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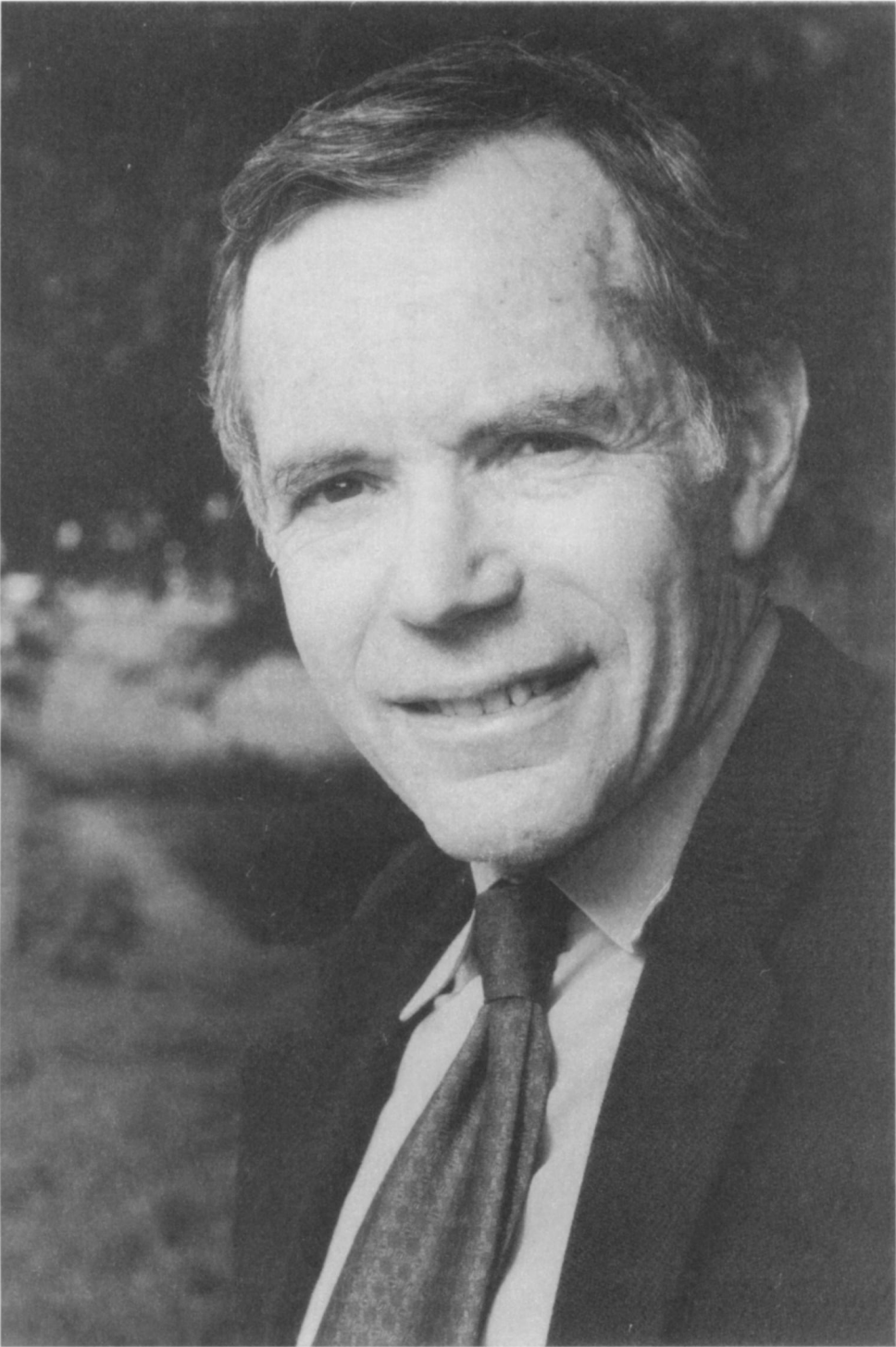
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Presidential Address
American Freedom in a Global Age

ERIC FONER

TO BE CHOSEN AS PRESIDENT OF THE American Historical Association is the highest honor that can come to a historian in the United States. I am extremely grateful to my colleagues for selecting me as the first AHA president of the twenty-first century—or, depending on how one measures the passage of time, the last of the twentieth.

In either case, I want to begin tonight by recalling briefly the last turn of the century. One hundred years ago, the United States had just emerged victorious in its “splendid little war” against Spain. It was actively engaged in the decidedly less splendid struggle to subdue the movement for independence in the Philippines. Both conflicts announced that the country was poised to take its place among the world’s great powers, and writers here and abroad confidently predicted that American influence would soon span the globe. The precise nature of that influence was a matter of some dispute. In his 1902 book *The New Empire*, Brooks Adams, whose brother Charles Francis Adams served as this association’s president exactly one century ago, saw America’s rise to world power as essentially economic. “As the United States becomes an imperial market,” he proclaimed, “she stretches out along the trade-routes which lead from foreign countries to her heart, as every empire has stretched out from the days of Sargon to our own.” Within fifty years, Adams predicted, “the United States will outweigh any single empire, if not all empires combined.”¹

The year 1902 also witnessed a prediction with a somewhat different emphasis, offered by W. T. Stead in a short volume with the arresting title, *The Americanisation of the World: or, The Trend of the Twentieth Century*. Stead was a sensationalist English editor whose previous writings included an exposé of London prostitution, *Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon*. He would later meet his death as a passenger on the *Titanic*. Convinced that the United States was emerging as “the greatest of world-powers,” Stead proposed that it and his homeland “merge” (by which he meant both political union and individual intermarriages), so that the enervated British could have their “exhausted exchequer” revived by an infusion of America’s

Thanks to Professor Thomas Bender of New York University for inviting me to participate in the 1999 La Pietra Conference on Internationalizing the Study of American History, where some of the ideas in this essay were first developed, and for his extremely helpful comments on the paper I delivered there. I also wish to thank my colleague, Victoria DeGrazia, for sharing with me some of her insights on the consequences of globalization.

¹ Brooks Adams, *The New Empire* (New York, 1902), 208.

“exuberant energies.” But what was most striking about Stead’s little essay was that he located the essential source of American power less in the realm of military or economic might than in the relentless international spread of American culture—art, music, journalism, theater, even ideas about religion and gender relations. He foresaw a future in which the United States would promote its values and interests through an unending involvement in the affairs of other nations.²

Today, we are in many ways living in the world Adams and Stead imagined (although Britain does retain its nominal independence). At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United States is indisputably the world’s preeminent military, economic, and cultural power. Moreover, the flow of people, investment, production, culture, and communications across national boundaries that impressed both Adams and Stead continues its rapid growth. We are constantly being reminded that the world we inhabit is becoming smaller and more integrated and that formerly autonomous nations are bound ever more tightly by a complex web of economic and cultural connections. Globalization, the popular shorthand term for these processes, has been called “*the* concept of the 1990s.” However, its novelty, extent, and consequences remain subjects of heated disagreement. Is globalization producing a homogenized and “Americanized” world, a unified global culture whose economic arrangements, social values, and political institutions are based primarily on those of the United States? Or is it transforming societies without making them identical, producing “multiple modernities” in which international images and commodities are incorporated locally in a continuing process of selection and reinterpretation?³

I do not plan tonight to try to answer these questions, which now engage the attention of some of our most prominent social scientists. But as a historian, I feel it necessary to point out that, like every other product of human activity, globalization itself has a history. The dream of global unity goes back to the days of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. The internationalization of commerce and culture and the reshuffling of the world’s peoples have been going on for centuries. Today’s globalized communications follow in the footsteps of clipper ships, the telegraph, and the telephone. Today’s international movements for social change—including protests against some of the adverse consequences of globalization—have their precedents in transnational labor and socialist movements, religious revivals, and struggles against slavery and for women’s rights. As for economic globalization, Karl Marx long ago pointed out that capitalism is an international system that “must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” This was why he and Friedrich Engels called on proletarians to unite as a global force. “All old-established national industries,” they wrote, “have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and

² W. T. Stead, *The Americanisation of the World: or, The Trend of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1902), 5, 59, 123.

³ David Reynolds, *One World Divisible: A Global History since 1945* (New York, 2000), 650–51; Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 1–4; David Held, *et al.*, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, Calif., 1999), 3–7; “Multiple Modernities,” special issue of *Daedalus* (Winter 2000).

self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.” These words were written in 1848.⁴

Nonetheless, the dimensions and speed of globalization have certainly accelerated in the last two decades. And by remaking our present, globalization invites us to rethink our past. All history, as the saying goes, is contemporary history. Today, our heightened awareness of globalization—however the term is delimited and defined—should challenge historians to become more cognizant of how past events are embedded in an international, even a global, context. Nearly fifty years ago, Geoffrey Barraclough wondered whether histories with a “myopic concentration on individual nations” could effectively illuminate “the world in which we live.”⁵ For American historians, this question is even more pertinent today.

The institutions, processes, and values that have shaped American history—from capitalism to political democracy, slavery, and consumer culture—arose out of global processes and can only be understood in an international context. This, of course, is hardly a new insight. Back in the 1930s, W. E. B. Du Bois insisted that it was impossible to understand the black experience in the United States without reference to “that dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa . . . that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry.” Herbert E. Bolton warned that by treating the American past in isolation, historians were helping to raise up a “nation of chauvinists.”⁶

At the time, these pleas more or less fell on deaf ears. But some of the best recent works of American history have developed complex understandings of the nation’s relationship to the larger world. The emerging “Atlantic” perspective on the colonial era offers the promise of seeing early American history not simply as an offshoot of Great Britain or prelude to the revolution but as part and parcel of the international expansion of European empires and the transatlantic migration of peoples. Bonnie Anderson’s history of the “first international women’s movement” traces the transatlantic exchange of ideas on issues ranging from suffrage to child rearing and divorce. *Barbarian Virtues*, by Matthew Jacobson, examines how a century ago Americans’ real and imagined encounters with foreign peoples—as potential consumers and laborers, and as exemplars of a “lower” state of civilization—helped shape a new sense of national identity. Daniel Rodgers’ *Atlantic Crossings* demonstrates that American Progressivism must be seen as part of an international discussion about “social politics.” Important writings in economic history stress how world markets have shaped our agriculture, port cities, and industrial towns. Most of these works focus on relationships between the United States and Europe. But the best recent work in Asian-American studies has begun to develop what might be called a Pacific perspective that moves beyond an older paradigm based on immigration and assimilation to examine how continuing

⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (New York, 1998), 39. See also Kevin H. O’Rourke and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *When Did Globalization Begin?* National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, 7633 (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

⁵ Geoffrey Barraclough, “The Larger View of History,” *Times Literary Supplement* (January 6, 1956): ii.

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York, 1935), 15; Herbert E. Bolton, *Wider Horizons of American History* (New York, 1939), 2.

transnational cultural and economic interactions shape the experience of minority groups within the United States. Yet in nearly all areas of American history, such works remain dwarfed by those that stop at the nation's borders.⁷

A little over a decade ago, my predecessor as AHA president Akira Iriye called for historians to “internationalize” the study of history by treating the entire world as their framework of study. This is a daunting challenge, probably impossible for most historians to accomplish. Of course, as Professor Iriye well knows, international paradigms—“the West,” “modernization,” “the Judeo-Christian tradition”—can be every bit as obfuscating as histories that are purely national. My point is somewhat different—that even histories organized along the lines of the nation-state must be, so to speak, deprovincialized, placed in the context of international interactions. Since the birth of the modern era, the nation has constituted the principal framework for historical study. It is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Internationalizing history does not mean abandoning or homogenizing national histories, dissolving the experience of the United States, or any other nation, in a sea of supranational processes. International dynamics operate in different ways in different countries. Every nation, to one extent or another, thinks of itself as exceptional—a conviction, of course, rather more prominent in the United States (and among its historians) than elsewhere. But globalization does force us to think about history in somewhat different ways.⁸

Historians are fully aware of how American military might, commodities, and culture have affected the rest of the world, especially in the twentieth century. We know how the United States has exported everything from Coca-Cola to ideas about democracy and “free enterprise.” Far less attention has been devoted to how our history has been affected from abroad. “Europe,” Frantz Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “is literally the creation of the Third World.”⁹ Fanon was referring not only to the wealth Europe gleaned from its colonial dependencies but to the fact that the encounters of different peoples—real encounters and those of the imagination—crystallize political ideologies and concepts of identity. They also, one might add, always seem to produce inequalities of power and of rights. Fanon’s insight needs to be extended to the United States. An understanding of America cannot be obtained purely from within America. To illustrate my point, I want to refer to the most central idea in American political culture, an idea that anchors the American sense of exceptional national identity—freedom.

⁷ J. H. Elliott, *Do the Americas Have a Common History? An Address* (Providence, R.I., 1998); Bonnie S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women’s Movement, 1830–1860* (New York, 2000); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York, 2000); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Oscar V. Campomanes, “New Formations of Asian American Studies and the Question of U. S. Imperialism,” *Positions* 5 (Fall 1997): 523–50.

⁸ Akira Iriye, “The Internationalization of History,” *AHR* 94 (February 1989): 1–10. See also Lawrence Veysey, “The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Fall 1979): 455–77; Ian Tyrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *AHR* 96 (October 1991): 1031–55; David Thelen, “Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History,” *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 432–62; Thomas Bender, *The La Pietra Report: The NYU-OAH Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000). Annual reports of this project and *The La Pietra Report* are available on the World Wide Web at www.oah.org.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Constance Farrington, trans. (New York, 1963), 81.

No idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political vocabulary, "freedom"—or "liberty," with which it is almost always used interchangeably—is deeply embedded in the record of our history and the language of everyday life. The Declaration of Independence lists liberty among mankind's inalienable rights; the Constitution announces as its purpose to secure liberty's blessings. Obviously, other peoples also cherish freedom, but the idea does seem to occupy a more prominent place in public and private discourse in the United States than elsewhere. The ubiquitous American expression, "It's a free country," invoked by disobedient children and assertive adults to explain or justify their actions, is not, I believe, familiar in other societies. "Every man in the street, white, black, red or yellow," wrote the educator and statesman Ralph Bunche in 1940, "knows that this is 'the land of the free' . . . 'the cradle of liberty.'"¹⁰

In *The Story of American Freedom*, published in 1998, I examined the history of the idea of freedom in the United States, viewing it as a tale of debates, disagreements, and struggles rather than a fixed category or predetermined concept.¹¹ While not entirely neglecting the international dimensions of American history, I emphasized how the changing meaning of freedom has been shaped and reshaped by social and political struggles within the United States—battles, for example, over the abolition of slavery, women's rights, labor organization, and freedom of speech for those outside the social mainstream. Yet America's relationship, real and imagined, with the rest of the world has also powerfully influenced the idea of freedom and its evolution. As with other central elements of our political language—independence, equality, and citizenship, for example—freedom has been defined and redefined with reference to its putative opposite. The most striking example, of course, is slavery, a stark, homegrown illustration of the nature of unfreedom that helped define Americans' language of liberty in the colonial era and well into the nineteenth century. In the early labor movement's crusade against "wage slavery" and denunciations of "the slavery of sex" by advocates of women's rights, the condition of African Americans powerfully affected how free Americans understood their own situation.

While Americans have frequently identified threats to freedom at home, including slavery, luxury, and a too-powerful federal government, they have also looked abroad to locate dangers to freedom. The American Revolution was inspired, in part, by the conviction that Great Britain was conspiring to eradicate freedom in North America. In the twentieth century, world affairs have frequently been understood as titanic struggles between a "free world," centered in the United States, and its enemies—Nazis during World War II, communists during the Cold War, and, most recently, "terrorists," drug cartels, or Islamic fundamentalists.

Of course, the relationship between American freedom and the outside world works both ways. "America," as myth and reality, has for centuries played a part in how other peoples think about their own societies. The United States has frequently been viewed from abroad as the embodiment of one or another kind of freedom.

¹⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), 4.

¹¹ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1998).

European labor, in the nineteenth century, identified this country as a land where working men and women enjoyed freedoms not available in the Old World. In the twentieth, younger generations throughout the world selectively appropriated artifacts of American popular culture for acts of cultural rebellion. Some foreign observers, to be sure, have taken a rather jaundiced view of Americans' stress on their own liberty. The "tyranny of the majority," Alexis de Tocqueville commented, ruled the United States: "I know of no country, in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America." A century and a half later, another French writer, Jean Baudrillard, concluded his own tour of the United States with the observation that if New York and Los Angeles now stood "at the center of the world," it is a world defined not so much by freedom but by "wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence."¹²

My interest tonight, however, is not images of America emanating from abroad, or the global impact of the United States, but how global embeddedness has affected American history itself. At key moments in our history, America's relationship to the outside world has helped establish how freedom is understood within the United States. To a considerable degree, the self-definition of the United States as a nation-state with a special mission to bring freedom to all mankind depends on the "otherness" of the outside world, often expressed in the Manichean categories of New World versus Old or free world versus slave.

The idea of America as an embodiment of freedom in a world overrun by tyranny goes back to well before the American Revolution. Ironically, however, this ideology must be understood not simply with reference to the unique conditions of North American settlement—available land, weak government, etc.—but as a conscious creation of European policymakers. From the earliest days of settlement, migrants from Britain and the Continent held the promise of the New World to be liberation from the social inequalities and widespread economic dependence of the Old. Many others saw America as a divinely appointed locale where mankind could, for the first time, be truly free in the sense of worshipping God in a manner impossible in Europe. But these ideas can only be understood in the context of the clash of empires that produced American settlement in the first place, and engaged the colonists in a seemingly endless series of wars involving the rival French, Spanish, and Dutch empires. British monarchs did as much as colonists themselves to create the idea of America as an asylum for "those whom bigots chase from foreign lands" by actively encouraging continental emigration to the New World in order to strengthen their colonies without depleting the population of the British Isles. As Marilyn C. Baseler writes, colonial liberty of conscience "was largely a byproduct of English policies and did not necessarily reflect a strong commitment by America's early settlers to the principles of religious freedom."¹³

¹² Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: European and American Mass Culture* (Urbana, Ill., 1996); David M. Potter, *Freedom and Its Limitations in American Life*, Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed. (Stanford, Calif., 1976), 2–3; Jean Baudrillard, *America*, Chris Turner, trans. (New York, 1988), 23.

¹³ Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993); Marilyn C. Baseler, "Asylum for Mankind": *America, 1607–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 4, 56.

The growth of the three most dynamic empires of the eighteenth century—the British, French, and Dutch—depended on the debasement of millions of people into slavery and the dispossession of millions of native inhabitants of the Americas. The yoking of freedom and domination was a global phenomenon, intrinsic to the imperial expansion of Europe, England’s mainland colonies not excepted. Nonetheless, all three empires developed discourses claiming a special relationship to freedom (partly in contrast to the Spanish, who were seen as representing tyranny at home and a peculiarly inhumane form of imperialism overseas). From an international perspective, claims by Britain and its colonies to a unique relationship with liberty ring somewhat hollow. The Dutch actually had more justification in claiming to represent the principle of religious toleration, while France respected the principle of “free air”—which liberated any slave setting foot on metropolitan soil—well before Great Britain. Nonetheless, the idea that the Anglo-American world enjoyed a unique measure of freedom was widely disseminated in the colonies. Belief in freedom as the common heritage of all Britons was, Jack P. Greene writes, the “single most important element in defining a larger Imperial identity for Britain and the British Empire.” It served to cast imperial wars against Catholic France and Spain as struggles between liberty and tyranny, a language in which to this day virtually every American war has been described.¹⁴

The coming of independence rendered the rights of “freeborn Englishmen” irrelevant in America. But the revolution did more than substitute one parochial ideology of freedom for another. The struggle for independence universalized the idea of American freedom. Even before 1776, patriotic orators and pamphleteers were identifying America as a special place with a special mission, “a land of liberty, the seat of virtue, the asylum of the oppressed, a name and a praise in the whole earth,” to quote Joseph Warren. This vision required a somewhat exaggerated negative image of the rest of the world. Outside British North America, proclaimed Samuel Williams in *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1775), mankind was sunk in debauchery and despotism. In Asia and Africa, “the very idea of liberty” was “unknown.” Even in Europe, Williams claimed, the “vital flame” of “freedom” was being extinguished. Here, and here alone, was “the country of free men.”¹⁵

This sense of American uniqueness was pervasive in the revolutionary era, as was the view of the revolution as not simply an internal squabble within the British Empire but the opening of a new era in human history. The point was not necessarily to spark liberation movements in other countries but to highlight the alleged differences between the United States and the rest of mankind. One pamphleteer of 1776, Ebenezer Baldwin, predicted that even in the year 2000 America would remain the world’s sole center of freedom. But while affirming their uniqueness, Americans from the outset were obsessed with the repute in which they

¹⁴ Jan Lucassen, “The Netherlands, the Dutch, and Long-Distance Migration in the Late Sixteenth to Early Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Europeans on the Move: Studies on European Migration 1500–1800*, Nicholas Canny, ed. (Oxford, 1994), 153; Sue Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France*”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York, 1996), 3–5; Jack P. Greene, “Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Wm. Roger Louis, editor-in-chief, 5 vols. (New York, 1998–99), 2: 208; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 35, 53–55, 212.

¹⁵ Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 119, 138–40; Theodore Draper, *A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution* (New York, 1996), 414.

were held abroad. George Washington defended the suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion, in part, because of “the impression it will make on *others*”—the others being European skeptics who wished to see the world-historical experiment fail because they did not believe human beings could “govern ourselves.” Over half a century later, Abraham Lincoln would contend that slavery weakened the American mission by exposing the country to the charge of hypocrisy from the “enemies of free institutions” abroad.¹⁶

In his *History of the American Revolution* (1789), David Ramsay, the father of American historical writing, insisted that what defined the new nation was not the usual basis of nationality—a set of boundaries, a long-established polity, or a common “race” or ethnicity—but a special destiny “to enlarge the happiness of mankind.” This narrative was elaborated by nineteenth-century historians such as Walter H. Prescott, Francis Parkman, and George Bancroft. In their account, the seeds of liberty, planted in Puritan New England, had reached their inevitable flowering in the American Revolution and westward expansion. These writers were fully aware of the global dimension of American history, but their conviction that the United States represented a unique embodiment of the idea of freedom inevitably fostered a certain insularity. Since territorial growth meant “extending the area of freedom,” those who stood in the way—European powers with legal title to part of the North American continent, Native Americans, Mexicans—were by definition obstacles to the progress of liberty. In the outlook of most white Americans, the West was not a battleground of peoples and governments but an “empty” space ready to be occupied as part of the divine mission of the United States.¹⁷

American expansion, which involved constant encounters with non-white people (or people like the Mexicans defined as non-white), greatly enhanced what might be called the exclusionary dimensions of American freedom. The nation’s rapid territorial growth was widely viewed as evidence of the innate superiority of a mythical construct known as the “Anglo-Saxon race,” whose special qualities made it uniquely suited to bring freedom and prosperity to the continent and the world. America may have been an empire but, in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase, it was an “empire of liberty,” supposedly distinct from the oppressive empires of Europe.¹⁸

Of course, the contradiction between the rhetoric of universal liberty and the actual limits of freedom within the United States goes back to the era of colonization. The slavery controversy was primarily a matter internal to the United States. But as an institution that existed throughout the Western hemisphere, and whose abolition was increasingly demanded by a movement transcending national

¹⁶ John C. Rainbolt, “Americans’ Initial View of Their Revolution’s Significance for Other Peoples, 1776–1788,” *The Historian* 35 (May 1973): 421–22; John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1931–44), 34: 98; Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953–55), 2: 255.

¹⁷ Arthur H. Shaffer, *To Be an American: David Ramsay and the Making of the American Consciousness* (Columbia, S.C., 1991), 107–12; Dorothy Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty,” *AHR* 100 (June 1995): 651–52; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 97–112.

¹⁸ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 1–4; Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1990).

boundaries, slavery's impact on American freedom had an international dimension as well. Slavery did much to determine how a nation born in revolution reacted to revolutions abroad. American culture in the antebellum period glorified the revolutionary heritage. But acceptable revolutions were by white men—like the Greeks or Hungarians—seeking their freedom from tyrannical government, not slaves rebelling against their own lack of liberty. Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner were not part of the pantheon of national heroes, nor was Toussaint L'Ouverture greeted with the same enthusiasm as Louis Kossuth. Indeed, unlike the French, whose revolution certainly had its share of violence, the carnage in Saint-Domingue was taken to demonstrate that blacks lacked the capacity for self-government—in a word, they were congenitally unfit for the enjoyment of freedom.¹⁹

As the nineteenth century wore on, the centrality of slavery to American life exposed the nation to the charge of willful hypocrisy, and from no quarter was the charge more severe than from blacks themselves. Black abolitionists were among the most penetrating critics of the hollowness of official pronouncements about American freedom. In calling for a redefinition of freedom as an entitlement of all mankind, not one from which certain groups defined as “races” could legitimately be excluded, black abolitionists repudiated the rhetorical division of the world into the United States, a beacon of freedom, and the Old World, a haven of oppression. “I am ashamed,” declared black abolitionist William Wells Brown, “when I hear men talking about . . . the despotism of Napoleon III . . . Before you boast of your freedom and Christianity, do your duty to your fellow man.”²⁰

Most strikingly, abolitionists, black and white alike, reversed the familiar dichotomy between American freedom and British tyranny. Once slavery had been abolished in the British Empire, the former mother country represented freedom more genuinely than the United States. August 1, the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies, became the black Fourth of July, the occasion of annual “freedom celebrations” that pointedly drew attention to the distinction between the “monarchical liberty” of a nation that had abolished slavery and “republican slavery” in the United States. With the passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Act, several thousand black Americans fled to Canada, fearing reenslavement in the United States. Which country was now the asylum of the oppressed?²¹

As Linda Colley has argued, the abolition of slavery in 1833 enabled Britons to regain the earlier sense of their own nation as a paradigm of freedom. Emancipation demonstrated Britain's superior national virtue compared to the United States, and gave it, despite the sordid realities of British imperialism, an irrefutable claim to moral integrity. A similar process occurred in the United States. After decades of the slavery controversy, which had somewhat tarnished the sense of a special American mission to preserve and promote liberty, the Civil War and Emancipation

¹⁹ Donald R. Hickey, “America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti, 1791–1806,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (Winter 1982): 368–73; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 412–14.

²⁰ C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985–92), 4: 248–49.

²¹ John R. McKivigan and Jason H. Silverman, “Monarchical Liberty and Republican Slavery: West Indian Emancipation Celebrations in Upstate New York and Canada West,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 10 (January 1986): 10–12; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 235.

reinforced the identification of the United States with the progress of freedom, linking this mission as never before with the power of the national state. By the 1880s, James Bryce was struck by the strength not only of Americans' commitment to freedom but by their conviction that they were the "only people" truly to enjoy it.²²

If, in the nineteenth century, America's encounter with the world beyond the Western hemisphere had been more ideological, as it were, than material, the twentieth saw the country emerge as a continuous and powerful actor on a global stage. At key moments of worldwide involvement, the encounter with a foreign "other" subtly affected the meaning of freedom in the United States. One such episode was the struggle against Nazi Germany, which not only highlighted concern with aspects of American freedom that had previously been neglected but fundamentally transformed perceptions of who was entitled to enjoy the blessings of liberty in the United States. It also gave birth to a powerful rhetoric, the division of the planet into a "free world" and an unfree world that would long outlive the defeat of Adolf Hitler.

Even before the United States entered World War II, the gathering confrontation with Nazism helped to promote a broadened awareness of civil liberties as a central element of American freedom. Today, when asked to define their rights as citizens, Americans instinctively turn to the privileges enumerated in the Bill of Rights—freedom of speech, the press, and religion, for example. But for many decades, the social and legal defenses of free expression were extremely fragile in the United States. A broad rhetorical commitment to this ideal coexisted with stringent restrictions on speech deemed radical or obscene. It was only in 1939 that the Department of Justice established its Civil Liberties Unit, for the first time in American history, according to Attorney General Frank Murphy, placing "the full weight of the department . . . behind the effort to preserve in this country the blessings of liberty."²³

There were many causes for this development, from a revulsion against the severe repression of the World War I era to a new awareness in the 1930s of restraints on free speech by opponents of labor organizing. But what Michael Kammen calls the "discovery" of the Bill of Rights on the eve of the American entry into World War II owed much to the ideological struggle against Nazism and the invocation of freedom as a shorthand way of describing the myriad differences between American and German society and politics. Once the country entered World War II, the Nazi counterexample was frequently cited by defenders of civil liberties in the United States. Freedom of speech took its place as one of the "four essential human freedoms," President Franklin D. Roosevelt's description of Allied war aims. Not only did the Four Freedoms embody the "crucial difference" between the Allies and their enemies, but, in the future, Roosevelt promised, they would be enjoyed

²² Colley, *Britons*, 351–59; James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols. (London, 1889), 2: 635.

²³ Jerold S. Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal* (Indianapolis, 1966), 210–13; Michael J. Klarman, "Rethinking the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Revolutions," *Virginia Law Review* 82 (February 1996): 43.

“everywhere in the world,” an updating of the centuries-old vision of America instructing the rest of mankind in the enjoyment of liberty.²⁴

Talk of freedom permeated wartime America—in advertisements, films, publications of the Office of War Information, and in Roosevelt’s own rhetoric. Over and over, Roosevelt described the war as a titanic battle between “freedom” and “slavery.” The Free World, a term popularized in 1940–1941 by those pressing for American intervention in the European conflict, assumed a central role in wartime rhetoric. It was in a speech to the Free World Association in 1942 that Vice-President Henry Wallace outlined his vision of a global New Deal emerging from the war, in which the nation’s involvement in the postwar world would universalize the Four Freedoms and ensure the promise of the American Revolution. Wallace was, in part, responding to Henry Luce’s more chauvinistic call for the United States to assume the role of “dominant power in the world.” But whatever their differences in outlook, both Wallace and Luce envisioned the United States as henceforth promoting freedom not merely by example or occasional international intervention but via an unending involvement in the affairs of other nations. Indeed, at the war’s end, globalist language and imagery pervaded the mass media, and the idea of America having inherited a global responsibility evoked remarkably little dissent.²⁵

If World War II presaged a transformation, in the name of freedom, of the country’s traditional relationship with the rest of the world, it also reshaped Americans’ understanding of the internal boundaries of freedom. The struggle against Nazi tyranny and its theory of a master race discredited ideas of inborn ethnic and racial inequality and gave a new impetus to the long-denied struggle for racial justice at home. A pluralist definition of American society, in which all citizens enjoyed equally the benefits of freedom, had been pioneered in the 1930s by leftists and liberals associated with the Popular Front. It became the government’s official stance during the Second World War. What set the United States apart from its wartime foes was not simply dedication to the ideals of the Four Freedoms but the resolve that these should extend to persons of all races, religions, and national origins. It was during the war that a shared American Creed of freedom, equality, and ethnic and religious “brotherhood” came to be seen as the foundation of national unity. Racism was the enemy’s philosophy; intolerance was a foreign import, not a homegrown product.²⁶

Reading American pluralism backward into history, postwar scholars defined the

²⁴ Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York, 1987), 336; Samuel I. Rosenman, comp., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 13 vols. (New York, 1938–50), 9: 672.

²⁵ Charles D. Lloyd, “American Society and Values in World War II from the Publications of the Office of War Information” (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 1975), 32–33; Rosenman, *Public Papers*, 10: 181, 192; 11: 287–88; 13: 32; Mark L. Chadwin, *The Hawks of World War II* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 69–70, 275; Henry A. Wallace, *The Century of the Common Man*, Russell Lord, ed. (New York, 1941), 14–19; Henry R. Luce, *The American Century* (New York, 1941), 22–27, 31–33, 37–39; John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 73–87.

²⁶ Wendy Wall, “‘Our Enemies Within’: Nazism, National Unity, and America’s Wartime Discourse on Tolerance,” in *Enemy Images in American History*, Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase and Ursula Lehmkuhl, eds. (Providence, R.I., 1997), 210–23; Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, Md., 1992), 190–96; Lloyd, “American Society and Values,” 56.

United States as a nation with a purely civic identity, as opposed to the “ethnic” nationalism of other countries. The American Creed became a timeless definition of America nationality, ignoring the powerful ethnic and racial strains in the actual history of our national consciousness. At the same time, however, the rise of anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia inspired the rapid growth of what would later be called a “diasporic” consciousness among black Americans, which highlighted the deeply rooted racial inequalities in the United States and insisted they could only be understood through the prism of imperialism’s long global history. Like many other products of the war years, this vision of racial inequality in the United States as part of a global system rather than a maladjustment between American ideals and behavior did not long survive the advent of the Cold War.²⁷

Rhetorically, the Cold War was in many ways a continuation of the battles of World War II. The discourse of a world sharply divided into opposing camps, one representing freedom and the other slavery, was reinvigorated in the worldwide struggle against communism. Once again, the United States was the leader of a global crusade for freedom against a demonic, ideologically driven antagonist. The Cold War was a crucible in which postwar liberalism was reformulated. A revulsion against both Nazism and communism abroad, reinforced by the excesses of McCarthyism at home, propelled liberal thinkers toward a wholesale repudiation of ideological mass politics. In its place emerged a pragmatic, managerial liberalism meant to protect democratic institutions against excesses of the popular will.

The debate over communism helps explain the widespread impact, at least among liberal intellectuals, of Sir Isaiah Berlin’s 1958 essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Berlin distinguished sharply between “negative liberty”—the absence of external obstacles to the fulfillment of one’s desires—and “positive liberty,” which led to the subordination of the individual to the whole by identifying the state as the arbiter of the social good. Negative liberty represented the West, with its constitutional safeguards of individual rights, positive liberty the Soviet Union. Of course, the idea of freedom as the absence of restraint had deep roots in American history, but Berlin himself was alarmed by how readily his formulation was invoked not only against communism but to discredit the welfare state and anything that smacked of economic regulation. The absorption of his essay into the mainstream of liberal thought had the effect of marginalizing a different understanding of “positive” freedom as active citizen engagement in democratic politics advanced around the same time by Hannah Arendt.²⁸

With the USSR replacing Germany as freedom’s antithesis, the vaguely socialistic freedom from want—central to the Four Freedoms of World War II—slipped into the background or took on a very different meaning. Whatever Moscow stood for was by definition the opposite of freedom—and not merely one-party rule, suppression of free expression and the like, but public housing, universal health insurance, full employment, and other claims that required strong and persistent

²⁷ Hans Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Princeton, N.J., 1955), 19–20; Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black America and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), 3.

²⁸ Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York, 1985); Robert Booth Fowler, *Believing Skeptics: American Political Intellectuals, 1945–1964* (Westport, Conn., 1978); Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York, 1969), xliii–xlix, 118–72; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), 22–26, 119–21.

governmental intervention in the economy. If freedom had an economic definition, it was no longer economic autonomy, as in the nineteenth century, “industrial democracy” (a rallying cry of the Progressive era), or economic security for the average citizen guaranteed by government, as Roosevelt had defined it, but “free enterprise” and consumer autonomy—the ability to choose from the cornucopia of goods produced by the modern American economy. A common material culture of abundance would provide the foundation for global integration—eventually including even the communist world—under American leadership. The Cold War helped secure the glorification of “free enterprise” as the most fundamental form of American freedom, an idea promoted by ubiquitous political rhetoric, advertising campaigns, school programs, and newspaper editorials. Since the Free World contained so many despotic governments (even South Africa was a member in good standing), official definitions of that geopolitical construct tended to feature anticommunism and market economics more than political liberty.²⁹

Although in the late 1960s and 1970s, with the collapse of the postwar ideological consensus and a series of economic and political crises, the Cold War rhetoric of freedom eased considerably, it was reinvigorated by Ronald Reagan. The “Great Communicator” effectively united into a coherent whole the elements of Cold War freedom—negative liberty (that is, limited government), free enterprise, and anticommunism—all in the service of a renewed insistence on American’s global mission. Consciously employing rhetoric that echoed back at least two centuries, Reagan proclaimed that “by some divine plan . . . a special kind of people—people who had a special love for freedom” had been chosen to settle the North American continent. This exceptional history imposed on the nation an exceptional responsibility: “we are the beacon of liberty and freedom to all the world.”³⁰

Today, at least in terms of political policy and discourse, Americans still live in the shadow of the Reagan revolution. “Freedom” continues to occupy as central a place as ever in our political vocabulary, but it has been largely appropriated by libertarians and conservatives of one kind or another, from advocates of unimpeded market economics to armed militia groups insisting that the right to bear arms is the centerpiece of American liberty. The dominant constellation of definitions seems to consist of a series of negations—of government, of social responsibility, of a common public culture, of restraints on individual self-definition and consumer choice. Once the rallying cry of the dispossessed, freedom is today commonly invoked by powerful economic institutions to justify many forms of authority, even as on the individual level it often seems to suggest the absence of outside authority altogether.³¹

As we enter the twenty-first century, the process of globalization itself seems to

²⁹ Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism 1945–60* (Urbana, Ill., 1994), 1–3, 44–51; Herbert McClosky and John Zaller, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward Capitalism and Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 133; *The Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington, D.C., 1963), 169; David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They’re on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–1965* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999).

³⁰ *The Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1985* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 70; David E. Procter, *Enacting Political Culture: Rhetorical Transformations of Liberty Weekend, 1986* (New York, 1991), 61–65; *The Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1986* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 1505.

³¹ Foner, *Story of American Freedom*, 330–32.

be reinforcing this prevailing understanding of freedom, at least among political leaders of both major parties and journalistic cheerleaders who equate globalization with the worldwide ascendancy of American commodities, institutions, and values. A series of presidential administrations, aided and abetted by most of the mass media, have redefined both American freedom and America's historic mission to promote it for all mankind to mean the creation of a single global free market, in which capital, natural resources, and human labor are nothing more than factors of production in an endless quest for greater productivity and profit. Meanwhile, activities with broader social aims, many of them previously understood as expressions of freedom, are criticized as burdens on international competitiveness. The prevailing ideology of the global free market assumes that the economic life of all countries can and should be refashioned in the image of the United States—the latest version of the nation's self-definition as model of freedom for the entire world. "In so many ways," writes Thomas Friedman, "globalization is us." "Us" to Friedman means the "spread of free-market capitalism to every country in the world" and the Americanization of global culture. Of course, what Friedman fails to take into account is that "us" is itself a complex and contested concept. There has always been more than one definition of America and of American freedom, and today there is more than one American vision of what globalization should be.³²

For what one student of the subject calls "hyperglobalizers," globalization defines a new epoch in human history, in which a "global civilization" will supersede traditional cultures.³³ Having become irrelevant, the nation-state will wither away or at least surrender its economic functions. At the moment, however, rather than homogenizing the world, globalization seems to be creating all sorts of new cultural and political fissures and exacerbating old ones. The proliferation of social movements and sometimes violent conflicts based on ethnicity, religion, and local and regional cultures suggests that the arrival of a single global culture or consciousness is not yet at hand. But these developments do seem directly related to a decline in the traditional functions of the nation-state.

Politically speaking, the world is likely to remain divided into territorial states for many years to come. Nonetheless, globalization is raising profound questions about governance and accountability in the global economy and throwing into question traditional ideas about the relationship between political sovereignty, national identity, and freedom. Today, the assets of some multinational corporations exceed the gross national products of the majority of the world's nations. Decisions that affect the day-to-day lives of millions of people are daily made by institutions—the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and transnational corporations—that operate without a semblance of democratic accountability. By expanding "individual choice" and weakening the powers of governments, declares a recent account, globalization enhances freedom.³⁴ This definition, however, excludes from consid-

³² John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (New York, 1998), 216–17; Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York, 1999), 309. For an alternative vision of globalization, emphasizing international social movements rather than market hegemony, see Jeremy Brecher, et al., *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

³³ Held, *Global Transformations*, 3–4.

³⁴ Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York, 1996); John

eration such elements of freedom, also deeply rooted in the American experience, as self-government, economic autonomy, and social justice.

The relationship between globalization and freedom may be the most pressing political and social problem of the twenty-first century. Historically, rights have been derived from membership in a nation-state, and freedom often depends on the existence of political power to enforce it. "Without authorities, no rights exist." Perhaps, in the future, freedom will accompany human beings wherever they go, and a worldwide regime of "human rights" that know no national boundaries will come into existence, complete with supranational institutions capable of enforcing these rights and international social movements bent on expanding freedom's boundaries. Thus far, however, economic globalization has occurred without a parallel internationalization of controlling democratic institutions.³⁵

Like any other process rooted in history, globalization produces losers as well as winners. It creates and distributes wealth more rapidly than in the past, while simultaneously increasing inequality both within societies and in the world at large. The question for the twenty-first century is not whether globalization will continue, but globalization by whom, for whom, and under whose control. The fate of freedom is centrally involved in this question. It should not surprise us if the losers—those marginalized by globalization—adopt definitions of freedom rather different from those of the winners. It is not inevitable that globalization must take a single, neo-liberal form or that economic openness requires a state's retreat from the social protection of its citizens.³⁶

At the height of the Cold War, in his brilliant and sardonic survey of American political thought, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz observed that the internationalism of the postwar era seemed in some ways to go hand-in-hand with self-absorption and insularity. Despite its deepened worldwide involvement, the United States was becoming more isolated intellectually from other cultures. Prevailing ideas of freedom in the United States, Hartz noted, had become so rigid and narrow that Americans could no longer appreciate definitions of freedom, common in other countries, related to social justice and economic equality, "and hence are baffled by their use."³⁷

Today, Hartz's call for Americans to listen to the rest of the world, not simply lecture it about what liberty is, seems more relevant than ever. This may be difficult for a nation that has always considered itself a city upon a hill, a beacon to mankind. Yet American independence was proclaimed by those anxious to demonstrate "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind." In the global world of the twenty-first century, it is not the role of historians to instruct our fellow citizens on how they

Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *A Future Perfect: The Challenge and Hidden Promise of Globalization* (London, 2000), 336–37.

³⁵ Charles Tilly, "Globalization Threatens Labor's Rights," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 47 (Spring 1995): 4; Smith, *Nations and Nationalism*, 89, 97–98; Eric Hobsbawm, *On the Edge of the New Century* (New York, 2000), 31, 43; Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *AHR* 100 (October 1995): 1052–57.

³⁶ See Jonathan Michie and John Grieve Smith, eds., *Global Instability: The Political Economy of World Economic Governance* (London, 1999).

³⁷ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), 306.

should think about freedom. But it is our task to insist that the discussion of freedom must transcend boundaries rather than reinforcing or reproducing them. In a global age, the forever unfinished story of American freedom must become a conversation with the entire world, not a complacent monologue with ourselves.

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