CHAPTER

1

Interpreting the Early Republic

Succeeding generations have gravitated toward very different interpretations of the early republic. Ninety years ago most historians believed that the decades after the Revolution brought profound battles that pitted aristocrats and merchants against planters, small farmers, and artisans. Then fifty years ago it became academically fashionable to emphasize continuity and consensus instead of change and conflict. The early republic, historians argued, saw no great transformation; instead, a preexisting American competitive capitalism blossomed with only minimal, superficial social strife. Today's scholarship has returned to the idea that the period brought what one historian has described as "deep change." But there is no agreement at all about the origins and nature of that change and the degree of conflict it generated. Some see the developments as nothing less than the beginning of a transition to capitalism; others, as a shift from one form of capitalism to another. Still others characterize the change in different ways, using a proliferation of historical models.

Recapturing the history of previously neglected groups presents other challenges as well. One important recent scholarly trend has taken up the question of American identity and citizenship, sometimes in line with what has become known as multiculturalism. In a sense, these historians have posed once more the question J. H. St.-John Crèvecoeur asked in 1782: "What then is the American, this new man?" But they have done so in very new ways, focusing on how specific groups of Americans (distinguished according to race, ethnicity, class, region, religion, and gender) developed their own senses of collective purpose. Challenging the narrow received wisdom that confuses the outlooks of privileged Americans for those of the nation at large has brought a bracing enlargement of the basic terms of American history. Yet it can also obscure any sense of a shared American identity, and of the evolution of American nationalism. How, readers might ask, can historians of the early republic question the national motto, E pluribus unum *without vaunting the* pluribus *at the expense of the* unum*?*

Historians have also begun to reassess the early republic in an international perspective, which raises additional difficulties for anyone searching for a general history of the age. There is a venerable historical literature on American foreign policy, stretching from the conflict with Britain and France that roiled the politics of the 1790s and led to the War of 1812 to the expansionist drive that culminated in the war with Mexico from 1846 to 1848. No discussion of the nation's early history can avoid coming to terms with the sectional, economic, partisan, and cultural forces that drove foreign affairs—and, in turn, how foreign affairs affected debates

over what seem to be wholly domestic conflicts. More recent scholarship has revised that history by placing less emphasis on the fine points of high-level diplomacy than on broader intellectual, cultural, and social exchanges and conflicts that crossed the nation's borders. This focus, in turn, has led some historians to cast doubt on any interpretation that dwells on the United States in isolation from the rest of the world. But a shift in emphasis to what some call "transnational" history runs the risk of obscuring basically national concerns—and of again sacrificing coherence for the sake of comprehensiveness.

Overcoming these difficulties and writing a true, more comprehensive history of the period requires an exacting, critical look at the approaches taken by contemporary scholars. It also requires a thorough, open engagement with older approaches that considers how these earlier ideas and interpretations might be joined with recent concerns.

At issue are not simply matters of empirical dispute but fundamental differences over how to interpret the past. The more that historians have moved outside history's traditional concerns, the less they have established common ground. Research on groups once marginalized has had a particularly unsettling effect. It is not enough, some historians contend, merely to annex the history of African-Americans, women, Native Americans, wage earners, and others to the familiar story line—a story line that, despite interpretive differences, has usually emphasized the expansion of American freedom and democracy. That narrative, they insist, is so flawed that it needs to be scrapped. In its place, they have substituted more pessimistic, tragic renderings of the early republic, revealing how the nation's most cherished democratic ideals and institutions were entwined, from the start, with injustice and exploitation.

These newer accounts have successfully challenged some durable collective myths. Yet they have also tended to be fragmented, telling parts of the larger story without providing a clear sense of how these parts connect. Rescuing the history of neglected groups has run the risk of ignoring or caricaturing everything that used to be considered part of the mainstream. At times, correcting past biases has led to bleak and accusatory depictions of the early republic, with only limited capacity to explain how and why things did *change.*

ESSAYS

The first two selections offer contrasting ways of interpreting the early republic. Sean Wilentz of Princeton University emphasizes the deep changes that unfolded in the decades after the Revolution, and especially after 1815. According to his essay, economic changes created new divisions of class and section that undergirded the political realignments that led eventually to the Civil War. The selection by the late Clinton Rossiter, for many years a political scientist at Cornell University, assesses how American nationalism evolved from the Revolution to the Civil War. Although written several decades ago. Rossiter's article strikingly and lucidly anticipated later historians' interests in questions of identity, nationality, and citizenship. In the third essay Jeffrey Pasley of the University of Missouri examines the cultural aspects of early American politics, approaching the history of elections with fresh insights taken from recent work by social and cultural historians. If Pasley is correct, a vibrant democratic political culture emerged earlier than many historians assume and had a powerful effect on the party politics of the age of Jefferson and after. In the final essay Bradford Perkins, professor of history emeritus at the University of Michigan, evaluates the cultural and intellectual foundations of early American diplomacy—crucial matters

in decades when concerns over the nation's very survival, and later over its rapid expansion, sparked heated debates about foreign policy. Readers should consider the unstated assumptions in each essay about the character of the early republic and about the larger issues that shape American history.

The Market Revolution

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SEAN WILENTZ

For many years, historians had little difficulty finding labels to describe the period from 1815 to 1848. To some it was the age of Jackson, dominated by Old Hickory and the Democratic party; to others, the era of the common man, a time of sweeping democratic ferment and reform. Today such phrases sound quaint. Two decades' worth of outstanding revisionist work has made political historians wary of the old presidential synthesis of American history; less attention is now paid to the specific details of Jacksonian electioneering and policy-making, and more to such broad themes as the changing structure of party organizations and the rise of new political ideologies. Likewise, an outpouring of work by social historians—much of it on groups previously slighted—has dramatically changed basic assumptions about the period and raised new, often disturbing questions: How can the years that brought the rise of the Cotton Kingdom and the spread of slavery reasonably be called the era of the common man? What was the role of women in this phase of American history? Were not at least some of the democratic advances of the time won at the murderous expense of Native Americans?

By exploring these and other issues, recent studies have moved well beyond the familiar chronicles of political and social elites. Unfortunately, recent work has fragmented our understanding into a host of academic subspecialties. It has also led, in some instances, to a denigration of formal politics and policy, as if such "traditional" matters as the Bank War or debates over the tariff were unimportant. The job of connecting the pieces—and especially of recombining social and political history—has only just begun. Still, one theme does seem to unite Jacksonian historians of various persuasions and suggest a way of once again viewing the period as a whole: the central importance of the market revolution, which, in one way or another, touched the lives of all Americans. . . .

Thesis

The extraordinary economic changes of the early nineteenth century have never failed to impress historians. Between 1815 and 1850 Americans constructed elaborate networks of roads, canals, and early railroad lines; opened up wide areas of newly acquired land for settlement and trade; and began to industrialize manufacturing. What had been in Thomas Jefferson's day a backward rural nation on the fringes of world economic development had by midcentury established many of the preconditions necessary to its becoming a major economic power.

In the 1950s George Rogers Taylor wrote what remains the authoritative account of these changes and dubbed them, collectively, America's "transportation revolution." Since then, historians have done less to challenge Taylor's interpretation than

to reexamine some of its implications. Social historians in particular have stressed that economic change radically disrupted existing systems of production and old social hierarchies, replacing them with entirely new opportunities and dependencies. Behind the technological and institutional innovations Taylor discussed was a deeper revolution in human relations, linked to the emergence of new markets in land, labor, and produce.

Much of the scholarly work on this market revolution has concentrated on northeastern cities as key sites of economic development. Intense mercantile activity there, of course, long antedated 1815. Yet between 1815 and 1848 eastern urban capitalists dramatically accelerated the pace of economic change. Often working hand in hand with state and local governments, these merchant capitalists were at the forefront of transportation improvements; they made great strides in expanding credit and financing resources and in imposing some order on currency and banking; above all, they hastened the erosion of the old artisan handicraft system and the rise of new manufacturing enterprises.

Compared to later periods in U.S. history, industrial growth between 1815 and 1848 was modest; by 1850, the majority of the nation's population still lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture, while only about 14 percent of the labor force worked in manufacturing. Nevertheless, the rate of industrial growth was impressive, especially in the Northeast. The most spectacular examples of early industrialization were the new textile mills of New England, financed by leading established seaboard merchants. Yet as labor historians have shown, mechanization and factory construction constituted only one of several strategies used to revamp manufacturing. In once bucolic single-industry towns . . . merchant capitalists altered production by dividing up craft skills and putting out as much work as possible to country girls living in outlying rural communities. Entrepreneurs in the major seaboard cities and in newer inland settlements such as Cincinnati likewise divided up artisan crafts and relied on underpaid outworkers—women, children, poor immigrants—to produce work for low piece rates. The deployment of these different methods of production brought a rapid increase in the output of raw materials and finished goods, at lower prices and of a higher quality than Americans had ever enjoyed. Simultaneously, however, the new order disrupted the customary artisan regime of masters, journeymen, and apprentices and left thousands of workers dependent on the caprices of the wage-labor market.

Changes in northeastern manufacturing were closely related to a deepening crisis in northeastern rural life. Traditionally, historians slighted the extent of social change in the American countryside before the Civil War. Although improvements in transportation and increased commercialization obviously enlarged the productive capacity of American agriculture, historians tended to assume that most family farms were small capitalist enterprises from at least the mid-eighteenth century on. Recent scholarship, however, has focused on the variety of social pressures, beginning in the 1750s and continuing through the 1840s, that undermined a distinct way of life, one geared more to barter exchange and quasi-self-sufficiency than to the production of cash crops for market. [One] major impetus for change was demographic, as the mounting population of the settled rural Northeast began to outstrip the available supply of land, leaving rural patriarchs unable to pass on sufficient acreage to their sons. By 1815 these straitened circumstances had led to a steady

decline in family size and to an increase in westward migration; it had also heightened farmers' need for cash to buy additional land, thus encouraging them to shift into cash-crop production. The transportation improvements of the next thirty years facilitated that shift and brought to the countryside (at steadily decreasing prices) manufactured articles previously unavailable in the hinterland. By 1850 the vast majority of northeastern farmers had reorganized their production toward cash crops and were depending on country merchants for household items and farm implements once produced at home.

Few historians would dispute that the market revolution brought substantial material benefits to many if not most northeasterners, urban and rural. But the new abundance was hardly distributed equally. Studies of property holding have confirmed that in small country towns and in large cities alike, a tiny proportion of the northeastern population came to command the bulk of the newly created wealth. Those who benefited most from the market revolution—merchants and manufacturers, lawyers and other professionals, and successful commercial farmers, along with their families—faced life situations very different from those known to earlier generations. The decline of the household as the locus of production led directly to a growing impersonality in the economic realm; household heads, instead of directing family enterprises or small shops, often had to find ways to recruit and discipline a wage-labor force; in all cases, they had to stay abreast of or even surpass their competitors.

Perhaps the most profound set of social changes confronting this new middle class involved the internal dynamics of family life. As Nancy Cott, Mary Ryan, and others have explained, the commercialization of both city and countryside removed women from the production of goods, including goods for strictly household use. The world of the propertied began to separate into two spheres: a male public sphere of politics, business, and the market, and a female private sphere of domestic duties and child rearing. By 1850 a new romantic standard of rights and responsibilities within middle-class families had replaced the more severe patriarchal regime of the eighteenth century—a "cult of domesticity" that vaunted women's supposed moral superiority while it restricted women's place to the home, as wives, mothers, and domestic guardians.

Less fortunate northeasterners faced a very different reality, dominated by the new dependencies created by the market revolution. For those at the bottom—immigrant and black day laborers, outwork seamstresses, the casual poor—a combination of overstocked labor markets and intense competition among employers kept wages and earnings near or below subsistence levels. Even in New England, farm girls who went off to work in factories expecting decent situations and high wages found that mill conditions had deteriorated by the mid-1830s. Those small independent artisans and well-paid craft workers who survived faced the real possibility of falling into similar distress, victimized as they were by an increasingly volatile business cycle and by the downward pressures on earnings and real wages in various important trades. By the 1830s a new working class was beginning to carve out its own identity in a variety of trade unions and in political efforts aimed at redirecting the course and consequences of American economic expansion. Marginal small farmers saw their livelihoods threatened by competition from western areas opened by canal development and by the middlemen's downward pressure on prices;

in addition, legal reinterpretations of property rights further shifted the balance of power against them. To all these people, middle-class respectability and the cult of domesticity meant little when measured against the struggle to achieve or preserve their economic independence—or barring that, simply to make ends meet.

Far less is known about the market revolution's social impact in the Old Northwest and the western territories, although some fine recent work has started to redirect the field. Studies of migration suggest that rural northeasterners who could not make a go of it tried to avoid entering the urban wage-labor market; the largest single supply of urban workers (at least by 1850) consisted of immigrants and their children, among them hundreds of thousands of new arrivals escaping hard times in Ireland and Germany. Native-born rural northeasterners, joined by migrants from the South, headed west instead, most of them hoping to reconstruct the independent yeoman communities that had crumbled back home. Accordingly, they bought up as much cheap western land as they could to ensure that they would be able to provide for their families and their descendants.

This new yeomanry faced numerous obstacles. First, the removal of Native Americans from the land had to be completed; federal and state authorities willingly complied, using fraud and violence as necessary. Once the lands were open, settlers found themselves pitted against capitalist farmers and speculators eager to convert the virgin land to capitalist development. As the proportion of public land sold to speculators dramatically increased, would-be settlers and squatters had to battle hard to get the land they wanted. Once settled, farmers usually had to enter into some sort of economic relations with land speculators or bankers, either taking out mortgages or borrowing money to pay for farm improvements.

debt

Despite these hardships, the vast majority of settlers eventually owned their farms outright. Most of them managed, for a time, to set up a facsimile of the yeoman regime. But it was not to last. Hoping to develop markets for their surplus crops, the western yeomen for the most part supported the extension of new east-west transport routes after 1820; the impact of their innovations quickly surpassed early expectations. By 1850 northwestern farm operators were almost fully integrated into commercial markets; specialized production of grain, livestock, or dairy products became the norm for successful commercial farmers. Under the pressure of reorganization, attempts to recreate the old order of yeoman independence collapsed. Although still dominated by small farmers, the Old Northwest emerged as one of the leading areas of cash-crop agriculture in the world, displacing New England and the mid-Atlantic seaboard as the supplier of eastern and overseas markets.

The opening of the market brought prosperity and rising profits to those farmers who secured sufficient acreage and learned to handle the new rules of credit and competition. Like eastern businessmen (and western businessmen in the new cities along the transport routes), western commercial farmers reordered their public and private lives in accord with the standards of eastern middle-class domesticity. Yet like the Northeast, the Northwest had its dispossessed and those who faced imminent dispossession. Not only were the Native Americans removed from their lands, but so too a substantial number of white settlers suffered from the revolution in marketing. Those unable to get sufficient credit to improve their operations or unwilling to learn capitalist agriculture methods wandered on the periphery of the most concentrated settlement, squatting on unimproved land or purchasing new land—often

rich, western farmers

only to lose it. Those who could not sustain themselves and could not travel farther on fell into tenancy and the ranks of agricultural wage labor. In all, the rise of capitalist agriculture in the Northwest, as in the Northeast, produced new classes of independent and dependent Americans.

The South experienced the market revolution quite differently, though just *how* differently has been the subject of continuing debate. The outstanding feature of southern economic and social history after 1815 was, of course, the rise of the Cotton Kingdom and the westward expansion of plantation slavery. Since the mid-1950s an outstanding literature on slavery has completely overturned the old sentimentalized, racist interpretation of the plantation as a benevolent institution, supposedly designed as much to civilize "inferior" blacks as to reap profits for the planters. Such recent historians as Eugene D. Genovese, Herbert G. Gutman, Lawrence Levine, and Albert Raboteau have paid especially close attention to the slaves' own experiences and discovered that a distinctive Afro-American culture took shape under slavery, a culture based on religious values and family ties that gave the slaves the power to endure and in certain ways resist the harshness of bondage. Far from a benign world of social harmony, the plantation South was an arena of intense day-to-day struggles between masters and slaves.

Far more controversial has been the argument, advanced most forcefully by Genovese, that the expansion of slavery led to the creation of a distinctive, noncapitalist southern civilization. As Genovese sees it, the southern slaveholders' attachment to land and slaves as their chief forms of investment guaranteed that the South would remain economically and socially distinct. To be sure, the slaveholders were linked to the wider world of capitalist markets and benefited from the improvement of American commerce and finance; like all men of business, they were acquisitive and at times greedy. But, Genovese contends, the master-slave relationship—so unlike labor relations in the North—created a unique mode of social organization and understanding. At the heart of these arrangements was what Genovese calls paternalism, a system of subordination that bound masters and slaves in an elaborate network of familial rights and duties. Plantation paternalism was fraught with conflict between master and slaves, although (Genovese insists) it did help contain the slaves' rebelliousness. Above all, the slaveholders as a class—and the South as a region—did not share in the possessive individualism and atomistic liberalism that were coming to dominate northern life.

Genovese's interpretation has been extremely influential, though it has also been challenged on various fronts. In particular, historians have questioned Genovese's contention that slavery precluded southern economic development, and that the planters exercised ideological hegemony over their slaves. Generally, however, scholars today agree that the market revolution had the effect of widening the differences between northern and southern society and culture. As historians examine the worlds of southerners who were neither masters nor slaves, southern distinctiveness seems all the more apparent; at the same time, these studies have heightened our appreciation of the complexities of the slave South.

Perhaps the most interesting work of the last few years concerns the nonslaveholders who constituted the majority of the southern white population before the Civil War. Far removed from the old settlements of the Tidewater and the rich soils of the Black Belt, there lived relatively isolated communities of white householders

and their families who produced mainly for their own needs and had only occasional contact with the market economy. While their way of life distinguished these southern yeomen from the commercial farmers of the North, it also set them apart from the wealthier, less egalitarian planters of their own region; jealous of their personal independence and local autonomy, the southern yeomen resented any perceived intrusion on their political rights. Cries of "white supremacy" and the yeomen's acquiescence in slavery softened these class differences, but throughout the 1830s and 1840s the southern yeomen remained deeply suspicious of the planters' wealth and power, and the possibility that the planter elite might pursue local development policies to the detriment of the backcountry.

The rediscovery of the persistent southern yeomen—in contrast to the declining northern yeomen—has reinforced the argument for growing social divergence between North and South before 1850. But in a different sense the southern yeomen's dilemmas also point out certain commonalities in the history of commercialization throughout the country, which in turn help us understand the market revolution as a national process. At one level, commercialization—as overseen by the nation's merchant capitalists, manufacturers, commercial farmers, and planters—created a hybrid political economy by introducing capitalist forms of labor and market agriculture in the North, and by fostering a different slave-based order in the South. Viewed more closely, the market revolution can also be seen to have produced new and potentially troublesome social conflicts within each major section of the country. Entrepreneurs and wage earners, middlemen and petty producers, masters and slaves, planters and yeomen all found themselves placed in unfamiliar positions, arrayed against each other in fresh struggles for power and legitimacy. In the long run the divergences between free labor and slavery would dominate other differences. Before then, however, new social relations and conflicts *within* the various sections generated social tensions that came to the fore in politics—as new parties, the Democrats and the Whigs, emerged to battle over the shape of the market revolution.

Nationalism and American Identity in the Early Republic

CLINTON L. ROSSITER

Through all the years from Washington to Lincoln the American people were engaged in an industrious search for *self-identity*. The search, we know to our sorrow, led in the end to a shattering crisis [yet] the record was one of unusual achievement, and we must not let the events of the 1850's and 1860's blind us to this truth. If this had not been so, if there had been no solid sense of continental nationhood both inclusive and exclusive, the North would never have gone to war to preserve the Union, and both victorious North and conquered South would not have moved on together toward a new, more solid sense of such nationhood. The foundations of American nationalism, as they were to prove in the hour of reckoning, had been

From Clinton Rossiter, *The American Quest: An Emerging Nation in Search of Identity, Unity, and Modernity* (Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 123–135. © 1971, Mary Crane Rossiter.

well and truly laid by the middle of the nineteenth century, and by all odds the most important of these foundations was the nation itself. . . .

Long before the coming of the Revolution, preachers, poets, and pamphleteers were telling fellow colonists that they were "a new Jerusalem sent down from heav'n," a different and better race of men with a special destiny to cherish. The winning of independence transformed this kind of prophetic exhortation into a settled article of American faith. Yet while Americans saw and identified themselves as a new people on the face of the earth, two fateful questions remained to be answered:

—First, were they different and better enough to rejoice confidently in the fact—and, if they were, in what ways?

—Second, was the fate of America to be a country, that is, one sovereign nation like Britain and France, or a "country," that is, a parcel of related yet basically sovereign half-nations, city-states, and provinces like Germany and Italy?

In the process of answering the first question "yes" with the aid of words like "republicanism," "liberty," "opportunity," "morality," "improvement," and, finally, "democracy," and the second also "yes" with the portentous qualification expressed in the word "federal," the people of the United States found an identity that permitted the Union to develop and expand in unprecedented ways. Perhaps more important, this sense of identity then encouraged it to stand up successfully to the most severe test a nation can ever meet.

If the legacy of remembrances at the service of orators and schoolteachers was skimpy compared with that of British or France, the young Republic drew enough sustenance from the memory of the founding generation alone to make *history* a nourishing support of the sense of an American nationalism. Then as now the Hampdens, and also the Village Hampdens, of America liked to "look back with reverence" as keenly as forward with anticipation; as a result, the apparatus of myth, symbol, slogan and ceremony designed to emphasize the uniqueness and unity of the American people grew more impressive with each passing year. The invocations of a heroic past and visions of a glorious future indulged in by men as different in style as David Ramsay, Jedidiah Morse, Parson Weems, Jared Sparks, John Quincy Adams, William Holmes McGuffey, Rembrandt Peale, John Trumbull, Daniel Webster, John Marshall, and, pre-eminent among historians who felt the hand of God laid upon America, George Bancroft kept the apparatus working at full blast. It is interesting and highly pertinent to note that the first major public oration of an ambitious young lawyer named Abraham Lincoln—the date was January 27, 1838, the audience the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield—referred reverently to the Founding Fathers (a few of whom were still walking around unburied) as if they were heroes who had sailed with Jason and sketched plans with Solon. In describing his own generation as the "legal inheritors" of the "fundamental blessings" of an unexampled system of personal liberty, he paid homage to a "*once* hardy, brave, and patriotic, but now lamented and departed race of ancestors," and the young men of Springfield doubtless nodded solemn approval of the description. Here was one new nation, it would seem, that had a special talent for creating and exploiting instant history, and also for believing in it. Twenty-three years later, in his Inaugural Address as President of a temporarily disunited United States, Lincoln summoned history once again to support the cause of American nationalism. "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, will yet swell the chorus of the Union,"

he insisted doggedly—and how right he was to insist upon the power of common memory to reunite the nation.

While some scholars have written sadly of the poverty of the American legacy and crudeness of the techniques used to exploit it, their collective judgment strikes the mind as either precious or irrelevant. The kind of nation most Americans hoped for in the future demanded a legacy that would liberate energy without paralyzing will; at the same time, the techniques of national devotion needed to express the American character as something simple, sincere, zestful, and democratic. As to the legacy, one may well ask: Did a new nation ever have heroes quite so satisfying as the Pilgrim Fathers, the men of Jamestown, the Signers, the Framers, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Boone, and the semidivine Cincinnatus of the West, George Washington? And as to the techniques, one may go on to ask: Are our hearts ever stirred today, as were those of our ancestors, with feelings of joyful patriotism by the oratory of thousands of ordinary men on the Fourth of July and of scores of larger-than-life men like Daniel Webster on occasions like the celebration at Plymouth in 1820 and the laying of the cornerstone at Bunker Hill in 1825? Such feelings have gone out of fashion; yet in the days of our youth they were the intellectual fertilizer of the flowering of American nationalism.

Interest also played a part, as northern men like Gouverneur Morris and southern men like John C. Calhoun proved rather forcefully in a left-handed way. Unblushing nationalists in their early years when the Union was a source of emotional nourishment to them and practical benefits to friends and neighbors, they lost their faith in later years when the waters from the source began to have a brackish taste. For most Americans between 1815 and 1850, however, the more perfect Union was a new kind of nation in which membership bestowed a range of rights, privileges, immunities, opportunities, and protections that no sensible man would wish to surrender. Those Americans who set off bravely for territory that was not yet American—Florida, Texas, California, Oregon—and expected the flag to follow in the fullness of time proved this point about the services of interest to nationhood even more forcefully than did the disillusioned Morris and the disgruntled Calhoun. They knew, as those also knew who stayed at home, that everybody would be a loser if the Union were to divide or dissolve, or if it were to permit other sovereign nations of Americans to spring up on its southwestern, Pacific, and northwestern flanks.

Although it is sometimes hard to glimpse through the dust stirred up by the fury of political debate, the violent acts committed by persons and crowds, and the unceasing tussle of North and South, a notable *consensus* of political, economic, and social principle added greatly to the vitality of American nationalism in this period. The collapse of Federalism and the rejection of English and European Radicalism left a fair field for American-style Liberalism. By 1850 the principles of bourgeois democracy had become a national tradition with no serious competition from the right, the left, the past, the future, or even from the South. Dissenters hung on, to be sure, in stately mansions in Philadelphia and Charleston, immigrant hovels in New York and Boston, socialist studies in Milwaukee and Cincinnati, and utopian communities all over the land. Most Americans, however, were dedicated in common to the beauties of personal liberty, the security of constitutionalism, the rightness of democracy, the wrongness of class distinctions, the virtue of private property, the

moral necessity of hard work, the certainty of progress, and above all the uniqueness, superiority, and high destiny of the United States of America. Detractors of democracy and prophets of doom were unpopular in a land whose national character expressed itself in disbelieving laughter at the dismal proclamation of Fisher Ames in 1803 that the United States was "too big for union, too sordid for patriotism, too democratic for liberty." When it did, in the end, prove almost too big for union, the men of the south demonstrated a peculiar allegiance to the political consensus by adopting a constitution copied, with only a sprinkle of generally sensible changes, from the Constitution of 1787.

Few young nations have been more lavishly blessed, if that is the right word, by the existence of an enemy than the United States in the early years of independence; few have made more effective use of the techniques of *comparison* in the search for identity. Whether this enemy was Europe as a whole, as it was symbolically in much writing and orating of the time, or that special corner of Europe called Britain or England, as it was literally in 1812 and prospectively in 1845, its mere presence in the world helped speed up the course of self-identification in the United States. I agree with Cushing Strout that "for much of their history Americans have defined themselves through a deeply felt conflict with Europe," and would add only that in no period has this conflict been carried on more energetically, self-righteously, and, all things considered, fruitfully than [these] decades. . . . Reactive nationalism was an unusually powerful sentiment in the days of Monroe, Adams, and Jackson. Indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that men were content to define America simply as *anti-Europe* or, on certain anniversaries, *anti-England*. Washington Irving spoke for most Americans in 1832 when, after seventeen years of working at literature and playing at diplomacy in Europe, he told an audience of distinguished citizens who had assembled to welcome him home to native soil and native themes:

> I come from gloomier climates to one of brilliant sunshine and inspiring purity. I come from countries lowering with doubt and danger, where the rich man trembles and the poor man frowns—where all repine at the present and dread the future. I come from these to a country where all is life and animation; where I hear on every side the sound of exultation; where every one speaks of the past with triumph, the present with delight, the future with glowing and confident anticipation.

For all but a few fastidious or supremely self-confident Americans the comparison between the New World and the Old ranged from the invidious to the odious. America was free, fresh, democratic, virtuous, and progressive; Europe, in particular that "disolute old whore England," was oppressive, tired, crippled by class distinction, corrupt, and decaying. . . .

Finally, the dedication to *individualism* of an entire people worked in ways mysterious in nature yet plain in result to encourage America to recognize itself as a nation. The fact of American individualism antedated the use of the word by several generations; it was, by any name, one of a half-dozen distinctive characteristics of the young civilization. There could be no more dramatic testimony to the width of the gulf between Europe and America than the transformation in meaning that took place when the word was finally imported for popular use around 1840. In the school of Saint-Simon, Yehoshua Arieli has pointed out, individualism was "almost

How to define America

invidious = animosity

odius = intense displeasure

synonymous with selfishness, social anarchy, and individual self-assertion"; in the pages of John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review* it "connoted self-determination, moral freedom, the rule of liberty, and the dignity of man."

American individualism in the time of O'Sullivan was not, of course, as simple a concept and gentle an influence as all that, for it covered a span of personal principle and conduct ranging from the kindly self-reliance of a philosopher like Emerson to the ruthless self-advancement of an entrepreneur like Commodore Vanderbilt by way of the doughty self-removal of a mountain man like Bill Williams. In later years it was to be twisted into strange and often ugly forms; in recent years it has been transformed into an ideology of self-deception with which to mask the decline of both the privacy and the independence of the person. Yet in those early, simpler years individualism was a governing principle of American life, and as such it made a rich if still neither measurable nor quite comprehensible contribution to the progress and unity of the nation. By freeing a race of ambitious men from the institutional shackles of the European past it set them to digging, tinkering, migrating, playing politics, generating visions, and taking risks at a pace that surprised, even if it often dismayed, those who came from Europe to see for themselves what the fuss was all about. By stripping these men of membership in most groups and orders of traditional society it focused a large portion of their loyalties on the most exciting object in sight: the nation. And since the nation itself seemed so permissive in practice and liberty-oriented in doctrine, those groups and orders that endured or sprang up—families, neighborhoods, churches, schools, colleges, associations, professional groups—could command the loyalties of individuals for their own purposes and then, as it were, reinforce and pass them on upward to serve the great Republic. Whether as an individual going it alone or cooperating freely with others, the American of the first half of the nineteenth century found much of his own identity precisely in being a free American.

One other loyalty-commanding order existed between the individual and the nation; and, however necessary to the growth of a continental republic, it posed a persistent, occasionally passion-provoking threat to unity. That order was the state or, in a larger sense, the region. Men pledged their allegiance, I repeat, to a *federal* nation; the allegiance was therefore of a kind that had never been known before. Although it had been tested severely in 1798–1799, 1814–1815, and 1828–1833 (and, in the judgment of many Americans, found weaker than they had expected), the allegiance gathered strength as the years passed and history, interest, consensus, comparison, and individualism all did their good work along with more tangible or visible forces such as the English language, the Constitution, and a party system seemingly designed to suppress passions and resolve crises.

By 1850 most men were convinced that to be a loyal American one had to emulate Washington, Jefferson, and John Adams, and thus also be a loyal son of state and region. Two giants of the earliest years had been undiluted nationalists, Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton, but they were obviously special cases. In the middle of the nineteenth century only an immigrant with the principles of a Francis Lieber (and with no political ambitions) could emulate them. Every important American nationalist stood with feet planted firmly in some part of the country in which he had been raised or to which he had migrated; to that part he directed a

sizable portion of his public fealty. Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, Stephen A. Douglas, Thomas Hart Benton, Abraham Lincoln—all had love for the Union, all had love for their states and regions, all saw no conflict, rather, a mutually nourishing connection, between the two loves. These famous men and the millions of followers for whom they spoke were patriots who had met every test set by Rousseau—inclination, passion, necessity—and had attached their ultimate patriotism to a nation so huge and loose-jointed that the sight of it would have sent Rousseau, not to forget Montesquieu, into a state a shock.

The pursuit of an American identity led many citizens, not at all surprisingly, to think and speak of a "nation singled out by the searching eye and sustained by the protecting arm of a kind and beneficent Providence" for the purpose of changing "the whole aspect of human affairs on this globe." The idea of *an American mission* had taken root in the colonies as far back as 1630 when John Winthrop proclaimed Massachusetts a "city upon a hill," and in the forcing bed of the Revolution it burst into full flower. The belief in a high destiny encouraged resistance, rationalized rebellion, legitimized independence, and justified an often apparently senseless war in which Americans shed the blood of Americans as well as of Englishmen, Irishmen, Scots, and Hessians. Then, when all these astonishing events had come to pass, it moved a few choice spirits to take the lead in reconstituting the political system on the basis of a new unity forged out of the realities of an old diversity. Thereupon an entire people took up the theme of the United States as both guardian and beneficiary of a cosmic trust.

While several variations on the theme of a national mission won popular acceptance during and after the Revolution—America as asylum, America as redeemer, America as exporter of the spirit of liberty, America as the "seat of another golden age," even America as an "all powerful commonwealth" in which the countries of Europe would find their place as "colonies"—the primary destiny of these settlements-turned-republic remained constant throughout the early decades of independence, and thereby gave the United States a penetrating sense of self-identity and an exhilarating sense of self-confidence that were to support the Union nobly in its hour of trial. If the concept of mission was useful both to the incipient nation that fought the Revolution and to the fledgling nation that went in search of unity and modernity, it was indispensable to the uncertain nation that found its unity denied and modernity challenged in 1861.

Stripped of all excrescences and elaborations, the true American mission commanded the United States to stand before the world, neither boastfully nor meekly, as a model republic. It was a simple belief; and, by reason of this simplicity, it was comprehensible, viable, and endlessly serviceable. At a desperate stage in the march of history, Americans believed, God had called forth certain hardy, liberty-loving souls from the privilege-ridden nations of the Old World; He had carried these precious few to a fresh scene, thus presenting them and their descendants with the best of all possible environments for the development of a free and progressive nation; and in bestowing this special grace He had also bestowed a special obligation for the success of the special nation. Were the Americans to fail in their experiment in republican self-government, they would fail not only themselves and their posterity but also all men everywhere who deserved to be free. If such government could

Hessians = GERMANS, mercenaries.
↓
fought against American colonists

work here, it might also work in other parts of the world; if it could not work here, it would never work anywhere.

The final and perhaps fundamental point about this concept of mission was that *a successful America would serve literally as an experiment or model*: It would invite men of other nations to admire and imitate; it would not go into the business of exporting ideas and institutions with the sword and the dollar. The principal force for carrying the American message to a doubting world was, quite simply, the force of good example.

These pages could be filled with thousands of heartfelt declarations of faith in the mission of the independent United States as it was framed in this first, unspoiled version. Let us be content with a scatter in which remembered men declaimed in behalf of forgotten compatriots:

John Adams to himself and a few friends (1765):

> I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.

James Madison to his fellow delegates at Philadelphia (1787):

> It is more than probable we are now digesting a plan which in its operation will decide forever the fate of republican government.

Alexander Hamilton to the same gentlemen a few minutes later:

> I concur with Mr. Madison in thinking we are now to decide forever the fate of republican government. If we do not give to that form due stability and wisdom, it will be disgraced and lost among ourselves, disregard and lost to mankind forever.

George Washington to the dignitaries assembled to hear his first inaugural address (1789):

> The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as *deeply*, as *finally*, staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people.

Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Priestley (1802):

> We feel that we are acting under obligations not confined to the limits of our society. It is impossible not to be sensible that we are acting for all mankind; that circumstances denied to others, but indulged to us, have imposed on us the duty of proving what is the degree of freedom and self-government in which society may venture to leave its individual members.

Joseph Story to an assembly at Cambridge celebrating the fiftieth anniversary, not of independence, but of Phi Beta Kappa (1826):

> We stand, the latest, and if we fail, probably the last experiment of self-government by the people.

Andrew Jackson, no friend of Story's, to the nation in his Farewell Address (1837):

> Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race.

A famous poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to his extensive audience (1849), which included the even more extensive audience of William H. McGuffey:

> *Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!*
> *Sail o, O UNION, strong and great!*
> *Humanity with all its fears,*
> *With all the hopes of future years,*
> *Is hanging breathless on thy fate!*

And last, a famous historian and public servant, George Bancroft, to a joint session of Congress gathered to pay tribute to Abraham Lincoln (1866);

> In the fullness of time a Republican rose up in the wilderness of America. Thousands of years had passed away before this child of the ages could be born. From whatever there was good in the systems of former centuries she drew her nourishment; the wrecks of the past were her warnings. . . .
>
> The fame of this only daughter of freedom went out into all the lands of the earth; from her the human race drew hope.

Since these words speak eloquently for themselves, let me limit myself to three brief concluding observations:

First, the eloquence seems to have been entirely sincere. I have never found, despite a severe if admittedly remote probing of psyches and motives, any evidence to suggest that these men and those who echoed them throughout the land did not mean exactly what they said

Second, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the rest were not indulging in flights of fancy. They were, rather, expressing a solid belief that almost all Americans carried in their minds and hearts.

And third, the belief seems to have been about as benevolent in influence inside the United States and mild in impact outside as any concept of national mission in modern history. It taught more Americans to be thankful, dutiful, and moderately self-confident than to be arrogant, undisciplined, and blindly self-willed; it pressed upon America's neighbors in every direction without furnishing a license to conquer them. In sum, the American mission stimulated a healthy nationalism that fell short of unthinking chauvinism and an exuberant expansionism that fell short of imperial conquest. [I]t performed, through the perception and eloquence of Lincoln, its last and greatest service: It gave moral justification, which was needed desperately, to the terrible war for the Union.

There were times, to be sure, when the orators of the muscular, combative version of Manifest Destiny came close to converting the American mission from the Republic-as-experiment to the Republic-as-conqueror, but a more restrained if hardly self-denying version managed to prevail. If it was the destiny of the American people to expand until neighbors as well as nature called a halt, it was not their destiny to engulf Canada, Mexico, Central America, and the islands of the Caribbean or to leap over the Pacific (ah, those more simple days!) in search of empire. The concept of mission encouraged expansion into the unsettled or only thinly settled lands of the West, for thus they could be won outright and, in American minds, altogether properly for the cause of republican liberty; it did not give the government of the United States an excuse to lord it over half the world and exact tribute from the

NO Empire

rest. In short, the American mission helped to make *a nation with the dimensions but not the trappings of empire.* For that service, if for no other, later generations of Americans should study thoughtfully the purest version of their nation's mission, and perhaps even go to it from time to time for spiritual refreshment.

Popular Political Culture in the Early Republic

JEFFREY L. PASLEY

Popular politics in the early republic was necessarily creative, adaptive, and variable. Because the early political parties were organizationally almost nonexistent, the work of building support for them was conducted by scattered groups of local activists, with little centralized direction or funding. Necessarily reliant on local resources and personnel, these typically self-appointed activists simply made partisan use of whatever existing traditions, institutions, and practices they could, including many that were longstanding features of Anglo-American culture. Among these were holiday celebrations, parades, taverns, toasts, songs, town meetings, petitions, militia company training days, and various products of local printing presses, including broadsides, handbills, almanacs, poems, pamphlets, and, especially, the small-circulation local and regional newspapers that sprang up everywhere after the Revolution.

Some of the most interesting political artifacts of this type are the plethora of songs published on the back pages of partisan newspapers and sometimes as sheet music or in songbooks, many of which were sung in taverns or at partisan gatherings. The musical output included not only "Jefferson and Liberty" and "The People's Friend," but also such unlikely numbers as "Adams and Liberty," "Huzzah Madison Huzzah," and even "Monroe Is the Man." Especially popular among local partisans were innumerable sets of new lyrics to popular tunes such as "Yankee Doodle," "Hail Columbia," and the "Anacreonic Song," better known today as the melody to "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Each region of the country had its own particular local practices that were drawn into partisan politics and became part of a distinctive regional political culture. In the South, the famous court-day barbecues were transformed from rituals of noblesse oblige into competitive partisan debates, initiating the southern stump-speaking tradition. In the cities and larger towns, fraternal orders, voluntary associations, and militia companies were politicized, with the so-called Democratic-Republican societies and the Tammany Society being two of the best-known examples on the Republican side. These groups formed the beginnings of the highly disciplined neighborhood-based political organizations that would in time become known as urban political "machines."

In New England, where churches and the clergy had always played an unusually prominent role in public life, many aspects of religious culture were adapted to partisan use. The Congregational establishment was heavily and intemperately Federalist,

and its members did not hesitate to put partisan political instructions into their sermons. Around 1800, these instructions usually followed the formula published in the Federalist newspapers: Would the people choose "GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; Or impiously declare for JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!"? At the same time, the traditions of the jeremiad and the publication of sermons gave rise not only to a large number of published political pamphlets and books by the clergy, but also the practice of secular politicians giving and publishing formal orations that often took on a distinctly homiletic tone. . . .

While always locally controlled and thus highly varied in tone and content, certain practices were nearly universal in this political culture. Among the most important were the holiday celebrations that dotted the civic calendar, each of which brought many of the elements mentioned above together into a single political event. For Republicans, the most important day was the Jefferson-centric Fourth of July, which they had championed as a more republican and democratic alternative to Washington's Birthday or government-declared thanksgiving and fast days. The festivities typically began with a parade or procession in which townsmen would march by trades, militia companies, and other groupings to a church, meeting hall, or public square. There a lengthy program would be held, featuring political and patriotic music (usually including at least one song written for the day), a reading of the Declaration of Independence, a prayer or sermon, and an oration by some local political activist. . . . Finally the assembled group would retire to a hotel, tavern, or outdoor space, depending on the prosperity and location of the organizers, for a community banquet. Shady bowers on some prominent Republican's property seem to have been popular banquet spots in the Berkshires.

The highlights of such banquets were the toasts, drunk at the end and accompanied by cheers or cannon blasts if possible. At least fifteen or sixteen toasts were usually prepared in advance of the celebration, and those who could still speak after fifteen or sixteen belts could then offer "volunteers" from the floor. Afterward, an account of the celebration would be published in a sympathetic local newspaper, including a verbatim transcript of the toasts. No mere drinking game, political banquet toasts served, and were intended to serve, as informal platforms for the community, party, or faction that held the gathering. Pointed and quite specific political sentiments were expressed, and even the patriotic boilerplate was calibrated to reflect the values of the toasting group. So the Republicans of Tyringham, Pittsfield, and Lenox, Massachusetts, all toasted the memory of George Washington, but worked into their salutes fairly bitter criticisms of the Federalist proposal to build a giant pyramid-shaped crypt for the first president. As the Tyringham celebrants put it, "8. *The memory* of WASHINGTON—More durably embalmed in the affections of *Republicans*, than in the most costly *Mausoleum*.—3. cheers." Not surprisingly, the cheesemaking Republicans of Cheshire were especially pugnacious. Three Federalist statesmen were given the toast, "From such supporters of the Constitution good Lord deliver us." To the federal judges who lost their positions in the Republican repeal of the Federalist Judiciary Act of 1801, they sent the message, "*Sixteen Dead Judges*—As Judges may they sleep in eternal peace." Accounts of celebrations were often reprinted far outside their home region, and the toasts they contained were carefully parsed for the subtle and not-so-subtle indications they gave as to the balance of political forces and the state of public opinion in a given

area. Toasts were also taken seriously enough to sometimes warrant follow-ups, reviews, and rebuttals.

Another common denominator of this political culture was the use of newspapers as partisan political weapons. Indeed, newspapers were so central that . . . we might well consider the parties of this period to be newspaper-based. Federalists commonly blamed Jefferson's election on the loose national network of Republican newspapers led by the Philadelphia *Aurora*, and Republicans tended to agree. After 1800, no serious political activist thought that anything could be accomplished without newspaper support in as many places as possible, and at times they equated the maintenance of a newspaper with the actual existence of a party, faction, or movement. Aaron Burr's chief political henchman wrote in 1805 that "the instant" the Burr faction's tottering newspaper, the New York *Morning Chronicle*, failed, "*the Burrites would become 'uninfluential atoms,'* there would be *no rallying point*," and, even worse, their popularity and organizational vigor would be judged contemptibly weak because they were "*incapable any longer of supporting a press*."

Newspapers not only communicated party ideas, they represented and *embodied* these loosely organized parties in quite literal ways. Only in the pages of a partisan newspaper was a particular set of ideas, attitudes, policies, and candidates packaged together under the party label. Regular readers got a corporeal link to the party that they had few other ways of obtaining, and more important, they could learn, week to week, election to election, and public event to event, what it meant and how it thought to be a follower of that party. Many printers and editors became leading party activists and chief party spokesmen in their communities, and their offices were often unofficial party clubhouses.

As David Waldstreicher has argued, newspapers and other productions of the same partisan printing presses were critical to making the various elements of this political culture work as politics. Since public events could only be held intermittently, and attended only by a minority of the population of one small region at any given time, even an extremely well attended celebration or a particularly eloquent oration could have few wide-reaching or lasting political effects unless an account was printed in a newspaper. This was particularly true given the vast geographic extent of the nation and even of some states and individual congressional districts[.] In such a situation, Alexis de Tocqueville noted, members of a party or any other political group needed "some means of talking every day without seeing one another and of acting together without meeting."

Print transformed toasts, holiday celebrations, and parades from quaint local customs into vital forms of political communication. The whole practice of holding political banquets culminating in carefully worded toasts would have been politically meaningless without the newspaper report that allowed a few booze-soaked phrases to become a community's testament to the world. . . .

One final aspect of the early republic's political culture . . . was the producerist language in which ordinary Americans often expressed themselves on public occasions, the tendency for people who made things to speak through the medium of the things they made. This language has been most frequently noted in the case of urban artisans, who marched in civic processions by trades and held periodic trade festivals. These performances often combined some demonstration of the craft or display of its products with slogans asserting its members' political virtue and contribution

to the strength of the nation or some other formulation of the common good. Believing that their trades supplied needful community services as much as commodities to be sold in the market, producers thought it made perfect sense to ground their claims to citizenship at least partly on the utility, quality, and, sometimes, the size of their productions.

The most famous example was the "Grand Federal Procession" held in Philadelphia (along with similar events in Boston and New York) to celebrate and legitimize the ratification of the Constitution. In Philadelphia, the potters had a horse-drawn float carrying a potter's wheel and men making actual cups, mugs, and bowls during the parade. A flag carried the motto, "*The potter hath power over his clay*," referring to the idea that a man with a trade could make his own independent livelihood and thus controlled his own mind and destiny. The cabinet and chair-makers also had a rolling workshop, with the slogan "*By unity we support society*," a double- or triple-entendre, taking in the solidarity of the craft, the actual crafting of devices to hold up the human bottom (chairs), and the great value to society of a craft that could meet so basic a need as sitting. The bricklayers contented themselves to march with their trowels, aprons, and a banner that made a straightforward link between their pride as tradesman and as republican citizens: "*Both buildings and rulers are the works of our hands*." . . .

It is rare for historians to write about "Jeffersonian Democracy" or a democratic "Revolution of 1800" anymore unless to debunk or invert them, and the rise of mass participatory democracy is now often delayed in historical interpretations until the 1830s or later. Yet I would argue that this early partisan political culture—which developed during the 1790s, fully emerged after Jefferson was elected in 1800, and faded only after the parties became better organized in the 1830s—was one of the most participatory and transformative that the United States has ever experienced, despite its utter lack of many elements that came to define party politics later. Nationally, this political culture not only elected Thomas Jefferson in the face of government repression, but in doing so, fundamentally revised the nature of the United States as a political regime, unofficially but effectively rewriting the Constitution to incorporate organized competition for popular majorities. The founders had created "a republican Constitution, imposing salutary checks on the popular will," wrote the Jacksonian-era conservative Calvin Colton, but from 1800 on, "the popular will in the shape of a dynasty of opinion, has habitually triumphed over these provisions. The government has been republican in form, but democratic in fact."

Remarkable changes can also be detected on the level of political behavior. Though dominant interpretations have long brushed the information aside, statistics gathered by J. R. Pole and Richard P. McCormick in the 1950s and 1960s, now buttressed by the work of the American Antiquarian Society's First Democracy Project, found an "extraordinary surge" of voting over the period 1800–1816. Voter participation approached 70 percent of adult white males during the campaigns of 1799 and 1800 in heavily politicized states such as Pennsylvania . . . and trended up to those levels elsewhere a bit later. The surge was especially notable in New England, where Federalist-Republican competition was particularly intense after 1800, as the Federalists suddenly became vulnerable in places they once dominated with little challenge and the Republicans made strong efforts to win over the one region where they were defeated in 1800. According to the numbers generated by

McCormick and Pole, it was not until 1840 or so that the better-organized parties of the Jacksonian era managed to match that record. . . .

Though voting was limited largely to adult white males, there is much evidence that a lack of voting rights did not prevent women from developing strong and partisan political interests and opinions. Moreover, the festive, community-based political practices of the era afforded particularly wide opportunities for not only women but also other legally disfranchised groups, including children, African Americans, new immigrants, and propertyless white males, to participate in political events. Not everyone was invited to sit at one of those banquet tables or hand in a ballot, but just about everyone could and did attend the civic celebrations, listen to the speeches, or read or hear what was in the newspapers. Nonwhite groups also had political celebrations of their own. . . .

Acknowledging democratization in the wake of Thomas Jefferson's "Revolution of 1800" does not mean we should minimize the damage done to African and especially to Native Americans or ignore the exclusions and limitations that the American form of party politics ultimately entailed. We do not even have to give Jefferson and his policies much credit. His primary contribution may have been the image he projected, or had projected on him, as "The People's Friend," a great statesman who nevertheless respected the values and intelligence of ordinary citizens. . . .

While strange and often rather ridiculous to modern eyes (and greatly lacking in the kind of uniformity and consistency that some social scientific scholars would like to see in a party "system") this political culture was successful precisely because it was *not* a standardized national system. Instead, it was thoroughly embedded, and built out of, the culture of everyday life.

Interests and Values: American Foreign Policy in the Early Republic

BRADFORD PERKINS

The driving forces in American foreign policy both are and are not like those of other nations. They include the same emphasis on national self-interest, the same intrusion of the larger culture, the same distortions of world events seen through a prism of national values. But each of these factors also has a peculiarly American character.

At least since the publication in 1959 of William Appleman Williams' *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, . . . historians (and polemicists) have adopted his thesis that the United States has always been "expansionist." In at least one sense, of course, this is a truism. Every nation serves first of all its own interests, even those which, like the United States after 1776, France after 1789, and the Soviet Union after 1917, profess to represent the aspirations of the entire world. . . .

Americans, at least many of them, certainly were expansionists, before independence and after, even before most of them thought of "America" as more than a geographical term. And they were proud of it. In 1771, a young graduate of Yale,

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Bradford Perkins, "Interests, Values, and the Prism: The Sources of American Foreign Policy," *Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776–1865*, 1993. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Timothy Dwight, published the first of many patriotic effusions that were to flow from his pen:

> Hail land of light and glory! Thy power shall grow
> Far as the seas, which round thy regions flow;
> Through earth's wide realms thy glory shall extend,
> And savage nations at thy scepter bend.
> And the frozen shores thy sons shall sail,
> Or stretch their canvas to the ASIAN gale.

In the succeeding century, similarly chauvinistic statements echoed Dwight. More to the point, his predictions largely came true. American dominion indeed grew "far as the seas," to the Pacific coast. Americans did force "savage nations," Mexico and the Indian tribes, to bend to their scepter. They "stretched their canvas" over the globe. Whether they achieved world-wide glory or influence is problematic; they were both respected and scorned—worse yet, sometimes ignored—in other lands. Still, Dwight's youthful effort laid out what would be the agenda of American diplomacy.

In the nation's early years, foreign commerce was of course a critical factor. Although what was essentially subsistence farming remained predominant, a market economy steadily developed, and foreign markets quickly became an important part of the system. At no other time has such a high proportion of the national product been exported, and the price level of many important commodities was essentially determined by export prices. At least until John Quincy Adams's presidency, every chief executive devoted much of his attention to the fostering of trade and the vibrant merchant marine that carried it.

Even while they were colonies, and on the whole loyal ones, Americans dissented from the mercantilism of the British Navigation Acts system, which in effect largely limited trade to intraimperial exchange. They wanted freedom to trade with as many nations as possible, whether in or outside British domains, in whatever goods they chose. Logically enough, their later policies as a nation differed from those of other countries; in general, Americans sought to expand commerce by unshackling rather than directing it. Still, their basic purpose differed little from that of almost all nations at many times. . . .

By 1865, the United States had expanded to the Pacific Ocean, and citizens often boasted that the nation had become an empire.

Such massive expansions into contiguous areas have not been common. The nearest modern parallel is the Russian expansion under the czars, begun in the late fifteenth century and essentially completed in the nineteenth. In that long process, the Russian people spread out from their original center around Moscow, just as Americans moved westward from the Atlantic Coast. A central purpose, however, was to establish dominion over non-Russian populations whose efforts could be exploited by the center. Americans, on the other hand, did not seek to reduce Native Americans or, for that matter, Mexicans to the role of laborers in their vineyard. To say this is not to exalt Americans' morality: their purpose was selfish; their methods, particularly in dealing with the Indians, often were cruel. However, they sought land and its resources, not a subordinate population. They would have been happiest if

the Indians had simply disappeared, and it was no accident that the half of Mexico that was seized contained only a few thousand Mexican inhabitants. This kind of expansionism was unique to the United States.

Of Dwight's catalog, there remains only the category of "glory." Americans considered themselves a model society, one destined to transform the world. As John Adams wrote in 1765, expressing what was already a widespread view, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scheme and design of Providence for the illumination and emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." The success of the Revolution and the establishment of republican government increased such feelings, and most Americans believed, although historians still debate the degree of accuracy in their claims, that the French and Latin American revolutions, as well as the European revolts of 1848, confirmed the argument. . . . Time and again, Americans demanded that they be respected as a model for the world.

Before the Civil War, this thought usually was harmless arrogance; only occasionally, in happy contrast to later times, did a price have to be paid. Many other nations have had phases of arrogance in their history, some of them nearly as long as the American. This last form of "expansion" is, like the others, a function of the inherent egocentrism of any nation's diplomacy. The American form differed; the central meaning did not.

The form sprang, of course, from cultural values. In all nations, those who make decisions are influenced not merely by the information at their disposal but by the values they bring to consideration of the information. When the United States was born, and for many years thereafter, foreign policy decisions in most countries were subject to the scrutiny of a relative few, at most of a legislature. George Canning, after he became foreign secretary of Great Britain in 1822, is considered the first European diplomatist who sought broader support from the political public as a whole. In the United States, things were quite different from the outset. Revolutionary leaders and, later on, government officials had to seek national concurrence in their policies; the policies had to coincide with or be justified in terms of national values. . . .

The core beliefs lasted so long—to our own time—and became so embedded in the American outlook that they seem unremarkable today. However, even though drawn in part from the thinking of others, particularly in seventeenth-century England, they were radical departures from the dominant values of Europe at the time of the Revolution and for many years continued to be far more pervasive than in other countries. Moreover, they gained strength from the apparently confirming events of the years from independence to the Civil War. Indeed, it is impossible to understand American foreign policy without recognizing the profound, persistent impact of an ideology that emerged during the colonial and early national periods.

The most important belief was a commitment to republicanism. . . . For a generation or more after independence, Americans worried about the fate of their experiment in popular government. Some feared that republicanism would be destroyed by demagoguery; others saw the looming shape of aristocratic control or Caesarism. Still, no true American suggested that the concept itself be abandoned, only that distortions be corrected. Americans agreed that republicanism—and the United States as its preeminent practitioner—represented the hope of the present and the future.

Fears for their govt

Closely allied with republicanism, ever more so as the nation progressed, was the concept of individualism. . . . Unlike French republicans after 1789, Americans seldom talked of a "national will" transcending the views of individuals. Although government—especially state government—intervened in economic matters much more than is suggested by polemicists expressing reverence for the policies of the Founding Fathers, and although, too, cooperative economic efforts became increasingly important, individual enterprise was the model form, as befitted the nation of farms and farmers that America was at her birth. . . .

The virtually universal endorsement of republicanism and individualism by no means translated into unanimity regarding foreign affairs. Indeed, disputatious, sometimes violent disagreements over policy began well before the celebrated clash between Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian views in the 1790s and continued beyond the Civil War. However, differences over policy should not obscure the common body of beliefs shared by practically every American, beliefs that deeply influenced both sides in all the debates and both gave impetus to and placed limits upon the rival policies put forward.

Their credo . . . meant that Americans and, to a very large extent, their presumably more sophisticated leaders instinctively distrusted monarchical, statist regimes. These beliefs also meant, with qualifications soon to be noted, that Americans welcomed and endorsed revolutions. In 1796, President Washington expressed a national outlook when he averred that his "best wishes were irresistibly excited whenever, in any country, he saw an oppressed nation unfurl the banners of freedom." Largely but not exclusively because noninterventionist ideas predominated, Americans only very rarely even considered positive action in support of struggles against monarchy. But the wishes of Washington and his countrymen were important, frequently coloring the policy of the United States.

Every nation views others in the world through a prism shaped by its own experience and unique to itself. Even today, American statesmen, and those who record their actions, often overlook this simple, almost self-evident point. . . . In American history such a prism, the product of experience and culture, conditioned the way in which Americans viewed world developments and consequently how they responded to them.

America's commercial policies cannot be explained if one ignores the nation's devotion to individualism; statist controls were by definition condemned, and "open doors" were preferable. America's drive for territory, in large part the product of greed, derived essential strength from the prism, which allowed Americans to see themselves as bringing progress and improvement to Louisiana or Florida or Oregon or Mexico.

Similarly, the American reaction to revolutions abroad was essentially a projection of their vision of their own. They had, they firmly believed, risen against tyranny, avoided sanguinary excesses, and created a republic—such was God's path for the world. Thus they welcomed antimonarchical risings but, in a frequently repeated "cycle of hope and disappointment," recoiled when revolutions moved toward repression, Bonapartism, or deep social change. The Terror divided Americans previously nearly unanimously in favor of the French Revolution. The "Springtime of Revolutions" in 1848 evoked applause, but the radical violence that developed in France soon alienated many Americans. Between these dates, in 1830, still another

French revolution, a move in the direction of liberalism but not even a republican one, earned praise from President Jackson because of "the heroic moderation which . . . disarmed revolution of its terrors." The contrast is instructive.

In reacting as they did, Americans usually failed to remember special circumstances that had made their kind of revolution possible. . . . Largely self-governing throughout most of their history as colonies, Americans came to freedom with patterns of behavior and thought that made republicanism both logical and easy; they did not have to exorcise political privileges of rank or transform the economic order to create conditions in which republicanism might flourish. When others, not so lucky, went past what Americans considered the proper boundaries of revolution, they lost American sympathies.

Since national egotism was strong, the inability of others to create individualist republicanism was explained in terms of their inferiority to Americans. . . . When revolution broke out while he was American minister in Paris, Jefferson at first considered limited monarchy rather than republicanism the appropriate solution for France, since her people were so ill-prepared for self-government. Years later, when Latin Americans rose against Spanish rule, virtually every American welcomed the revolt but many, including Jefferson, rightly doubted that true republicanism would follow. . . .

These two apparently dissimilar reactions . . . are in fact reflections of the same facet of the prism. Republicanism in the American style was the highest form of government. Those who compromised it might be inherently inferior as a result of their history, but in any event they sinned. Throughout their history, Americans have regarded foreign nations in this way.

A sentence in [Aléxis de Tocqueville's] *Democracy in America* also encapsulates the second distortion provided by the prism. In a characteristic tone, Tocqueville wrote, "Their fathers gave them a love of equality and liberty, but it was God who, by handing a limitless continent over to them, gave them the means of long remaining equal and free." Americans were blessed with abundant land and resources. There was of course poverty, perhaps most notably in the cities that burgeoned before the Civil War. Women played no political role. And there was slavery. On the whole, however, for the men who voted and governed, conditions were much better than in other nations; in particular, the proportion of landowners was higher than elsewhere. Above all, though there were of course periodic slumps, a high rate of economic growth prevailed.

This eased the path to republicanism, contributed to national stability, and strengthened the devotion to individualism. "We supposed that our revelation was 'democracy revolutionizing the world,'" an historian has written, "but in reality it was 'abundance revolutionizing the world.'" In many other nations, political change evoked social conflict, creating what from the American point of view was unrepublican turmoil. Such tensions existed in the United States, but comparatively speaking they were muted. . . .

The prism concept suggests one other line of thought. Scholars often distinguish between ideals and self-interest as motives of foreign policy, seeing them as polar opposites. In fact, mingling and reinforcement are the norm; conflict between national interest and national culture is the exception. For this the prism is largely responsible. As Max Weber wrote many years ago, "Interests (material and moral),

not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men. Yet the 'images of the world' created by these ideas have very often served as switches determining the tracks on which the dynamism of interests keep action going." In sum, material interests, culture, and the prism combine in a complex interplay which creates foreign policy.

There is no clearer illustration of the compatibility of the three factors than the devotion to isolationism. Americans sought commerce with all the world, but they refused to become involved in the politics of other continents and, in particular, to align themselves with any other power. Sometimes compromised in practice, notably in the alliance of 1778 with France, a connection that was essential to the success of the Revolution, political isolation was an unvarying desire and increasingly became fixed dogma, even though the word itself was not used to describe policy until the twentieth century. Such a policy was obviously prudent: a state with all interests save the commercial confined to its own periphery was made stronger in that area by the width of the Atlantic Ocean. A power weak by world standards could only suffer from involvement in the wars of greater ones, and a noninvolved power could hope, at a time when the rights of neutrals were taken more seriously than later, to profit greatly from wartime trade.

At the same time, involvement in the sordid politics of Europe could be and was regarded by Americans as contaminating, a descent to the level of court intrigues and amoral national selfishness contrary to the principles of republicanism. Involvement would force compromises of principle, expose simple but honest American diplomats to the wiles of cynically tricky Europeans, and, perhaps above all, dim the "beacon of liberty," the light to the world held forth by the United States. Although often false (were such men as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay more principled than their interlocutors?), these beliefs in turn created the prism through which Americans viewed developments across the seas, an angle of vision that conditioned interpretations of actual developments and confirmed the mind-set that had created the prism in the first place.

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