

The Colonial Origins of American Identity

by Walter A. McDougall

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Who are we Americans, and why did the American Revolution occur? Who peopled the thirteen colonies and what did they believe in, or come to believe in common, that caused so many to risk their lives, fortunes, and honor for independence? To answer these questions, I propose two analytical frameworks, which involve what I call the four spirits of English expansion and the four notions of liberty that British colonists came to express in the New World.

America: A Civil Religion and a Permanent Revolution

The final verse of the “Star-Spangled Banner” captures the American Creed far better than the first verse, which merely sets the scene at Fort McHenry:

O thus be it ever when free men shall stand
Between their loved home and the war's desolation
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the Pow'r that has made and preserved us a Nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just
And this be our motto: In God is our trust!
And the Star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Francis Scott Key assures us we will always know victory and peace, because we are a nation by grace of God and our cause of freedom is holy. Such devotionals to “divine-right republicanism” (my coinage) are so familiar that Americans scarcely notice how thoroughly they pervade our national hymns, texts, and oratory. Moreover, whether Americans believe their creed is derived from Biblical faith, Enlightenment reason, or both, they have always considered it valid for the whole human race. Thomas Jefferson did

not say “*I propose*” but rather “*We hold* these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.”

So who are we Americans? Are we truly new Israelites dwelling in, or fashioning, a new Promised Land? Citizens of the world offering refuge to the “tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free”? Crusaders for human rights abroad—the last, best hope of mankind? Or are Americans a people suffering from messianic delusions of grandeur, intent on cloaking their self-centered pursuit of happiness in self-righteous piety? Perhaps Americans’ behavior runs the whole gamut from charity and sacrifice to cruelty and hypocrisy simply because Americans have been uniquely free to be fully human.

One person who understood colonial Americans was the Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke. Early in 1775 the thirteen colonies were finally galvanized into resistance by Britain’s Intolerable Acts. The Royal Navy was blockading Boston, the British Army was patrolling its streets, and the Continental Congress in Philadelphia was urging solidarity with Massachusetts lest all the colonies lose their liberties. It seemed impossible that, as John Adams put it, thirteen clocks might strike as one. Yet, against all expectations, Puritans, Quakers, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Deists, farmers, mechanics, merchants, and planters, united against king and Parliament out of fear that the British meant to reduce the colonies to a manner of slavery. George III was just as determined to suppress this treason, convinced that the whole British Empire might unravel if he did not. Then, just a month before fighting broke out on Lexington Green, Burke begged the government to reconsider. Parliament met in the evening, politics being a gentleman’s avocation in those days, but Burke showed no mercy on the weary, wine-soaked House of Commons. He spoke for three hours, explaining with brilliant insight why peace and obedience in America could never be had through coercion. Why? Because, Burke explained, the colonies’ population, agriculture, fishing, shipping, manufactures, and commerce were growing at such a rate that suppression was no option even in the short run. But more salient than their material strength was the colonists’ character:

Those people are Englishmen, mi’lord, born with a free spirit. They are, what is more, Englishmen in whom religion is in no way worn out or impaired; and their mode of professing it is a main cause of this free spirit. Those people are Protestants, mi’lord, and of that kind, which is most adverse to all submission of mind and opinion. . . . Their northern colonies profess various denominations, but they commune in the same spirit of liberty. As for the southerners, their leaders are Anglicans, but their spirit of liberty is still more high and haughty. That is because they are slave-owners, mi’lord, and where this is the case in any part of the world, those who are free are most proud and jealous of their freedom . . . for it is to them a rank and privilege distinguishing them from their slaves. . . . You ask on what grounds the Americans defy us? Do you not know, mi’lord,

that no people on earth has made so general a study of law, which renders men acute, inquisitive, dexterous, resourceful. . . . But even if the colonists were less numerous, less loving of liberty, less steeped in religion, less proud, they would still be irrepressible for the simple fact Americans are full of chicane and take whatever they want.¹

Burke's motions to repeal the Intolerable Acts were soundly defeated.

Another Englishman who understood Americans was the drifter Thomas Paine, whom Benjamin Franklin by chance encouraged to seek his fortune in Philadelphia. In January 1776, just fourteen months after his arrival, Paine told the colonists who they were, or wanted to be, or were destined to be whether they liked it or not. His 50-page indictment of British oppression charged that any colonist who shrank from declaring independence and taking up arms for freedom lacked not only common sense, but manhood itself—that is, anyone who wasn't a Patriot wasn't really American. *Common Sense* was a sensation because Paine intuitively drew on both the vocabularies that resonated with colonists groping to know their destiny: the first was radical Whig, country-party ideology informed by enlightened Scottish philosophy; the second was evangelical Protestant millenarianism inspired by the First Great Awakening.

And yet, *Common Sense* was awash in ambiguities. Paine imagined America becoming an empire of 100 million and the greatest power on earth, but he warned that the union of states might prove as fragile as glass. He condemned repression but urged Patriots to repress Tories, traitors, and slackers lest the revolution abort. He told Americans they were like Noah, free to fashion a New Order for the Ages, but feared that Americans lacked the republican virtue the great commission required. He extolled equality but warned against the fickle "mind of the multitude." He saw Americans becoming the richest people in history but knew how materialism bred corruption and boredom. He praised Americans' rebelliousness but chided them for their lawlessness. Above all Paine invoked reason, but his rhetoric played an emotional keyboard ranging from hatred, anger, and vengeance to fear, self-love, and self-doubt. Indeed, the pamphlet was so demagogic that sober John Adams, who also preached independence, penned a rebuttal. But it was Paine, not Adams, who fingered the colonies' pulse. So deftly did Paine conflate Biblical and secular principles that Christians and rationalists of almost all sorts could nod in agreement. He derived a politics of liberty from religious principle in order to make a religion of politics. He made America herself a sort of religion, her fight for independence a holy war, and the chiliaric fruits of victory a chance to build heaven on earth. And if liberty was a holy cause, then opposition to it was sacrilege. That is why Paine repeatedly

¹ Speech in the Commons by Burke (Mar. 22, 1775), in R. C. Simmons and P. D. G. Thomas, eds., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America 1753–1783* (White Plains, N.Y.: Kraus International, 1982), pp. 600–11.

warned that “We the people” will “get” anyone who failed to embrace the cause.²

As is so often the case in the course of human events, only a minority of the colonists actually displayed virtue and sacrifice for the cause. Adams figured that one-third of the colonists were of Tory sentiment and another third just tried to lie low. Hence, as is so often the case in American history, the honor and sacrifice of the few, with George Washington at their head, secured liberty for the many.

But the United States survived and prospered because, as Burke said, Americans were “full of chicane.” The earliest colonial promoters, John Winthrop included, were, among other things, hustlers: bold and devious entrepreneurs who advertised and huckstered to attract labor and capital. Colonists themselves repeatedly duped or defied their own chartered companies or proprietors. And as early as 1651, when Parliament passed its first Navigation Act, the assemblies of New England and Virginia explicitly forbade their settlers to obey English law. Over the next century, the colonists turned smuggling, tax evasion, cooking the books, sailing under false colors, land speculation, stock-jobbing, jury nullification, and civil disobedience into fine arts. They then employed all of their penchant for artifice to win independence in the name of the highest ideals of that age.

For instance, the supposedly unanimous passage by Congress of the Declaration of Independence was achieved through desperate arm-twisting, logrolling, and possibly back-alley threats or bribes. Robert Morris’s financial shenanigans saw Congress through the war, but also lined Morris’s pockets. Franklin engaged in magnificent diplomatic duplicity, first to secure the French alliance that won the war, then to betray that alliance to gain the treaty with Britain that won the peace. A few years later Madison, Hamilton, and the other Federalists employed brilliant deceptions to convoke what none dared call the Constitutional Convention, and then pulled off a whole series of political coups to ram through ratification of the Constitution, state by state.

The Framers of that document likewise took human nature as they found it. They purposely designed a government that did *not* rely on republican virtue, which is always in short supply, but instead harnessed private ambitions for the public good, while minimizing the dangers of private corruption through checks and balances. Did the Framers imagine the emergence of political parties? Not at all, and none denounced them more loudly than Jefferson. But when Jefferson determined that the Federalists meant to replicate British-style government in America, he exploited the free market in power set up by the Constitution to form the first party and win a national election via a sordid deal with the first master of urban machine politics, Aaron Burr. John Marshall was not above encouraging the litigation that allowed his

²These observations are based on Robert A. Ferguson’s “The Commonalities of Common Sense,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (2000).

Supreme Court to create by fiat a national market in goods and services, while the clergy of old and new denominations quickly learned how to compete in the free spiritual market, sheltered by the First Amendment. Every episode of frontier expansion and admission of new states to the Union was a riotous tale of political mischief and land speculation. Nor do the origins of America's canals and railroads bear close examination.

What Burke called chicanery usually parades in the fig leaf of American pragmatism. But why should we be embarrassed that our wise Founders drafted legal, political, economic, and religious rules of the game that tapped even the selfish instincts of people to hasten national growth, expand opportunity for the many, and bless the enterprise with an aura of hope and idealism? Why be embarrassed that Americans know how to do good by doing well, and how to feel good about doing well? Why not admit we are a civic-minded nation of hustlers?

After all, Paine's vision of American greatness came true, albeit not in the manner he would have preferred. Liberty under law bestowed opportunity, first on white males and eventually on people of all races and both genders. It unleashed the energies of a people already trained to be hustlers, both in the positive sense of doers, dreamers, builders, hard-workers, joiners, givers, and team-players, and in the pejorative sense of speculators, manipulators, profiteers, and scofflaws. Those qualities, plus bountiful resources, permitted Americans to build a republic of continental expanse and the richest, most dynamic nation in history. Free to exploit their own ingenuity and enjoy the fruits of their labor, Americans had every incentive to take risks and every excuse to believe in their future. They multiplied at a frenetic pace, subdued the continent by hook, crook, and pocketbook, invented and imported one new technology after another, and in time flooded the world with their products, culture, money, and might. And they did it all at breakneck speed. America is not only a sort of religion. America is a permanent revolution that both heartens and horrifies all other nations by dint of its very existence.

The Four Spirits of English Colonization

Where did the United States of America come from? American students have long been taught that the new nation was founded by colonists who had fled Tudor-Stuart England and Hanoverian Britain in search of religious freedom and economic opportunity, taking up arms to escape British imperialism. But when one asks when, why, and how the English first embarked on overseas expansion, it becomes clear that the thirteen colonies, far from rejecting the spirits of English expansion, actually embraced and expressed them even more fervently than the English themselves.

Four such spirits—born of economics, religion and politics, strategy, and legal philosophy—can be traced in English expansion. And one can see

that the colonists who rebelled did so in part because of their conviction that Britain itself had betrayed the original spirits of empire and was choking the destiny that Americans imagined was theirs.

1. *Economics.* The first of those spirits was conjured by something that happened in England before it occurred anywhere else: a whole society began to reorganize on the basis of capitalism. Capitalism is usually associated with merchants and trade and traced back to the Italian city-states or the Dutch Republic. But merchants and long-distance trade in luxury goods are universal phenomena. For a whole society to have become capitalist, the 95 percent of the people who worked on the land had to dissolve the bonds of slavery or serfdom, feudal dues and land tenures, village communes and commons, and replace them with free markets in land, labor, and food—in short, to turn the very necessities of life into commodities.

Ever since the bubonic plague arrived in 1348, landed gentry faced a chronic labor shortage, and huge swaths of Europe fell back into wasteland. On the continent, various means were employed to bind peasants to the soil—indeed, serfdom was on the rise east of the Elbe. But English lords cleverly exploited their feudal rights to dismantle feudalism. They discovered that the way to attract productive labor and maximize revenue was to enclose common pastures, expand cultivation and sheep runs, and farm out land to “farmers” under long-term leases. They were able to do this because England’s common-law tradition and independent judiciary sanctified contracts and property rights. The process was gradual and uneven, but by the late fifteenth century landlords and farmers were responding to market incentives by exploiting economies of scale, using more efficient agricultural methods, cutting costs, and specializing. Those who succeeded expanded their acreage by purchase or reclamation, while brokers, lawyers, and merchants sprang up to manage the real estate and commodity markets and promote exports.

The new printing industry met the demands of rural capitalism with books and pamphlets on farming, husbandry, and orchards until a veritable rage for “improvement” swept England. Burgeoning markets, population recovery, and rising prices due in part to the influx of Spanish silver and gold stimulated the English economy, while lords and merchants invested their profits from agriculture and textiles in mining, commerce, and colonization. Nobles elsewhere frowned upon capitalism, but the English gentry were obsessed with it. Soon people of all social classes had to adjust to new notions of freedom that meant, ironically, bowing to the dictates of the market.

The biggest losers in this transition were cottagers, who lost their ancient access to common forests and fields. England’s port cities swelled with rootless rural folk seeking employment, and Parliament fretted about the attendant poverty, crime, and vice. But even the dispossessed contributed to England’s rise, because it was they who signed up as indentured servants, to serve as the shock troops of colonization. New lands beckoned across the Atlantic: lands waiting to be improved and in turn to improve all men and

women willing to brave the risks and the work. Hence rural capitalism, free markets, the improvement ethic, and the consumer culture—what John Bunyan dubbed Vanity Fair in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)—comprised the first inspiration for English expansion.

2. *Religion and politics.* The second spirit was that of the Reformation. In 1534, Henry VIII broke with the Papacy and declared England an empire subordinate to no power on earth. Henry seized and sold off the Church's vast properties in England and Wales, another big boost to rural capitalism. Those measures, and his own personality, magnified the power and popularity of the monarchy. But Henry was careful to make it all legal by asking Parliament to approve his measures—and what one Parliament did, another might undo, as the Stuarts sadly discovered. Finally, Henry stirred up support through propaganda vilifying the Pope as the Antichrist and all who served the Catholic cause as slaves of Satan. They included a minority in England itself, and a majority in Scotland and Ireland, which is why English politics displayed a paranoid style and obsessed with popish plots.

Paranoia increased during the brief Catholic revival of Queen Mary I ("Bloody Mary"), who ruled from 1553 to 1558. But when she died childless and the crown passed to Elizabeth I (1558–1603), exiled Protestant clergy returned, crying, "God is English!" Meaning, of course, God is Protestant, and the English are His chosen people.

Elizabeth hoped a broad and tolerant Anglican Church might end sectarian strife. She failed, of course, to reconcile Presbyterians, especially the radical Puritans. But all English Protestants could agree on their archenemy when the Spanish Armada sailed in 1588, sparking fifteen years of war. England played the role of St. George, God's earthly sword meant to slay the Spanish dragon. By the time Jamestown and New England colonies were planted, English Protestants carried over the sea a militant, crusading anti-Catholicism.

3. *Strategy.* The third spirit of English expansion stemmed from strategic rivalry among Europe's monarchs. But in Britain, geopolitics was the business not only of kings and ministers, but the whole nation. For if Spain and then France were religious enemies, they were also competitors for the unimaginable wealth of the New World. Prior to the Elizabethan age, few English captains had sailed beyond the sight of land. But 1561 saw the publication of *Arte of Navigation*, a translation of Spain's secret textbook for sailors, which a spy in the employ of England's Muscovy Company had pilfered. This text has been called "one of the most decisive books ever printed in the English language. It held the key to the mastery of the sea."³

Soon Oxbridge dons were drafting maps and teaching captains celestial navigation, while craftsmen designed sextants and astrolabes. Privateers

³D. W. Waters (RN), *The Art of Navigation in England and Elizabethan and Early Stuart Times* (New Haven: Yale University, 1958), p. 104.

like Hawkins and Drake raided the Spanish Main and Sir Walter Raleigh dreamed of outflanking the Spaniards by settling Virginia. When Spain protested, Queen Elizabeth replied: "Prescription without possession is not valid. Moreover, all are at liberty to navigate. . . since use of the sea and air are free to all."⁴

Thus did Elizabeth invoke common law and the improvement ethic to argue that only settlement confers ownership. Needless to say, colonial proprietors, indentures, and squatters sailed to America with that principle in their hearts.

4. *Legal philosophy.* But what of lands already occupied by others, for instance by Native Americans? That brings us to the legal philosophical spirit of English expansion, according to which any rights savage or indigent peoples had to their lands were forfeit. That right of eminent domain was applied first in Ireland, which was in many respects a laboratory for colonization. There the English pronounced themselves shocked by a backward people whose ignorant, unchanging ways wasted their land's rich potential. There English occupiers learned to condemn and to fear uncivilized neighbors. As one officer quipped about tales of Virginia: "Indians? We have Indians at home . . . Indians in Wales, Indians in Ireland."⁵

John Locke later explained this theory of property in his *Second Treatise on Government* (1690). He began by stating, "In the beginning all the world was *America*," by which he meant undeveloped and thus up for grabs. He concluded by stating that Indians "exercise very little Dominion, and have but a very moderate sovereignty." That strikes us as arrogant, but what is surprising about the English was their need to *justify* conquest by appealing to natural law. Needless to say, their belief that displacement of savagery by civilization was both inevitable and proper was the fourth spirit of English expansion.

Albion's Seed: Four British Cultures in America

What about liberty? Did not colonists come to America in search of religious and civil liberty? Many did, but as Oscar Handlin shrewdly wrote, "liberty was a continent Americans inadvertently discovered while searching for something else."⁶ But whether liberty was something they pursued, or something they learned through governing themselves in the wilderness, the four diasporas that colonized British America understood liberty differently. Hence, when their representatives met in Philadelphia, they had to negotiate a

⁴ A. L. Rowse, *The Elizabethans and America* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), pp. 24–25, 31–32.

⁵ Nicholas P. Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established 1565–1576* (London: Harvester, 1976), pp. 160–63.

⁶ Oscar and Lilian Handlin, *Liberty and Power 1600–1760* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. xix.

hybrid blueprint for liberty that goes far to explain subsequent American history.

The encyclopedic study of those diasporas is David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (1991), which Alan Taylor expanded upon in his excellent *American Colonies* (2001). My own *Freedom Just Around the Corner* (2004) surveys six groups, discussing at length the huge contributions made by Germans in Pennsylvania and, of course, enslaved Africans. But since the Germans were mostly separatist or apolitical and the Africans absent from political discourse, one may legitimately limit discussion of American liberty to Fischer's four British folkways.

Puritans. Best known are the 30,000-odd Puritans who swarmed out of East Anglia and London after 1630 to escape the Stuarts' High Anglican impositions and settle New England. Puritans claimed to pursue three missions: to live in godly peaceable kingdoms and build an exemplary "shining city on a hill"; to convert the Indians before Jesuit missionaries got to them; and to return someday to England when God prepared it for purification. They accomplished none of those goals. To be sure, New England became a theocracy of sorts, but the Puritans pursued material goals as ardently as spiritual ones, showed little interest in Indians, and lost their errand to England when Oliver Cromwell imposed his own Puritan Commonwealth through civil war.

New Englanders were thus obliged to define what it meant to be free in America. They knew there was no freedom in moral anarchy, for then all men are slaves to their own sinful natures. But neither was freedom found beneath bishops or kings. Accordingly, Puritans preached "ordered liberty" rooted in the rule of law, private virtue, the family, and communal self-government. They hated hierarchy and privilege, valued public service above private wants, and believed the Lord called men unto liberty in all things except willful sin. Such was the liberty loved by John Hancock and Sam and John Adams.

Cavaliers. Virginia, by contrast, was a land speculation quickly turned tobacco colony. So was Maryland, since Lord Baltimore's dreams of founding a haven for Catholics and a neo-feudal proprietorship were dashed by the influx of obstreperous Protestants. What really placed a cultural stamp on the Chesapeake was the arrival of Cavaliers, or King's Men, who lost their estates in the English Civil War and accepted Virginia Governor William Berkeley's offer of land grants. They stemmed mostly from England's southwest and spoke in a languid rhythm. Virginia planters cared little for religious disputes, but made a religion of horsemanship, hospitality, and hierarchy. Their pride was expressed by William Byrd II, who likened himself to a Biblical patriarch: "I have my Flocks and my Herds, my Bond-men and Bond-women, and every Sort of Trade amongst my own servants, so that I live independent of all except Providence."⁷

⁷J. H. Breen, *Puritans and Adventurers: Change and Persistence in Early America* (New York: Oxford University, 1980), p. 152.

Thus was born the American South, and a notion of liberty contrasting sharply with that of New England.

Planters took inequality for granted. Hence to be free of domination exerted by others—which is slavery—meant to exert authority *over* others, be it wife, children, or servants. Such hierarchical liberty was a direct descendent of the aristocratic ethic that inspired the Magna Carta, English Parliament, and Bill of Rights of 1690. To a high-born Virginian, the most salient political question was not who should govern, but whether the natural aristocrats governed dishonorably, or with justice and wisdom. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and George Mason cherished such freedom.

Quakers. A third political culture arose in the Delaware Valley under William Penn. Quakers dispensed with all clergy, churches, ceremony, symbols, and dogmatic theology in the belief that all men and women possess the divine “inner light.” They admonished each other to live in simplicity and equality, however often their merchants elevated counting-house values over those of the meetinghouse. Indeed, religious toleration itself was partly a promotional gimmick that Penn’s ubiquitous advertising campaigns exploited to good effect. Pennsylvania was an instant commercial success. But Quakers, of course, were pacifist, so their notion of liberty was “live and let live.” A simple enough proposition, but its complex corollaries included resistance to taxes raised for war and any taxes imposed by a non-representative body. Thus would Pennsylvanians like John Dickinson *shout* for liberty as loudly any, but infuriate other colonists with their refusal to *act*.

Scots/Irish. The fourth great migration followed the Act of Union of 1707 whereby the English and Scottish crowns merged to forge Great Britain. Many Scots hated England, the Anglican Church, and Parliament’s assault on their woolen trade, or else hoped to exploit their new access to Britain’s market and empire to improve their station in life. Some of the 200,000-odd Scots and Ulstermen who sailed for America were people of education and means. Most were Border folk, poor and lawless, whose ancestors had feuded, rustled cattle, and fought the English, Irish, and each other’s clans for centuries. Once in America they swarmed inland on the Philadelphia Wagon Road, crossed the Shenandoah Valley into western Virginia and Carolina, and planted America’s first country-and-western, or hillbilly, culture—defined by whiskey, violence, folk music, and ecstatic evangelism.

These so-called Scots/Irish were pure libertarians, for whom freedom meant the absence of any outside authority. They reckoned all who imposed or collected taxes and rents to be glorified thieves, and all who drew or enforced boundaries to be glorified jailers. As one observer wrote, they “shun everything which appears to demand of them law and order, and anything that preaches constraint. They are not wicked. Their object is merely wild.”⁸ That

⁸ Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, pp. 777–82, quote at p. 777.

was the liberty precious to Patrick Henry, Daniel Boone, the Calhouns, and the Jacksons. England

Finally, the colonial elites in all regions save New England proved extremely receptive to English Freemasonry, with its ideals of republican virtue, rational government, and religious toleration.

Origins of the American War of Independence

To return to the question posed at the start, why did the American Revolution occur? Its long-range causes surely date back to the colonies' origins, because, as many British officials lamented, colonists displayed contempt for distant authority the moment they arrived in the New World. Still, those proto-Americans remained loyal subjects of England's kings for 156 years after the settlement of Jamestown in 1607 and fought side by side with the English in their many wars. Hence, the short-range causes of separation must be sought in the very thing British subjects on both sides of the ocean fervently prayed for: victory, in the Seven Years War—the climactic French and Indian War—in 1763. For after the conquest of Canada, the British double-crossed the colonists by betraying all four spirits of English expansion, spirits Americans invoked to justify their own heady dreams of expansion.

First, Parliament imposed a slew of new taxes and restrictions on colonial manufactures and commerce. Some were onerous, some not, but if the principle were granted, what restrictions, taxes, and monopolies might Parliament *not* impose on Americans, strangling their growth and trampling the whole market-based improvement ethic underfoot? Second, Parliament legalized the Catholic Church in what was now British Canada. Tolerate the Catholics? What had the empire fought for these past two hundred years? When the Continental Congress convened in 1774, Paul Revere made its first order of business a stinging protest of this Quebec Act. Third, Britain drove the French out of North America only to transfer the whole Mississippi basin to Catholic Spain, which promptly banned American flatboats and threatened to close the port of New Orleans. Fourth, George III endeavored to shelter his other new subjects, the Indians, by forbidding white settlement west of the Appalachians, the so-called Proclamation Line of 1763.

In all of these ways, London was just trying to adjust to the new realities brought on by victory in North America. But to Americans, it seemed the British had become heretics in their own church! To Americans it seemed that Britain itself had supplanted the Catholics' powers as the royal, aristocratic, monopolistic, corrupt, oppressive dragon. So as early as 1765 the Sons of Liberty and the Stamp Act Congress retrained their rhetorical cannon, so recently aimed at the French, against Britain.

Who Are We, We Americans?

What became of those four original spirits of English colonization, over the course of declaring independence, ratifying the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the first decades of national life? The initial capitalist drive to enclose and improve common lands within a commercial market triumphed in the United States more thoroughly than in its island of origin. The thirteen colonies rebelled in part because crown and Parliament began to restrict Americans' freedom to expand their agrarian frontier, commerce, and industry. Having won independence, the states crafted a Constitution in part to forge a national market. Having achieved unity, they then made and interpreted laws, and embraced secular and religious values, promoting the swiftest possible development of their nation.

Likewise, the "God is English" Protestant spirit, which reviled Roman Catholicism's dogma, hierarchy, and universality, triumphed in the United States. To be sure, Americans embraced religious liberty as an indispensable adjunct of civil liberty. But in so doing they created a vast spiritual marketplace in which evangelical Protestants proved the sharpest competitors. Anti-Catholicism was never far beneath the surface in America, nor was Americans' belief that the United States was a Promised Land destined to usher in the Millennium. Moreover, England's geopolitical challenge to Spanish and French imperialism reached its acme in U.S. war and diplomacy. Americans claimed the right, indeed believed it their destiny, to rid the New World of European possessions and add as many as possible to their own empire of liberty. Finally, the English notion of a racial hierarchy justifying expulsion or enslavement of lesser breeds who got in the way of expansion characterized American behavior even more than it did that of the British. "White man's democracy," tolerant or else fiercely supportive of slavery and Indian removal, triumphed with Andrew Jackson in 1828. Americans also invented much that was new under the sun, even glorious, thanks to the influence of Reformed Christianity, English Whig thought, the Scottish Enlightenment, Freemasonry, and the power of their own founding myths. Rarely did Americans go into battle with conscience tying one hand behind them. Nevertheless, the roads they traveled from Jamestown and Plymouth to Jacksonian Democracy were surveyed, plotted, and paved in Tudor, Stuart, and Hanoverian Britain.

So, who are we, we Americans? We're a priesthood of all believers in a civil religion that combines, often uneasily, the universals preached by Christian evangelism and the universals posited by the Enlightenment—a civil religion that blesses all sects but stands above them in the manner of a grand Freemason lodge. We're master builders pledged to complete the unfinished pyramid under the All-Seeing Eye of Providence that appears on our Great Seal and one-dollar bill. We're revolutionaries devoted to creative destruction and even creative corruption so long as it hastens the arrival of a future we assume will be better than the present. We're a jealous people who

react ferociously against all who dare interfere with our pursuit of happiness. And we're a nation of hustlers and self-reinventors ready to do or believe whatever helps us worship both God and Mammon, and thus feel good about doing well.

How well have we done? Samuel Huntington once wrote that “America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it also a hope.”⁹ Jefferson embodied that hope when he called on Americans to realize their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Rev. John Wiswall did not. A graduate of Harvard and an Anglican pastor in Falmouth, Massachusetts, he was shocked to observe his neighbors split into hostile factions in 1775. The good parson tried to still their passions, but a mob damned him for a Tory and drove his family on board a British ship, whereupon his wife and daughter died from food poisoning. After the Declaration of Independence, Wiswall despaired and sailed, unwillingly, for England. Only God alone, he reflected, could still this “madness” because “the American people are altogether too free [ever] to be *content* with their happiness.”¹⁰



⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 262.

¹⁰ Robert McCluer Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760–1781* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), pp. 257–58. Aside from being a profound insight into “democracy and its discontents,” Wiswall’s focus on happiness is a fascinating anticipation of Jefferson.