



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



America: Experiment or Destiny?

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Source: *The American Historical Review*, Jun., 1977, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jun., 1977), pp. 505-522

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association

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America: Experiment or Destiny?

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.

NEARLY TWO CENTURIES AFTER MICHEL DE CREVECOEUR propounded his notorious question, an American Indian writing in the bicentennial year on the subject "The North Americans" for a magazine directed to American blacks concluded: "No one really knows at the present time what America really is."¹ Surely few observers were more entitled to wonder at the continuing mystery than those who like Vine Deloria, Jr., could accurately claim the designation "Native American." Surely no audience had more right to share the bafflement than one made up of descendants of slaves.

I hardly suppose that our discussions here—dominated as they are by white male historians—will have much greater success in resolving Crevecoeur's perplexity. Indeed, should the American Historical Association decide to discuss the meaning of the American experience again in 2076, we may confidently predict that our tercentennial successors, even if better distributed in sex and color, will be equally impotent before the problem. All any of us can do is describe a figure in the carpet—realizing as we do that contemporary preoccupations define our own definitions. That is all right, so long as we recognize what we are doing. "The one duty we owe to history," Oscar Wilde said with the utmost reasonableness, "is to rewrite it."² Our *AHR* series, like the *AHA* series from which it is drawn, will, I fear, reveal less about the principles of the appointed subject than about the predilections of the appointed participants. But then this is more or less true of all historical writing.

MY EFFORT HERE WILL BE TO SUGGEST TWO THEMES that seem to me to have subsisted in subtle counterpoint since the time when English-speaking white men first began the invasion of America.³ Both themes had their origins in the Calvinist ethos. Both were subsequently reinforced by secular infusions of one sort or another. Both have dwelt within the American mind and struggled for

¹ Vine Deloria, Jr., "The North Americans," reprinted from *Crisis in the Congressional Record*, 94th Cong., 2d Sess. (1976), E2494-95.

² "The Critic as Artist," in Richard Ellman, ed., *The Artist as Critic: The Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1969), 359.

³ I borrow the phrase, of course, from Francis Jennings's recent and admirable exercise in redressing American history, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, 1975).

its possession through the course of our history. Their competition will doubtless continue for the rest of the life of the nation. This paper aims to present these rival themes—by necessity, in broad strokes and excessive oversimplifications—and to propose some points about the relationship between the divergent outlooks and the health of the republic.

I will call one theme the tradition and the other the counter-tradition, thereby betraying at once my own bias. Other historians might reverse the terms. I would not quarrel too much about that. Let them betray their own biases. In any event, the tradition, as I prefer to style it, sprang initially from historic Christianity as mediated by Augustine and Calvin. The Calvinist ethos, as we all know, was suffused with convictions of the depravity of man, of the awful precariousness of human existence, of the vanity of mortals under the judgment of a pitiless and wrathful deity. Harriet Beecher Stowe recalled the atmosphere in *Oldtown Folks*: “The underlying foundation of life . . . in New England, was one of profound, unutterable, and therefore unuttered melancholy, which regarded human existence itself as a ghastly risk, and, in the case of the vast majority of human beings, an inconceivable misfortune.”⁴ “Natural men,” cried Jonathan Edwards, “are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell. . . . The devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out. . . . You have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air.”⁵ The language rings melodramatically in twentieth-century ears; but perhaps we moderns can more easily accept it as a metaphorical rendering of what those for whom God is dead prefer to call the existential crisis.

So terrible a sense of the nakedness of the human condition turned all of life into an unending and implacable process of testing. “We must look upon our selves,” said William Stoughton, the chief justice of the court that condemned the Salem witches, “as under a *solemn divine Probation*; it hath been and it is a Probation-time, even to this whole people. . . . This hath been and is a time and season of eminent trial to us.”⁶ So had it been at all times for all people. Most had failed the test. Were the American colonists immune to the universal law? In this aspect, the Calvinist notion of “providential history” argued against American exceptionalism. In the Puritan cosmos, Perry Miller has written, “God is not a being of whims and caprices, He is not less powerful at one moment than another; therefore in a certain sense any event is just as significant as any other.”⁷ This facet of the Calvinist outlook came close to the view of the Lutheran Ranke in the nineteenth century that “every epoch is directly before God.”⁸

⁴ (Boston, 1869) 368.

⁵ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

⁶ “New England’s True Interest,” in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans* (1938; reprint ed., New York, 1963), 1: 244.

⁷ Miller and Johnson, *Puritans*, 1: 82–83.

⁸ Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism* (London, 1972), 505.

The idea of “providential history”⁹ supposed that all secular communities were finite and problematic; all flourished and all decayed; all had a beginning and an end. For Christians this idea had its *locus classicus* in Augustine’s great attempt to solve the problem of the decline and fall of Rome—the problem that more than any other transfixed the serious historical minds of the West for precisely thirteen hundred and fifty years after the appearance of *The City of God*. This obsession with the classical catastrophe provided a link between the sacred and the profane in the American colonies—between seventeenth-century Americans who read the Christian fathers and eighteenth-century Americans who read Polybius, Plutarch, Cicero, Sallust, Tacitus. By the time the revolutionaries came to Philadelphia in 1776, the flames of Calvinism were already burning low. Hell was dwindling into an epithet. Original sin, not yet abandoned, was like everything else, secularized. Still, for the fathers of the republic as for the fathers of the Church, the history of Rome, in the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, remained the “textbook to which to turn for instruction about the course of human affairs, the development of freedom and the fate of despotism.”¹⁰

From different premises, Calvinists and classicists reached the same conclusion about the fragility of human striving. Antiquity haunted the Federal imagination. Robert Frost’s poem about “the glory of a next Augustan age. . . . A golden age of poetry and power” would have been more widely understood at George Washington’s inauguration than at John Kennedy’s. The Founding Fathers had embarked on a singular adventure—the adventure of a *republic*. For landmarks on a perilous voyage they peered across the gulf of centuries to Greece and especially to Rome, seeking the first and noblest expression of free men aspiring to govern themselves. “The Roman republic,” Alexander Hamilton wrote in the *Federalist*, “attained to the utmost height of human greatness.”¹¹ In this conviction the first generation of the American republic designed its buildings, wrote its epics, called the upper chamber of its legislature the Senate, signed its greatest political treatise “Publius,” sculpted its heroes in togas, baptized new communities, organized the Society of the Cincinnati, and instructed the young. “One is hagridden,” complained Edmund Trowbridge Dana in 1805, “. . . with nothing but the classicks, the classicks, the classicks!” (As a consequence of this heretical attitude, Dana failed to graduate from Harvard, receiving posthumously eighty years after an AB degree as of the class of 1799.¹²)

There was plausibility in the parallel. Alfred North Whitehead later recalled only two occasions in history “when the people in power did what needed to be done about as well as you can imagine its being possible”—the

⁹ See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, 1975), 41.

¹⁰ “The Lessons of History,” paper delivered at a conference on “The Nature of a Humane Society” sponsored by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Lutheran Church in America, October 29, 1976, 1.

¹¹ Number 34.

¹² Dana’s article, “The Winter of Criticism,” appeared in the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, 12 (October 1805), in Lewis P. Simpson, ed., *The Federalist Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge, 1962), 209, 230.

age of Augustus and the framing of the American Constitution.¹³ There was also warning. For the grandeur that was Rome had come to an inglorious end. Could the United States of America hope to do better?¹⁴

The Founding Fathers passionately ransacked the classical historians for ways to escape the classical fate. One cannot easily overstate the anxiety that attended this search or the relevance they seemed to find in the writers of antiquity. Thomas Jefferson thought Tacitus “the first writer of the world without a single exception. His book is a compound of history and morality of which we have no other example.” “To live without having a Cicero and a Tacitus at hand,” said John Quincy Adams, a founding son, “seems to me as if it was a privation of one of my limbs.”¹⁵ As Adams’s cousin William Smith Shaw put it, “The writings of Tacitus display the weakness of a falling empire and the morals of a degenerate age. . . . They form the subject of deep meditation for all statesmen who wish to raise their country to glory; to continue it in power, or preserve it from ruin.”¹⁶ Polybius was almost as crucial—for delineating the cycle of birth, growth, and decay that constituted the destiny of states; and for sketching the mixed constitution with balanced powers that the Founding Fathers seized as a glimpse at remedy.¹⁷

The classical indoctrination reinforced the Calvinist judgment that this was a time of probation for America. For the history of antiquity did not teach the inevitability of progress. It proved rather the perishability of republics, the subversion of virtue by power and luxury, the transience of glory, the mutability of human affairs. The conventional emphasis on the benign John Locke as the father of us all obscures the dark and ominous strain in the thought of the Founders recently recalled to our attention by J. G. A. Pocock—the strain that led from Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* through Harrington and Montesquieu to the Constitutional Convention.¹⁸

¹³ Lucien Price, ed., *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston, 1954), 161, 203. Perry Miller agrees: “As far as I read the history of the West, I find only one other great civilization that faced an analogous predicament, and that was the Roman Empire.” “The Shaping of the American Character,” *New England Quarterly*, 28 (1955): 439.

¹⁴ The careful reader will note that some of the Founders’ allusions are to Rome as a republic, some to Rome as an empire. It is not clear that they drew too sharp a distinction between these phases in Roman history. See, for example, Fisher Ames: “Rome was a republic from its very birth. It is true, for two hundred and forty-four years it was subject to its kings; but the spirit of liberty was never more lofty at any period of its long troubled life than when Rome was governed by kings. They were, in war, generals; in peace, only magistrates. For seven hundred years Rome remained a republic.” Seth Ames, ed., *The Works of Fisher Ames* (Boston, 1854), 2: 332–33.

¹⁵ In W. O. Clough, ed., *Intellectual Origins of American National Thought* (1955; reprint ed., New York, 1961), 71.

¹⁶ “The Age of Tacitus,” in the *Monthly Anthology*, 4 (July 1807): 368, in Simpson, *Federalist Literary Mind*, 50.

¹⁷ Polybius was “diligently read in America especially during the Revolutionary period.” Meyer Reinhold, ed., *The Classic Pages: Classical Reading of Eighteenth-Century Americans* (University Park, Pa., 1975), 121. Also see Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), *passim*.

¹⁸ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975). The same point has been made with less elaboration by Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), and by Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford, 1970). Reinhold writes that Polybius was known in America partly through direct study of Book VI of his *History* and “partly as mediated through Machiavelli’s *Discourses* and Montesquieu’s *Laws*.” *Classic Pages*, 121.

Pocock isolates what he called “the Machiavellian moment”—the moment in which a republic is “seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability.”¹⁹ He argues persuasively that this apprehension of the mortality of states was a vital element in the sensibility of Philadelphia in 1787. Not only was man vulnerable through this propensity to sin, but republics were vulnerable through their propensity for corruption. The dread of corruption, as Bernard Bailyn has demonstrated, had long since been imported from England.²⁰ History showed that, in the unceasing contest between corruption and virtue, corruption had always—up at least to 1776—triumphed.

The Founding Fathers had an intense conviction of the improbability of their undertaking. Such assets as they possessed came in their view from geographic and demographic advantage, not from divine intercession. Benjamin Franklin ascribed the inevitability of American independence to such mundane factors as population increase and vacant lands, not to providential design.²¹ But even these assets could not be counted on to prevail against history and human nature. Hamilton said in the New York ratifying convention, “The tendency of things will be to depart from the republican standard. This is the real disposition of human nature.” By 1802, when the Constitution was fifteen years old, he pronounced it a “frail and worthless fabric.” “Every republic at all times,” he said (always the classical analogy), “has its Catilines and its Caesars. . . . If we have an embryo-Caesar in the United States, ’tis Burr.”²² Jefferson and John Adams no doubt thought it was Hamilton.

If Hamilton be discounted as a temperamental pessimist or a disaffected adventurer, his great adversaries were not always more sanguine about the republic’s future. “Commerce, luxury, and avarice have destroyed every republican government,” Adams wrote Benjamin Rush in 1808. “We mortals cannot work miracles; we struggle in vain against the constitution and course of nature.”²³ “I tremble for my country,” Jefferson had said in the 1780s, “when I reflect that God is just.”²⁴ Though he was trembling at this point—rightly and presciently—over the problem of slavery, he also trembled chronically in the nineties over the unlikely prospect of “monarchy.” In 1798 he saw the Alien and Sedition Acts as tending to drive the states “into revolution and blood, and [to] furnish new calumnies against Republican Government, and new pretexts for those who wish it to be believed, that men cannot be governed but by a rod of iron.”²⁵ As president Jefferson trembled himself into unworthy panic over the murky dreams of Aaron Burr, that embryo forever

¹⁹ *Machiavellian Moment*, viii.

²⁰ *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

²¹ See Joseph Ellis, “Habits of Mind and an American Enlightenment,” *American Quarterly*, 28 (1976): esp. 161.

²² Quoted in Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton*, 71, 98; and Hamilton to Gouverneur Morris, February 27, 1802 in Hamilton, *Works*, ed. H. C. Lodge (New York, 1904), 7: 591.

²³ Adams to Rush, September 27, 1808 in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams* (New York, 1946), 149–50.

²⁴ *Notes on Virginia*, Query XVIII.

²⁵ Kentucky Resolutions of 1798, IX.

struggling to become Caesar. From the next generation William Wirt asked in 1809, "Can any man who looks upon the state of public virtue in this country . . . believe that this confederated republic is to last forever?"²⁶

THIS PERVERSIVE SELF-DOUBT, this urgent sense of the precariousness of the national existence, was no doubt nourished by European assessments of the American prospect. For eminent and influential Europeans regarded the new world, not as an idyll of Lockean felicity—"in the beginning, all the world was America"²⁷—but as a disgusting scene of degeneracy and impotence.

In the middle of the eighteenth century the famous Georges Buffon lent the weight of scientific authority to the proposition that life in the western hemisphere was consigned to biological inferiority. American animals were smaller and weaker; European animals shrank when transported across the Atlantic except, Buffon specified, for the fortunate pig. As for the indigenous natives of the fallen continent, they too were small and weak, passive and backward. Soon Abbé de Pauw converted Buffon's pseudoscience into derisive polemic. In England Oliver Goldsmith portrayed a gray and gloomy land where no dogs barked and no birds sang. Horace Walpole drew the inevitable conclusion: "Buffon says, that European animals degenerate across the Atlantic; perhaps its migrating inhabitants may be in the same predicament."²⁸ As William Robertson, the Historiographer Royal for Scotland, rendered it in his widely read *History of America*, published the year after the Declaration of Independence, "The same qualities in the climate of America which stunted the growth . . . of its native animals proved pernicious to such as have migrated into it voluntarily."²⁹

No one made this case more irritatingly and perseveringly than Abbé Raynal in France. Buffon, Jefferson observed, had never quite said that the European degenerated in America: "He goes indeed within one step of it, but he stops there. The Abbé Raynal alone has taken that step."³⁰ Raynal's much-reprinted work, *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and of the Commerce of Europeans in the Two Indies*, first published in 1770, explained how European innocence was under siege by American depravity. America, Raynal wrote, had "poured all the sources of corruption on Europe." The search for American riches brutalized the European intruder. The climate and soil of America caused the European species, human as well as animal, to deteriorate. "The men have less strength and less courage . . . and are but little susceptible of the lively and powerful sentiment of love"—a comment that perhaps revealed Raynal as in the end more a Frenchman than as an abbé. "Let me stop here," Raynal said in summation,

²⁶ Wirt to Benjamin Edwards, December 22, 1809 in J. P. Kennedy, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of William Wirt* (New York, 1849), 1: 246–47.

²⁷ *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, ch. 2, par. 49.

²⁸ Quoted in Antonelli Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900* (Pittsburgh, 1973), ch. 1, 160–75.

²⁹ Quoted in Henry Steele Commager, *Jefferson, Nationalism, and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1975), 43.

³⁰ Quoted in Gerbi, *Dispute*, 262.

and consider ourselves as existing at the time when America and India were unknown. Let me suppose that I address myself to the most cruel of Europeans in the following terms. There exist regions which will furnish thee with rich metals, agreeable clothing, and delicious food. But read this history, and behold at what price the discovery is promised to thee. Does thou wish or not that it should be made? Is it to be imagined that there exists a being infernal enough to answer this question in the affirmative! *Let it be remembered, that there will not be a single instant in futurity, when my question will not have the same force.* [Emphasis added.]

After the Declaration of Independence, Raynal added insult to injury. He was passing through Lyons on a journey from Paris to Geneva. The local academy, apprised of his presence, made him a member. In return, Raynal gratefully established a prize of 1200 francs to be awarded by the Academy of Lyons for the best essay on the arresting topic: “Was the discovery of America a blessing or a curse to mankind? If it was a blessing, by what means are we to conserve and enhance its benefits? If it was a curse, by what means are we to repair the damage?”³¹

The Founding Fathers were highly sensitive to the proposition that America was a mistake. Franklin, who thought Raynal an “ill-informed and evil-minded Writer,” once endured a monologue by the diminutive abbé on the inferiority of the Americans at his own dinner table in Paris. “Let us try this question by the fact before us,” said Franklin, calling on his guests to stand up and measure themselves back to back. “There was not one American present,” wrote Jefferson who was also there, “who could not have tost out of the Windows any one or two of the rest of the Company.”³² Jefferson himself devoted long passages in his *Notes on Virginia* to the refutation of Buffon on animals and of Raynal on human beings. Europeans “admired as profound philosophers,” Hamilton wrote scornfully in the *Federalist*, “have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed a while in our atmosphere.”³³ Tom Paine joined the fight; and John Adams noted in his *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* his delight in the way Paine had “exposed the mistakes of Raynal, and Jefferson those of Buffon, so unphilosophically borrowed from the despicable dreams of De Pau [*sic*].”³⁴

Though the Founders were both indignant and effective in their rebuttal, the nature of the attack could hardly have increased their confidence in the future of their adventure. The European doubt, along with the Calvinist judgment and the Machiavellian moment, made them acutely aware of the chanciness of an extraordinary enterprise. From the fate of the Greek city-states and the fall of the Roman Empire they drew somber conclusions about the prospects of the American republic. They had no illusions about the inviolability of America to history, supposing all states, including the American,

³¹ In Henry Steele Commager and Elmo Giodanetti, eds., *Was America a Mistake? The Eighteenth-Century Controversy* (New York, 1967), 126, 129, 138, 16.

³² Quoted in Gerbi, *Dispute*, 240–42.

³³ Number 11. In a footnote Hamilton cited de Pauw’s *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Américains*.

³⁴ *Defence*, Preface.

immediate unto history, as a consistent Calvinist should have supposed all states immediate unto God. "Have we not already seen enough," wrote Hamilton, "of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from the imperfections, weaknesses, and evils incident to society in every shape? Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?"³⁵ Though few were Calvinists of the old school, the Founding Fathers had no illusions about the perfectibility of man, Americans or others. The Constitution, James Bryce has well said, was "the work of men who believed in original sin and were resolved to leave open for transgressors no door which they could possibly shut."³⁶

We have all applied the phrase "end of innocence" to one or another stage of American history. This is surely an amiable flourish—or a pernicious delusion. No people who systematically enslaved black men and killed red men could be innocent. No people reared on Calvin and Tacitus, on Edwards and the *Federalist*, could be innocent. No nation founded on invasion, conquest, and slaughter could be innocent. No state established by revolution and thereafter rent by civil war could be innocent. The Constitution was hardly the product of immaculate conception. The Founding Fathers were not a band of saints. They were brave and imperturbable realists who committed themselves, in defiance of the available lessons of history and theology, to a monumental gamble.

Their recognition of this is why Hamilton, in the third sentence of the first *Federalist*, formulated the issue as he did. The American people, he wrote, had the opportunity "by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." So Washington defined it in his first inaugural address: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as *deeply*, as *finally*, staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people." The Founding Fathers saw the American republic not as a consecration but as the test against history of a hypothesis. They "looked upon the new federal organization," Woodrow Wilson wrote, "as an experiment, and thought it likely it might not last."³⁷

Washington's early successors, with mingled anxiety and hope, reported on the experiment's fortunes. In his last message to Congress, James Madison permitted himself "the proud reflection that the American people have reached in safety and success their fortieth year as an independent nation." This, the presidents believed, had more than local significance. "Our in-

³⁵ *Federalist*, Number 6.

³⁶ *The American Commonwealth* (New York, 1888), 1: 299.

³⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908; reprint ed., New York, 1961), 44-45.

stitutions,” said James Monroe in his last message, “form an important epoch in the history of the civilized world. On their preservation and in their utmost purity everything will depend.” Washington, said Andrew Jackson in his own Farewell Address, regarded the Constitution “as an experiment” and “was prepared to lay down his life, if necessary, to secure it a full and a fair trial. The trial has been made. It has succeeded beyond the proudest hopes of those who framed it.” Still Jackson discerned threats to the experiment—in the “moneyed power” and even more in the dissolution of the union itself, where chaos, he supposed, might lead the people “to submit to the absolute dominion of any military adventurer and to surrender their liberty for the sake of repose.”³⁸

Nevertheless, confidence—or at least the simulation of confidence—grew. “The present year,” Martin Van Buren said in 1838, “closes the first half century of our Federal institutions. . . . It was reserved for the American Union to test the advantages of a government entirely dependent on the continual exercise of the popular will.” “After an existence of near three-fourths of a century as a free and independent Republic,” said James Polk in the next decade, “the problem no longer remains to be solved whether man is capable of self-government. The success of our admirable system is a conclusive refutation of the theories of those in other countries who maintain that a ‘favored few’ are born to rule and that the mass of mankind must be governed by force.” The Mexican War, Polk soon added, “evinces beyond any doubt that a popular representative government is equal to any emergency.” Sixty years after the Constitution, Zachary Taylor pronounced the United States of America “the most stable and permanent Government on earth.”³⁹

How is one to account for this rising optimism? It was partly a tribute, reasonable enough, to survival. It was partly the spread-eagleism and vain-glory congenial to a youthful nationalism. It was no doubt also in part admonitory exhortation—let us not throw away what we have so precariously achieved—for the presidents of the middle period must have known in their bones that the American experiment was confronting its fiercest internal trial. No one understood more profoundly the chanciness of the adventure than the young man who spoke in 1838 on “The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions” before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois. Over most of the first half century, Abraham Lincoln said, America had been felt “to be an undecided experiment; now, it is understood to be a successful one.” But success contained its own perils; “with the catching, end the pleasures of the chase.” As the memory of the Revolution receded, the pillars of the temple of liberty were crumbling away. “That temple must fall, unless we . . . supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.” The conviction of the incertitude of life informed his presidency—and explained its greatness. His first message to Congress asked whether all repub-

³⁸ J. D. Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, 1909), 1: 579; 2: 262; 3: 295–96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3: 483–84; 4: 532–33, 632; 5: 9.

lics had an “inherent and fatal weakness.” At the Gettysburg cemetery he described the great civil war as “testing” whether any nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that men are created equal “can long endure.”⁴⁰

THIS WAS, I TAKE IT, A DOMINANT THEME of the early republic—the idea of America as an experiment, undertaken in defiance of history, fraught with risk, problematic in outcome. But a counter-tradition was also emerging—and, as the mounting presidential optimism suggests, with accumulating momentum. The counter-tradition too had its roots in the Calvinist ethos.

Historic Christianity embraced two divergent thoughts: that all people were immediate unto God; and that some were more immediate than others. At first, Calvin had written in the *Institutes*, God “chose the Jews as his very own flock”; the “covenant of salvation . . . belonged only to the Jews until the wall was torn down.”⁴¹ Then, with what Jonathan Edwards called “the abolishing of the *Jewish dispensation*,” the wall was “broken down to make way for the more extensive success of the gospel.”⁴² The chosen people thereafter were the elect as against the reprobate. Soon the idea of the saints acting within history disappeared into the transcendency of the posthistorical City of God.

So Augustine set along side of “providential history”—the rise and decline of secular communities within history—the idea of “redemptive history”—the journey of the elect to salvation beyond history. The age that sent the Calvinists to New England also saw a revival of the primitive chiliasm of the first century. The New Englanders felt they had been called from hearth and home to endure unimaginable rigor and ordeal in a dangerous land; so they supposed someone of importance had called them, and for important reasons. Their very tribulations seemed proof of a role in redemptive history. “God hath covenanted with his people,” said Increase Mather, “that sanctified afflictions shall be their portion. . . . The usual method of divine Providence [is] by the greatest Miseries to prepare for the greatest Mercies. . . . *Without doubt, the Lord Jesus hath a peculiar respect unto this place, and for this people.*”⁴³

It was not only that they were in John Winthrop’s words, as a City upon a Hill, with the eyes of all people upon them. It was that they had been despatched to New England, as Edward Johnson said, by a wonder-working Providence because “this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth.” The “Lord Christ” intended “to make his New England Souldiers the very wonder of this Age.”⁴⁴ The Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale’s last sermon, Nathaniel Hawthorne tells us, dealt with “the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilder-

⁴⁰ *Collected Works*, ed. R. P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), 1: 113–15; 7: 17.

⁴¹ John Dillenberger, ed., *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (New York, 1971), 350, 564.

⁴² *A History of the Work of Redemption*, sec. 3: 1.

⁴³ Quoted in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 41–42, 54–55.

⁴⁴ In Miller and Johnson, *Puritans*, 1: 145, 152, 199.

ness.” But, where the Jewish prophets had seen ruin for their country, Dimmesdale’s mission was “to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord.”⁴⁵ The great Edwards concluded that “the Latter-Day Glory is probably to begin in America.”⁴⁶

This geopolitical specification of the millennium—this identification of the New Jerusalem with a particular place and people—was rare, even in a time of millennial fervor. “What in England, Holland, Germany and Geneva,” Bercovitch writes, “was an *a priori* antithesis [between the saints and the state] became in America the twin pillars of a unique federal eschatology.” For the old world was steeped in iniquity, one more shameful episode in the long shame of providential history. The fact that God had withheld America so long—until the Reformation purified the church, until the invention of printing spread the Bible among the people—argued that He had been preparing it for some ultimate manifestation of His grace. God, said Winthrop, having “smitten all the other Churches before our eyes,” had reserved America for those whom He meant “*to save out of this generall callamitie*,” as he had once sent the ark to save Noah. The new land was certainly a part, perhaps the climax, of redemptive history; America was divine prophecy fulfilled.⁴⁷

The covenant of salvation, it seemed, had passed across the Atlantic. Like original sin, this proposition underwent secularization in the eighteenth century. Before the Revolution, John Adams, reading the original draft of his “Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law” to a club of Boston lawyers, indulged himself in that well-known rhetorical flight: “I always consider the settlement of America with reverence, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.” On reflection Adams evidently considered the sentiment extravagant if not dubious, for he deleted it from the paper as published. His son John Quincy Adams commented later: “Who does not now see that the accomplishment of this great object is already placed beyond all possibility of doubt?” His grandson Charles Francis Adams called the passage his grandfather cut from the paper “the most deserving of any to be remembered.”⁴⁸ So within a single family the idea of experiment began to yield to a different idea—the idea of an American national destiny.

The achievement of independence gave new status to the theory of America as an “elect nation” (Bercovitch) or a “redeemer nation” (E. L. Tuveson),⁴⁹ entrusted by the Almighty with the charge of carrying its light to the unregenerate world. The Reverend Timothy Dwight, Jonathan Edwards’s grandson, called Americans “this chosen race.”⁵⁰ “God’s mercies to New England,”

⁴⁵ *The Scarlet Letter*, ch. 23.

⁴⁶ *Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, pt. 2, sec. 2.

⁴⁷ Obviously this discussion draws heavily on the brilliant analysis in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 89–90, 100–04.

⁴⁸ In Charles Sumner, *Prophetic Voices Concerning America* (Boston, 1874), 54–55.

⁴⁹ *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago, 1968).

⁵⁰ Quoted in A. K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (1935; reprint ed., New York, 1963), 40.

wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe, daughter of one minister and wife of another, foreshadowed “the glorious future of the United States . . . commissioned to bear the light of liberty and religion through all the earth and to bring in the great millennial day, when wars should cease and the whole world, released from the thralldom of evil, should rejoice in the light of the Lord.”⁵¹

Patriotic fervor swept the idea of divine national mission far beyond the evangelical community. Jefferson thought the Great Seal of the United States should portray the children of Israel led by a pillar of light.⁵² “Here Paradise anew shall flourish,” wrote Philip Freneau in an early statement of the myth of American innocence,

by no second Adam lost
No dangerous tree or deathful fruit shall grow,
No tempting servant to allure the soul
From native innocence. . . .⁵³

“We Americans,” wrote the youthful Herman Melville, “are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . . God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. . . . Long enough have we been sceptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us.”⁵⁴

The belief that Americans were a chosen people did not imply a sure and tranquil journey to salvation. As the Bible made amply clear, chosen people underwent the harshest trials and assumed the most grievous burdens. The rival propositions—America as experiment, America as destiny—thus shared a belief in the process of testing. But one tested works, the other faith. So Lincoln and Mrs. Stowe agreed from different standpoints in seeing the Civil War as the climactic test. Northern victory, however, strengthened the conviction of providential appointment. “Now that God has smitten slavery unto death,” Mrs. Stowe’s brother Edward wrote in 1865, “he has opened the way for the redemption and sanctification of our whole social system.”⁵⁵

The Kingdom of God was deemed both imminent in time and immanent in America. It was a short step from the Social Gospel at home to Americans carrying the Social Gospel to the world. The Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans, wrote the Reverend Josiah Strong, had ably but separately developed the spiritual, intellectual, and physical qualities of man. “Now for the first time in the history of mankind the three great strands pass through the fingers of one predominant race to be braided into a single supreme civilization in the new era, the perfection of which will be the Kingdom fully

⁵¹ Quoted in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 87–88.

⁵² Quoted in Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson: The Apostle of Americanism* (1929; reprint ed., Ann Arbor, Mich., 1957), 428.

⁵³ Quoted in Commager, *Enlightenment*, 188.

⁵⁴ *White-Jacket*, ch. 36.

⁵⁵ Quoted in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1935; reprint ed., New York, 1959), 157.

come. . . . All unite in the one Anglo-Saxon race, indicating that this race is pre-eminently fitted, and therefore chosen of God, to prepare the way for the full coming of his kingdom in the earth."⁵⁶ It was another short step from this to what the Reverend Alexander Blackburn, who had been wounded at Chickamauga, called in 1898 "the imperialism of righteousness";⁵⁷ and from Blackburn to the messianic demagoguery of Albert J. Beveridge, "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation. . . . And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world."⁵⁸

So the impression developed that in the United States of America the Almighty had contrived a nation unique in its virtue and magnanimity, exempt from the motives that governed all other states. "America is the only idealistic nation in the world," said Wilson on his pilgrimage to the West in 1919. "The heart of this people is pure. The heart of this people is true. . . . It is the great idealistic force of history. . . . I, for one, believe more profoundly than in anything else human in the destiny of the United States. I believe that she has a spiritual energy in her which no other nation can contribute to the liberation of mankind. . . . [In the war] America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world."⁵⁹

In another forty years the theory of America as the savior of the world received the furious *imprimatur* of John Foster Dulles, another Presbyterian elder, and from there the country roared on to the horrors of Vietnam. So the hallucination brought the republic from the original idea of America as exemplary experiment to the recent idea of America as mankind's designated judge, jury and executioner. Nor is there strong reason to suppose that Vietnam has altogether cured us of this infatuation. "Call it mysticism if you will," Governor Ronald Reagan said several months ago, "but I believe God had a divine purpose in placing this land between the two great oceans to be found by those who had a special love of freedom and the courage to leave the countries of their birth."⁶⁰ Nor are we yet absolutely clear that the victor in the bicentennial election may not believe that nations, like presidents, may be born again.

WHY DID THE CONVICTION of the corruptibility of men and the vulnerability of states—and the consequent idea of America as experiment—give way to the myth of innocence and the delusion of a sacred mission and a sanctified destiny? The original conviction was rooted in realistic conceptions of history and of human nature—conceptions that waned as the republic prospered.

⁵⁶ *The New Era* (New York, 1893), 71, 354.

⁵⁷ From the *Chicago Standard*, August 6, 1898, in J. W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898* (1935; reprint ed., New York, 1964), 293.

⁵⁸ In Norman A. Graebner, ed., *Ideas and Diplomacy* (New York, 1964), 372–73.

⁵⁹ Phrases from speeches in Omaha, Sioux Falls, San Francisco, San Diego, Cheyenne, in Wilson, *Messages and Papers*, ed. Albert Shaw (New York, 1924), 2: 815, 822, 969, 1025, 1086.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, April 1, 1976.

The intense historical-mindedness of the Founding Fathers did not endure. Though the first generation came to Philadelphia loaded down with historical examples and memories, its function was precisely to liberate its descendants from history. Once the Fathers had done their work, history began again on a new foundation and in American terms. "The Past," Melville said in *White-Jacket*, "is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life that it lives to us even in anticipation."⁶¹ The process of narcissistic withdrawal from history, much commented on by foreign travelers, was sustained by the simultaneous withdrawal, after 1815, from the power embroilments of the old world. The new nation was largely populated by people torn from, fleeing from, or in revolt against their own histories. This also helped take the republic out of the movement and motive of secular history. "Probably no other civilised nation," said the *Democratic Review* in 1842, "has . . . so completely thrown off its allegiance to the past as the American."⁶²

Teleological isolation survived the end of political and economic isolation. We find ourselves at this Bicentennial, for all the show-business clatter of the Fourth-of-July celebrations, an essentially historyless people. Businessmen agree with the elder Henry Ford that history is bunk. The young no longer study history. Intellectuals turn their backs on history in the enthusiasm for the ahistorical behavioral "sciences." As the American historical consciousness has thinned out, the messianic hope has flowed into the vacuum. And, as Christianity turned liberal, shucking off such cardinal doctrines as original sin, one more impediment was removed to belief in national virtue and perfectibility. Experiment gave ground to destiny as the premise of national life.

All this, of course, was both provoked and fortified by latter-day exertions of national power. All nations succumb to fantasies of innate superiority. When they act on these fantasies, as the Spanish did in the sixteenth century, the French in the seventeenth, the English in the eighteenth, the Germans and Japanese and Russians and Americans in the twentieth, they tend to become international menaces. The American hallucination took root during the long holiday from the world of reality. When America re-entered that world, the hallucination was confirmed by the overwhelming power in our own possession.

So the theory of the elect nation, the redeemer nation, the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue, almost became the official creed. Yet, while the counter-tradition prospered, the tradition did not quite expire. Some continued to regard it all as the deceitful dream of a golden age, wondering perhaps why the Almighty should have chosen the Americans.⁶³ "The Al-

⁶¹ *White-Jacket*, ch. 34.

⁶² Quoted in R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago, 1955), 159.

⁶³ "How odd
Of God
To choose
The Jews"—Hilaire Belloc.

mighty,” Lincoln insisted at his second inaugural, “has His own purposes.” He clearly knew what he was saying, because he wrote soon thereafter to a fellow ironist, Thurlow Weed: “Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, . . . is to deny that there is a God governing the world.”⁶⁴

After the war, Walt Whitman, once the supreme poet of democratic faith, suddenly perceived a dark and threatening future. The experiment was in jeopardy. These States, no longer a sure thing, had become a “battle, advancing, retreating, between democracy’s convictions, aspirations, and the people’s crudeness, vice, caprices.” America, Whitman apprehended, might well “prove the most tremendous failure of time.”⁶⁵ “’Tis a wild democracy,” Emerson said in his last public address; “the riot of mediocrities and dishonesties and fudges.”⁶⁶ There is prosopographical felicity in the fact that a fourth generation of Adamses raised particularly keen doubts whether Providence in settling America had after all opened a grand design to emancipate mankind. Henry Adams began as a connoisseur of political ironies, seeing history (in terms well defined by Pocock) as “an intelligible story of how men’s actions produce results other than those they intended.”⁶⁷ Irony was at least at odds with destiny; but in time his brother Brooks pushed Henry, and history too, beyond irony into catastrophe. “You Americans believe yourselves to be exempted from the operation of general laws,” the cynical Baron Jacobi had growled in Henry’s *Democracy*.⁶⁸ Brooks was a mighty exception. Juggling equations of energy, centralization, and social velocity, he doubted whether any society was exempt from the law of civilization and decay.

Henry, seizing his brother’s clue, sought to pursue thought “to the limit of its possibilities,” a point he thought might arrive in the year 1921.⁶⁹ He became a sort of reverse millennialist, convinced that science and technology were rushing the planet toward an apocalypse unredeemed by a Day of Judgment. “At the rate of increase of speed and momentum, as calculated on the last fifty years,” he wrote Brooks in 1901, “the present society must break its damn neck in a definite, but remote, time, not exceeding fifty years more.” It was a queer sensation, he felt—“this secret belief that one stands on the brink of the world’s greatest catastrophe. For it means the fall of Western Europe, as it fell in the fourth century.”⁷⁰ He began to see himself as Augustine—a failed Augustine, of course (“I aspire to be bound up with St. Augustine . . . My idea of what it should be proved beyond my powers. Only St. Augustine ever realised it”). Augustine had the advantage of the City of God. The rule of phase left room only for the City of Chaos. “A law of

⁶⁴ Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address; Lincoln to Weed, March 15, 1865, in *Works*, 8: 333.

⁶⁵ *Democratic Vistas*.

⁶⁶ “The Fortune of the Republic.”

⁶⁷ *Machiavellian Moment*, 6.

⁶⁸ Ch. 4.

⁶⁹ “The Rule of Phase Applied to History,” in Henry Adams, *The Tendency of History* (New York, 1919), 172.

⁷⁰ Henry to Brooks Adams, November 23, 1900 and May 7, 1901 in H. D. Cater, ed., *Henry Adams and His Friends: A Collection of His Unpublished Letters* (Boston, 1947), 502, 508.

acceleration,” Adams wrote, “definite and constant as any law of mechanics, cannot be supposed to relax its energy to suit the convenience of man.” The United States, like everything else, was finished. In the end Adams too abandoned experiment for destiny; but destiny for him was not only manifest but malign. “No one anywhere,” he wrote a few weeks before the outbreak of the First World War, “. . . expects a future. The life is that of the fourth century, without St. Augustine.”⁷¹

William James retained the experimental faith, abhorring the fatalisms and absolutes implied by “the idol of a national destiny . . . which for some inscrutable reason it has become infamous to disbelieve in or refuse.” We are instructed, James said, “to be missionaries of civilization. . . . We must sow our ideals, plant our order, impose our God. The individual lives are nothing. Our duty and our destiny call, and civilization must go on. Could there be a more damning indictment of that whole bloated idol termed ‘modern civilization’?” All this had come about too fast “for the older American nature not to feel the shock.” One cannot know what James meant by “the older American nature”; but he plainly rejected the supposition that American motives were, by definition, pure, and that the United States enjoyed a divine immunity to temptation and corruption. Like the authors of the *Federalist*, James was a realist. “Angelic impulses and predatory lusts,” he precisely wrote, “divide our heart exactly as they divide the heart of other countries.”⁷²

So the warfare between realism and messianism, between experiment and destiny, continued to our own day. No recent critic of the counter-tradition was more effective than Reinhold Niebuhr with his devastating Christian polemic against the whole idea of “salvation through history.”⁷³ The United States seemed to him to embody in an emphatic way the illusions of liberal culture, in great part because “we had a religious version of our national destiny which interpreted the meaning of our nationhood as God’s effort to make a new beginning in the history of mankind.” The Puritans had gradually shifted from emphasis on the divine favor shown to the nation to emphasis on the virtue the nation allegedly acquired through divine favor. Niebuhr defined messianism as “a corrupt expression of man’s search for the ultimate within the vicissitudes and hazards of time” and warned against the “deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America.” The myth of innocence was fatal to wisdom and prudence. “Nations, as individuals, who are completely innocent in their own esteem, are insufferable in their human contacts.” Let the righteous nation understand the divine judgment that waits on human pretension—and not forget “the depth of evil to which individuals and communities may sink, particularly when they try to play the role of God in history.”⁷⁴ So, in an ultimate irony of American history, Niebuhr used religion to refute the religious version of the national destiny.

⁷¹ Henry Adams to H. O. Taylor, November 22, 1909; to C. M. Gaskell, June 1, 1914; and to Ferris Greenslet, after December 22, 1915 in W. C. Ford, ed., *The Letters of Henry Adams, 1892–1918*, (Boston, 1938), 526, 625, 635; and *The Education of Henry Adams*, ch. 34.

⁷² Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York, 1961), 624–27, 631.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York, 1949), 31.

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York, 1952), 4, 42, 69–70.

Men were corruptible, states perishable: like all other nations, America was forever on probation-time. If some political leaders were messianists, the perception of America as an experiment conducted by mortals of limited wisdom and power without divine guarantee informed the practical intelligence of others. The second Roosevelt saw life as uncertain and the national destiny problematic. The republic was still an experiment and “demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”⁷⁵ Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s realism kept American participation in the Second World War closer to a sense of national interest than of world mission. In a later time John F. Kennedy argued the antimessianic case: “We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient—that we are only 6 percent of the world’s population—that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 percent of mankind—that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity—and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.” Kennedy combined a premonition of the Machiavellian moment with an ancestral religion that understood the limits of human striving. “Before my term has ended,” he said in his first annual message, “we shall have to test anew whether a nation organized and governed such as ours can endure. The outcome is by no means certain.”⁷⁶

This evoked the mood of the Founding Fathers. But the belief in national righteousness and providential destiny remains strong—a splendid triumph of dogma over experience. One cannot but feel that this belief has encouraged our recent excesses in the world and that the republic has lost much by forgetting what James called “the older American nature.” For messianism is an illusion. No nation is sacred and unique, the United States or any other. All nations are immediate unto God. America, like every country, has interests real and fictitious, concerns generous and selfish, motives honorable and squalid. Providence has not set Americans apart from lesser breeds. We too are part of history’s seamless web.

Yet we retain one signal and extraordinary advantage over most nations—an entirely secular advantage, conferred upon us by those quite astonishing Founding Fathers. For they bequeathed us standards by which to set our course and judge our performance—and, since they were exceptional men, the standards have not been rendered obsolescent even by the second law of thermodynamics. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution establish goals, imply commitments, and measure failures. The men who signed the Declaration, said Lincoln, “meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though not perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all

⁷⁵ *Public Papers*. . . , vol. 1: 1928–1932 (New York, 1938), 646.

⁷⁶ *Public Papers*. . . 1961 (Washington, 1962), 19, 726.

colors everywhere.”⁷⁷ The values embodied in these remarkable documents constitute what Gunnar Myrdal has called the “American Creed”: “The schools teach them, the churches preach them. The courts pronounce their judicial decisions in their terms.” The conflict between creed and reality has been a powerful motive in the quest for justice. “America,” said Myrdal, “is continuously struggling for its soul.”⁷⁸

We can take pride in our nation, not as we pretend to a commission from God and a sacred destiny, but as we struggle to fulfill our deepest values in an inscrutable world. As we begin our third century, we may well be entering our golden age. But we would be ill advised to reject the apprehensions of the Founding Fathers. Indeed, a due heed to those ancient anxieties may alone save us in the future. For America remains an experiment. The outcome is by no means certain. Only at our peril can we forget the possibility that the republic will end like *Gatsby* in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s emblematic fable—*Gatsby*, who had come so long a way and whose “dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

“*Gatsby* believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857, in *Works*, 2: 406.

⁷⁸ *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), 4.

⁷⁹ *The Great Gatsby*, ch. 9.

