politics, and society in many different, sometimes contradictory ways between 1900 and 1929, but it left virtually none of its major institutions unchanged. The modern business corporation, modern politics, the modern presidency, a modern vision of the international order, and modern consumer capitalism were all born in these years.

More than in most eras, Americans in the first years of the twentieth century felt the newness of their place in history. Looking back on the late nineteenth century, they stressed its chaos: the boom-and-bust cycles of the economy, the violent and exploitative aspects of its economy and social life, the gulf between its ostentatious new wealth and the lot of its urban poor and hard-pressed farmers, and the inefficiency of American politics in a world of great nations.

A REVOLUTION IN ORGANIZATION

The pioneers in the reorganization of social life on more deliberate and systematic lines were the architects of the modern business corporation. In the aftermath of the 1890s depression, they undertook to supplant the unstable partnership and credit systems of the past with the forms of the modern corporation: broadly capitalized, more intensely managed, and national in scope and market. The reorganization of Andrew Carnegie’s iron and steel empire by the J. P. Morgan banking house into the mammoth US Steel Corporation in 1901 was a sign of the trends to come. By the 1920s, corporate giants in production, communications, finance, life insurance, and

entertainment dominated the economy; the two hundred largest corporations in 1929 owned nearly half the nation's total corporate wealth.

The new scale of economic enterprise demanded much more systematic organization. On the shop and office floor the systematization of work routines was intense, from the elaborate organization of clerical labor at Metropolitan Life to the subdivision of automobile making at Ford in 1913 into tasks that workers could repeat over and over as an assembly line dragged their work past them. In the showcases of “welfare capitalism,” a new cadre of personnel managers undertook to smooth out the radically unstable hiring and firing practices of the past, creating seniority systems and benefits for stable employees. By the 1920s the corporate elite was heralding a “new era” for capitalism, freed of the cyclical instabilities of the past. Its watchwords now were efficiency, permanence, welfare, and service.

With similar ambition to escape the turbulence of late nineteenth-century economy and society, progressive reformers undertook to expand the capacities of governments to deal with the worst effects of barely regulated capitalism. Their projects met far more resistance than those of the corporate managers. But between 1900 and 1929 they succeeded in bringing most of the characteristics of the modern administrative state into being. More professionalized corps of state factory inspectors endeavored to safeguard workers from dangerous working conditions, physically exhausting hours, and industrial diseases. Public utility commissions endeavored to pull the pricing of railroad shipping, streetcar fares, and city gas and water supplies out of the turmoil of politics and put them in the hands of expert-staffed commissions charged with setting fair terms of service and fair return on capital. New zoning boards, city planning commissions, and public health bureaus sprang into being to try to bring more conscious public order out of chaotic land markets, slum housing, poisoned food, polluted water supplies, and contagious diseases.

PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

The energy of the new progressive politics was most intense at the state and local levels where civic reform associations of all sorts sprang up to thrust the new economic and social issues into politics. Women's leagues, labor federations, businessmen's good government lobbies, social welfare associations, and investigative journalists led the way, borrowing on each other's techniques and successes.

Despite the more sharply defined constitutional limitations on federal power in this period, visions of more active government filtered up into national politics as well. Theodore Roosevelt set the mold for a much more active, issue-driven presidency than any since the Civil War. Roosevelt brought an anti-trust rhetoric and a powerful interest in environmental conservation into politics. In the national railroad strike of 1894, President Cleveland had dispatched federal troops to break the strike; now in the national coal strike of 1902, Roosevelt offered the White House as a venue for mediation. Pushed by its farm and labor constituencies, the Democratic Party, too, moved toward more active and effective governance. The era's impetus for the creation of a more centralized banking system to stabilize the nation's credit system had come first from elite bankers. Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic Congress incorporated their plan for a central bank into the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, sliding a publicly appointed board of governors over the bankers' plan for self-regulation. Congress took its first steps toward nation-

wide child labor restriction, though the Supreme Court struck down the act on a narrow reading of the Constitution's "commerce clause."

The relationship of these progressive reforms to democracy was complex. To break what they saw as the corrupt alliance between business wealth and political party bosses, progressive reformers succeeded in moving the election of US Senators from the state legislatures to the general electorate and, in some states, instituting new systems of popular referenda, initiative, and recall. They championed votes for women, bringing the last states holding out against women's suffrage into line in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. But they also tightened up voting registration systems to curb immigrant voters, and they acquiesced in disfranchisement measures to strike African Americans off the voting rolls that had swept through southern states between 1890 and 1908.

IMMIGRATION

The immigrant-filled cities were a focal point for the progressives' mixed feelings about mass democracy. Between 1900 and the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, more than thirteen million immigrants arrived in the United States, pouring into industrial cities largely from the rural regions of central and southern Europe. The new economy, in which six out of every ten industrial workers in 1914 was born abroad, was built on their cheap labor. Out of this new urban working class sprang not only new forms of poverty and overcrowded, tenement living but also powerful political machines, vigorous labor unions, and a socialist party that on the eve of the First World War rivaled any outside of Germany. Middle-class progressives sometimes took the urban masses as political allies. More often, however, the progressives saw the urban poor as objects of social concerns: as populations to be assimilated, improved, and protected from the employers, landlords, and political bosses who exploited them. Progressives inclined less toward talk of class justice than toward faith in a unitary public good; they thought less in terms of protected rights than of mediation and efficient management. They may have placed too much trust in experts, science, and the idea of the common good, but they brought into being the capacities of the modern state to push back against accidents of social fate and the excesses of private capital.

THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

In all these state-building endeavors, early twentieth-century Americans moved in step with their counterparts in other industrial nations. That meant increasing the capacity of the nation to project its interests more forcefully abroad. In the Philippines, seized as a collateral asset in the war to free Cuba from Spanish rule in 1898, a commission led by William Howard Taft undertook to establish an American-style model of imperial governance. In Latin America, where American economic interests were about to eclipse Britain's, US muscle flexing became routine. On a dozen different occasions between 1906 and 1929, US administrations dispatched troops to Mexico and the Caribbean to seize customs houses, reorganize finances, or attempt to control the outcome of an internal revolution.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 brought these state-building ambitions to a peak. Once the Wilson administration's efforts to trade neutrally with all the belligerents collapsed in 1917, the administration entered the war determined to turn the nation into an efficient social machine

for its promotion. Manpower was recruited through a wartime draft. Funds were raised through income tax levies and a public crusade for war bond sales, orchestrated with the best techniques that advertisers and psychological experts could muster. The nation's railroads were temporarily nationalized to coordinate transportation; farmers were organized for war production; the War Industries Board undertook to coordinate industrial production; labor representation rights were granted to boost production and morale; and social workers and psychologists undertook to sort out and ease the transition into war for the almost three million new military recruits. It was only thirteen months between the arrival of US troops in France in October 1917 and the Armistice, but the war gave Americans a model for the efficient mobilization of resources in a common cause that early New Dealers, in particular, would remember.

The First World War gave Americans their first vision of a more effectively managed international order as well. The idea of reorganizing the world for the more efficient management of international disputes had many sources in this period. "Wilsonianism," as it has come to be called, was not uniquely Woodrow Wilson's idea, though he pushed more strongly for it than any of the other great power leaders who met at the peace conference at Versailles in 1919. When the Senate failed to muster the two-thirds necessary to ratify US entry in the new League of Nations, the defeat came as a major blow to progressives. But the application of the label "isolationist" to the period disguises the heightened role that the United States actually played in the organization of international affairs in the 1920s. The nation cooperated with the other great powers in the era's arms-limitation agreements. American banker Charles Dawes won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1925 for engineering a more sustainable international plan for German war reparations payments, soon further eased by the US government's orchestration of new loans to German borrowers. Although the United States was not a participant in the new World Court created under the terms of the peace treaty, an American jurist served on its panel of eleven judges.

POSTWAR AMERICA

Domestically, the break between the prewar and postwar years seemed much sharper than on the international stage. The year 1919, in which the war economic machine ground suddenly to a halt, was one of the most volatile years of the twentieth century. Demobilization unleashed a wave of labor strikes unprecedented in their scale and the radical character of their demands. Workers tried to expand their wartime gains against employers who were determined to drive back unions and reassert management's prerogatives of control. Fearful of revolution abroad and at home, the Justice Department rounded up and deported hundreds of aliens whom it judged, without trial, to be radical and disloyal. Violence erupted along race lines as white mobs in more than twenty cities poured into African American neighborhoods to attack homes and persons. A new Ku Klux Klan emerged in both the North and South with the goal of intimidating not only blacks but also Catholics, immigrants, and radicals. In the aftermath of 1919's turmoil, Calvin Coolidge, a Republican presidential candidate committed to returning the nation to "normalcy," swept the election in a landslide.

Still, many of the managerial ambitions of the earlier years survived into the "new era." Coolidge was no friend of energetic government, but his commerce secretary and successor, the engineer Herbert Hoover, held much more ambitious ideas of the role of government in promoting business and public ends than he is generally credited with. The massive Hoover Dam public

works project was a product of the Coolidge and Hoover administrations; the most important Depression-era agency for financial restabilization, the Reconstruction Finance Administration, began as a Hoover initiative. The drive to prohibit the production and sale of alcohol for consumption undertaken in 1919 and the shuttering of the borders to new European immigration in 1921 were driven in part by moral conservatives' recoil against the mores of the urban, immigrant city. But there were progressives who saw in both measures the promise of a better-organized society, deliberately managing its population movements and curbing the wasteful effects of drunkenness on labor efficiency and on abused wives and children.

The changes that marked the 1900–1929 period were very unevenly spread across the nation's regions and peoples. Southern leaders were not immune to progressive political ambitions. Southern farmers lobbied hard for federal credit systems to supplement private lenders in the cash-strapped South. They turned the system of federally supported agriculture extension agents into a far-flung network of scientific advice, crop marketing assistance, and lobbying help in Congress. But southern progressive reform had its limits. Efforts to enfranchise women, or effectively ban the employment of twelve- and thirteen-year-old children in the textile mills, or enact national anti-lynching legislation met with major resistance. Although there were islands of exception, the South was visibly poorer than the rest of country, much less urbanized, farther from the new consumer society being built elsewhere, and intractably committed to cotton, low-wage labor, and management of its own racial matters.

The most striking change in the South was the massive wartime exodus to the North of African Americans, breaking the ties that had bound most former slaves to agricultural poverty and tenancy since the end of the Civil War. Animosity toward African Americans did not change in the North in this period, where racial pseudo-science flourished in both elite and popular forms, but the labor shortages of the First World War shattered northern employers' bans against African American workers, and the strenuous efforts of southern landlords to keep black labor from fleeing north were not enough to blunt the effects. Almost a half million African Americans fled between 1914 and 1920. Most were rural folk for whom the sharply defined housing ghettos and racially segregated labor markets of the urban North still seemed a major step up from sharecropping and the codes of southern racial subordination. They were joined by aspiring poets, entrepreneurs, jazz musicians, and rights advocates who helped to make Chicago's South Side and New York City's Harlem magnets for a newly self-conscious, urban, and assertive black politics and culture. New racially segregated labor patterns changed the American Southwest as well, as expanding jobs in the farms, mines, and railroads drew hundreds of thousands of workers across the border with Mexico.

Women experienced the era's changes in more complex ways than men. Northern middle-class women had played a defining role in advancing many of the progressive social reforms of the day. Even before they gained the vote, they had established themselves as important politics actors. Working out from woman-dominated social spaces in the settlement houses, women's clubs and colleges, the social-gospel churches, and the social work professions, they undertook to demonstrate women's higher moral sensibilities and their greater sense of responsibility for the larger "civic household." The campaign for political equality for women both altered and undermined those premises. By the 1920s, the settlement-house worker was a far less visible presence in the culture than the bobbed-hair, flapper-clad "new woman"—more independent, more athletic, more eager to compete with men, and more drawn to men's company.

CONSUMER CULTURE

These new women were both the objects and the subjects of the last major domains of society to be reorganized in this period, the industries of entertainment and consumption. Both grew dramatically between 1900 and 1929. It was one of the most important discoveries of the age that even pleasure could be engineered. Moviemakers like D. W. Griffith learned not simply to film a gripping story, but, through new techniques of scene cutting, to pace and manipulate the very emotions of their audiences. Psychology moved into advertisements as goods and pleasures were made to sell themselves by their brands and slogans. Music halls, chain-managed vaudeville, amusement parks, dance clubs, the glittering movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s, and, finally, radio transformed entertainment in this period, particularly for urban Americans. By the 1920s they lived in a culture much more cosmopolitan—with its African American jazz and dance music, Yiddish comedy, and screen idols who showcased their foreignness—more sexualized, more commercial, and more deliberately organized than any before it.

Together with the new forms of pleasure, a new flood of goods poured out of the early twentieth-century economy as production emphases shifted to mass-marketed goods and household consumers. Canned foods, refrigerators and other electric appliances, factory-made shirtwaists, celluloid collars, and chemically made rayon, cigarettes and soft drinks, snap-shot cameras and phonograph records, together with hundreds of other consumer goods brought the reorganization of capital, production, and advertising into daily life. The most revolutionary of the era's new goods was the automobile, no longer a toy of the elites but a democratic commodity, thanks in part to Henry Ford's determination to make cars so efficiently and to pay his workers enough that even factory workers could own one. By 1929 there was one automobile for every five persons in the United States. Already the automobile's effects on the patterns of suburban living, recreation, status, rural isolation, and even sex were being acutely sensed.

By the end of the era, to be outside the new world of mass-marketed goods—as millions of poor and rural Americans continued to be—was for the first time to be an outsider in one's own nation. Almost no one in the fall of 1929 thought that the bounty might be at its end.

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The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945

by David M. Kennedy



General George S. Patton Addressing the 80th Infantry in Kaufbeuren, Germany, July 1945.

Across the long arc of American history, three moments in particular have disproportionately determined the course of the Republic's development. Each respectively distilled the experience and defined the historical legacy of a century. Each embraced a pair of episodes with lastingly transformative impacts. From 1776 to 1789 the Revolutionary War and the adoption of the Constitution brought national independence and established the basic political framework within which the nation would be governed ever after. From 1861 to 1877 the Civil War and Reconstruction affirmed the integrity of the Union, ended slavery, and generated three constitutional amendments that at least laid the foundation for honoring the Declaration's promise that "all men are created equal." And between 1929 and 1945 the Great Depression and World War II utterly redefined the role of government in American society and catapulted the United States from an isolated, peripheral state into the world's hegemonic superpower. To understand the logic and the consequences of those three moments is to understand much about the essence and the trajectory of all of American history.

To a much greater degree than in the earlier cases, the changes set in motion by the Great Depression and World War II had their origins outside the United States—a reminder of the increasing interdependency among nations that was such a salient feature of the twentieth century. The Great Depression was a worldwide catastrophe whose causes and consequences alike were global in character. "The primary cause of the Great Depression," reads the first sentence of President Herbert Hoover's *Memoirs*, "was the war of 1914–1918." And that so-called Great War, along with the Depression it spawned, was the driver that eventually produced the even greater catastrophe of World War II.

Economists and historians continue to this day to debate the proximate causes of the Great Depression. But even after due allowance has been made for the effects of the American stock market's "Great Crash" in 1929 and for the policies of the United States Federal Reserve System, there can be little doubt that the deepest roots of the crisis lay in the several chronic infirmities that World War I had inflicted on the international political and economic order. The war exacted a cruel economic and human toll from the core societies of the advanced industrialized world, including conspicuously Britain, France, and Germany. The lingering distortions in trade, capital flows, and exchange rates occasioned by the punitive Treaty of Versailles, as the economist John Maynard Keynes observed at the time, managed to perpetuate in peacetime the economic disruptions that had wrought so much hardship in wartime. What was more, memories of the war's bitter fighting and vengeful conclusion rendered the postwar international atmosphere toxic. To those abundant physical and institutional ills might be added a rigidly doctrinaire faith in laissez-faire, balanced national budgets, and the gold standard. All of this added up to a witches' brew of economic illness, ideological paralysis, and consequent political incapacity as the Depression relentlessly enveloped the globe.

The United States had participated only marginally in the First World War, but the experience was sufficiently costly that Americans turned their country decidedly inward in the 1920s. They disarmed their military forces and swiftly dismantled the nation's war machinery. The United States Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and rejected membership in the nascent League of Nations. Congress in 1922 effectively closed the American market to foreign vendors with the Fordney-McCumber Tariff, among the highest in United States history, and the Smoot-Hawley Tariff eight years later. Washington also insisted that the Europeans repay the entirety of the loans extended to them by the US Treasury during the war. And in 1924 the republic for the first time in its history imposed a strict limit on the number of immigrants who could annually enter the country. Among those eventually excluded (though none could yet know it) were thousands of Jewish would-be fugitives from Nazi persecution. Militarily, diplomatically, commercially, financially, even morally, Americans thus turned their backs on the outside world.

American prosperity in the 1920s was real enough, but it was not nearly as pervasive as legend has portrayed. The millions of immigrants who had swarmed into the nation's teeming industrial cities in the preceding decades remained culturally parochial and economically precarious in gritty ethnic ghettos. The overwhelming majority of black Americans still dwelled in the eleven states of the old Confederacy, the poorest and most disadvantaged people in America's poorest and most backward region. And well before the Great Depression, almost as soon as the Great War concluded in 1918, a severe economic crisis had beset the farm-belt. It did not entirely lift until the next world war, more than twenty years later. The long-suffering countryside was home to nearly half of all Americans in the 1920s; one out of every five workers toiled on the nation's fields and farms. Virtually none enjoyed such common urban amenities as electricity and indoor plumbing.

Other maladies began to appear, faintly at first, but with mounting urgency as the Depression began to unfold. A ramshackle, woefully under-regulated private banking system, a legacy of Andrew Jackson's long-ago war on central banking, had managed to wobble its dysfunctional way into the modern era. Some twenty-five thousand banks, most of them highly fragile "unitary" institutions with tiny service areas, little or no diversification of clients or assets, and microscopic capitalization, constituted the astonishingly vulnerable foundation of the national

credit. As for government—public spending at all levels, including towns, cities, counties, states, and the federal government itself, amounted only to about 15 percent of the gross domestic product in the 1920s, one-fifth of which was federal expenditures. Ideology aside, its very size made the federal government in the 1920s a kind of ninety-pound weakling in the fight against the looming depression.

Yet for most of the 1920s the mood of much of the country, impervious to news of accumulating international dangers and buoyed by wildly ascending stock prices as well as the congenial optimism long claimed as every American’s birthright, remained remarkably upbeat. Then in the autumn of 1929, the bubble burst. The Great Crash in October sent stock prices plummeting and all but froze the international flow of credit. Banks failed by the thousands. Businesses collapsed by the tens of thousands. Millions—nobody knew at first how many, so primitive were the government’s fact-finding organs—went unemployed. Herbert Hoover, elected just months earlier amid lavish testimonials to his peerless competence, saw his presidency shattered and his reputation forever shredded because of his inability to tame the depression monster—though, again contrary to legend, he toiled valiantly, using what tools he had and even inventing some new ones, as he struggled to get the upper hand.

By 1932, some thirteen million Americans were out of work, one out of every four able and willing workers in the country. Even those horrendous numbers could not begin to take the full measure of the human misery that unemployment entailed. Given the demography of the labor force and prevailing cultural norms that kept most women—and virtually all married women—out of the wage-paying economy, a 25 percent unemployment rate meant that, for all practical purposes, every fourth household in America had no breadwinner. Many Americans came to believe that they were witnessing not just another downswing of the business cycle, but the collapse of a historic economic, political, and social order, perhaps even the end of the American way of life. Yet curiously, as many observers noted, most Americans remained inexplicably docile, even passive, in the face of this unprecedented calamity.

Among those who were perplexed by the apparent submissiveness of the American people as the Depression descended was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. “There had never been a time, the Civil War alone excepted,” an associate recollected Roosevelt saying during the 1932 presidential campaign, “when our institutions had been in such jeopardy. Repeatedly he spoke of this, saying that it was enormously puzzling to him that the ordeal of the past three years had been endured so peaceably.”^[1] That peculiar psychology, rooted in deep cultural attitudes of individualism and self-reliance, strongly impeded any thought of collective—i.e., political—response to the crisis. Those elusive but deep-seated and powerful American cultural characteristics go a long way toward explaining the challenge that faced any leader seeking to broaden the powers of government to combat the Depression.

FDR AND THE NEW DEAL

Elected to the presidency in 1932 on a platform that promised “a new deal for the American people,” Franklin Roosevelt now took up that challenge. He faced a task of compound difficulty: he had to find ways to counter-punch to the Depression crisis, put in place reforms that would make future such crises less likely, and convince his countrymen of the legitimacy of his precedent-shattering initiatives.

FDR was destined to hold office for more than a dozen years. He was thrice re-elected, a record matched by no previous incumbent and forbidden to all future presidents by the passage of the Twenty-second Amendment to the Constitution in 1951. FDR was then and has remained ever since a surpassingly enigmatic figure. His personality perplexed his contemporaries and has challenged his biographers ever since. His long-serving secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, called him “the most complicated human being I ever knew.”^[2] Yet for all the opacity of his innermost character, he clearly brought with him to the presidency one simple and supremely important belief. It is appropriate to call it a vision: that American life could be made more secure.

Roosevelt, like Hoover before him, never did find a remedy for the Great Depression. It hung heavily over the land for nearly a dozen years of suffering and anxiety without equal in the history of the republic. Before World War II wiped out the Depression at a stroke, none of FDR’s exertions managed to wrestle the unemployment rate below 14 percent. For the decade of the 1930s as a whole, it averaged 17 percent. Some critics mistakenly blame the economy’s stubborn inability to recover on Roosevelt’s own allegedly anti-business policies.

Yet while Hoover’s failure to restore the economy led to his political ruin, Roosevelt seized upon the enduring economic crisis as a matchless opportunity to achieve objectives whose scope far transcended the immediate woes of the Depression decade. FDR used the Depression crisis to break the untamed bronco of let-’er-rip, buccaneering, laissez-faire capitalism that had gone unbridled since the dawn of the industrial revolution in America more than a century earlier. He and his fellow New Dealers invented new governmental institutions like the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to bring stability to the historically shaky banks, the casino-like stock exchanges, and the often violently tumultuous world of labor relations. They gave birth to other institutions as well, including the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and the Federal National Mortgage Association (“Fannie Mae”) to make mortgage lending more secure, thereby unleashing the money and the energy that made a majority of Americans homeowners and built the suburbs of the Sunbelt after World War II. They passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, abolishing at last the scourge of child labor and establishing minimum wage guarantees. Most famously, with the Social Security Act of 1935 they erected a comprehensive system of unemployment and old-age insurance to protect laid-off workers and the elderly against what FDR called “the hazards and vicissitudes of life.”

These were on the whole market-enhancing, not market-encroaching initiatives. They sought not to nationalize core industries (as commonly occurred in European states), nor even to attempt central direction of the national economy, but rather to use federal power in artful ways to make the private economy function more efficiently and less riskily as well as more fairly.

Achieving security was ever the prime value and always the dominant motif of the New Deal’s many innovations. Americans lived for generations thereafter in a world rendered more predictable, less volatile, safer—and for those reasons more prosperous and probably also more just—than they would have enjoyed, or endured, without FDR’s achievements.

The New Deal serves to this day as a political talisman, invoked variously by Left or Right to promote or denounce activist government or an enlarged public sphere. So by what historical

standard should the New Deal be judged? If appraised on grounds of swiftly achieving economic recovery, despite some modest success, the New Deal must be declared a failure. But Roosevelt's greatest ambitions and highest priorities were not simply to get back to business as usual. His highest aim was to do nothing less than rewrite the nation's historic social contract. And on those grounds the New Deal can be said to have succeeded handsomely.

Roosevelt most explicitly acknowledged that larger ambition in his second Inaugural Address in 1937, when he boasted that "our progress out of the depression is obvious," but then added the startling observation that "such symptoms of prosperity may become portents of disaster." To say the least, that's an exceedingly rare sentence in the annals of presidential pronouncements. What could Roosevelt have meant when he linked economic recovery with political disaster?[3]

A clue may be found in the passage that immediately followed on that Inaugural Day. "Here is the challenge to our democracy," he said: "One-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." The context makes clear that he was not then speaking about the victims of the transient Depression, which he believed to be lifting. He was talking, rather, about those farmers and immigrants and African Americans who had long languished on the margins of American life and whom he hoped to usher into its main stream. "We are going to make a country," he once remarked to Frances Perkins, "in which no one is left out." The ironic truth is that it was precisely FDR's failure to end the Depression that provided him with the necessary political space to enlarge the sphere of American democracy by enacting lasting reforms like the Securities and Exchange Act, the Federal Housing Authority Act, the Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act.[4]

One test of the logic of this argument might be to ask: If FDR had somehow found the solution to the Depression by, say, the end of the fabled but in the last analysis scarcely consequential Hundred Days in 1933, would there have been a New Deal as we know it? Save only FDIC, all the reforms mentioned above date from 1934 and thereafter. If the economy had been immediately restored to full health, it is at least arguable that business as usual would have meant politics as usual, and the United States would have missed what FDR called its "Rendezvous with Destiny"—that is, its chance to tame at last the volatile and destructive demon of no-holds-barred industrial capitalism whose unchecked gyrations had ravaged lives—and fortunes—for nearly a century before the 1930s.

WORLD WAR II

The world the American people had tried to exclude after the First World War could not forever be kept at bay. Adolf Hitler and Franklin Roosevelt came to power within weeks of one another. Hitler was installed as the German chancellor on January 30, 1933; Roosevelt was inaugurated as President of the United States just thirty-three days later, on March 4. The entire history of Roosevelt's presidency unfolded under the shadow of Hitler's chancellorship and eventually the swelling belligerency of Japanese militarists. The challenges of the Great Depression and the accomplishments and shortcomings of the New Deal, and of FDR, cannot be understood outside of that framework. And just as the story of the Great Depression is not simply the story of the American people in a moment pregnant with both danger and opportunity, the story of World War II is a tale of peoples around the world violently swept up in its frightful cataclysm—though the Americans, as it happened, were uniquely spared the worst of the war's ravages.

The Japanese attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, brought the United States into the war as a formal belligerent—more than two years after the war had begun with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Yet while it has become a commonplace to note that the Pearl Harbor attack dramatically extinguished American isolationism, the fact is that traditional isolationist sentiment was by that time already markedly diminished—and that anxieties about its possible revival animated American leaders throughout the conflict and well into the postwar period.

At the outset of his presidency, Franklin Roosevelt had not challenged the isolationist mood of his countrymen, declaring in his first Inaugural Address that “our international trade relations, though vastly important, are in point of time and necessity secondary to the establishment of a sound national economy.” But as the international environment grew more perilous, FDR worked ever harder to disabuse Americans of the view that the world’s problems were none of their concern. He chafed increasingly under the restrictions of the several “Neutrality Laws” that Congress passed between 1935 and 1939, and succeeded at last in securing passage of the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941, committing the vast economic resources of the United States to the war against the so-called Axis Powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy. Hitler, correctly, deemed the Lend-Lease Act tantamount to a declaration of war. With an initial appropriation of some \$7 billion (nearly equal to the entire average annual federal budget in the 1930s, and reaching nearly \$50 billion by war’s end) Lend-Lease aimed to make the United States into what Roosevelt called “the great arsenal of democracy.”

With some qualifications, the “arsenal of democracy” concept remained at the core of American grand strategy throughout the war. To be sure, the United States took nearly sixteen million men (and several thousand women) into uniform, fielded a ninety-division ground force, floated a two-ocean navy, built a gigantic strategic bomber fleet, and suffered 405,399 military deaths. Yet the greatest American contribution to the war effort was neither manpower nor heroism, but cash and weapons. As the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin cynically but accurately observed, the United States adhered to a policy of fighting with American money, and American machines, and Russian men. Some eight million Soviet troops died fighting Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*, while as many as sixteen million Soviet civilians perished. In a war with the dubious historical distinction that it inflicted more civilian than military deaths, the American toll of civilian deaths attributable to enemy action in the forty-eight continental states was six—a young woman and five schoolchildren killed together by a crude Japanese balloon-borne fire bomb that exploded in south-central Oregon on May 5, 1945.

Thus if the response to the question “who won World War II?” is determined by who paid the greatest price for the ultimate victory, the answer is unambiguously the Soviet Union. Yet if one means which country most benefited from victory, the equally unambiguous answer is the United States. Not only were American war deaths, proportionate to population, about one-sixtieth those in the Soviet Union, and one-fourth those in Great Britain, but among all the major belligerents, the United States alone managed to grow its civilian economy even while producing prodigious quantities of armaments and other supplies for itself and its allies. The civilian economies of both the Soviet Union and Great Britain shrank by nearly one-third during war time. In the United States civilian consumption expanded by nearly 15 percent. The war forever banished the Depression and ignited the economic after-burners that propelled the American economy to unprecedented heights of prosperity in the postwar decades.

How did the Americans manage to fight a war so different from the war that so horribly punished so many other peoples? Geography—or, more precisely, the conjunction of geography with the technologies available in the mid-twentieth century—is surely part of the answer. The two-ocean moat that for centuries had shielded the New World from the Old World continued to insulate the United States in World War II—though the advent of America’s own long-range, ocean-spanning strategic bombers clearly signaled the end of the republic’s long era of “free security.”

But American grand strategy in World War II was built upon more than the accidents of geography. Like any leader in a comparable situation, Roosevelt sought what economists call a “least-cost pathway” to victory, shrewdly employing his country’s peculiar assets and capabilities to maximum advantage at minimum cost—and doing so in ways that would be least likely to reawaken the isolationist sentiment that Roosevelt had battled throughout the prewar decade.

Four great principles lay at the core of that grand strategy: to focus on Germany, not Japan, as the primary strategic foe (as Roosevelt said, the defeat of Germany would mean the defeat of Japan, but the defeat of Japan would not mean the defeat of Germany); to rely principally on the novel doctrine of strategic bombing, aiming not at the enemy’s forces in the field, but at his civilian heartland; to keep the ground force as small as possible, leaving millions of men to work on the home-front industrial production lines; and to delay as long as feasible the great amphibious invasion of northwest Europe—the battle eventually known as “D-Day.” The Soviet victory at Stalingrad in February 1943 ratified the viability of all those principles by reassuring Roosevelt and his British ally, Winston Churchill, that the Russians would stay in the war and bear the brunt of the fighting. The much-debated “unconditional surrender” formula that FDR announced at Casablanca in January 1943 was primarily intended to reassure the Soviets that the Americans and British, too, were committed to seeing the war through to the extinction of the Nazi regime, which eventually came on May 8, 1945.

The war against Japan, originally conceived as a purely defensive affair to hold the Japanese at bay in the mid-Pacific until Germany was defeated, took an unexpected turn in June 1942 when the Imperial Japanese Navy lost four aircraft carriers at the Battle of Midway. Though the war against Germany still had the higher priority, the door now opened for American offensive actions in the Pacific. US forces relentlessly closed in on the Japanese home islands, culminating in months of intensive firebombing raids against Japan and ultimately the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, which clinched the Japanese decision to surrender.

In that same month Winston Churchill declared that the triumphantly victorious United States, restored to economic health, flush with energy, morally and politically self-confident, stood “at the summit of the world.”^[5] For a nation that just half a decade earlier had lain economically prostrate at the distant margins of the international order, that was a remarkable accomplishment and one that would shape the character of the remainder of the twentieth century, abroad as well as at home.

[1] Rexford Tugwell, *The Brains Trust* (New York: Viking, 1968), 295.

[2] Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Viking, 1946), 3.

[3] Franklin D. Roosevelt, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1937 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/froos2.asp

[4] Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, 113.

[5] David Cannadine, ed., *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The Speeches of Winston Churchill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 282.

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1945 to the Present

by William H. Chafe



President-elect Barack Obama is welcomed by President George W. Bush for a meeting at the White House with former presidents, from left, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter. (Courtesy of the White House)

No event proved more important to the course of modern American history than World War II. The war cast America onto the world stage as a mighty economic and military giant. It rescued the country from the Great Depression, created full employment, and for the first time in a generation increased real income for American workers. Moreover, the poorest 40 percent of the population saw its share of the national income grow, while the top 5 percent witnessed a decline. Technology boomed, and the computer age began. African Americans and women experienced more dramatic change than they had in decades. And the contours of postwar diplomacy took shape in response to issues dividing the Western Allies on the one hand from the Soviet Union on the other. Although the war lasted only four years for the United States, its impact endured for generations.

Domestically, the war triggered massive social changes. More than 6.5 million women took jobs for the first time, increasing the female labor force by 57 percent. Most were married and over 35. Whereas before the war, the average woman worker was young, single, and poor, by the end of the war she was married, middle aged, and increasingly middle class. African Americans joined the Armed Forces in record numbers, while two million left the South for factory jobs in the North and West. While facing ongoing discrimination, black Americans pursued the “Double V” campaign—victory against racism at home as well as victory against fascism abroad. Membership in the NAACP—the largest African American protest organization—skyrocketed from 50,000 to 500,000.

In the meantime, workers with rising incomes put their money into savings accounts, since rationing limited their ability to purchase consumer goods like cars and clothes. Those funds were then available to fuel the consumer boom that followed the war. Millions took advantage of the opportunities to buy new houses in the suburbs, shop for new cars and appliances, and join the burgeoning “affluent society” of the 1950s.

The war also set the stage for the dominant political and diplomatic reality of the postwar years—the Cold War. Tensions among the Allies had existed from the beginning of World War II, and after the war profound conflicts continued to separate the superpowers. What would be the fate of Poland, whose freedom was the reason for Allied intervention in the first place? How would Germany and Japan be governed after the war? What about other Eastern European countries like Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary? Should they fall under Soviet control, or have Western-style free governments? And how about the atomic bomb? Should the United States try to be the sole nuclear power, or should it share information about atomic science?

Although Roosevelt was confident he could reconcile these tensions, he died before the war ended, and he never shared his ideas for making peace. His successor, Harry Truman, found himself in an increasingly hostile relationship with Stalin and the USSR. By 1947, polarization between the two superpowers had come to dominate all diplomatic relations. In the Truman Doctrine, the President portrayed America as being in a holy war with Soviet Union. It was a battle between good and evil, he said, with God-fearing people who believed in freedom on one side, and atheistic Communists who believed in tyranny on the other. In this worldview, there could be no room for compromise, and anyone who suggested such a course was immoral. Pursuing a policy of “containment,” the United States pledged to fight Communist incursions any place and any time they occurred.

Tensions worsened through the 1940s and 1950s as nations around the world aligned themselves on one side or the other. The United States created the Marshall Plan in 1948 to rebuild Europe and established NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance) the same year. In 1949, the USSR tested its first atomic bomb, and Communist China led by Mao Zedong emerged. In 1950, North Korea—with Russia’s approval—invaded South Korea, precipitating an immediate American response. The Korean War was the first open military conflagration of the Cold War. And in 1955, when NATO accepted the Federal Republic of Germany as a member, Russia formed the Warsaw Pact to prevent future invasions of Soviet territory and tighten control over Eastern Europe.

But Cold War anti-communism was not limited to foreign policy. The “other side of the [Cold War] walnut” was domestic anti-communism. From the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the immediate postwar years to the launching of McCarthyism in 1950, fear of domestic communism dominated political discourse at home. It was the primary weapon in President Truman’s re-election campaign in 1948. Threatened by the candidacy of former Vice President Henry Wallace on the Progressive Party ticket, Truman denounced “Wallace and *his communists*” (emphasis added), suggesting that anyone to the left of the Democratic Party mainstream was suspect. When Truman proposed national health care insurance to Congress in 1947, it was excoriated as “socialized medicine,” an effort to imitate the Soviet Union. The same allegation was made against day care centers in New York City, because such centers suggested that the state take over the responsibilities of the family, as in the Soviet Union. Those who supported such measures were denounced as “fellow travelers” and “communist sympathizers.”

As a result, a centrist consensus emerged as the dominant political style of America. Democrats and Republicans celebrated American democracy and capitalism; they agreed there were no fundamental problems with American society, and that any problems that did exist could be

solved by incremental reform. Economic growth would serve as the primary means of securing social progress. The anchor of this consensus was anti-communism, both as a foreign policy toward the Soviet Union and as a political stance rejecting the kind of left-of-center politics that was prevalent in the Labor Party in England and the Social Democratic Parties of France and Germany. To be sure, Democrats and Republicans disagreed on many issues, but for the most part both parties occupied the center of the political spectrum.

Thus, Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican and a war hero, was elected president in 1952, but he never sought to undo the New Deal. Indeed, he created a Cabinet-level Department of Health, Education and Welfare and famously wrote his brother that anyone who contemplated ending Social Security must be out of his mind. Similarly, when John F. Kennedy was elected president, he focused primarily on the Cold War and on stimulating economic growth. He might have been a Democrat, but in substance, Kennedy represented continuity with, not difference from, President Eisenhower.

In spite of this political consensus, the Civil Rights Movement was able to surge forward in the postwar years, creating the foundation for a decade of rapidly expanding protest. When black veterans returned from World War II, they refused to accept second-class citizenship any longer. With their uniforms still on, they went to register to vote. When they were beaten—even murdered—for trying to exercise the franchise, they fought back. The war had kindled a new activism and a new faith among African Americans. What had previously been endured was vigorously resisted, from the bottom up. When a black woman was raped by six white police officers in Montgomery, Alabama, angry African Americans, led by a Women’s Political Council and a black labor union, insisted that the police be put on trial. One of those activists was Rosa Parks. Secretary of the local NAACP, she was determined to challenge racism wherever it existed. So when she was told to give up her seat on a public bus to a white person in December 1955, she refused. Her arrest sparked phone conversations between the Women’s Political Council and the black labor union, and the next night, the African American community poured into a Baptist church where they heard a young and unknown minister, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., implore the community to stand up for justice. For 381 days, not a single black person in Montgomery rode a public bus, until finally the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public transportation was unconstitutional.

By the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had become a page-one story in every newspaper and had entered the political arena as a pivotal issue. On February 1, 1960, four first-year college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, “sat in” at the local Woolworth’s to demand the right to buy a cup of coffee at the lunch counter, just as they were able to purchase school supplies and toiletries at other counters. They started a flash fire of similar protests. Within two months, sit-ins had spread to fifty-four cities in nine different states, and in the North students, black and white, protested stores that practiced segregation in the South. Soon, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was created, and civil rights demonstrators sought to integrate public restaurants and hotels and register voters in every Southern state.

By 1963, President John F. Kennedy could no longer ignore what was happening around the country and went on national television to declare that racial equality was a “moral issue” as old as the Scriptures and to propose legislation that would end segregation in the work place and in all public accommodations. Five months later on November 22, 1963, Kennedy was

assassinated. He did not live to see his legislation pass, but his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, not only secured passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but also signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, prohibiting the states from denying African Americans their right to vote in the South. The greatest reform president since Franklin Roosevelt, Johnson also waged a War on Poverty, secured passage of Medicare, which offered health insurance to senior citizens, and promoted far-reaching changes in federal aid for education, manpower retraining, and urban renewal.

As in the abolition movement more than one hundred years earlier, the battle over equal rights for African Americans quickly led to a battle over equal rights for women. Throughout the 1950s, women's employment rate increased four times faster than men's. Although most of those jobs were underpaid and not competitive with men's jobs, they contradicted the dictum that "a woman's place is in the home." Soon, that cultural norm came under overt attack. President Kennedy established the Commission on the Status of Women, which in 1963 called for reforms in women's status. The 1964 Civil Rights Act specifically outlawed discrimination in the workplace against women as well as African Americans, and when there was little effort to enforce that prohibition, a group of activists led by Betty Friedan created the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Friedan had written the best-selling *Feminine Mystique* in 1963, revealing the dissatisfaction of middle-class housewives who were concerned with "the problem that has no name." It was given a name—sexism—and NOW set out to integrate women into the mainstream of American society, just as the NAACP had done for black Americans.

Young woman activists in the Civil Rights Movement, in the meantime, realized that they were treated as "second-class citizens," even within a movement dedicated to equal rights. As the Civil Rights Movement split over the emergence of Black Power, many white woman civil rights activists joined the New Left, a predominantly campus-based organization that started groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). There, too, women experienced condescension from white male radicals.

Soon, they started the women's liberation movement. Not a national, hierarchical organization like NOW, women's liberation groups emerged in grassroots settings where fifteen or twenty women gathered together for "consciousness-raising" sessions where they explored what it was like to be a woman. As such groups proliferated, a sea change occurred in the attitudes of young women. The result was a revolution in social values. No longer did most young women believe that happiness could be found solely in marriage and children. Growing numbers of women sought independence, equal relationships, and careers; they married later, had fewer children, and insisted on equal access to careers. In 1965, only 5 percent of all students entering medical school, law school, or business school were women. Twenty-five years later, that figure had skyrocketed to 50 percent.

Protest movements in the 1960s culminated when activists zeroed in on the Vietnam War as a primary example of what was wrong with American society. The war itself was a direct product of the Cold War. During World War II, Americans enjoyed an informal alliance with Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Vietnamese resistance against Japan. But when France re-imposed its colonial regime in Indochina, the United States supported its NATO ally against Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese nationalists. When the French withdrew in 1954, the United States supported a pro-Western South Vietnamese government. John F. Kennedy increased American troop strength

from 800 to 15,000, but resisted requests for more troops. Bolstered by his success during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Kennedy gave every indication that he would begin withdrawing American troops after the 1964 election. But after the assassination, Lyndon Johnson, far less experienced than Kennedy, believed he had to resist Communist insurrection in Vietnam at all costs. By July 1965 Johnson had begun escalating American involvement in Vietnam, and the number of troops soon reached 540,000.

Initial protest against the war was moderate. It began with “teach-ins,” where opponents of the war debated representatives of the State Department in the hope that reason would prevail. But intellectual argument changed nothing. Student activists quickly intensified their protests. They demonstrated against universities that had defense industry contracts or that hosted recruitment visits from companies like Dow Chemical, the manufacturer of napalm. Soon, anti-war protestors started burning draft cards and calling the police who opposed them “capitalist pigs.” By the end of 1967, it was nearly impossible for an administration official to visit a college campus anywhere in the country without rowdy and violent demonstrations.

As the presidential election year of 1968 dawned, the nation was split apart more severely than at any time since the Civil War. Radical student groups threatened to take over campuses. The “Weathermen,” a break-off group from SDS, called for violent revolution. More moderate reformers rallied behind the anti-war presidential candidacy of Senator Eugene McCarthy from Minnesota, who contested Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. A rapid-fire succession of explosive developments made the world seem dramatically different with each passing month.

In January, Vietnamese insurgents launched the Tet offensive (during the Vietnamese new year), assaulting every major South Vietnamese city, even briefly occupying the US Embassy in Saigon. One month later, Eugene McCarthy captured 48 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary. The next week, Robert F. Kennedy, also an anti-war senator, joined the presidential campaign. On March 31, Lyndon Johnson announced a halt in the bombing of North Vietnam, then stunned the nation by declaring he would not run for re-election. Four days later, on April 4, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. In reaction to King’s death, despite leaders urging for non-violence in his honor, riots broke out in more than 110 American cities. In May, students occupied the main administration buildings at Columbia University protesting racist policies. Then on June 5, Robert F. Kennedy was gunned down after winning the California primary, seemingly on his way to the Democratic presidential nomination. In August, the Democratic National Convention was racked by violence, and Chicago police engaged in brutal attacks against journalists and student protestors. The presidential race was dominated by a sense of domestic crisis. Alabama Governor George Wallace, a third-party candidate, lambasted all protestors as traitors. Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, called for a return to law and order, claiming to speak for the “silent majority” who believed in patriotism, hard work, and reverence for God. Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey sought to find a middle ground in vain, though he did almost win.

The election of Richard Nixon inaugurated a new era of conservatism, based on rallying mainstream Americans against social experimentation and protest groups. Although he had dedicated his presidency to “bringing us together,” Nixon practiced a politics of polarization. His “Southern strategy” sought to use racial conflict as a basis for creating a new Solid South, this

time dominated by white Republicans. Spiro Agnew, his alliterative vice president, gave repeated speeches denouncing the “nattering nabobs of negativism” who insisted on criticizing rather than celebrating America. While Nixon had spoken of a “secret plan” to end the Vietnam War, he chose a strange way of executing it, engaging in secret bombing of Cambodia and then invading the country, a course that prompted renewed student protests and led to the killing of four student demonstrators by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio. Although Nixon finally ended the war in 1973 (on terms virtually identical to those he could have had in 1969), he did so by such excessive bombing of Hanoi that he seemed to be out to prove that he was the “mad man” that he wanted his enemies to think he was.

Nixon’s greatest achievements were in the foreign policy realm, which he cared about more deeply than anything else. A person who detested most of his own Cabinet and the daily routine of presidential meetings, Nixon spent as much time as he could by himself in a small study off the Oval Office. Most often, his hopes focused on transforming America’s relations with China. As one of the most inveterate anti-Communists to ever walk the halls of Congress, Nixon was ideally situated to reverse nearly a quarter century of hostility and open relations with Peking. After all, no one could accuse him of being soft on Communism. Plotting with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger (he never told his secretary of state about his China plans), Nixon secretly arranged the dramatic breakthrough. He went personally to China, met with Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, and inaugurated diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China. It was a master stroke.

While Nixon could be a visionary on foreign policy, he also engaged in petty, self-destructive, and vindictive efforts to squash his political adversaries. Going into the 1972 presidential election, it was clear that Nixon would easily defeat his opponent, George McGovern. But for Nixon that was not enough; he wanted to destroy his foes. Nixon created “the Plumbers,” a group of secret operatives who broke into offices of the political opposition and sought to sabotage their campaigns. When the Plumbers entered the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate apartment complex for the second time (the first effort was botched), an alert security guard noticed the break-in and the burglars were arrested. Soon two *Washington Post* cub reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, discovered the names of White House officials in the notebook of the Plumbers’ leader. Although it took nearly two years, the full story finally came out. The President of the United States not only helped to create the Plumbers, he also schemed to pay them off if they stayed quiet and explicitly ordered a campaign to obstruct justice. Ironically, all this was taped by ubiquitous tape recorders set up by Nixon himself to document his presidency. Eventually, Watergate led Republicans and Democrats alike to conclude that Nixon had to go, and in the summer of 1974 Richard Nixon, faced with impeachment, resigned the office of the presidency. Gerald Ford assumed the presidency.

Watergate inaugurated an era of malaise in America. A series of developments in the 1970s caused the American people to doubt that the nation could continue to reign, unchallenged, as ruler of the world. In 1973 and 1974, an OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo on oil sales highlighted America’s dependence on Middle Eastern fuel, with mile-long gas lines forming in every major city. “Stagflation” became the byword for the American economy. For the first time, high unemployment went hand in hand with high inflation rates, both in double digits. As the economy foundered, so too did the nation’s sense of well being and moral stability. Supreme Court decisions legalizing abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973) and other rulings such as the outlawing of school prayer in the 1960s enraged millions of

conservatives. When Americans were forced to flee Saigon in 1975, clinging to helicopters, it seemed a fitting symbol of the country's decline, economically, politically, militarily, and on issues of basic social values.

Jimmy Carter's election to the presidency in 1976 seemed like a partial answer. An unknown politician and a born-again Christian who told the American people they deserved a government as moral and as competent as its citizens, the former Georgia governor seemed ideally suited to restore a sense of stability to the nation. But Carter did not know how to deal with Congress. The energy crisis overwhelmed him. So too did inflation rates nearing 20 percent. Although he represented a breath of fresh air in foreign policy, especially in espousing democratic regimes in Africa and Latin America, Carter ultimately fell victim to one of the most humiliating defeats America had experienced—the seizure of the American embassy in Teheran, Iran, and the holding of more than sixty American hostages for over a year. Nothing more powerfully exemplified America's new sense of powerlessness.

Ronald Reagan was the “cowboy” who came riding in from the West to rescue America's sense of well being and pride. An actor, Reagan exuded leadership and strength. He operated on a simple creed: Capitalism was the only economic system that worked; people had to free themselves of the burdens of government—especially taxation—to manifest their creativity; no one should be allowed to challenge America militarily; and with these in hand, the nation would bounce back. Once again it would be “morning time in America.” To a remarkable degree, Reagan delivered. He cut taxes, created new jobs, increased the military budget dramatically, called the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” and won back the confidence of the people. Walter Mondale, the Democratic candidate for president in 1984, never stood a chance. Reagan swept forty-nine of the fifty states.

Yet Reagan's successes (and failures) were largely a product of the staff who served him. As long as James Baker was his chief of staff and Michael Deaver scripted his lines, Reagan's performance was impeccable. But when Baker swapped jobs with Donald Regan, Secretary of the Treasury, everything fell apart. Regan lacked the finesse of Baker. New National Security aides Oliver North and Admiral John Poindexter had Reagan sign off on the Iran-Contra affair—a scheme to have Israel sell US arms to Iran to free hostages and then use the profits to arm the “Contra” rebels in Nicaragua. Unfortunately, aiding the “Contras” was a direct violation of the Boland Amendment, a Congressional act that prohibited such aid. Reagan, never a “hands-on” president, was oblivious to the entire disaster. With poor staff, he blundered badly and, once more, it seemed that America was doomed to be afflicted with a failed chief executive.

Yet in the end, Reagan pulled off a miracle. At his wife Nancy's prompting, he had entered into intense negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union. Unable to compete financially or militarily with Reagan's arms buildup, Gorbachev was ready for peace. He also recognized the futility of pursuing policies of Stalinist repression within his own country. As a result, Gorbachev and Reagan arrived at a dramatic arms control treaty and set the world on a path that signified the end of the Cold War. Returning from a triumphant final visit to Moscow, Reagan told the press that what he had just done was like being in a Cecil B. DeMille movie. It was, he said “the role of a lifetime.”

Reagan's immediate successor—and his vice president—was George Herbert Walker Bush, a Yankee transplanted to Texas who had been a Congressman, ambassador to the United Nations and to China, and CIA director. Using his experience to brilliant effect, Bush presided masterfully over the end of the Cold War. To the astonishment of the world, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 after twenty-eight years. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union itself fell apart, literally, with its constituent parts breaking away to form independent republics. Bush handled it all well, always careful to respect the sensibilities of other nations. Partly because of that skill, he shaped the most effective coalition of the post-Cold War world. Carefully putting together a military and political force of sixty-five nations under a United Nations mandate, Bush led a military drive, presided over by General Colin Powell, that removed Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi forces from the oil-rich nation of Kuwait in 1991. After "Operation Desert Storm," Bush's popularity rating soared to 91 percent.

Bush seemed tone deaf, however, when it came to responding to the economic recession that swept the country in 1991–1992. Due to Bush's lack of creative response, a presidential contest that in early 1991 seemed hopeless for any Democrat suddenly became a toss-up. In the absence of other candidates—most of whom thought Bush was unbeatable—a young governor from Arkansas, William Jefferson Clinton, proved singularly adept at forging a political coalition consisting of the old New Deal Democrats and a group of new centrist Democrats who hued to the middle and loved the idea of a charismatic, bright leader.

Pivotal to Clinton-era politics was the partnership that existed between the President and First Lady Hillary Clinton. Not since Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had there been such a political team. But unlike the Roosevelts, Bill and Hillary talked explicitly about a "co-presidency." She was involved in decisions, at times taking the lead role. As a result, there was no single person in charge during the administration's first two years.

In the end, the hallmark of Bill Clinton's presidency was the deficit reduction package he passed in 1993, with increased taxes, reduced spending, and an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit for poor people. It passed by just one vote in the House, with Vice President Al Gore casting a tie-breaking vote in the Senate. The plan produced a surplus and a projected elimination of the national debt, while creating an economic climate that created a precedent-shattering twenty-two million jobs.

But the other main story of the first two years was a failed health care reform package, developed by a task force led by Hillary Clinton. In neither design nor execution did she display sensitivity to political realities. Indeed, so unpopular was the bill that it never even came to a Congressional vote. Moreover, disgust about the whole process led to a devastating defeat for the Democrats in 1994, led by Newt Gingrich, who moved forward with a conservative agenda—his "Contract with America"—that threatened to cut taxes, trim Medicare, and return to an age of laissez-faire economics.

But Clinton had not earned the label of being the "comeback kid" for nothing. During 1995–1996, he masterminded a brilliant campaign to make Gingrich look like a reactionary extremist. In 1995, in response to the devastating Oklahoma City terrorist bombing executed by right-wing militant Timothy McVeigh, Clinton drew the country together as its spiritual and political leader. He followed up with a series of modest legislative victories—V-chips for parents to monitor their

kids' television programming; 100,000 new police officers on the streets to halt crime; tax breaks for parents of students attending college; incentives for homeowners. Clinton even signed a bill on welfare reform that promised to "end welfare as we know it." "The era of big government is over," he declared. Perhaps most important, Clinton made Gingrich look reckless, and when Congress decided to shut the government down rather than pass Clinton's budget, it was Gingrich, not Clinton, who looked like an irresponsible radical. Not surprisingly, Clinton soared to re-election in 1996 over Republican Robert Dole.

But Clinton could not avoid his personal demons. In the midst of the government shutdown, he had an affair with a twenty-two-year-old White House intern. When the information was raised by a Special Prosecutor investigating the Clintons for a real estate venture in Arkansas, Clinton chose to lie, under oath, about the affair. Soon there was another Congressional impeachment process underway, and Bill Clinton became the second president in history to be indicted by Congress and brought to trial before the United States Senate. (Nixon would have been the second, but he resigned.) In the end, Clinton survived. In the view of the Senate and of over 65 percent of the American people, the affair and his perjury was not the "high crime and misdemeanor" that the Founding Fathers had in mind when they created the impeachment clause. Nevertheless, Clinton largely undermined his second term in the White House and tarnished one of the most effective presidencies of postwar America.

In perhaps the most sensational and disputed election in American history, George W. Bush was elected president in 2000. Although he lost the popular vote to Al Gore by over 540,000 votes, he appeared to win the Electoral College. The state that proved decisive was Florida, with twenty-five electoral votes, although the election there was rife with voting scandals. In many areas, minorities had difficulty getting their votes counted. In Dade County, a "butterfly" ballot was printed that confused normally pro-Democratic voters. In the end, the Supreme Court, by a 5-4 vote in *Bush v. Gore*, decided to stop the recount before it was complete and to certify the existing results. Bush would be president. But Al Gore had partially brought the defeat on himself by refusing to run on the accomplishments of the Clinton-Gore administration and by distancing himself from Clinton—who still retained an approval rating of more than 60 percent as he left the White House.

The George W. Bush administration will be remembered forever because of the terrorist attacks by Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. Al-Qaeda conspirators hijacked four jumbo passenger jets. Two were flown into the 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The towers collapsed, killing nearly 3,000 people. A third plane flew into the Pentagon. A fourth was headed for the White House when courageous passengers and crew stormed the cockpit and forced the plane to crash in the Pennsylvania countryside. It was a time of national shock parallel to that which occurred after the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Everyone was united, including allies around the globe.

But unlike the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the American people were not asked to engage in common sacrifice. Instead of people paying more taxes for a strengthened military, tax rates were cut, especially for the rich and powerful. President Bush announced "the War on Terror," a military campaign against Afghanistan, the home base of Osama bin Laden, with the approval of the American people. But then Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld refocused their attention on Saddam Hussein's Iraq. With none of the

coalition-building that his father had engaged in for “Desert Storm” in 1991, the younger Bush proceeded without UN sanction. The administration cited Clinton’s 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which stated Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, to ensure Congressional authorization for the attack. The American invasion of Iraq was carried out with less than half the number of troops Colin Powell had gathered in 1991, as the war continued in Afghanistan. What followed was an eight-year civil war inside Iraq. Despite assiduous efforts, no weapons of mass destruction were found. Confused, angry, and frustrated, Americans returned to the tortured divisions of the Vietnam War era. Like that earlier war, the Iraq conflict polarized the country, except that this time, with no draft, volunteer soldiers paid the price through multiple tours of duty, while average Americans simply enjoyed their lower taxes.

Like John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton before him, Barack Obama came to the presidency as a messenger of change, a leader who would restore America to its path as a leader among nations. The first black president, Obama rallied people who had never voted before with “Change we can believe in” and “Yes we can.” But although Obama achieved much of what he set out to accomplish—national health insurance (the first president in a hundred years to succeed), rigorous re-regulation of investment banking and Wall Street, a new arms control agreement, repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” to legalize the service of gay men and women in the Armed Forces—the recession Obama inherited from Bush would not go away. As a result, in 2010 the Democratic Party suffered a defeat in the Congressional elections parallel to that which Clinton suffered in 1994. America seemed caught in a never-ending pendulum of politics swinging from one side to the other.

Where it might end no one can predict. But every major theme of the past sixty years had its origins in World War II and its aftermath. The question is whether, as in World War II, America can find a new and shared sense of mission to carry it forward into the new millennium.

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