

Religion & Liberty

SUMMER 2026

OUR RELIGIOUSLY
SECULAR FOUNDING

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THE PERSONAL GOD OF
GEORGE WASHINGTON

John C. Pinheiro

WINSTON CHURCHILL'S
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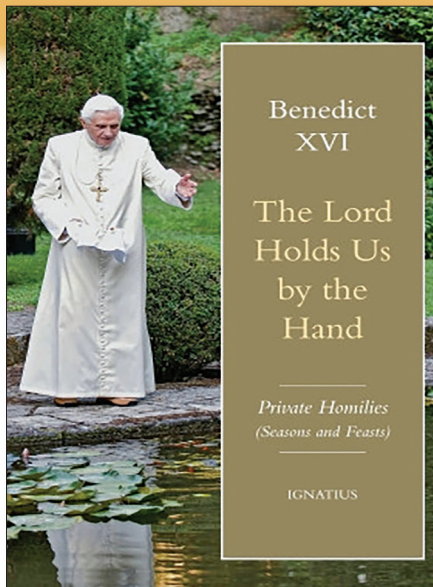
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THE ISSUE THIS TIME

BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

“Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of...Monticello.” But I’m paraphrasing. If you thought our Founding Fathers were indignant 250 years ago, consider the malcontents raging in pulpits, at lecterns, and on X.com today. It seems the OG rebels got so much wrong, unable as they were to anticipate the depredations of women’s suffrage, Little Richard, internet porn, and season 8 of *Game of Thrones*. They were just too *liberal*, you see. If only they’d read more Cardinal Bellarmine and less John Locke. Or something.

It’s hard to know how seriously to take the nationalists and integralists and Pain-in-the-Whatsitists. They often come off as mere cosplayers, Renaissance Faire revolutionaries, with no real skin in the game. And honestly, were the Reformed Protestant instantiation of this Nowhereland to gain real political power, not six months would pass before its Lord Protectors would be dueling over whether it was more biblical to hang or burn witches. Their Christian commonwealth wouldn’t last as long as Richard Cromwell’s, never mind Oliver’s.

As for Catholics similarly vexed by a lack of Public Piety, there are plenty of formerly confessionally Catholic countries littering Europe these days, preferring radical iconoclasm and gender fluidity to sacralization.

Then there are the newly imported supporters of sharia my it’s getting late...

A radical “progressivism,” too, would see our American civilization tossed on the garbage heap of racial supremacy, even as its advocates enjoy all the privileges of the supposedly undeserving privileged.

Whether this is all much ado blah blah blah, time will tell. And please note: There’s certainly much to grieve over: our culture of narcissism, scientific god-like pretensions, and abject desecration of *innocence*. But is it time for another revolution? Or a reversion to first principles, those articulated in our nation’s founding documents, especially the Declaration, whose 250th birthday is this summer?

“The Declaration of Independence is not only an American document,” said the legendary Winston Churchill as quoted by Michael Lucchese. “It follows on Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights as the third great title-deed on which the liberties of the English-speaking people are founded.” In short, it was a decidedly *conservative* document.

Yes, but what of faith? While the Declaration alludes to a “Creator,” were we ever formally a *Christian* nation? Do “first principles” include official recognition of Christianity as the faith of the land to which pols must vow fidelity? Thomas Kidd has done yeoman’s work in examining the irreducible complexity of the early republic’s grappling with *religio* and governance.

Defining Christianity’s role in the American founding can be surprisingly difficult. Partly this is because of the taken-for-granted quality of Christianity during the founding era. At the founding, even the most skeptical leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, could assume that the “self-evident truths” of Christian (or at least theistic) belief would give the nation ethical stability and vitality.

Samuel Goldman examines a further complicating factor—that of salutary non-Christian influences, specifically the Hebraic, reminding us that among the founding’s gifts is religious liberty, on which the Father of the Nation himself reflected. Writes John Pinheiro, revisiting Michael and Jana Novak’s *Washington’s God* on its 20th anniversary: “Washington ‘used more than reason alone,’ the Novaks argue, ‘to come to his understanding of religious liberty.’ His opinion on religious liberty grew out of his ‘theological anthropology.’”

Speaking of anniversaries, Adam Smith’s magisterial *Wealth of Nations*, which functions as another founding document of sorts, also turns 250 this year. As Erik Matson notes, Smith advocated for “‘the liberal system of free exportation and free importation,’ which he contrasted with an ‘illiberal and oppressive’ political superintendence of private life.” He was also no fan of mercantilists, who “proposed a combination of tar-iffs, tax breaks (drawbacks), and production subsidies to encourage exports and limit imports to facilitate a healthy ‘balance of trade.’” Sound familiar?

So here’s to the good ole USA, 250 years young, born in a most conservative rebellion but kept vital by its classically liberal instincts. Long may she pave the way for human flourishing everywhere.

Religion & Liberty

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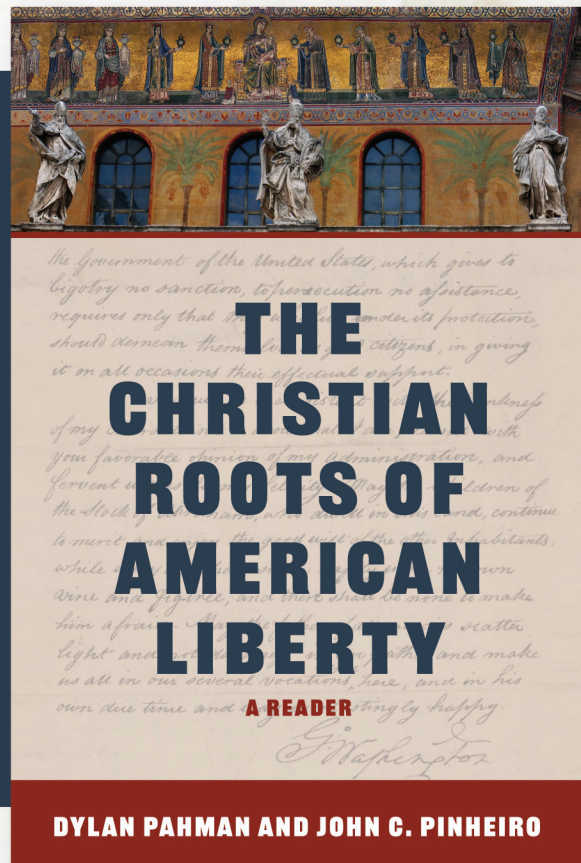


Was the American founding an Enlightenment invention or an organic development of liberty?

Liberal or conservative? Secular or Christian?

American conservatives traditionally answered “both” to these questions. More recently, new movements on the Right have challenged this conviction. Some even dismiss the founding as hopelessly secular.

Yet centuries of Christian ideas shaped the American founding, and Pahman and Pinheiro provide the sources to prove it in *The Christian Roots of American Liberty*. Along with select American writings, readers can examine historic Christian works that birthed the core principles of liberty. This edited collection, marking the United States’ 250th anniversary, provides the resources to conserve this timeless foundation.



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“LET THESE TRUTHS BE INDELIBLY IMPRESSED ON OUR MINDS—THAT WE CANNOT BE HAPPY WITHOUT BEING FREE—THAT WE CANNOT BE FREE WITHOUT BEING SECURE IN OUR PROPERTY—THAT WE CANNOT BE SECURE IN OUR PROPERTY, IF, WITHOUT OUR CONSENT, OTHERS MAY, AS BY RIGHT, TAKE IT AWAY.” — JOHN DICKINSON

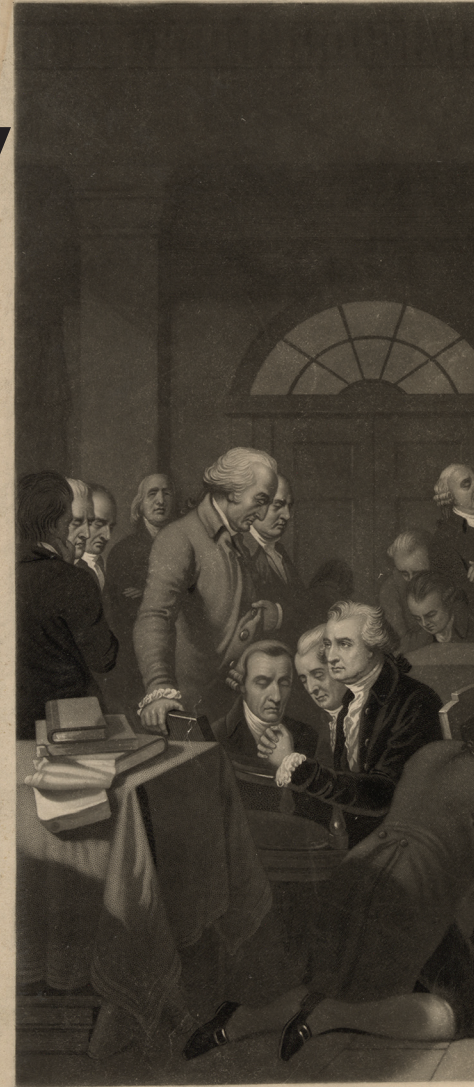
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OUR RELIGIOUSLY SECULAR FOUNDING

by THOMAS KIDD

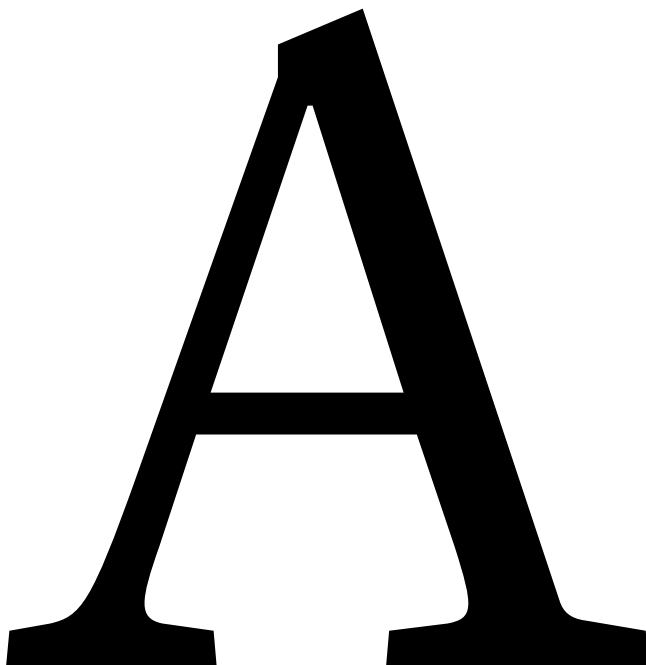
Are we a Christian nation? Were we ever? The role of religion in America's founding remains obvious or controversial, depending on whom you ask.



THE FATHERS

This is a black and white engraving depicting a historical courtroom scene. In the center, a man with long, light-colored hair, wearing a white clerical robe with a dark collar, stands at a wooden pulpit. He is gesturing with his hands as if speaking or reading aloud. To his right, a group of men are seated at a long, dark wooden table. They are dressed in 18th-century formal attire, including wigs, powdered hair, and dark coats. Some are looking towards the speaker, while others are looking down at papers or resting their heads. In the foreground, a man is seated in a large, ornate chair, leaning forward with his hands clasped, appearing to be listening intently. To the left, another man is seated at a table, writing on a document. The room has a high ceiling with a large window on the right side, partially covered by a dark curtain. A doorway is visible in the background. The floor is made of large wooden planks. The overall style is that of an 18th-century engraving, with fine lines and a detailed depiction of the scene.

Our Religiously Secular Founding



AS AMERICA OBSERVES the 250th anniversary of its independence, the nation is simultaneously entering a post-Christian era. Although American church attendance rates remain high compared to much of Europe, signs point to a broad de-Christianization of American society. The indicators include the growing number of Americans who say they adhere to no religion (“the nones”), a plummeting American birth rate, stubbornly high numbers of abortions, and the normalization of gay marriage and transgender ideology.

Observed against the backdrop of our morally chaotic culture, the 2026 anniversary urgently raises the question of our nation’s Christian roots. Is America

still America if religion loses most of its public relevance? Many elites in academia, business, and politics are actively hostile toward Christian morality and people of faith. Could the nation somehow return to earlier times of Christian establishment?

Claims that America is a “Christian nation” have become vastly more common in the past half-century than they were in the revolutionary period. Perhaps the formative role of Christianity and the Bible was so obvious in revolutionary America that people felt little need to mention it. Today the growing national absence of Christian mores makes some Christians look back nostalgically at the American founding as a time of relatively unquestioned Judeo-Christian assumptions, if not uniformly orthodox Christian beliefs.

Many a country music singer has promised an estranged lover that “you’re gonna miss me when I’m gone.” That is how many conservatives and traditional religious people evidently feel about our nation’s loss of Christian norms. It’s easier to perceive the powerful role that Judeo-Christian scaffolding once played in America now that it has largely collapsed. Even certain atheists such as the Somali-born writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali have declared themselves Christians in recent years, animated by a conviction that the secular West has squandered its Christian cultural inheritance. Anecdotal evidence further suggests that young people, especially men, are turning to confessional versions of Christianity, hoping to find moral assurance against the toxic antipathies of post-Christian society.

But even for devout Christians, defining Christianity’s role in the American founding can be surprisingly difficult. Partly this is because of the taken-for-granted quality of Christianity during the founding era. At the founding, even the most skeptical leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, could assume that the “self-evident truths” of Christian (or at least theistic) belief would give the nation ethical stability and vitality.

Another reason that religion in the founding seems elusive is that the major precipitating factors in the Revolution—British tax programs and parliamentary sovereignty—were not immediately related to religion. Religion informed key principles behind the founding and, later, the Constitution, such as the importance of virtue and dangers of vice, but religion did not *cause* Americans to seek independence. In some ways, shared Anglo-American Protestantism actually made the break with Britain



Thomas Walley's 1863 painting of George Whitefield preaching in Bolton in 1750 during the first Great Awakening

more difficult. Some of the staunchest Loyalists were northern Anglican ministers who found revolution against British rule unpalatable ethically and ecclesiologically.

Some historians have posited, however, that if religion did not cause the Revolution, it played a strong conditioning role and made the nation ripe for rebellion. Such writers point to the preparatory effects of the Great Awakening, the greatest religious and social upheaval in the British colonies prior to the Revolution. Many leading Patriots, such as Boston's Samuel Adams and Virginia's Patrick Henry, were deeply influenced by the revivals of the 1740s and '50s. The Great Awakening gave them a religious vocabulary for rights and liberties that they put to powerful use during the revolutionary crisis. America's zeal for the "sacred cause of liberty," to use a phrase from the time, was born in the crucible of revival.

A religious grounding for the Revolution was also suggested by the great parliamentarian Edmund

Burke in a speech in 1775. The "fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English colonies probably than in any other people of the earth," Burke argued, partly because of the colonists' intense Protestant religion. Their Protestantism was "of that kind which is the most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion. This is a persuasion not only favourable to liberty, but built upon it."

To Burke, the Americans' religious commitment to liberty did not simply begin with the Great Awakening. Their staunch disposition went deeper, back to the founding of the colonies by Puritans and other Christian dissenters. Especially in the northern colonies, the colonists' stark religion was "a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion." British authorities were frustrated with the colonists' constant bucking against taxes, but Burke warned that continuing to escalate the crisis was only to kindle a "flame that is ready to consume us." A religious people with the Americans' ferocious convictions would never back down.

In one of the Revolution's most uncanny coincidences, Patrick Henry rose across the sea the very next day, March 23, 1775, to respond (as it were) to Burke. The setting was the Virginia Patriot Convention, meeting at St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia. When he was a boy, Henry's mother had taken him to revival meetings in Hanover, Virginia, where the Presbyterian pastor Samuel Davies presided. Davies, who exemplified both the deep piety and formidable learning of the Great Awakening preachers, later became the president of Princeton College. Henry, a traditional Anglican, thought that Davies was the "greatest orator" he ever heard speak. This was quite a compliment coming from the man widely regarded as the most powerful Patriot speechmaker.

Indeed, Henry's scintillating "Liberty or Death" oration sounded a lot like a revival sermon. Its short text was filled with biblical allusions. Few scholars had noticed this feature until an astute historian in the 1980s, Charles L. Cohen, realized that "Liberty or Death" was teeming with references to Scripture, especially from the prophet Jeremiah. Some politicians still cite the Bible today, but when they do, they must accommodate our biblical illiteracy by naming the chapter and verse, or prefacing the citations with "as the Good Book says." Henry didn't do that. He could assume that everyone in the Virginia audience sufficiently knew the Bible to recognize the quotes, even relatively obscure ones.

To Henry, the time had come to prepare for defensive measures against the fearsome British army. If Americans didn't prepare, they could become like "those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not" (Jer. 5:21). British assurances of good will could prove a "snare to your feet" (Jer. 18:22). Alluding to Hebrews 8:1, Henry declared that if he did not call on colonists to accept the inevitable clash, it would be an "act of disloyalty toward the Majesty of Heaven." In a more familiar reference to Jesus's arrest in the Gospels, he warned delegates to "suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss."

In his rousing conclusion, Henry asked, "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God!" The very last line contained a fascinating conflation of classical and biblical rhetoric. Raising his arms, he declared, "I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" The phrase "as for me" recalled Israel's leader Joshua placing the choice before the people to serve God or not. "As for me and my house," Joshua declared,



Patrick Henry Before the Virginia House of Burgesses by Peter F. Rothermel (1851)

"we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). And the iconic phrase "give me liberty or give me death" echoed a line from the well-known tragedy *Cato*, written by Joseph Addison in 1713 about the Roman hero Cato the Younger. The Patriots lived in a mental world populated with classical and Judeo-Christian champions.

Despite the manifest Christian influences on Founders such as Henry, there are reasons to question the idea of a uniformly Christian Founding. Among the major founders, there were relatively few examples of overtly traditional Christians. To find them, you generally have to look beyond the five or six who will get the most attention this year. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were clearly not orthodox believers, denying basic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the authority of Scripture. John Adams was respectful toward Christianity but was a Unitarian and liberal Congregationalist. George Washington and James Madison were likewise appreciative of religion but were guarded about their own beliefs. Alexander Hamilton lived no one's idea of a model Christian life,

“

AMONG THE MAJOR FOUNDERS, THERE WERE RELATIVELY FEW EXAMPLES OF OVERTLY TRADITIONAL CHRISTIANS.

”

though he did insist upon receiving Communion after he was fatally shot by Aaron Burr.

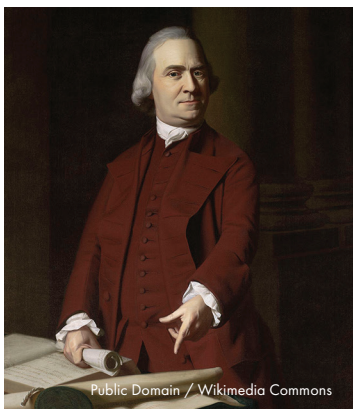
When you move past this all-star roster, however, there were plenty of founders who cultivated a deep Christian faith. These included Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, New York's John Jay, Connecticut's Roger Sherman, and New Jersey's Elias Boudinot. These were major leaders in the founding era, even if their fame has faded a bit today (except for Adams, due to the popular beer named for him). The devout Congregationalist Sherman was the only person who signed the four great state papers of the revolutionary era: the Continental Association (in which the Continental Congress agreed in 1774 to take unified colonial action against Britain), the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the U.S. Constitution.

Another representative Christian was the New Jersey Presbyterian John Witherspoon, the only active clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. Witherspoon had moved from Scotland to serve as the president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1768, and he became a member of and chaplain to the Continental Congress, where he signed the Declaration in 1776.

Witherspoon's popular 1776 sermon “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” posited that God's providence would determine the war's outcome. If Americans honored God and they fought in a righteous cause, they could have confidence in the results. Witherspoon exhorted Americans to “put your trust in God, and hope for his assistance in the present important conflict. He is the Lord of hosts, great in might, and strong in battle. Whoever hath his countenance and approbation, shall have the best at last.”

Witherspoon's oration was not a “God and country” stem-winder, as we might hear today in a patriotic evangelical service. He certainly did not assume that God must be on America's side. Witherspoon's sermon contained as much warning as encouragement. “Every good man ought to take in the national character and manners, and the means which he ought to use for promoting public virtue, and bearing down impiety and vice.” Virtue was essential in time of war. Not only did people court God's wrath if they were profane and irreligious, but impiety bred the kind of self-centeredness that would decimate the war effort. “Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction,” Witherspoon cautioned.

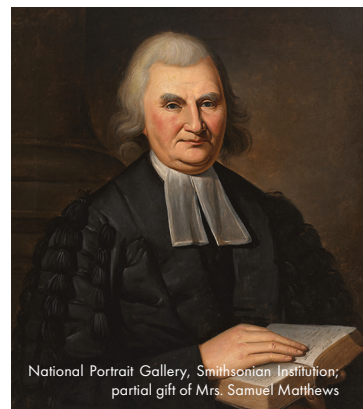
Samuel Adams, portrait by John Singleton Copley (1772)



John Jay, portrait by Gilbert Stuart (1794)



John Witherspoon, by Rembrandt Peale, after Charles Willson Peale (1794)



God did indeed deliver America through the Revolutionary War, even though George Washington and the Continental Army's leaders struggled terribly to maintain enlistments, to keep soldiers from going AWOL, and to obtain sufficient funding to supply the army's basic needs. (Thus their starving winter encampment at Valley Forge.) Once the war ended, Americans needed a final basis for national political union. This came in the form of the Constitution. Experience taught the founders that they couldn't assume that politicians or the people would be virtuous. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist*, "Men are not angels." Madison, the Constitution's primary author, believed that the new government possessed enough power to do what a competent government needed to do, but not so much power that it would become tyrannical. Assumptions about virtue and vice undergirded the Constitution.

And yet the Philadelphia convention of 1787 produced a document that said virtually nothing about God. We may roll our eyes at provocative secularist books like *The Godless Constitution* (1996), but they do have a point. The Constitution's only mention of God is the paltry reference to the "year of our Lord" 1787. When asked why the framers did not say more about the deity, Alexander Hamilton allegedly said, "We forgot."

We might more plausibly explain the curious omission by the fact that the Constitution is a technical frame of government. Unlike the Declaration, the Constitution contains little inspiring rhetoric that might have generated references to the divine. Still, God's absence is conspicuous and leaves one with the impression that the founders saw the national government as a "secular" one. But secular didn't seem to mean the same thing to them as it does for today's rigid, censorious left.

Christian-based principles of morality and sin still animated the framers' concerns about trustworthy and effective government. And unlike the U.S. Constitution, most of the state constitutions had religious oaths that required officeholders to affirm belief in the Bible or at least in God. New England states even maintained established, tax-supported Congregationalist churches for decades after the First Amendment (1791). The First Amendment's prohibition on an "establishment of religion" only limited the actions of Congress, not the states.

Also, there was little evidence that the founders envisioned "strict separation" of church and state, especially at the state level. You can also observe a

comfortable national partnership between religion and government in the Christian chaplains enlisted by Congress and the Continental Army, and in the explicitly Christian prayers and fast days proclaimed by the Congress during the Revolution. One of Congress's prayer day proclamations in 1777, for example, recommended that citizens offer "their humble and earnest supplications that it may please God through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot [their sins] out of remembrance."

Still, observers in 1787 and many decades afterward regretted that the Constitution included no affirmation of faith in God. Critics repeatedly sought to introduce an amendment that would insert specifically Christian language into the document, but to no avail. We may also recall that Benjamin Franklin, who called himself a Deist, proposed in 1787 that the Constitutional Convention open its sessions with prayer. His motion was supported only by a few other delegates (including Roger Sherman), and it was ultimately tabled.

In sum, the founders seem erratic regarding religion. How can we make sense of this puzzle? It appears that two essential principles about church and state were widely assumed by the founders, whether they were traditional Christians or Deists. One precept was that religion, and Christianity specifically, was the primary shaper of morality. As John Witherspoon had argued, the republic's survival depended on the virtue of its people. Some, such as Thomas Jefferson, contended that education also could serve as a primary source of moral fortitude, but most Patriots assumed that religion was its most vital wellspring.

As George Washington classically argued in his 1796 Farewell Address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness....And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Even Jefferson conceded in his First Inaugural Address that "our benign religion" [Christianity], practiced in many denominational forms, was a unique source of the people's "honesty,

truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man.” America desperately needed such values to endure as a nation.

The founders’ second widely assumed principle about church and state was religious liberty. This principle helps explain the Constitution’s secular appearance. The Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, adopted three main clauses regarding religion. One of them banned religious test oaths for national officeholders. The second and third clauses, both in the First Amendment, prohibited a national established church (an “establishment of religion”) and guaranteed “free exercise of religion.”

By 1791, the year the Bill of Rights was ratified, there was little controversy over a statement concerning free exercise of religion. But the ban on an established church and the prohibition on religious tests raised a crucial question for the framers. Should the national government partner with churches to enforce Christian belief and practice? Or should they emphasize free exercise of religion? In 1776, the founders were basically split on these questions. Some, such as John Adams and Patrick Henry, desired direct government support for religion, at least at the state level. But many other Patriots, including rank-and-file evangelicals such as the Baptists, simply wanted the ability to preach the gospel in freedom, with no government regulation of religion. As James Madison contended in his “Memorial and Remonstrance” (1785), Christianity did not need government aid, and the religion flourished in greater purity when disconnected from the state. Christianity, Madison wrote, “disavows a dependence on the powers of this world: it is a contradiction to fact; for it is known

that this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them” during the centuries from the apostolic period until the establishment of the papacy and its attendant state support. Baptists and other dissenters heartily agreed with Madison’s historical reasoning for religious freedom.

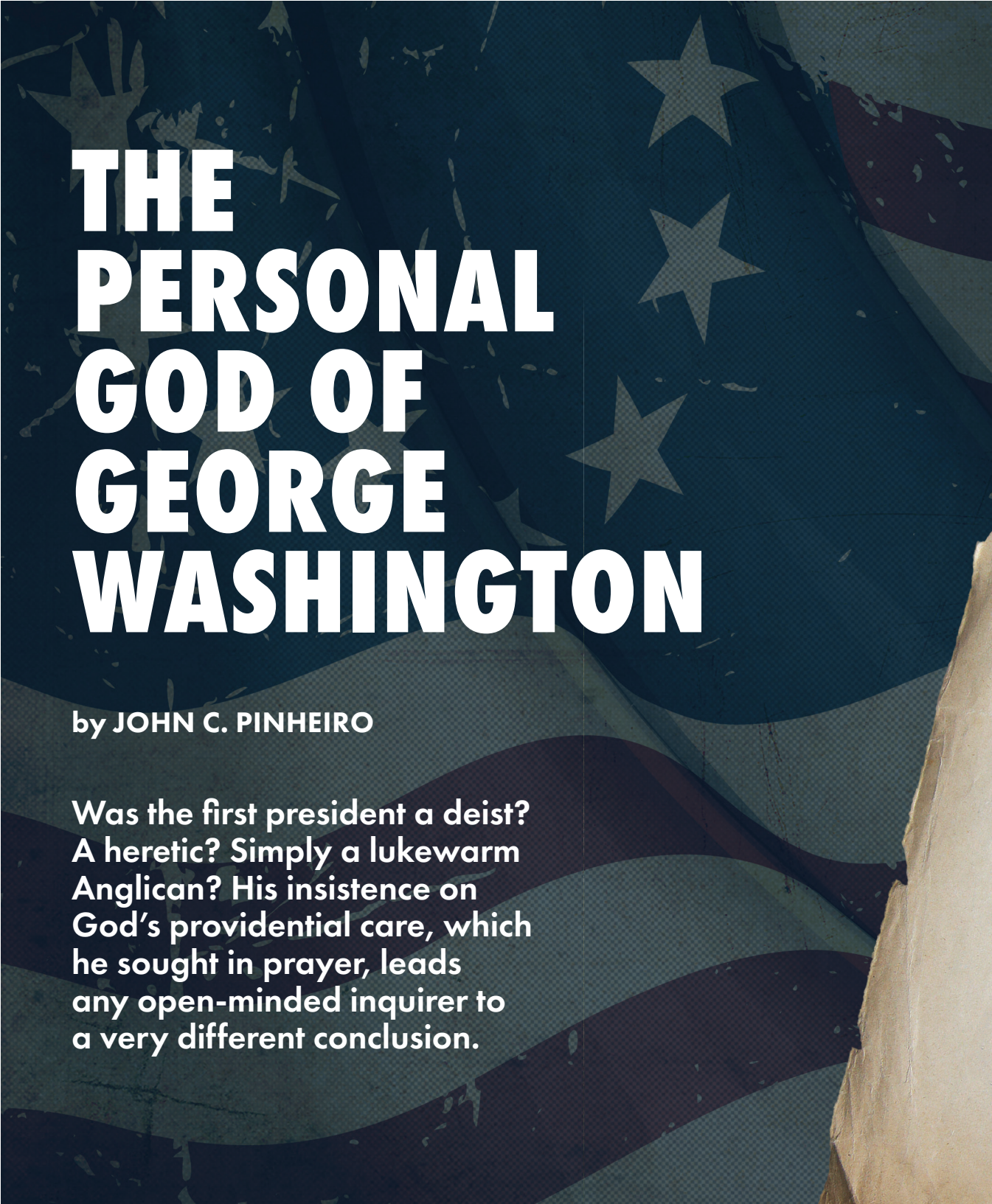
Although Massachusetts maintained its established church until 1833, Madison and groups such as the Baptists represented a wave of religious liberty that would dramatically change American law and religion. Not only did the Baptists and Methodists become the two largest Protestant denominations by the Civil War, but religious liberty also accommodated a great influx of Catholic immigrants starting in the 1830s. Though Catholics still faced various kinds of discrimination, there was broad understanding (one heralded by George Washington’s assurances to Catholics and Jews) that religious liberty was not just for Protestants. Under the umbrella of free exercise, America manifested a surprising combination of a secular political order, liberty of conscience, and a vibrant and diverse Christian (and Jewish) milieu that was unparalleled in world history.

“Secularism” in the American founding tradition, then, was definitely not anti-religious. America’s ideal of religious liberty held that religion was so important that government should take “no cognizance” of it, in Madison’s terms. The crucial desideratum was to keep the government from corrupting religion or denying citizens’ rights to free exercise.

Today, however, we see innumerable challenges to religious liberty and free exercise. These include attempts to coerce believers into acting against their consciences in the name of the LGBTQ+ agenda and other progressive priorities. We have also witnessed aggressive acts of protest and blatant violence against houses of worship and religious schools. In our nation’s anniversary year, we seem to be in a moment of cultural and religious decision. Will our post-Christian culture ever substantially return to founding ideals of Christian virtue and religious freedom? Or will the mandates of our post-Christian culture make America an increasingly unfriendly place for people of faith? **RL**

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**WHEN ASKED WHY
THE FRAMERS DID NOT
SAY MORE ABOUT THE
DEITY, ALEXANDER
HAMILTON ALLEGEDLY
SAID, ‘WE FORGOT.’**
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Thomas Kidd is research professor of church history at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. He is the author of several books including Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh.



THE PERSONAL GOD OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

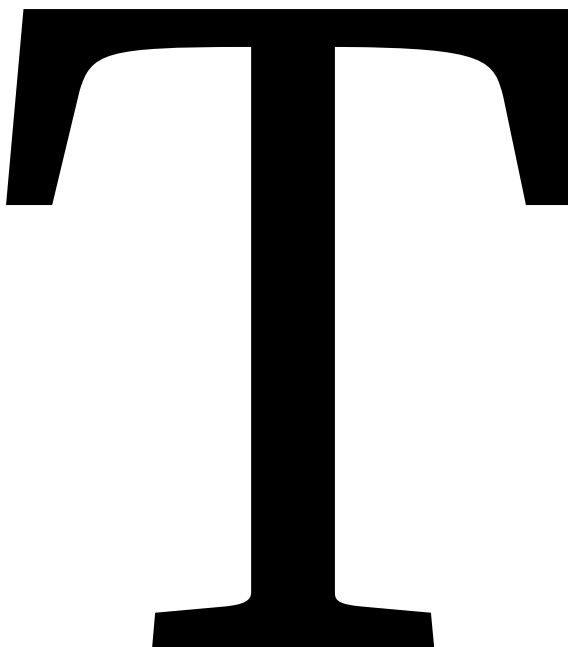
by JOHN C. PINHEIRO

Was the first president a deist? A heretic? Simply a lukewarm Anglican? His insistence on God's providential care, which he sought in prayer, leads any open-minded inquirer to a very different conclusion.

Composite image: Statue of George Washington / EJRodriguez / Adobe Stock; excerpt from Washington's 1783 Circular Letter to the States (overlaid on parchment) / George Washington Papers / Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; vintage parchment / denys_kuvaiev / Adobe Stock Betsy Ross flag design / nazlisart / Adobe Stock

I now make it my earnest prayer,
that God would have you, and the State
over which you preside, in his holy protection;
- that he would incline the hearts of the
Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordi-
-nation & obedience to Government, - to enter-
tain a brotherly affection & love for one
another, for their fellow Citizens of the United
States, at large, and particularly for their brethren
who have served in the Field, - and finally,
that he would most graciously be pleased
to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy,
and to demean ourselves with that charity,
humility, & pacific temper of mind, which
were the Characteristics of the Divine
Author of our blessed Religion, & without
an humble imitation of whose example
in these things, we can never hope to be
a happy Nation.





THE YEAR 2026 is one of the most important anniversaries in the history of ordered liberty. Americans, and the world, are observing the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This year is also the 250th anniversary of the publication of Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, the book that launched the modern study of classical economics.

There is another important, albeit lesser known, anniversary: the 20th anniversary of *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country* by Michael Novak and Jana Novak. This book holds a

special place in my heart because of its role in how I first came to know the Acton Institute.

I was a research professor at the University of Virginia editing the *Papers of George Washington* when Michael Novak began work on *Washington's God*. Thanks in part to a friendly exchange of letters between the two of us about Washington in *First Things*, over several months Michael and his research intern consulted me and my colleague, Frank Grizzard Jr., about Washington and religion. I was really the junior partner and Grizzard, author of *The Ways of Providence: Religion & George Washington*, the expert.

When Michael found out I was leaving Virginia for a tenure-track professorship in Grand Rapids, he praised my choice. Why? Because Grand Rapids was where the Acton Institute was located. He told me the first person I needed to look up on my arrival was his "good friend, Fr. Robert Sirico." I did, and the rest, as they say, is history.

So *Washington's God* is special to me for personal reasons, but why should it be of interest to you?

As Americans celebrate the 250th anniversary of their country's birth, many doubt its future. In doubting its future, they also question its founding principles, heroes, and myths. This includes increasing numbers on the right who should know better. Rather than seeking to conserve the universal principles at the heart of the American founding—human dignity, limited government, religious liberty, civil liberty—these critics instead blame them for America's social ills, cultural decay, and political pathologies.

Given his role as general-in-chief of the Continental Army, president of the Constitutional Convention, and the first president of the United States, Washington indeed was the founding's "indispensable man." Henry Lee famously called him, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Indeed, Washington is a Founding Father whom you will admire more, not less, the more you study him.

Due to his unquestioned importance, Washington's religious beliefs have preoccupied Americans for over two centuries. On the one hand, there are those well-meaning Christians who think proving Washington was a Christian will validate the founding and confirm that the United States was, is, and ever shall be a "Christian nation." On the other hand, there are those who think his alleged deism strips the founding of all religious meaning, revealing an overwhelmingly secular and even anti-religious event

with no intellectual or moral roots in the Western and Christian heritage.

In *Washington's God*, Michael and Jana Novak set out to tackle this debate, not as ideologues with foregone conclusions but as scholars interested in basing their assessment only on Washington's own words and actions. Their findings should play an important role in the fight on the right over the value of America's founding principles, for in the quest to identify Washington's god we encounter a microcosm of Americans' struggle to find the meaning of the founding on the occasion of the nation's 250th birthday.

Other scholars, the Novaks claim, have not taken "Washington's words about God seriously." In the 20th century most historians were just not interested in religion. This led them to characterize Washington as a deist, a practical rationalist, or "at best a tepid Anglican." These views can be boiled down to three theses: that Washington was a deist, that he lacked religious conviction but merely pretended to be a Christian for the sake of public appearance, and that by "Providence" he merely meant something impersonal like fate or destiny rather than the personal, loving, and holy God of the Bible.

The Novaks argue that when we combine Washington's own words related to God, religion, and virtue and his universal reputation as a man of integrity "who meant what he said, and did what he asked others to do, and acted seamlessly between

his private life and his public life," then we cannot conclude that Washington was a deist, a rationalist, or a tepid believer.

One strength of this book is that it reminds us first to take people at their word, for there are those who actually believe what they say. Where faith is concerned, this means taking religion seriously. If one starts from the Marxist perspective that religion is about power, class, and control, then that lens will shape one's conclusions. As I wrote back in 2011, in an essay for *The Imaginative Conservative*, "Taking religion seriously in our study of the past means first of all beginning with the assumption that people really believe what they say they believe."

Some self-understanding is in order as well. As the inscription on the Temple of Delphi in ancient Greece read, and as Socrates later affirmed, the key to wisdom is to "know thyself." When we acknowledge our own faults, we will not be so quick to dismiss others' religious beliefs as hypocrisy just because they sometimes fail to live up to them.

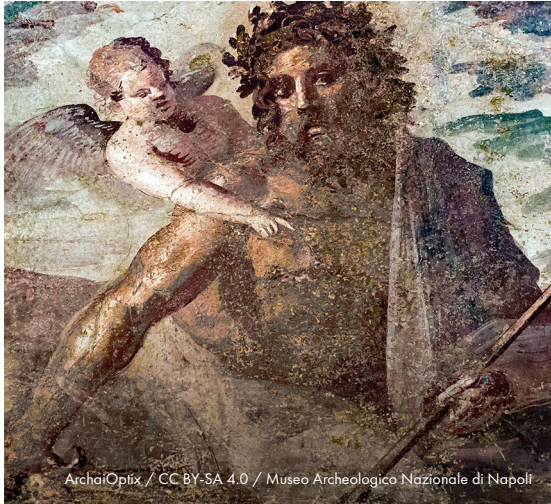
The core of the Novaks' argument is that if Washington was a man of integrity and not a hypocrite, then this fact ought to shape how we interpret what he said publicly and privately about God. "Our method...was to begin with trust in Washington's integrity."

Washington's God thus devotes considerable space to establishing the role of virtue and integrity in Washington's life, explaining why and how he gained this reputation. There are many examples, including his decision to free his slaves and provide support

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”

Washington praying at Valley Forge, engraving by John C. McRae (1866), based on a painting by Henry Brueckner





Fourth Style Pompeian fresco of Zeus with Eros

and education for them and their descendants upon his death. But the one that is the most biblical (i.e., one of the three temptations offered to Christ by the devil) involved Washington's refusal to become a king when he could easily have done so. This impressed many, including King George III.

Along with acknowledging Washington's integrity, a second key to making sense of his religious views is to understand what he meant when referring to "Providence." The Novaks demonstrate how Washington's experiences on the battlefield shaped his understanding of God's Providence. It was the battlefield more than the Book of Common Prayer that taught Washington to pray to God for blessings and to offer him thanksgiving.

Washington was so convinced of the connection between piety and divine favor that he mandated paid chaplains for all Continental Army encampments. The chaplains' job was to "implore the blessings of heaven" and to offer "thanksgiving to God" in order to "continue to deserve his future blessings." We must, he told his men, be grateful for "the miraculous care of Providence." God's "interpositions" and "Divine favour" would be needed for what Washington said was a righteous cause. Impiety, said Washington, threatened a loss of God's blessings.

Washington did not equate Providence with unstoppable destiny. His sense of Providence also was not the understanding of fate we see in Homer's *Iliad*, wherein success or failure is dependent on the whims of Zeus:

There are two urns that stand on the door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike for the gifts they bestow: an urn of evils, an urn of blessings. If Zeus who delights in thunder mingles these and bestows them on man, he shifts, and moves now in evil, again in good fortune. But when Zeus bestows from the urn of sorrows, he makes a failure of man. [trans. Lattimore]

Our destiny is not determined by whim. Nor is it a faceless kind of fate like the kind the writer of *Beowulf* accepts when he declares, "Fate goes as fate must." According to the Novaks, for Washington Providence meant "the total sovereignty of God over concrete contingent events and the benevolence of God," even amid trials. It was more a sharpener of one's character and opportunity for virtue than a predetermined outcome.

Washington's appeals to Providence reveal that he thought it involved a test of one's faith under pressure. This helps explain his serenity during the worst days of the Revolutionary War: "Ours is a kind of struggle designed I dare say by Providence to try the patience, fortitude and virtue of Men." For Washington, acknowledging Providence enabled men to face great difficulties while developing the virtues needed to persevere, whether in victory or in defeat.

In other words, Washington knew that appealing to Providence does not mean one always wins. But it does mean that one faces life's difficulties with prudence, fortitude, and realism.

What Washington learned on the battlefield he joined to what he knew as a regular churchgoer familiar with the *Book of Common Prayer*. The result was an anthropology with a realistic but uncynical view of what he could expect from others. With its

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PROVIDENCE DOES
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ALWAYS WINS.**



Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Leutze (1851)

“balance between avoiding too much pessimism in bemoaning human depravity, on the one side, and taking its affirmation that God had also given humans a certain nobility . . . too far to the other extreme,” the *Book of Common Prayer* confirmed Washington’s own experience.

As Washington himself put it, “We must take human nature as we find it.” It is harder to be a utopian ideologue grown bitter from human frailty and easier to be patient and magnanimous with others when one’s understanding of human nature is rooted in a recognition that the human person is a mix of aspirational and real virtues with passions and interests.

In the end, the Novaks assert, it was this realism about human nature that enabled Washington to act “as a Christian general ought to act.”

Along with Washington’s integrity, sense of Providence, and Christian anthropology, another way to identify the god of Washington entails investigating what late 18th-century deism was and what it was not. The Novaks do this in a chapter that everyone who lazily proclaims that “the founders were deists” ought to read.

Citing the work of Avery Dulles, the Novaks point to deism as an unintended fruit of the Protestant Reformers’ critique of the Catholic engagement with philosophy and reason. Protestants thought that

Catholics had overemphasized reason and veered too strongly into paganism, not only in philosophy but in art. “Luther called reason ‘the Devil’s greatest whore’ and the ‘greatest enemy that faith has.’”

Anglicans, meanwhile, argued that moral truths could be learned through reason alone. Thus, it should not surprise us that deism first arose in English efforts “to boil Christianity down to its most practical points.” This entailed the study of human nature. As the Novaks put it, these early deists “did not so much deny Christian doctrines as try to find doctrines of reason that performed the same practical work.” Few in England lampooned Christian beliefs like the intellectual leaders of the French Enlightenment or hated Christianity like the Jacobins of the 1790s did.

These early modern deists, in the Novaks’ telling, were different in important ways from the theist philosophers of the ancient world. First, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero were pre-Christian and unfamiliar with Judaism. Second, the earliest Christians admired the ancient theists for uncovering through philosophy so much about God without having access to revelation. Divine Providence had prepared them to accept the gospel. As C.S. Lewis put, “A pagan...is a man eminently convertible to Christianity. He is essentially pre-Christian, or sub-Christian, religious man. The post-Christian man of our day differs from him as much as a divorcee differs from a virgin.”

Between the ancient philosophical theists and the modern deists lay over 1,500 years of Christianity. The modern deists relished the task of “stripping away” as much Christianity and Judaism as they could from what they saw as a reasonable belief in an impersonal, creator god. In reality, however, as they stripped away the miracles, the Incarnation, and other Christian beliefs, Enlightenment deists unknowingly “borrowed many themes from the Jewish-Christian past: fraternity, equality, liberty, compassion for the most vulnerable, sensitivity to the category of cruel and inhuman treatment of human beings, the moral evil of slavery, and the rest.” All the while the deists had faith that they had learned these things through reason alone.

The Novaks assert that this is why “deism is best understood as an attitude, a posture,” more “a movement of the imagination, such as romanticism, than like an ideology composed of one set of clear ideas.”

Taking this all into account, the Novaks (correctly, in my view) conclude that Washington was not a deist. The idea that Washington was a deist does not fit with his own words and behavior. One does not call an impersonal deist god “holy,” pray to it, or thank it, let alone talk about seeking its favor and intervention. Nor does an impersonal god act in history through what Washington called “interpositions” or assess our piety and private behavior.

If Washington’s god was not the god of the deists, then to whom did Washington pray and give thanks?

The Novaks contend that Washington’s god was not only the God of the Hebrew Scriptures but also the God of the Christians. All this comes together in a prayer Washington attached as president to his Circular Letter to the States. In the letter, Washington asks God “to dispose us all, to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our Blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation to whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.” Washington is referring here to Jesus Christ and to the Christian theological virtues.

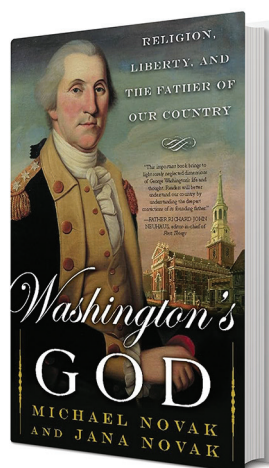
Having established Washington’s Christianity, the question remains of his attitude toward religious liberty. In our time of anti-religious secularism on the one hand and the illiberal promotion of Protestant triumphalism or post-liberal Catholic integralism on the other, we should want to know what the “Father

of his country” thought about religious liberty, especially if he was a Christian. Thankfully, *Washington’s God* is illuminating in this regard.

Washington “used more than reason alone,” the Novaks argue, “to come to his understanding of religious liberty.” His opinion on religious liberty grew out of his “theological anthropology,” which took account of “the way that God created human beings.” Freedom of conscience, for Washington, was rooted in the human person’s capacity to reflect and to choose, not the more practical goal of preventing sectarian violence. The State protects religious liberty because it is foundational to who the human person is, as a being whose mind was created to know the truth, to make choices, and thereby achieve character and virtue.

Washington’s respect for religious liberty did not just extend to his fellow Americans but even to America’s adversaries in war. In the name of liberty, Washington commanded Benedict Arnold to respect the Canadians’ religion during the Revolutionary War: “While we are contending for our own Liberty, we should be very cautious of violating the Rights of Conscience in others, ever considering God alone is the Judge of the Hearts of Men, and to him only in this Case, they are answerable.”

As general, Washington’s vigorous promotion of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion did not stop him from mandating chaplains. As president, he proclaimed days of thanksgiving and appealed to God for blessings on America. This began with his first inauguration, when “Washington reached beyond the Constitution to swear his oath of office upon the Bible; he even kissed the Bible upon taking the oath.” Here is one precedent that some historians dismiss



Washington’s God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country

By Michael Novak
and Jana Novak
(Basic Books, 2007)

as political theater. The Novaks argue that calling this “political theater” ignores everything we know about Washington’s character and sense of integrity.

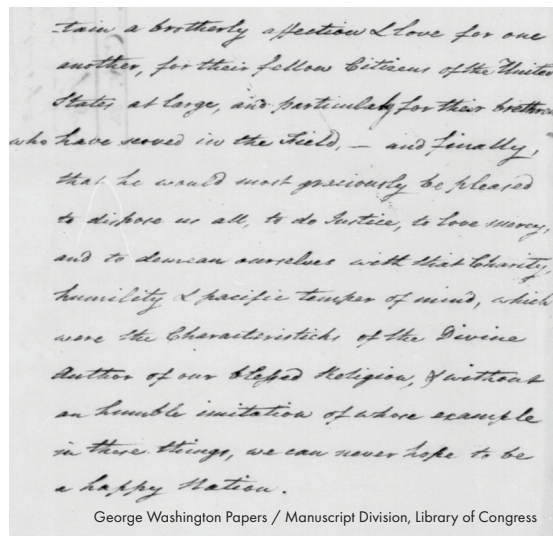
Arguably, the best-known words by Washington on religion come from his 1796 “Farewell Address”:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens....And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion....Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

At first glance these words can seem instrumentalist, seeing religion as a good only because it tends to create the preconditions for social and political stability. One needs to read the “Farewell Address,” however, in light of the totality of Washington’s religious statements and behavior over the course of his life. Washington believed that virtue comes from religion, and that to merit divine blessing in the plan of Providence requires piety. The precondition for virtue and piety is freedom of religion.

Questioning the principles of the American founding is not just an intra-American problem. Although American revolutionaries referred to the “traditional liberties of Englishmen,” they also believed that they were protecting and promoting rights that were universal to all humanity. These rights were universal because they were neither the gift of the State nor the peculiar inheritance of a single people. They were traditional among the English because, according to the Whig historians, Saxons had fought for liberty and self-government for centuries against arbitrary and centralizing tendencies of Norman rule. Among these “traditional liberties of Englishmen” were rights that were no less universal for having been preserved by centuries of common law jurisprudence and constitutional development.

It was not Washington but another Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, who brought these seemingly contradictory ideas of particularity and universality together. Jefferson did so first in his *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774) and then in the



Washington’s prayer in his 1783 Circular Letter to the States

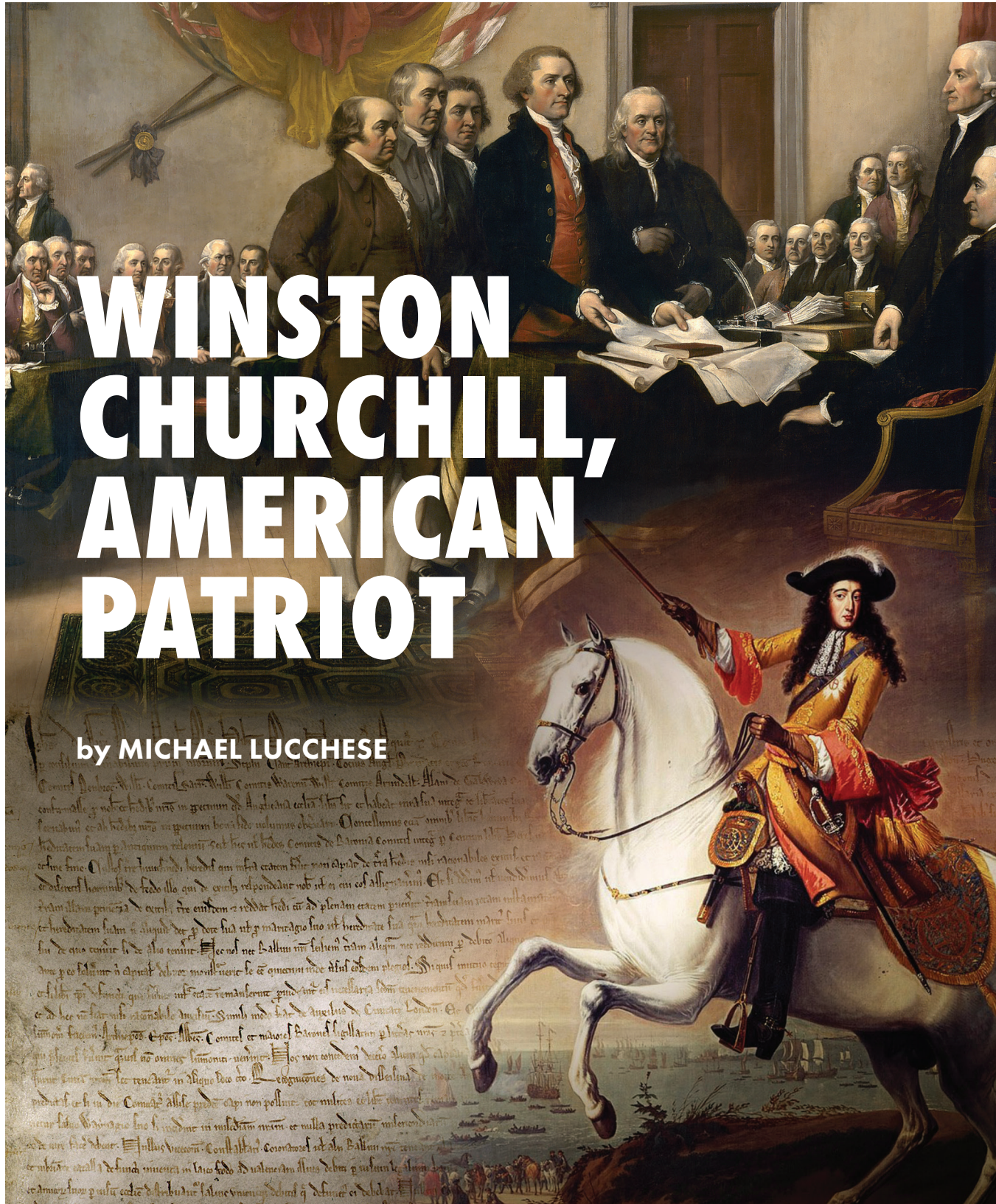
Declaration of Independence (1776). In the former, Jefferson wrote of “those rights which God and the laws have given equally and independently to all.” In the latter, he wrote of Americans’ “firm reliance on the protection of divine providence.”

Washington in some ways thought more deeply about God than Jefferson did. Washington believed in Providence not because he was as well read as Jefferson or had been to college like Jefferson but because he had seen God’s “interpositions” as general during the Revolutionary War. He also believed in Providence because of the peaceful settlement of difficulties among the United States that resulted in the U.S. Constitution.

As President Washington told several “Hebrew Congregations” in 1790:

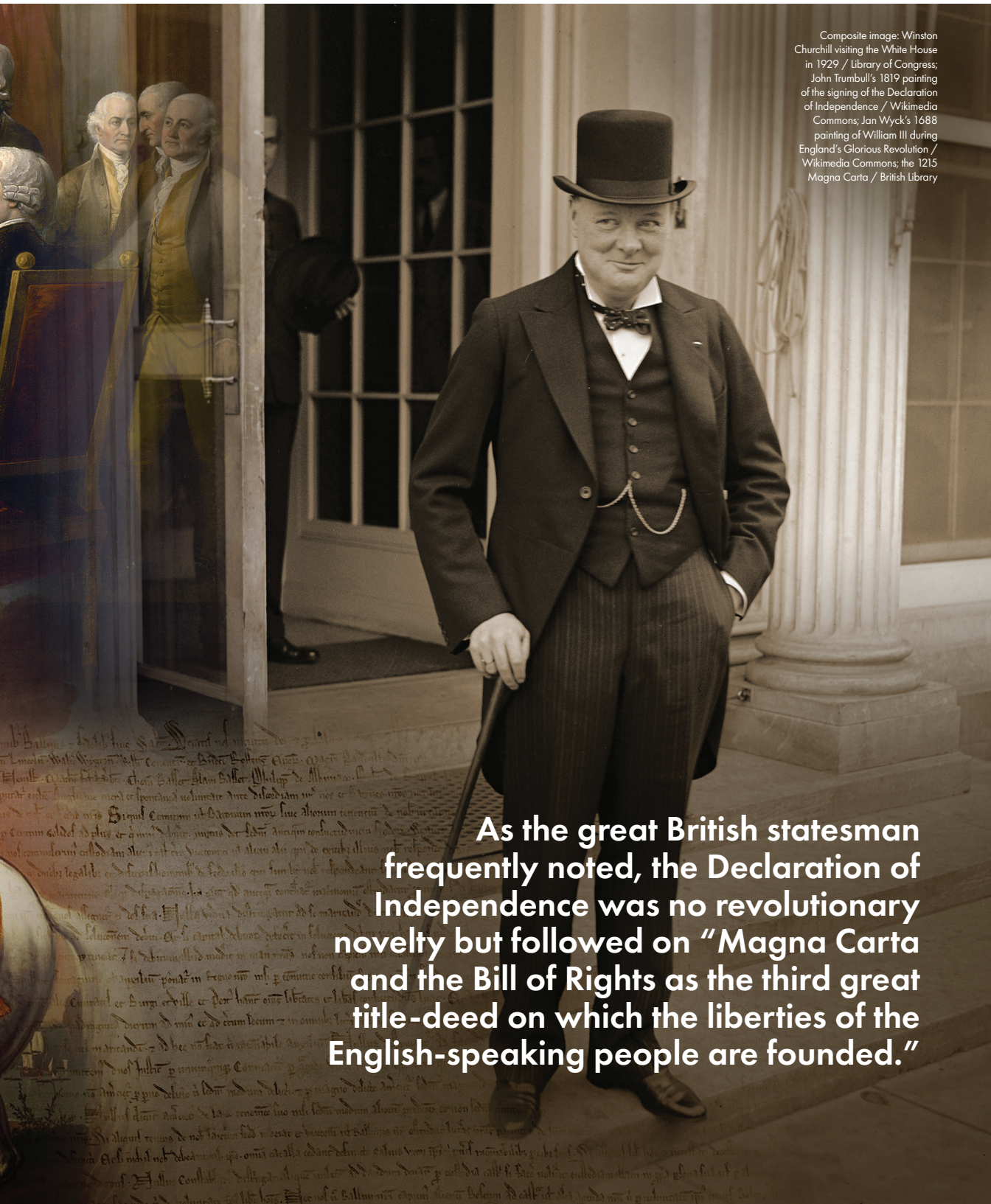
The Power and Goodness of the Almighty were strongly Manifested in the events of our late glorious revolution; and his kind interposition in our behalf has been no less visible in the establishment of our present equal government. In war he directed the Sword; and in peace he has ruled in our Councils. My agency in both has been guided by the best intentions. **RL**

John C. Pinheiro is director of research for the Acton Institute and author of The American Experiment in Ordered Liberty and Missionaries of Republicanism: A Religious History of the Mexican-American War.



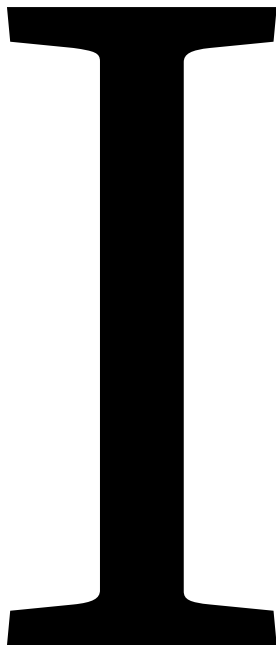
WINSTON CHURCHILL, AMERICAN PATRIOT

by MICHAEL LUCCHESI



Composite image: Winston Churchill visiting the White House in 1929 / Library of Congress; John Trumbull's 1819 painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence / Wikimedia Commons; Jan Wyck's 1688 painting of William III during England's Glorious Revolution / Wikimedia Commons; the 1215 Magna Carta / British Library

As the great British statesman frequently noted, the Declaration of Independence was no revolutionary novelty but followed on "Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights as the third great title-deed on which the liberties of the English-speaking people are founded."



IN THE 250 YEARS SINCE the founding, only eight people have been granted honorary citizenship in the American Republic. Some, such as the Marquis de Lafayette and Casimir Pulaski, played pivotal roles in winning independence itself. Others, such as Raoul Wallenberg and Mother Teresa, have been granted this high title because they were such powerful advocates of the ideals of human dignity. When Congress makes a foreigner an honorary citizen, it is a way of memorializing not just exceptional individuals but also the principles of the American Revolution they embody.

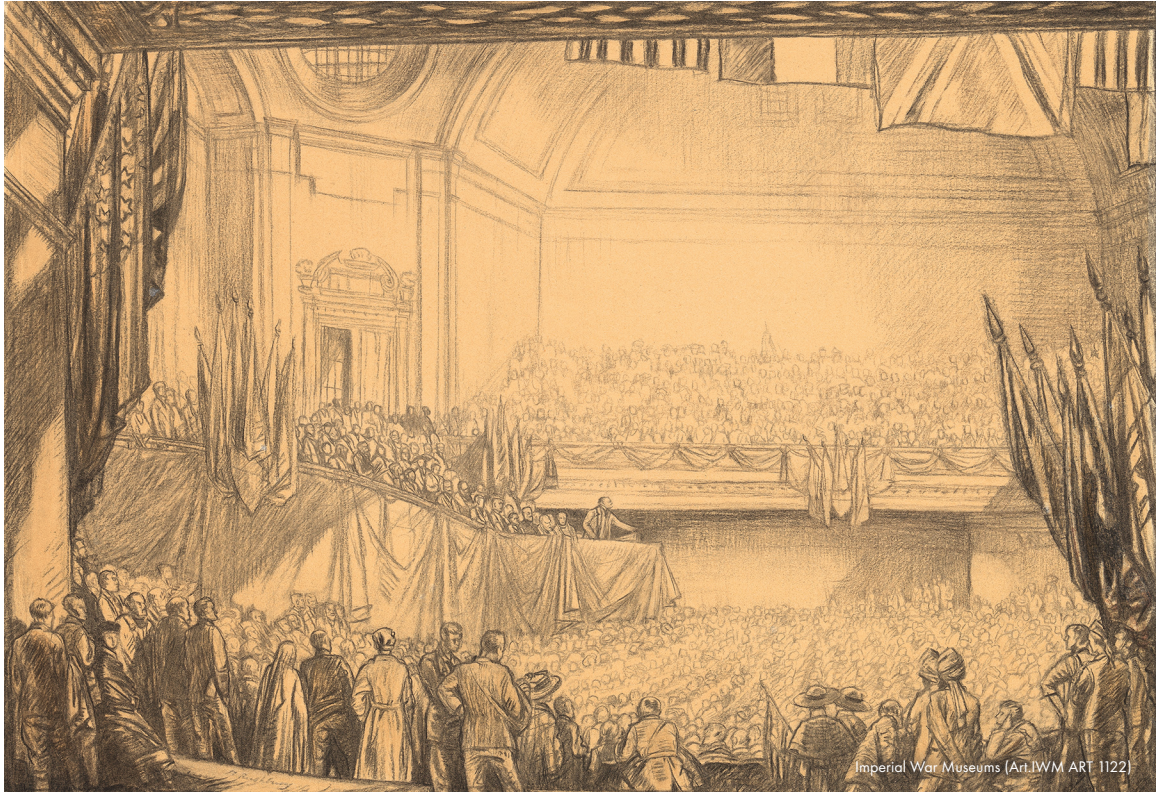
Before any of these heroes of liberty, though, the first person made an honorary U.S. citizen was an icon

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**CHURCHILL INSISTED THAT
THE DEFENSE OF WESTERN
CIVILIZATION DEPENDED
UPON THE ‘SPECIAL
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”

of Britishness: Sir Winston Churchill. In the August 1962 speech introducing a bill to award the rank to the former prime minister, Ohio Senator Stephen M. Young described him as “the hero of two nations.” But Churchill’s achievement goes beyond that. His fight against totalitarianism inspired people across the free world to resist tyranny. Churchill saved Great Britain and rescued the whole of Western civilization. It is altogether fitting and proper that the nation he often called the “Great Republic” would make him an honorary son.

Throughout his entire career, Churchill insisted that the defense of Western civilization depended upon the “special relationship” between the United States and the United Kingdom. The son of an American heiress and a British aristocrat (he had ancestors who fought on *both* sides of the War for Independence), he uniquely understood that the historical ties between the two nations go beyond a shared language. The English-speaking peoples were bound together by a common culture and an ardent love for liberty that Churchill believed was more precious than almost anything.

As American citizens today reflect on 250 years of independence, it is worth looking back to what our honorary brother had to say about our republic. Not only did Churchill understand the roots of American order, but he also sought ways to nourish them through both history and oratory. Furthermore, he attempted to found the post-World War II global order on those very same roots—not according to an arid universalism, but rather on the grounds of a truly rational conservatism that can balance principles and particulars.



Churchill giving his American Independence Day speech at Westminster in 1918, charcoal illustration by Henry Rushbury

Churchill may have been born to a long line of British aristocrats, but he was a great admirer of the American Revolution. He devoted long chapters of his multivolume, Nobel Prize-winning *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* to narrating its events and uncovering its principles, for example. And in public speeches in both the United States and Great Britain, he consistently drew connections between the struggle of the American founders to establish a free republic and the modern fight against tyrants and totalitarians.

Perhaps his most beautiful discourse on the theme came on July 4, 1918, in a speech given at Westminster honoring Independence Day. At the time, World War I was still raging. Imperial German forces' final spring offensive was only just beginning to falter after Allied troops, bolstered by American reinforcements, put up a fight at places like Aisne and Belleau Wood. Europeans, generally speaking, were ecstatic the United States had finally entered the conflict just in time to turn the tide. Churchill shared his countrymen's gratitude, but he also offered a somewhat more sophisticated interpretation of American involvement.

Churchill began that July 4 speech—perhaps unusually for an Englishman—with praise for the Declaration of Independence. “A great harmony exists between the spirit and language of the Declaration of Independence and all we are fighting for now,” he said. Churchill believed that World War I was about more than the petty squabbles of empires; the Allies were fighting, he argued, to vindicate self-government itself. Without falling into the excess of Wilsonian idealism, he was clear-eyed about the real threat German imperialism posed to Europe and the rest of the globe. The Americans, he understood, were joining the fight on the side of freedom against autocracy precisely because of the founding's principles.

Churchill went on to hail the American founding for defending the universal truths of human liberty. “The Declaration of Independence is not only an American document,” he said. “It follows on Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights as the third great title-deed on which the liberties of the English-speaking people are founded.” While the precise causes of the American Revolution may have been avoided had cooler heads prevailed on either side of the Atlantic,



Churchill's "Roaring Lion" portrait (1941) by Yousuf Karsh

Churchill recognized that the Patriot cause was essentially just. In fact, the then-British Minister for Munitions recognized that the American Revolution was a kind of jolt that Great Britain needed to pursue justice more closely. "By [the Declaration] we lost an Empire, but by it we also preserved an Empire," Churchill said. "By applying its principles and learning its lesson we have maintained our communion with the powerful Commonwealths our children have established beyond the seas." From Churchill's point of view, the American Revolution led to a kind of refounding of the British Empire.

Whatever the misunderstandings of the past might have been, Churchill believed that by 1918 the English-speaking peoples had long let the unpleasanties slip away. During that world crisis, they were united as never before in a battle against autocracy.

Against the Kaiser's vision of absolute rule, the Allies were fighting for limited government and constitutionalism—the only effective safeguards of human liberty. As Churchill put it in the speech's peroration:

Wherever men seek to frame politics or constitutions which safeguard the citizen, be he rich or poor, on the one hand from the shame of despotism, on the other from the miseries of anarchy, which combine personal freedom with respect for law and love of country, it is to the inspiration which originally sprang from the English soil and from the Anglo-Saxon mind that they will inevitably recur. We therefore join in perfect sincerity and simplicity with our American kith and kin in celebrating the auspicious and glorious anniversary of their nationhood.

These were principles that would continue to shape the way Churchill viewed and spoke about the “special relationship.” Later in his career, for example, in his famous “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri, the statesman would recur to the principles of traditional English liberties and the Declaration of Independence to sketch a vision for a free world strong enough to resist totalitarianism. “We must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principles of freedom and the rights of man,” he said, “which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world and which through Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, and the English common law find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence.” Throughout his entire public life, Churchill insisted that these ideals were something more than the ideology of liberalism; he taught us that the principles of English liberty and the American founding are high principles, worth fighting and dying for.

All the same, it would be a mistake to suggest Churchill sought to impose an abstract ideal of Anglo-American liberty on the whole world. He did not even seek to redefine British politics according to American principles. Churchill was, after all, a loyal monarchist and a defender of his native land’s parliamentary system—far different from the congressional system established by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. As a conservative in a Burkean mold, Churchill did not believe any nation should abandon its historic institutions in favor of a supposedly more “rational” scheme of social organization. Political establishments are strongest, he felt, when they emerged organically and reflected the wisdom of many generations rather than the innovative or destructive spirit of the present.

In this, Churchill’s view of the American founding greatly resembled that of the great conservative thinker Russell Kirk. The Michigan writer—who once witnessed Churchill speak at a campaign rally and described him as “common sense incarnate”—hardly recognized the American Revolution as a *revolutionary* at all. Kirk insisted “that the Patriots of 1776 intended no radical break with the past” and “thought of themselves as conservators rather than as innovators.” The men of Massachusetts and Virginia who led the rebellion felt that Parliament was appropriating powers it did not rightly command; they fought back, at first, to defend traditional English liberties.

The founders did not set out, Kirk argued, to build a republic as some kind of utopian experiment. If anything, they considered themselves to be following the example of their ancestors who, in 1688, overthrew a tyrant Stuart king to reestablish the liberties they had in turn inherited from their forefathers.

Churchill’s own treatment of the American Revolution in *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* also draws out its similarities to the Glorious Revolution. “The Declaration was in the main a restatement of the principles which had animated the Whig struggle against the later Stuarts and the English Revolution of 1688,” he wrote. The founders may have been attempting to establish liberty in conditions that the human race had never before faced, but they were guided by the lamp of experience. Their knowledge of history and reverence for the past made their labors a fundamentally conservative work. Any attempt to revive the order they constructed must be performed along similarly conservative lines.

The U.S. Constitution is perhaps the best illustration of this lesson. As Churchill acknowledged, a written constitution was in a certain sense “something unheard of in the existing world.” Indeed, he

Russell Kirk (1918–1994)



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acknowledged, the very idea of an “authoritative document” outlining all the responsibilities and limits on government “presents a sharp contrast with the store of traditions and precedents” comprising Britain’s unwritten constitution. “Yet behind it lay no revolutionary theory,” he continued. The delegates to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 were not reengineering society according to the egalitarian ideas of European *philosophes*; instead, Churchill explained, they were attempting to base their frame of government on “Old English doctrine freshly formulated to meet an urgent American need” in a sort of “reaffirmation of faith in the principles painfully evolved over the centuries by the English-speaking peoples.”

Ingenious as the framers were, though, Churchill saw no need for every society on the planet to adopt precisely their preference for a written constitution. In a 1936 essay for *Collier’s* magazine, he even offered a stark critique of the concept itself. Churchill held that the spirit of the *unwritten* constitution lent a sense of continuity and cooperation to British politics and society that simply could not be found in the vastness of the American Republic. Across several centuries, “a jealous care for constitutional rights came to mark both the great parties of the State,” he wrote. “And as to all men the Constitution represented security and freedom, none would consent willingly to any breach of it, even to gain a temporary advantage.” A certain kind of traditionalism is native to the British Isles, and it is—or perhaps was—the best safeguard of freedom.

Despite this reverence for his homeland’s customs and mores, Churchill recognized that what he called the “rigidity” of the written U.S. Constitution achieved something of the same effect on this side of the Atlantic. “A prime object of the Constitution was to be conservative; it was to guard the principles and machinery of State from capricious and ill-considered alteration,” he wrote in the third volume of *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. “In its fundamental doctrine the American people acquired an institution which was to command the same respect and loyalty as in England are given to Parliament and the Crown.” The point of politics—to Churchill, at least—is not to craft a one-size-fits-all regime to impose perfect justice on all places, but rather to find the solutions best suited to a particular people. Certain principles such as government by consent, private property, and

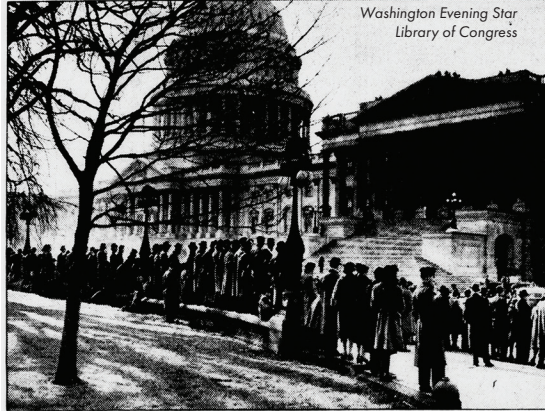
rule of law may be universal, but the particular ways they are instituted can never be.

In fact, Churchill considered the desire for a heavenly regime on earth to be one of the greatest dangers of the 20th century. Inspired at least in part by one of his great heroes, Edmund Burke, Churchill consistently framed his constitutionalism as a defense of the “wisdom of our ancestors.” As he put it in the *Collier’s* essay:

It is for these reasons among many others that the founders of the American Republic in their Declaration of Independence inculcate as a duty binding upon all worthy sons of America “a frequent recurrence to first principles.” Do not let us too readily brush aside the grand, simple affirmations of the past. All wisdom is not new wisdom. Let us never forget that the glory of the nineteenth century was founded upon what seemed to be the successful putting down of those twin curses, anarchy and tyranny.

Among Churchill’s other heroes was a great American, Abraham Lincoln. In his struggle against chattel slavery, the Railsplitter often made reference to the Declaration and its principles. Lincoln sometimes referred to the document as an “apple of gold” protected by a “picture of silver”—the written Constitution. Both were very doubtless of utmost value, but one could not exist without the other. Together, Lincoln held, the Declaration and Constitution articulated a “philosophical cause”: “the principle of ‘liberty to all.’” Just four score years later, Churchill would make similar arguments with regard to his own national crisis. For statesmen in this mold, the preservation of the institutions of self-government we have inherited is not a merely antiquarian endeavor.

Churchill drew on this principle especially when he came to rally the American people to action during World War II. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor during his December 26, 1941, address to a joint session of Congress, the prime minister declared he could never “feel quite like a fish out of water in a legislative assembly where English is spoken. I am a child of the House of Commons,” he went on to say. “I was brought up in my father’s house to believe in democracy. ‘Trust the people.’ That was his message.” Churchill then drew a direct connection between his father’s notion of “Tory



HOPING TO SEE PRIME MINISTER—Here is a portion of the crowd which stood in the Capitol Plaza today waiting for Prime Minister Churchill to emerge from the Senate chamber after his address before Congress.

Crowds wait for Churchill outside the U.S. Capitol (1941)

Democracy” and what he called “the Gettysburg ideal” of “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

English-speaking peoples on either side of the Atlantic, Churchill argued, may have differing political institutions, but they were united in a fight for freedom against fascism. In this respect, his message was little different in 1941 than it was in 1918. True, the United States and Britain faced dark hours ahead—while one speech was given toward the end of a war, the other was delivered only at its beginning. A long road lay ahead. And yet, Churchill told Congress, “the cause of freedom in every land, the question of whether deliverance comes in 1942 or 1943 or 1944, falls into its proper place in the grand proportions of human history.” Because Americans and Britons alike never swerved too far from the fight for constitutional liberty, he said, “As long as we have faith in our cause, and an unconquerable willpower, salvation will not be denied us.”

Indeed, Churchill said in an echo of his 1918 Independence Day address, the fact that the United States had finally entered the war had “led the subjugated peoples of Europe to lift up their heads again in hope.” The “famous ancient states” of Europe may have lain “prostrate under the Nazi yoke,” but America’s might promised a day of liberation. That day eventually came, and Adolf Hitler’s war machine collapsed—in no small measure because of the partnership between the English-speaking peoples Churchill forged.



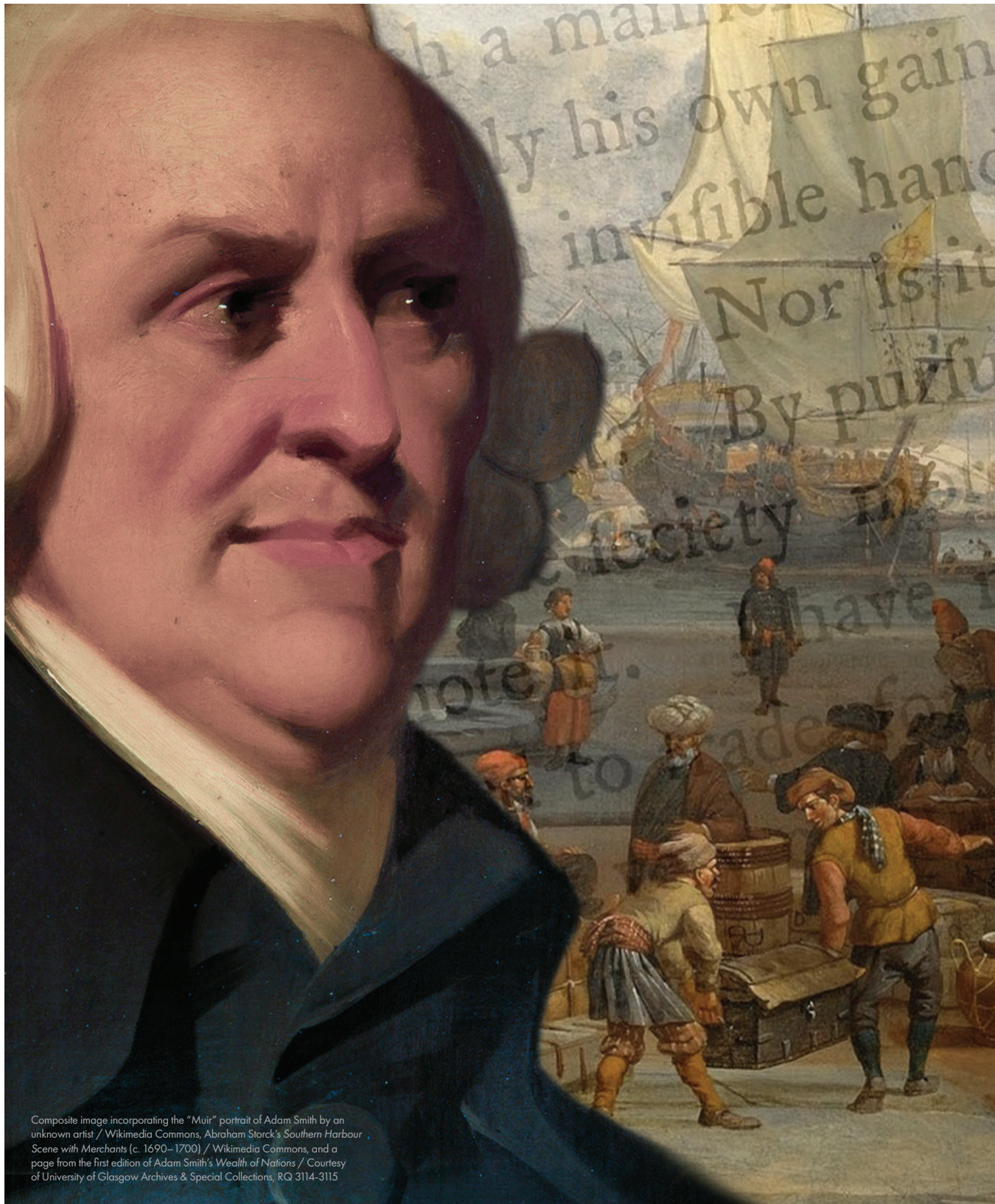
Terry Savage / Harry S. Truman Library & Museum

Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech in Missouri (1946)

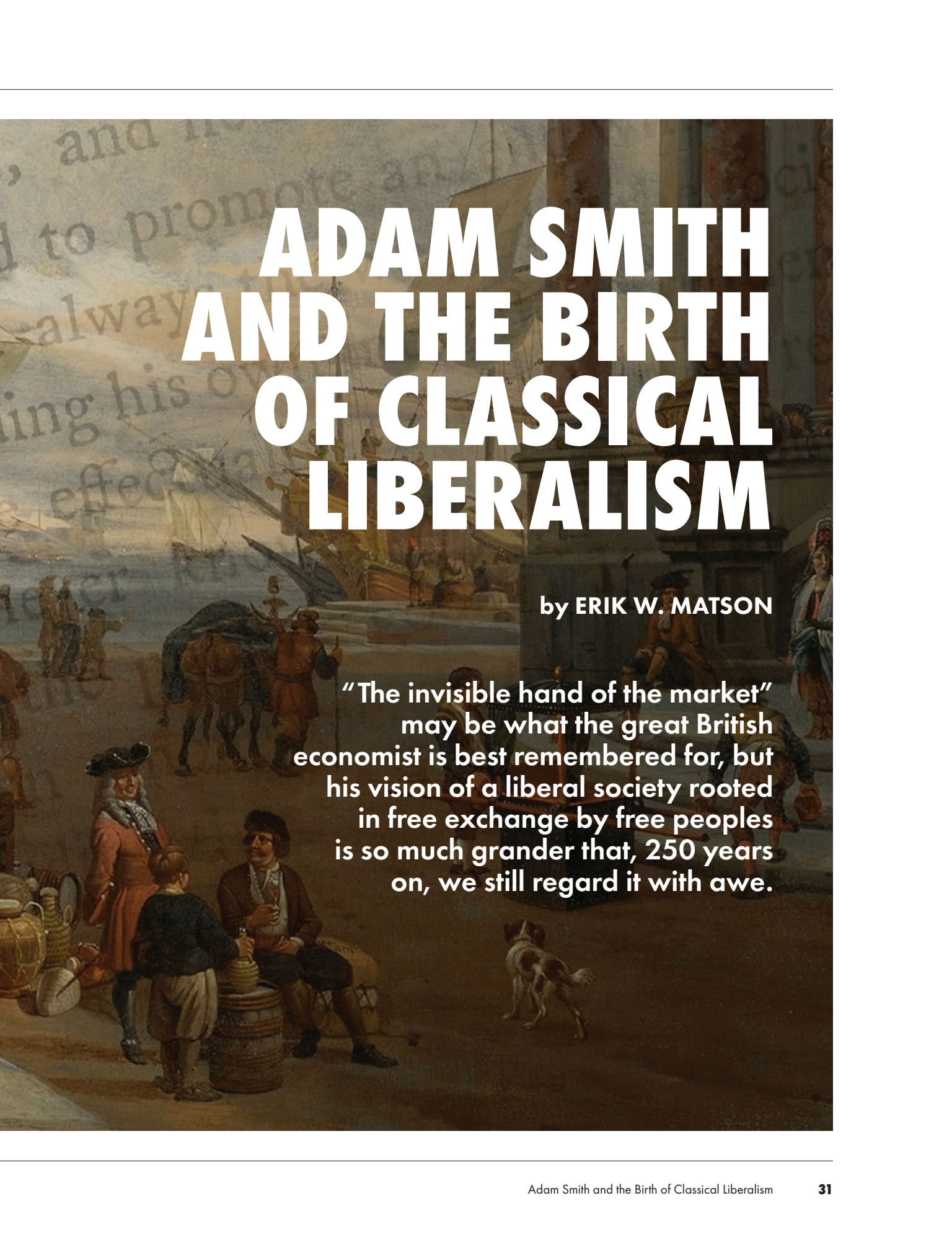
After the war, the statesman hoped that this partnership could be the basis for a just and lasting peace. While he supported institutions of international governance such as the United Nations, Churchill harbored no illusions about their effectual ability to check the imperialism of totalitarian powers such as the Soviet Union. He argued in his “Iron Curtain” speech instead that only “a special relationship between the United States and the British Commonwealth” could strengthen and enforce the will of a world organization. The slogans of liberals could not stop the Nazi or Soviet conquest of Europe. Only by sharing the physical and moral resources of our common civilization might we overcome tyranny in the modern age.

Two hundred and fifty years after achieving independence, it is tempting to see the “American experiment” as wholly unique. In some respects, to be sure, it is. But Churchill and other great conservatives would remind us that our Constitution did not emerge wholesale from a vacuum or descend from heaven. Its animating principles were discovered by our ancestors over the long centuries—and their example is perhaps the greatest source of strength we still have, if only we have the will to draw on it. **RL**

Michael Lucchese is the founder of Pipe Creek Consulting, an associate editor of Law & Liberty, and a contributing editor to Providence. He is also the editor of a new collection of Russell Kirk’s writings, On America: How to Understand the Legacy of 1776.



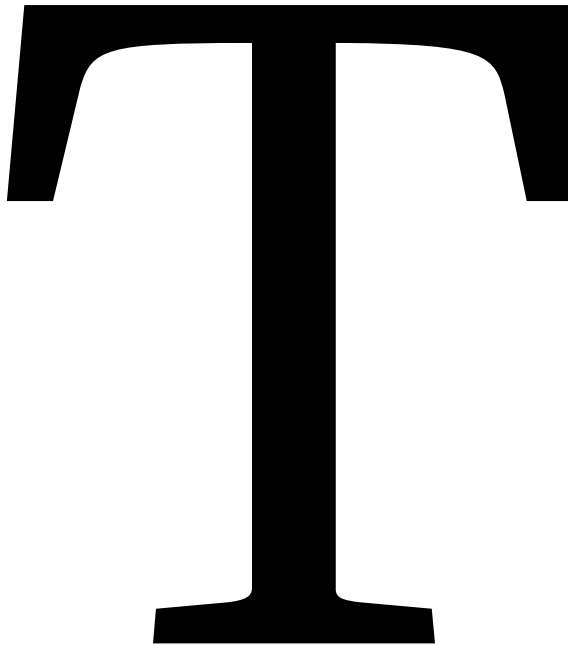
Composite image incorporating the "Muir" portrait of Adam Smith by an unknown artist / Wikimedia Commons, Abraham Storck's *Southern Harbour*, *Scene with Merchants* (c. 1690–1700) / Wikimedia Commons, and a page from the first edition of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* / Courtesy of University of Glasgow Archives & Special Collections, RQ 3114-3115



ADAM SMITH AND THE BIRTH OF CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

by ERIK W. MATSON

"The invisible hand of the market" may be what the great British economist is best remembered for, but his vision of a liberal society rooted in free exchange by free peoples is so much grander that, 250 years on, we still regard it with awe.



“THE MERCANTILISTS WERE the fetish-worshippers, the Catholics of political economy who treated money as the real incarnation of value. Adam Smith is like Luther in that he translates symbol into reality, money into labor.” So wrote Alasdair MacIntyre in his 1968 volume *Marxism and Christianity*. As Luther strove to pierce the fluttering veil of late medieval theology and find direct communion with God, so Smith strove to pierce the fluttering veil of mercantile thought and discover the true nature and causes of wealth.

Luther and Smith were protesters. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther planted himself against

the joint might of the Roman Church and the Holy Roman Empire, refusing to recant his theological convictions. It was there that he proclaimed the most famous words he probably never said: “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Two hundred and fifty-five years later, Smith planted himself against another formidable set of powers with his publication of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (WN). Luther had fulminated against a late medieval papacy enriching itself on the backs of poor German peasants. Smith now fulminated, in what he later described as a “violent attack,” against an expansive British state that enriched a few merchants, politicians, and adventurers at the expense of ordinary citizens.

One might, of course, take the comparison in a different direction. Luther, it has sometimes been said, catalyzed the coming apart of Western civilization. He facilitated the incursion of an impoverished set of theological approaches that eroded classical Christian understandings. Perhaps Adam Smith merely walked down the paths trod by Luther but a little further. Who are Smith’s butcher, brewer, and baker but disconnected individuals set adrift in Luther’s priesthood of all believers? What is modern economics but Lutheran individualism in mathematical garb?

One thing is clear: The name Adam Smith, like Martin Luther, has come to represent both a widely contested complex of ideas and a historical inflection point in the public imagination. How should we understand Smith in the 250th year since the publication of his great work of political economy?

William Strahan published Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in London on March 9, 1776. Smith’s friends responded to the work with great enthusiasm. The minister and rhetorician Hugh Blair wrote to Smith that the work “ought to be, and I am persuaded will in some degree become, the commercial code of Nations.” Adam Ferguson declared that Smith was “surely to reign alone on these subjects to form the opinions, and I hope to govern at least the coming generations.” Writing from his deathbed, David Hume told Smith he was “much pleas’d” with Smith’s “Performance.” The book had a “Depth and Solidity and Acuteness” that would recommend it to the public.

Even Smith’s intellectual opponents praised his accomplishments. Thomas Pownall, former governor of Massachusetts, disputed Smith’s conclusions about the costs and benefits of Britain’s colonial



Portrait of Adam Smith by John Kay (1790)

trade. But he did not hesitate to compare Smith to Isaac Newton and WN to the *Principia*. WN “might become an institute, containing the *principia* of those laws of motion, by which the system of the human community is framed and doth act.”

But notwithstanding the initial response of Smith’s friends and select critics, WN, as Richard F. Teichgraber III has documented, did not at first make much of a public impression. The book was initially much less successful than Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Strahan had printed two weeks prior. Smith’s “violent attack” on the British commercial system was not in fact the cause of much controversy. The book, as Smith remarked in his correspondence, was “much less abused than I had reason to expect.”

WN began to gain traction in Britain in the 1780s. Its rising reputation had much to do with agitations, beginning around 1778, for free trade with Ireland, and then more significantly with a British trade agreement with France in 1786 (the Eden Agreement). WN gradually became a tract for the times. By the end of the decade, references to the book could be found alongside references to Hume, Josiah Tucker,



Luther at the Diet of Worms, by Anton von Werner (1877)

and Arthur Young in parliamentary speeches. By 1792, two years after Smith’s death, Prime Minister William Pitt illustrated the extent of Smith’s ascendance when he asserted that WN provided “the best solution to every question connected with the history of commerce, or with systems of political economy.”

By the early 19th century, as Glory M. Liu has cataloged in *Adam Smith’s America* (2022), political economists and statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic sought to claim Smith’s increasing authority for themselves. Some did so by directly advancing Smith’s arguments for what he called “the liberal system of free exportation and free importation,” which he contrasted with an “illiberal and oppressive” political superintendence of private life. Others emulated Smith by cleaving to his pragmatism. This latter strategy was adopted, for example, by Henry Clay as he made the case for his “American System” of tariffs and industrial subsidies. Even the great liberal Adam Smith, it was said, allowed for exceptions to the presumption of free trade to support certain fledgling domestic industries.

In practice, Smith’s ideas may have been more honored in the breach. But by the turn of the century,

promoting it. By preferring the support of domestick to that of foreign industry he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invifible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the publick good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.

Courtesy of University of Glasgow Archives & Special Collections, RQ 3114-3115

A page from the first edition of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* shows his only direct mention of the "invisible hand"

his moral authority as a free trader and a liberal was widely assumed.

As Smith slowly transformed after his death into a public icon, many of the subtleties of *WN*, and an understanding of the context of Smith's political economy more generally, slipped away. The slippage was exacerbated by the increasing neglect of Smith's other great book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*), which provided an account of his moral psychology and ethics. German scholars who still engaged with *TMS* found themselves unable to reconcile its treatment of human nature with that found in *WN*. The famous "Adam Smith Problem" was born. Others—including Smith's first biographer, Dugald Stewart—viewed the ideas of *TMS* as incomplete, somewhat obscure, and if not in contradiction then at least irrelevant to Smith's ideas about political economy. Scholars were increasingly content to let the work lie dormant.

The dwindling interest in Smith's moral psychology and ethics coincided with a concerted effort made by some political economists to separate their discipline from normative concerns. John Neville Keynes wrote in 1891 that *economics* was to be preferred over *political economy* as "a designation for a positive science" separate from political, aesthetic, ethical, and theological considerations. Keynes's preferred

terminology of course caught on. Even as Keynes made his case in print, Alfred Marshall published his own flagship work in 1891: *Principles of Economics*, he called it, not *Principles of Political Economy*.

Beyond terminology, Keynes's methodology broadly obtained in the academic community. Many economists came to understand their discipline as an instrumental, value-free scientific enterprise. Committed to taking individuals as they are, rather than as we might like them to be, the discipline attempted to steer clear of ethical and political engagements toward what it took to be noncontroversial matters of fact. Economics in many quarters quite openly aspired to become a kind of social physics.

Throughout these developments, Smith remained the indisputable patron saint of the discipline he was increasingly said to have founded. The public perception of Smith shifted, however, along with the character of economists' self-understanding. As mid-19th-century proponents of industrial policy, and even late-century progressive economists such as Richard Ely, had attempted to shape Smith in their own image, so now did 20th-century neoclassical economists.

For the neoclassical school, Smith was a hardheaded social scientist. He did not hesitate to see us as we are: self-interested individuals principally committed to our own material betterment. The University of

Chicago economist George Stigler famously proclaimed that “*The Wealth of Nations* is a stupendous palace erected upon the granite of self-interest.” Self-interest could be held in check, even channeled toward productive ends, if properly constrained and directed. This was, as Paul Samuelson wrote in the most influential economics textbook of the century, *Foundations of Economic Analysis* (1946), “the mystical principle of the invisible hand.” Economists such as Kenneth Arrow were eventually able to demystify the principle, so to speak, and present it in a rigorous mathematical form. But the essential insight, they suggested, remained that which was first presented by Smith in 1776: Under an appropriate set of starting conditions, individuals pursuing their self-interests would bring about an efficient allocation of resources.

In conjunction with his long-standing association with the cause of free trade, the 20th century “invention of the invisible hand” by economists, as some commentators have put the point, produced the caricature of Adam Smith that widely obtains today in the popular imagination: an advocate of rugged individualism and laissez-faire capitalism whose ethical theory builds from a moral authorization of greed.

Smith scholarship has flowered in the past 40 years, however. Great strides have been made to recover a more holistic understanding of Smith’s ideas and his context. These efforts have been energized by a recovery of TMS, which has inspired a host of interdisciplinary perspectives on the interrelations between the moral psychology, ethics, and social commentary of that work with the political economy of WN.

Contemporary Smith scholars now agree that there are vital connections between TMS and WN

and perceive no fundamental discontinuity between the two works. Scholars agree that many have used Smith to promote ideas not present in his own works. Smith did not understand human beings as primarily self-interested, or as “rational” in the particular way that term is commonly used by contemporary decision theorists. Smith was by no means an apologist of greed.

There is less agreement about the enduring significance of Smith’s ideas. Disputes about Smith’s legacy persist along ideological lines. Right-leaning Smith scholarship maintains that the conventional view of Smith presented by mainstream economists, although not without its problems, is essentially correct. Smith really was an outspoken advocate of free trade and economic liberalization. He was skeptical of government power and understood the importance in politics and economics of incentive alignment. It is anachronistic to call Smith a libertarian, but the label is not entirely misleading.

Left-leaning scholars, on the other hand, fashion Smith in the image of modern progressivism. They maintain that Smithian ideas of liberty, equality, and justice, if we appreciate their specific logic in the original context of Smith’s texts, are consistent with the main tenets of the modern progressive agenda: sweeping economic regulations, progressive rates of taxation, and an expansive welfare state. Smith, it is said, was evidently concerned with issues of justice, fairness, inequality, and the corrupting social influence of large-scale, for-profit enterprise. It is not unreasonable to imagine that, were he alive today, he would identify as some sort of social democrat.

Left-leaning Smith scholarship today often builds on sound historiography. But its revisionary interpretations push too far. Because Smith’s philosophy

Richard Ely (1854–1943)



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was misconstrued and sometimes misrepresented, scholars conclude—or at least very strongly imply—that his ideas do not much support the causes he has historically been invoked to support. When we recognize that the political and ethical contexts of Smith’s trade arguments fell away in the late 18th century, we should reconsider the commonplace assumption that Smith was a strong free trader. When we see that Smith is much more sophisticated and nuanced than some economists—the Chicago School is a favorite target here—made him out to be, we should presume that Smith’s ideas are at odds with the main political cause they championed: the broadscale liberalization or de-governmentalization of society.

Such arguments are non-sequiturs. Context is of course important. But missing the full context of an argument does not necessarily mean that one has misapprehended its conclusions. One might even partially misapprehend the conclusion of, say, a political argument but still rightly perceive its tenor and the general direction in which it points.

Recovering a more robust picture of Smith does not require one to reject completely all aspects of his popular image, as is sometimes suggested. Smith did not condone greed. He did not argue that markets are “perfect,” however one might take such a statement. He did not believe that economic and political life could be separated. He did not denigrate statesmanship. He affirmed the need for government action, including the provision of some public goods. But Smith really was a protester for free trade. He really did believe that each should be free to pursue his interest his own way within the rules of justice. He really did believe that many political interventions distort economic activity, serving the interest of a few at the expense of the many. “The invisible hand” metaphor, although it grew in popularity in the 20th century, really does capture an essential element of Smith’s thought. It does not mean quite what some economists have said it means; but neither is it completely orthogonal to classic 20th-century economic interpretations.

What one finds through a deeper reading of Smith and his times is not something completely alien to common assumptions but something richer and more sophisticated that reformulates and sets those assumptions on stronger foundations. When we explore Smith’s great work of political economy within its ethical, philosophical, political, and even theological dimensions, we find something more compelling than, but not totally at odds with, popular readings of Smith as a committed advocate of liberty.



The University of Glasgow on High Street (1870)

Smith’s political economy subsisted within a wider enterprise of moral philosophy. Moral philosophy, as it was taught in Scottish universities in the 18th century, and as Smith himself taught it during his tenure at the University of Glasgow, moved from considerations of natural theology to discussions of moral psychology, ethics, politics, jurisprudence, and finally political economy.

The basic ordering of the curriculum of moral philosophy in Scotland brings out a commonly neglected point: Political economy was there conceived not as an independent study of commerce but as an outgrowth of an integrated study of social affairs, which was itself grounded in theological reflection on the nature and order of reality. Eighteenth-century political economy participated in what J. G. A. Pocock described as a “commercial humanism.”

The Christian theological framework contributed to a basic set of presumptions in Scottish social thought. Social orders are a providential outflow of the ordinary sentiments and activities of individuals. They do not need to be designed and maintained in any centralized manner. Rather, they bloom and flourish as individuals discover and abide by a basic set of universal moral principles, the most important of which correspond to three of the duties elaborated in the second table of the Decalogue: thou shalt not

murder, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Smith described these in *TMS* as the duties of “commutative justice.” We are commutatively just to another “when we abstain from doing him any positive harm, and do not directly hurt him, either in his person, or in his estate, or in his reputation.” When we obey the dictates of commutative justice—and the call of conscience generally—we may, Smith wrote, be said to “co-operate with the Deity” and advance “the plan of Providence.”

TMS is a work about the social and psychological processes through which we discover the principles of morality. *WN*, on the other hand, is partly an exploration of the extended social order that emerges when individuals subject themselves to the rules of commutative justice. *WN* is commonly said to work from the assumption that humans pursue their interests. That is true. It is important, however, to recognize that, for Smith, “interest” or “self-love” is not to be equated with egoism. As Smith’s teacher Francis Hutcheson remarked, “When men are said to be seeking profit or their own advantage, they are surely quite often serving their offspring and family.” Smith surely agreed.

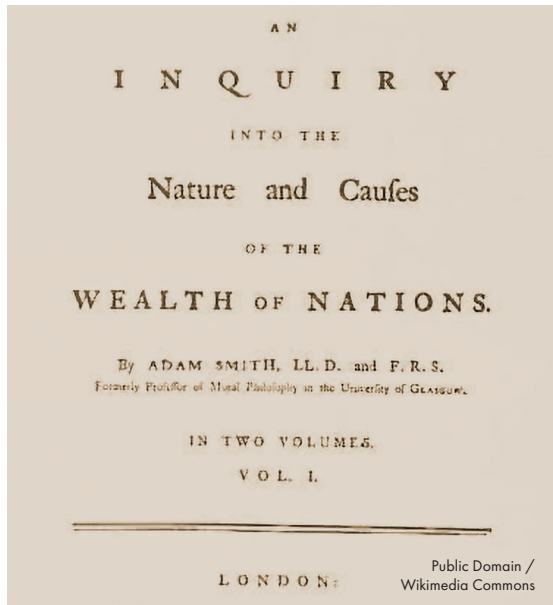
But it is also true that, as Jeffrey Young has argued,

“if self-interest is a bedrock [of *WN*], justice is a substratum.” Much of the famous economic analysis of *WN*, especially in Books I and II of the work, presupposes a basic ethical framework of commutative justice. When we tend to those presuppositions, we see clearly that *WN* is not simply a descriptive analysis that takes individuals as they are; it is also an effort to influence the ethical dimensions of our interests by elaborating the beneficial outcomes that can be realized, without political mediation, if we treat one another with justice.

To rehearse the basic arc of Smith’s analysis, Smith points out that abiding by the rules of commutative justice fosters exchange. Patterns of exchange give rise to the division of labor. As exchange networks grow, the division of labor extends, which spurs innovation and capital accumulation. Innovation and capital accumulation improve labor productivity, increase wages, and drive down prices. The whole process can be described as a cooperative enterprise. In pursuing the material betterment of ourselves and our familiars within the bounds of justice, we may be said to cooperate with one another. But more importantly, we may be said to cooperate with the Author of Nature in advancing the size and average

Smith’s division of labor in a modern automotive factory assembly line in Minsk (2021)





Title page from the 1776 London edition of *Wealth of Nations*

living standard of the human population. The economist Jacob Viner wrote to Alec Macfie, coeditor of the Oxford variorum edition of *TMS*, “The question for Smith, I think, is what does God want? And his answer, an adequate living standard for as many persons as possible.”

Through Smith’s analysis we see the enforcement of commutative justice as a mode—in fact, one of the most effective modes, at least as far as politics is concerned—of promoting the common good. When individuals behave justly toward one another, they indirectly promote an extensive commercial order that furthers their own interests and that of humanity generally. This is the essence of the invisible hand.

Invisible-hand-like sensibilities find further elaboration in Smith’s discussion of price formation. His treatment of prices, from a contemporary perspective, is somewhat muddled. But he correctly explains that actual market prices (as opposed to “natural prices”) are a function of a “higgling and bargaining” process. The market price of a good comes to reflect, at least in a metaphorical sense, its relative scarcity and utility or, in contemporary language, its supply and demand. Factors of production—labor, land, and capital—will be repurposed, if they are legally permitted to do so, in response to market prices as workers, landholders, and merchants compete for higher returns. The universal search for higher returns will, through the tendencies of competition,

encourage innovation and cost savings, ultimately to the benefit of consumers and the “good cheer of private families.”

While there is nothing mystical about market exchange in Smith, the macro-outcomes are truly remarkable. Hence, when Smith treats them in his famous discussion at the end of the first chapter of *WN*, he can’t help but resort to exclamatory statements of awe and wonder. One also can’t help but perceive something providential and reverential in the language Smith uses to describe, for several pages, the miraculous conjunction of processes required to produce even the most “coarse and rough” garment worn by the common “day-labourer,” the woolen coat.

Smith well knew that the potentialities he presented in his economic analysis were far from being realized in his own society. British politics in the late 18th century had been captured by various factions that promoted policies that served their own interests at the expense of the general public’s. These factions peddled a set of wrong-headed economic theories that are today glossed as “mercantilism.” The mercantilism of Smith’s day, in short, was a philosophy of power and plenty. It proposed that the wealth of a nation grows as it increases its exports of manufactured goods in exchange for precious metals, which it could use to fund military and colonial expeditions that would at once establish its geopolitical dominance and uncover new supplies of precious metals.

In Book IV of *WN*, for which he is most famous, Smith attacked mercantilist theory, beginning with its understanding of wealth. Wealth is not money but what money can buy: real goods and services available to citizens. But what really drew Smith’s ire was not

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”

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”

mercantilist misconceptions of wealth per se but the measures those misconceptions were used to support.

Mercantilists proposed a combination of tariffs, tax breaks (drawbacks), and production subsidies to encourage exports and limit imports to facilitate a healthy “balance of trade.” Smith took issue with such policies on economic grounds, drawing from the analysis developed in the earlier parts of the book. He lambasted the “absurd speculations that have been propagated concerning the balance of trade.” He took issue with mercantilist industrial policy, moreover, on epistemic grounds. Individuals in their local situations can “judge better than any statesman who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals.” Mercantilist speculations—and economic regulations generally—are akin to “absurd prescriptions of the doctor.” But perhaps most fundamentally, Smith took issue with mercantilist practice on ethical grounds.

Government by nature involves certain violations of liberty. The British state of Smith’s day had gone further. Not only did it violate liberties, but it used its authority to elevate the interests of a small group of citizens—merchants and politicians who offered one another mutual support—over the interest of the great body of people. Import taxes and subsidies raised prices and distorted resource allocation, reducing living standards for ordinary citizens; colonial ventures burdened the people with present taxes and future debt obligations for commercial benefits

that could be easily realized through a simple and less costly policy of free trade. For Smith, such elevation was not only counterproductive in economic terms, but deeply immoral: “To hurt in any degree the interest of one order of citizens for no other purpose but to promote that of some other, is evidently contrary to that justice and equality of treatment which the sovereign owes to all the different orders of his subjects.”

Underneath this proclamation rests Smith’s animating conviction that individuals are moral equals, whether street porters, philosophers, politicians or even the enslaved. (It is no coincidence that William Wilberforce was an admirer of Smith’s writings. *WN* treats of the economic inefficiencies of slavery, and *TMS* comments on the brutalities of the slave trade.) That conviction—which worked itself into the lifeblood of classical economic theory through the much-maligned assumption that *all* are to be analyzed equally as self-interested agents—is central to understanding Smith’s entire humanistic project.

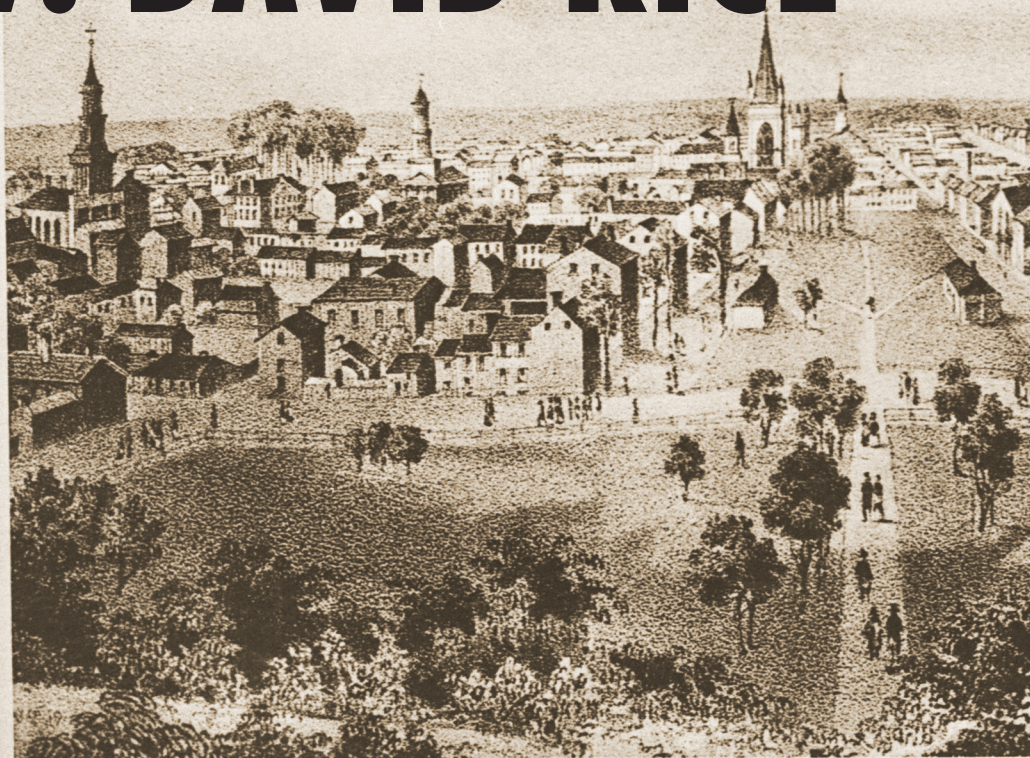
Amid his polemical engagement with mercantilism, Smith articulates his own ethical vision, which is implicit from the outset of *WN* and finds final expression as “the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice.” It is this formulation in *WN*, more than any other, that gave the word *liberal* its classical political meaning.

Smith’s liberal plan is, in some sense, not a plan, as it underdetermines the precise path of desirable political action in time and place. Smith appreciated gaps between the real and the ideal, and he understood that imprudent efforts to realize the ideal could easily end up making things worse—hence the conservative shades of his liberalism. But his liberal plan nonetheless points out the general direction of desirable reform. It casts a vision of faith, as relevant in 2026 as in 1776: When freed from political depredations and protected in their lives, liberties, and property, ordinary individuals, doing ordinary things in pursuit of material betterment, can discover and promote social improvement through voluntary association and the remarkable properties of market exchange. **RL**

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THE REVOLUTIONARY VIRTUE OF REV. DAVID RICE

by
CALEB
FRANZ



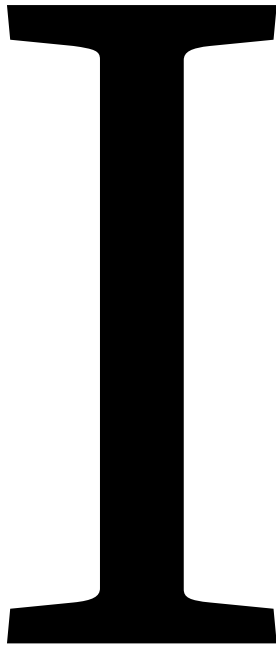
LEXINGTON, K
Taken from the Transylvania U



KY.
University.

**What may
at first seem
a long
series of
defeats may
in fact sow
the seeds
for great
victories to
come. The
life of one
frontier
minister
is proof.**

Bird's-eye illustration of
Lexington, Kentucky, sketched
by Ferdinand von Laer from
the rooftop of Transylvania
University's Old Morrison Hall
(c. 1851), built on the legacy of
Transylvania Seminary, which
Rev. Rice founded in 1785 /
University of Kentucky Libraries



IN 1783, REV. DAVID RICE crossed the Appalachian Mountains and stepped into Kentucky's wild frontier. As he traveled deeper into the wilderness and met with the settlers of the region, he found a deep melancholy blanketing the land and its people. Having battled his own depressive state since boyhood, he knew their feeling of hopelessness all too well. Rice had relied heavily on the comfort of God and the teachings of His word to guide him through his mental and spiritual darkness, but religion of any kind was scarce in the so-called dark and bloody land of Kentucky.

Just a year before his arrival, the American Revolution had been raging following the surrender

of Cornwallis at Yorktown in October of 1781. The war had proved especially difficult for the pioneers of the western theater. They weren't fighting for the lofty ideals outlined in the Declaration of Independence alone but for survival itself. The British had aligned themselves with the Indian tribes in the region. The conflict between the American frontiersmen and the British-allied Indians involved a far more brutal form of warfare than occurred in the eastern theater. This came to a head in August 1782, with the devastating defeat of American frontiersmen at the Battle of Blue Licks—Daniel Boone's own son, Israel, was among the casualties.

When the settlers weren't struggling to survive, they distracted themselves from the harshness of the wilderness by entertaining themselves with songs, dance, and strong drink. Many displayed tremendous faith in their journey to Kentucky and their resolve to endure the frontier, yet Rev. Rice found that the land's hardness had also hardened their hearts to spiritual matters. These sheep were lost and in desperate need of a shepherd. But even then, Rice hardly expected to be the one to answer such a call.

David Rice was born into a humble and pious family on December 29, 1733. His grandfather, a Welsh adventurer, came to Virginia while the colony was still young and acquired property in what is now Hanover County. On a return voyage to England to claim additional property, he died at sea, leaving his wife, nine sons, and three daughters to make their way in Virginia without him.

Among those nine boys was David Rice's father, also named David. The senior Rice worked as a simple farmer, content with his quiet life and with no desire to grow his farm into an enterprising plantation, as so many of his neighboring Virginians did. In fact, he and his wife abhorred slavery, believing it to be a sinful "plague" and an "unjust infringement on the rights of our fellow creatures."

Religion played an important role in the Rice household. The Rice children were taught the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments from an early age, and regularly attended church services. Yet as he developed his understanding of spiritual matters, such as the righteousness of God and the fall of man, the younger Rice began to suffer from depressive episodes. "When I was only six or seven years old," Rice later reflected in his memoirs, "I often prayed in secret,



View of the Peaks of Otter in the Blue Ridge Mountains

and ardently desired to escape punishment and obtain happiness after death. My prayers were frequently accompanied with many tears.”

Rice had a “great zeal for God, but it was not according to knowledge.” He wanted to know God but often struggled to understand the message of the gospel in these early years, his head filled with doubts and uncertainty. Throughout his youth, as his understanding of God’s grace and the sinful nature of man grew, he would swing between unspeakable joy and agonizing darkness. “I viewed myself the most miserable sinner under heaven,” Rice wrote.

In his memoirs, Rice recalls feeling totally unworthy of the grace God offers in the gospels through Christ. He felt himself a slave to sin, incapable of ever experiencing the presence of God due to this wickedness. Years of prayer and studying Scripture passed before he found relief, which came after some of the darkest, most distressing weeks of his life. In meditation, he encountered Matthew 23:37, where Jesus rebukes Jerusalem and reaffirms his persistent faithfulness toward his followers “as a hen gathereth her

chickens under her wings.” Though he had read the verse many times, it now struck Rice as if it were the first. Perhaps recalling scenes from his father’s farm, he reflected that the hen’s feathers, though not belonging to the chicks, were fully sufficient to protect them. All Rice needed to do, he realized, was to remain under Christ’s wing as a small chick. For now, this “full assurance” of God’s grace quieted his troubled mind.

In his newfound confidence of faith, Rice joined the College of New Jersey (Princeton). He obtained his bachelor’s degree, then returned to Virginia as he continued his study of divinity. He at last acquired his license to preach, entering the ministry in December of 1763. Around this time, Rice found an intimate and lifelong companion in Mary Blair, daughter of the well-respected Pennsylvania minister Rev. Samuel Blair. Mary was a woman of “uncommon strength of mind,” and in his marriage to her Rice finally felt he had “obtained favour of the Lord.” His wife’s prudence, reliability, and faithfulness soon proved indispensable.

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**‘WE CONTEND FOR
OUR ESTATES, FOR
OUR LIBERTIES, FOR
OUR LIVES, FOR OUR
POSTERITY, FOR THE
RIGHTS OF OUR KING
AND OUR COUNTRY,’
RICE DECLARED.**
”

Beginning his ministry, Rice filled the pulpit left vacant by Rev. Samuel Davies in Hanover County and preached there for four or five years. But along with Davies's congregation, Rice also inherited its internal disputes. Financial tensions ran high among certain members, and Rice's youthful brashness did little to ease them. The church was unable—or unwilling—to provide the support he needed. At last, Rice wrote to his presbytery, requesting release from the congregation. They obliged his request.

Rice was then a shepherd without a flock, unable to find a congregation willing to bring him on as their pastor. He offered ministerial services where he could but felt the tug of melancholy's return. This was alleviated only when Rice decided to head deeper into the frontier of Virginia—to Bedford County, where “no messenger of salvation had yet settled among” the sparse population.

Rice took his family to the Peaks of Otter in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Amid this community, he found Baptists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians alike welcoming him with open arms. These people had various racial and religious backgrounds, and were equally diverse in their country of origin. Finally, Rice found comfort in his community and great success in his ministerial efforts. He spent the next 13 years preaching in Bedford County.

During this time, the world around him was set ablaze. Further north, in Massachusetts, the first shots of the American Revolution rang out at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775. Within 15

months, the Second Continental Congress voted to officially dissolve all ties with Great Britain, declaring independence as the United States of America.

Rice was removed from the action of the revolution, but he was far from silent. Through his preaching, he helped foster a community deeply committed to the principles of American independence. In the early days of revolution, many colonists believed reconciliation with the British Empire was still possible. A Bedford County public meeting was held to address how they should react. In a stirring speech, Rice affirmed the just cause of the colonists to stand up in defense of their rights.

“We contend for our estates, for our liberties, for our lives, for our posterity, for the rights of our king and our country,” Rice declared to the people of Bedford County. Parliament, he believed, was ripping the empire apart. “This some in Great Britain already see; and I hope a vigorous and manly opposition on our part will soon open the eyes of others, rouse up the ancient generous spirit of Britain, bring just vengeance on the authors of these wicked counsels, and restore the chartered rights of America.” If this doesn't happen, Rice closed, “I fear the glory and prosperity of Britain is at an end, which may God of his great goodness forbid.”

Thus, when independence was finally declared in July of 1776, Rice cast his lot with the American cause. The survival and ultimate success of the American experiment was something Rice consistently invested in throughout his life. He believed the greatest threat to America's longevity and prosperity was not a foreign adversary but the integrity of its people.

“Ever since the establishment of American independence,” Rice later wrote, “and even for some time before, I have very much doubted whether we had political virtue sufficient to support our happy, free, republican government.” He considered it “impossible that we should long continue free and happy without a reformation in our principles and manners; and know of nothing that can produce this reformation but religion, religion to influence the mind and give it a happy direction.”

The issue of public virtue weighed heavily on Rice as he and his family prepared to enter Kentucky. During his years at the Peaks of Otter, Rice had built a comfortable and happy life, and he had little inclination to uproot himself again. But like so many preachers, then and now, he felt a persistent call to minister to those on the frontier.

His initial visit in 1783 was a success: Many of the settlers immediately requested he return and stay in Kentucky, with over 300 signing an invitation to return and serve as their minister. Convinced of his calling, Rice gathered his family and possessions and made the difficult journey across the mountains.

Yet within weeks of his arrival, Rice was once again overwhelmed with despair, fearing he had made a mistake. “I found scarcely one man and but few women who supported a credible profession of religion,” he wrote about his arrival. “With this I was considerably distressed, and made to cry, ‘where am I! What situation am I in?’” The warm welcome he had expected quickly gave way to the reality that true support was thin. He would labor for more than a year before establishing the first Presbyterian churches in the region—at Danville, Cane Run, and the Forks of Dick’s River.

As he toiled to bring religion to Kentucky, he also sought to bring education. After receiving a charter in 1780, Transylvania Seminary opened in 1785 in David Rice’s house near Danville. He sat as the chairman of the Board of Trustees for many years and also served as its first grammar school teacher. Thanks in large part to David Rice’s guidance and service, Transylvania became the first institution of higher learning west of the Appalachian Mountains.

With these religious and educational institutions, Rice hoped public virtue would begin to take hold in Kentucky. These endeavors made him increasingly lonely. Even as new ministers arrived, Rice sank “into my former melancholy.” He found these ministers lacking in proper theological understanding, thus threatening to “destroy both the spirit and practice of religion” in Kentucky. The isolation he felt only

intensified in the coming years as he confronted what he considered among the greatest strains on public virtue—the spread of slavery.

The road to Kentucky statehood began in 1784. In November, Colonel Benjamin Logan called for the frontier leaders of the region to meet in Danville to address a reported of impending Indian invasion. As they met, a disturbing realization swept over them: Little could be done without support from Virginia’s government across the mountains. A consensus was quickly reached: Kentucky statehood was both necessary and inevitable. The threat of attack from the tribes never manifested, but the issues of defense, overlapping land claims, taxation, and general distance resulted in a statehood convention called for December 27, 1784.

Between 1784 and 1792, 10 conventions were held to confront the pressing challenges facing Kentuckians and to draft a state constitution. Unlike Virginia, home to an extraordinary concentration of brilliant minds, Kentucky’s talent pool was far thinner. One notable exception was George Nicholas, a Virginian transplant whose legal mind rivaled many of his tidewater contemporaries. Nicholas became the driving force behind the creation of Kentucky’s state government, frequently corresponding with James Madison for advice through the statehood conventions. So respected were Madison’s constitutional insights that Caleb Wallace suggested that he remove himself from Virginia to be “politically buried in this Wilderness.” To this, Madison responded, “I do not smile at the Idea of transplanting myself into your wilderness,” although he was happy to continue to offer his “Ideas towards a constitution of Government for the State in embryo.”

While debates occurred over various issues throughout the conventions, nothing invoked the passions of the delegates like the subject of slavery. This was a direct result of David Rice’s presence, and Nicholas was his chief opponent. A slaveholder himself, Nicholas was convinced that without slavery, the gentry class from Virginia would not be incentivized to settle in Kentucky. He held firm that without their presence and participation, Kentucky would be held back.

Rice, in contrast, recognized the opportunity at hand. Kentucky was set to be the first state established beyond the Appalachian Mountains. As these conventions took place, the Continental Congress had passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, preventing slavery’s spread into the Old Northwest. If

New Providence Presbyterian Church in Salvisa, KY, founded by Rice in 1784 (current building erected after his death)





1942 commemorative postage stamp marking the 150th anniversary of Kentucky statehood

Kentucky followed this precedent, slavery's influence on the infant republic would be critically diminished and could possibly be eliminated without bloodshed.

Rice was the leader of a small but vocal delegation composed of ministers and general anti-slavery advocates. Rice recognized the difficulty of eliminating an institution that had been carried over from Virginia and practiced for decades in Kentucky already. But if it were not to occur at this convention, the opportunity may be forever lost. During the final statehood convention in 1792, he addressed the delegates in a speech entitled "Slavery, Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy." As he opened, Rice proclaimed that "as creatures of God, we are, with respect to liberty, all equal."

"If there is not in government some fixed principles superior to all law, and above the power of legislators, there can be no stability, or consistency in it," he told the delegates. "Liberty is an inherent right of man, of every man, the existence of which ought not to depend upon the mutability of legislation, but should be wrought into the very constitution of our government, and be made essential to it."

The solution, Rice determined, was simple. "I give it as my opinion, that the first thing to be done is to resolve *UNCONDITIONALLY* to put an end to slavery in this state." But he knew such a measure was

extremely unlikely in Kentucky, where "this evil is a tree that has been long planted, it has been growing many years, it has taken deep root, its trunk is large, and its branches extend wide." He argued that slaves had a "just claim to be freed instantly," but that due to the "bad conduct" of a generation of settlers planting the seed of slavery into Kentucky, "gradual emancipation only can be advisable."

Despite Rice's best efforts, the convention rejected his plea to sever ties with slavery. A motion was made to expunge the ninth article of the Kentucky constitution, which protected the institution of slavery, but it failed 16 to 26. Of the 16 to vote in the affirmative, 10 were ministers. Kentucky joined the Union on June 1, 1792—the first slave state west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Kentucky statehood convention was Rice's most prominent role in any political process. In part thanks to Rice's efforts, the Kentucky constitution upheld certain expectations of human dignity regarding enslaved individuals. It gave the legislature the "full power to pass such laws as may be necessary, to oblige the owners of slaves to treat them with humanity." This was admittedly a better outcome than many of the states

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**‘LIBERTY IS AN INHERENT
RIGHT OF MAN, OF
EVERY MAN; THE
EXISTENCE OF WHICH
OUGHT NOT TO DEPEND
UPON THE MUTABILITY
OF LEGISLATION.’**
”

in the Deep South would later permit. Nonetheless, Kentucky’s struggle over slavery continued in the decades to come, with anti-slavery forces repeatedly losing ground.

The 1792 constitution was never meant to be permanent. George Nicholas and others had hoped it would attract enough of the gentry class from Virginia to form a more stable constitution in 1799. Indeed, during the 1799 convention, several aspects of state governance were solidified, particularly support for slavery. This new constitution further disenfranchised blacks, Indians, and people of mixed race, while the provision dealing with slavery itself was upheld in its entirety.

Due to the influence of Rice and his ministerial anti-slavery caucus, the convention then voted to prohibit “any clergyman, priest, or teacher of any religious persuasion, society, or sect” from being eligible for the General Assembly. Ministers were also barred from the executive branch.

Following Rice’s removal from political life, he mostly focused on his ministry, but his reputation continued to suffer. He became known as a rather bitter and prickly man in his later years, and melancholy returned with a tight grip more often than not. Rice struggled financially, becoming the object of a crass poem that mocked him as a man who “cannot settle his affairs, Nor pay attention unto pray’rs.” In 1798 he removed himself from Danville to Greensburg, Kentucky, where he would spend the remainder of his life, passing away on June 18, 1816, at 83 years of age. The last words uttered by Rev. David Rice were “O when shall I be free from sin and sorrow!”

What is to be made of a life such as David Rice’s? On one hand, Rice was repeatedly met with failure after failure. He faced near constant financial ruin, he could not overcome slavery’s eventual (perhaps inevitable) spread across the Appalachian Mountains, and his ministerial work proved to be the butt of many jokes. He never truly escaped his sadness, which often resurfaced at the worst possible time. Considering these facts, his life appears a tragedy.

Yet that’s not the full picture. Thanks to his efforts planting churches at such a pivotal time in Kentucky’s development, religion spread throughout the frontier, eventually culminating in the Great Revival of 1800/1801. Because of this, many affectionately referred to him as “Father” Rice, and even the “Apostle of Kentucky.”

The energy he spent fighting slavery in 1792 failed in the short term but set the groundwork for future anti-slavery proponents to pick up the torch. Among these advocates was Rev. John Rankin, who would later be referred to as the “father of abolitionism” and got to know many of Rice’s colleagues during the few years he lived in Kentucky. Rev. John G. Fee—Kentucky’s most prominent abolitionist and the founder of Berea, Kentucky—was also influenced by Rice and distributed copies of “Slavery, Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy” throughout the commonwealth. Like John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, making straight the way for a greater glory yet to come, Rice laid the groundwork in Kentucky that allowed for the spread of religion and liberty in the 19th century.

Throughout the life of a Christian, remaining cheerful in the midst of strife and despair can feel impossible. Rev. Rice certainly fell victim to melancholy time and again. Faith is perhaps most difficult to maintain when our labor bears no fruit—or at least none we can enjoy. Rice’s life is a reminder to us that God does not promise a reward for our faithfulness in this life—but this is not cause for despair. Even when we do not get to see results, we can have assurance that all things work together for good. While Rice repeatedly suffered in his service to God’s will, he remained faithful until the end. **RL**

Caleb Franz is the program manager at Young Voices, a scholar with the Bluegrass Institute, and the author of The Conductor: The Story of Rev. John Rankin, Abolitionism’s Essential Founding Father.

IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Benjamin Rush: The American Revolution's Indispensable Doctor

by JOSEPH LOCONTE

ONE OF THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL conversations in American revolutionary history occurred in a Philadelphia bookstore, a meeting place for colonial leaders unhappy with the English Crown. In March 1775, Benjamin Rush, a young physician, walked into the shop. He was introduced to a down-on-his luck British ex-patriot hired by the shop's owner, Robert Aitken, as an editor for his new *Pennsylvania Magazine*.

Rush had been working on a document arguing the case for American independence. But he wasn't sure he should publish it because Philadelphia was the place of his livelihood, and the city was divided over the question of independence. "I shuddered at the prospect of the consequence of it not being well received," he wrote later.

Impressed by this British national, Rush suggested he should take up the task instead. The man agreed. His name was Thomas Paine.

Paine ultimately produced a pamphlet so persuasive that it is widely credited with turning the tide of public opinion in the colonies. "The cause of America," he wrote, "is in a great measure the cause of all mankind." Paine was the author, but Rush was his muse: The doctor heard every chapter, read out loud by Paine as he composed it. And Rush gave the 47-page pamphlet its famous title: *Common Sense*.

Rush soon overcame his reluctance to publicly embrace the American cause.

When Congress named Thomas Jefferson to draft a formal Declaration of Independence, the colonies were already

drawing up their own individual declarations. Rush must have impressed the Pennsylvania delegates because they gave him the job of writing that state's declaration.

On Sunday evening, June 23, 1776, Rush sat down at a table in his parlor and started writing.

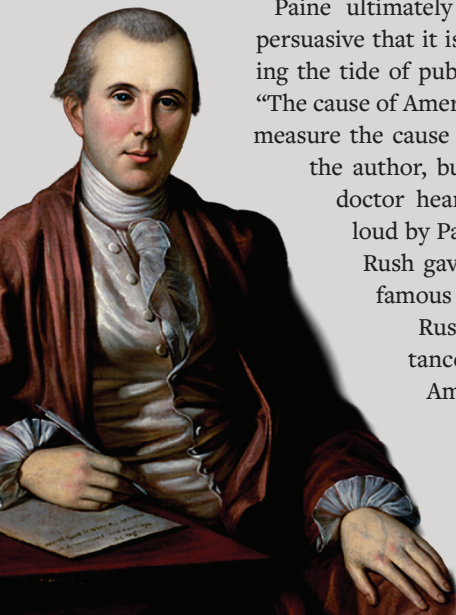
We call upon the nations of Europe, and appeal to the great arbiter and governor of the empires of the world, to witness for us that this declaration did not originate in ambition or in an impatience of lawful authority; that we were driven to it in obedience to the first principles of nature, [and] by the oppressions and cruelties of the...king and parliament of Great Britain.

Rush's document was enthusiastically adopted by the Pennsylvania statehouse. Jefferson's version, formally severing the ties between Great Britain and the American colonies, was approved by the Second Continental Congress on July 4.

Selected as a delegate to the Congress, Rush added his name to Jefferson's Declaration, effectively signing his own death warrant. At 30 years old, he was one of its youngest signatories. He immediately enlisted as a field surgeon in George Washington's Continental Army and was on hand during the battles at Brandywine, Trenton, and Princeton.

Yet Benjamin Rush was much more than a dedicated physician and patriot. He was a fervent abolitionist, a pioneer in psychiatry, a leader in education, an advocate of criminal justice reform, and a man of deep religious conviction.

Indeed, in the legacy of Doctor Rush we find the alliance of reason and revelation: Enlightenment



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ideals about human freedom framed by historic Christianity. Like many colonial Americans, Rush absorbed the writings of John Locke alongside his King James Bible.

On the eve of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Rush wrote a cautionary address to the American people. “The American war is over,” he wrote, meaning the war for independence. “But this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed.”

The next great task—designing a constitution that would secure the rights and freedoms proclaimed in the Declaration—was at hand.

Although Rush was not a delegate to the convention, he was a member of the Pennsylvania state convention to ratify the Constitution once delivered. He gave impassioned speeches urging unconditional adoption. Arguably the most important state in the union, Pennsylvania helped lead the charge for ratification.

It is hard to think of another colonial leader who more fully embodied the principles of the Declaration and the Constitution. Consider Rush’s early opposition to slavery: If freedom and equality were the birthright of every human soul, he reasoned, then slavery must be the enemy of the American Revolution. “The plant of liberty is of so tender a nature,” he wrote, “that it cannot thrive for long in the neighborhood of slavery.”

His 1773 pamphlet, “Address to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies upon Slavekeeping,” delivered a devastating assault on the institution. “Future ages ... will be at a loss which to condemn most, our folly or our guilt, in abetting this direct violation of the laws of nature and religion.” He berated white ministers who defended an institution “repugnant to the genius of Christianity.” Rush called for an end to the slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery in the colonies.

A leader in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the nation’s first major anti-slavery organization, Rush financially assisted the black churches of Philadelphia. In one of the most extraordinary moments in the early years of the republic, Rush participated in a banquet celebrating the roof-raising of a black church in the city. “About 100 white persons, chiefly carpenters, dined at the table, who were waited upon by Africans,” he recorded in his journal. “Afterward about 50 black people sat down at the same table, who were waited upon by the white people. Never did I see people more happy.”

On the same day the Treaty of Paris was signed, officially ending the Revolutionary War, Rush joined the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital. His approach to caregiving was visionary: He emphasized “the influence of imagination and will upon diseases,” instructing his medical students to demonstrate great patience and compassion for the sick. The Scripture teaches us, Rush said, to “make the measure of our love to our fellow creatures, the same as the love of the Author of our religion was to the human race.” He also revolutionized care for the mentally ill, making the Pennsylvania Hospital a pioneer in their humane treatment.

Thirty years after the Revolution, in 1805, Rush got into an exchange with his friend John Adams over the future of the American republic—a debate as deeply relevant today as it was 250 years ago. Adams wondered whether the character of the nation was republican enough. Were virtue and honor the principles guiding the government or had those principles been supplanted by ambition and greed and the disease of faction? “These are Serious and dangerous questions,” Adams wrote, “but serious men ought not to flinch from dangerous questions.”

Rush’s answer came in the form of an essay, “The Bible as a School Book,” a plea for civic education rooted in the Scriptures. The sacrificial love of Jesus, expressed in his death for all mankind, offered the strongest foundation for republican government. “For this divine book, above all others,” Rush argued, “favors that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues which constitute the soul of republicanism.”

Many today would scoff at the suggestion, given our intensely pluralistic society. Yet the eradication from all levels of education of the moral bedrock of biblical religion has taken its toll: a generation of young people anxious, angry, and alienated from one another and from the American story. Add to that a political culture lacerated by partisanship and the lust for power.

If we hope to renew the vision of 1776, perhaps that Old Time Religion—like that of the Revolution’s indispensable doctor—is the place to begin. **RL**

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Digging for America's Jewish Roots

How “Hebraic” is the American concept of liberty and equal rights? Perhaps the answer is to be found in how deeply immersed the Founding Fathers were in the Bible.

by **SAMUEL GOLDMAN**

LEO STRAUSS ONCE OBSERVED that “there exists a kind of Jewish glorification of every clever or brilliant Jewish mediocrity—which is as pitiable as it is laughable.” Every Jew who has received, for some long-ago birthday present, a book on great Jewish football players or a similar topic knows what he means. Strauss recalled that his distrust of this tendency was so great that he initially refused to believe reports of Einstein’s stature in science. It was only after a physicist friend reassured him that he acknowledged the achievements of the great genius.

A related tendency can be found in popular historiography. I have often rolled my eyes in the gift shops of museums and historic sites, which seem disproportionately stocked with works discussing Jewish contributions to American life. Jews in the military,

Jews on the frontier, Jews in the petroleum industry. It doesn’t seem to matter how marginal or attenuated the connection may be. If there were any Jews to be found in some past time or distant place, they’re certain to be found in the pages of books today.

For that reason I opened *Jewish Roots of American Liberty: The Impact of Hebraic Ideas on the American Story* with a certain trepidation. The essays in the collection are written by leading scholars and educators and intended as a reference for teachers in faith-based schools, rather than as a souvenir for vacationers. Still, I feared the inclination toward glorification and magnification that Strauss diagnosed.

I should not have worried. The contents of *Jewish Roots* do not claim that Jews “invented” America or were even major players in public affairs until fairly

recently. Instead, they focus on the pervasive influence of language, stories, texts, and imagery drawn from the Hebrew Bible (or, as Christians saw it, the Old Testament). This influence was particularly intense in the colonial and revolutionary periods, when narratives of exodus, tyranny, and redemption helped settlers and patriots understand and justify their struggles. But it continued into the 20th century, when the Bible remained a widely shared inspiration for aesthetic as well as political culture.

These observations might not have been necessary under better educational conditions. Within living memory, Americans were much more familiar with the Bible and comfortable with its use as a repository of language, moral teaching, and historical information, as well as a source of religious authority. That sensibility was partly the result of formal instruction. In K–12 schools, biblical texts and even group prayers were still part of the curriculum. In colleges and universities, the then-lively field of American Studies documented how biblical themes infused American life and literature from the very beginnings of European settlement. These conditions help explain how Martin Luther King Jr. could speak of seeing the promised land from a mountaintop and Ronald Reagan could describe America as a city on a hill and both could expect to be understood by their fellow citizens.

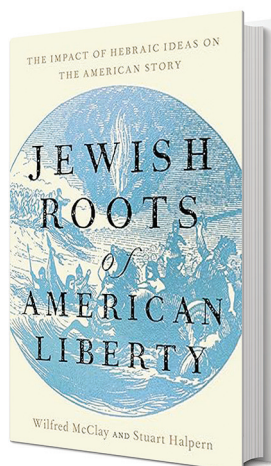
That shared framework was undermined by overlapping though distinct trends in law, public policy, and culture. Among them was the emergence of strict separationism in jurisprudence following the Second World War. Guided by the aspirations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison more than by historical

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**‘HEBRAIC’ DOES
NOT MEAN QUITE
THE SAME THING
AS ‘JEWISH.’**
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practice, courts increasingly barred public authorities from appearing to enforce, favor, or honor any particular religious doctrine, text, or community. Fearing lawsuits, many schools went beyond what courts required, discouraging the assignment or even discussion of potentially sensitive materials. It was in this context, although not only for this reason, that large numbers of Protestants began to join Catholics and Jews in seeking religious alternatives to public education.

Around the same time, elite institutions began to shift from endorsing a kind of soft pluralism intended to reassure Jews and Catholics that they, too, were fully American to promoting broader and more aggressive multiculturalism that insisted that all faiths, practices, and communities were of equal importance to a nation that was defined by a cosmopolitan future rather than an allegedly oppressive past. Buttressed by a renewed wave of immigration that included many who were neither Jews nor Christians of any variety, this new perspective made it more difficult to weave together any coherent national story—let alone to “privilege” the biblical threads in the fabric.

These conditions make a sort of reeducation necessary. Matters that were once fairly uncontroversial, if not simply obvious, need to be restated. Although it was written with an eye on challenges from the secularist and universalist left, *Jewish Roots* also contains defenses against some recent developments on the right. The statements on assimilation, religion, and national cohesion by Presidents George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Calvin Coolidge that are included in the volume are superior in reason, knowledge, and dignity to anything written in defense of currently fashionable conceptions of Christian nationalism or American heritage.



***Jewish Roots of
American Liberty:
The Impact of
Hebraic Ideas on
the American Story***

Edited by
Wilfred McClay
and Stuart Halpern
(Encounter Books, 2025)

But demonstrating the historical salience of such ideas leaves important questions open. One set of issues is indicated by the tensions between the title, which speaks of “Jewish roots,” and the subtitle, which invokes “Hebraic ideas.” As historian Daniel Dreisbach emphasizes in his essay on the political culture of the founding, early Americans were

drawn to the Hebrew Bible and...interpreted it through the lens of Christian—specifically Protestant—theology, tradition, and practice, not necessarily as it was expounded in Jewish theology or rabbinic commentary. Hebraic texts and themes...were selected and adapted to serve Christian theological and cultural interests.

“Hebraic,” in other words, does not mean quite the same thing as “Jewish.” There may have been as few as 2,500 Jews in the newly independent states, out of a total population of more than three million. Yet the contrast between symbolic importance and demographic nullity may not be as paradoxical as it seems. The biblical Hebrews were open to American imagination and, as we now say, “appropriation,” partly because most Americans of the time had little contact with living Jews or Judaism. So how did Americans who spoke admiringly of biblical patriarchs, kings, and prophets react as they began to encounter significant numbers of real people who might not meet such

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**ONE WAY IN
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elevated expectations and had their own ideas about the meaning and relevance of the biblical texts? With the exception of the presidential statements, each of which was addressed to an organized Jewish community, the book does not include much on the American encounter with actual Jews (or vice versa).

The point of asking such questions is not to insinuate that anti-Semitism was more pervasive or severe in America than it was. To the contrary, no modern state has ever been more welcoming to Jews. The “Hebraic” affinities of its originally Protestant-dominated culture is certainly among the reasons for this special relationship. Still, there is something of a lacuna in this volume that extends from about the 1840s, when Jewish immigration began in earnest, to the early 20th century, when a religiously and ethnically diverse population began to coalesce around a civic or “creedal” version of national identity that replaced more explicitly theological conceptions that were prominent earlier. A more comprehensive collection might pay greater attention to this period of transition.

Another issue has to do with the relative significance of Hebraic ideas in the American mind. Were they just one component in an eclectic synthesis that included English common law, classical republicanism, and modern philosophy? What was the weight of their influence compared to other elements—and for whom? The sources include works in several fields, including imaginative literature. One of the best chapters, by Dov Lerner, traces the influence of John Milton, perhaps Americans’ favorite author in the 18th century. But the archive on which *Jewish Roots* leans heavily is that of political sermons, a popular and influential genre until at least the Civil War. These sermons are important documents but might also paint a skewed picture, since patriotic clergy were naturally attracted to the most religiously significant materials at their disposal.

Other cohorts and figures certainly employed Hebraic language and typology. In his chapter, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik points out that a committee including John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson suggested a national seal featuring an image of Moses parting the Red Sea and the phrase “Rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God.” Of the three, however, it’s likely that only Adams saw the juxtaposition as more than rhetorical. The founders were shrewd politicians and aimed to appeal to what many ordinary Americans believed, whether or

not it reflected their own private convictions. Even in the 18th century, though, there may have been a gap between what Washington called “the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure” and popular morality.

One way in which Hebraic influence could have been more substantive than rhetorical involves natural rights, which play a distinctively large role in the American political tradition. Several contributors to *Jewish Roots* contend, plausibly, that the principle of inherent equality and liberty is derived from the biblical account of creation in the image of God. In his chapter, Mark David Hall distinguishes between the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition in Anglo-America and the European enlightenment, especially with regard to religious freedom. But was the difference really so evident at the time? Locke, too, places equal creation at the foundation of his case for limited government.

Equal creation in Genesis is not the Hebrew Bible’s last word on the matter, moreover. Other sections allow, and arguably endorse, monarchy, slavery, and other practices we now regard as incompatible with American ideals. In *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, historian Mark Noll shows that appeals to biblical models were not only characteristic of those who believed that the Declaration of Independence applied to men of all conditions and races, but also of those who denied this. Were such arguments less Hebraic than the ones we now look back on with pride? Or did they draw the wrong conclusions from the right sources? In a chapter on Lincoln, America’s greatest reader of the Hebrew Bible, Dreisbach reminds us that the Second Inaugural is a powerful warning against certainty that we understand the ways of the Lord.

No book—particularly an introductory volume—can answer all the questions it provokes. Rather than a last word, *Jewish Roots* is what co-editor Wilfred McClay elsewhere calls an “invitation” to learn, tell, and continue the American story. In many Jewish families, the highlight of the Pesach meal is the “four questions,” when the youngest child recites a series of queries whose answers rehearse the exodus from Egypt. *Jewish Roots* follows in that tradition for Americans who have always seen that narrative as, in some mysterious way, almost their own. **RL**

Samuel Goldman is an associate professor of humanities in the Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida.

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IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. — We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and Happiness. — Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all reference hath hitherto been to past misdeeds, rather than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. — But when a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Tyranny, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. — The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. — To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world. — He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good. — He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them. — He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of People, unless those People would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only. — He has called together legislative Bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures. — He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the People. — He has refused for a long time, after such Dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large; for their exercise, the State remains in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of Invasion from without, and convulsions within. — He has endeavored to prevent the Population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Strangers; refusing to grant them to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands. — He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing judicial Powers. — He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their Offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries. — He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their Substance. — He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our Legislature. — He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil powers. — He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution, and unacknowledged by our Laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation: — For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us: — For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States: — For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world: — For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent: — For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury: — For transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offences: — For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for the abridgment of our Liberties: — For depriving us in many cases of our valuable Liberty, and abridging our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments: — For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with powers to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever. —

The Truth of the American Republican Creed

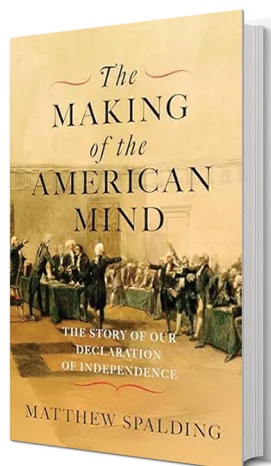
Ancient, medieval, and modern, the Declaration of Independence is greater than its influences—not to mention its modern critics.

by JAMES M. PATTERSON

THERE ARE TWO TROPES about the Declaration of Independence that conservatives have repeated for too many years. The first is that the Declaration is the American Creed. The second is that this creed owes its thinking to John Locke. The problem with the first idea is that too often the term “creed” is used only metaphorically, as in one does not really need to have any faith in it beyond what Americans already broadly share. The problem with the second notion is that it is simply false. As a result, the Declaration of Independence has, even for American conservatives, become an empty and fundamentally misunderstood symbol. If one adds to this how familiar the language of the Declaration has become, then

it simply operates in the background of political life as a patriotic noise.

Hence, Matthew Spalding's *The Making of the American Mind: The Story of Our Declaration of Independence* is a badly needed book for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. With great depth and an approachable style, Spalding addresses the shortcomings of the two platitudes mentioned above. Spalding demonstrates that the creed of the Declaration requires more of us than mere recognition of its rhetorical qualities. The principles of the Declaration of Independence have their origin in the Greek virtue of *phronesis*, the Roman concept of republican duty, a biblical insistence on



*The Making of the
American Mind:
The Story of Our
Declaration of
Independence*

By Matthew Spalding
(Encounter Books, 2025)

man's divine creation, and a modern innovation on ideas of political consent.

Spalding notes that the emphasis of the Declaration at the time of its promulgation was on the list of particulars that justified revolution; today, it is on the rationale for revolution in the first two paragraphs. The reason is that, at the time of its composition, the reason for revolution was well understood even among moderates like John Livingstone. Indeed, Livingstone had even written statements before and during the Continental Congress that aligned with the very same ideas as those in the Declaration. These ideas are literally creedal, however, as the language of "sacred and inviolable" in the original Jefferson draft became "self-evident," here meaning that all Americans confess that "all men are created equal and endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights," not because they will it but because the veracity of such a claim is obvious to a well-formed intellect.

As to the idea that the Declaration is purely Lockean, Spalding shows this view to be shallow. The Lockean reading of the Declaration was a way to contain the Declaration entirely within a specific moment in European history, when religion had lost salience and political foundations were grounded in a naturalistic account of human nature. Scholars from Danielle Allen to Michael Zuckert broadly support this understanding, and postliberals like Patrick Deneen have used it to engage in a radical critique of the entire American project. Spalding's rich historical account jettisons the simplistic Lockean reading and replaces it with a properly multivalent set of influences on Jefferson's composition—from quotations of St. Robert Bellarmine marked in Jefferson's copy

of Filmer's *Patriarcha* to the language of the oft-forgotten Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui. Spalding also illustrates that the Declaration of Independence is not properly understood as either "ancient" or "modern" but the full expression of political traditions owing their provenance to both, as well as to the medieval mind. Indeed, the Declaration itself demands such a reading if the truths expressed in it are self-evident, since this would mean that the truth of them transcends a particular time and place.

Of particular importance for eschewing the Lockean reading of the Declaration is Spalding's treatment of the term "happiness," which was my favorite part of the book. Spalding carefully charts the use of the term both before and during the Declaration's composition. Indeed, this discussion demonstrates at the same time the creedal and broadly historical claims. Here he affirms the significance of Locke but also of the "classical and Christian tradition going back to Cicero" that both Jefferson and Adams regarded as demanding a life of virtue. Hence, this artificial division between the ancient preoccupation with virtue and modern preoccupation with satisfaction often found among Straussian readings of the American founding is simply wrong. The Declaration does not frame an exclusively "modern" regime of "low but solid" liberalism but rather a proper republican regime that depends on the recognition that governments exist to defend the lives, liberties, and virtue of its citizens.

Spalding has not, however, written an academic monograph thick with footnotes and details of the academic battles I sketch here. Instead, the book is an approachable text for the average reader interested in deepening her understanding of the Declaration. To that end, Spalding has organized the book following the Declaration itself, each chapter moving through the Declaration almost word for word. In the section dedicated to the list of the Crown's offenses, Spalding digresses to provide an excellent historical summary of the events leading up to the composition of the Declaration. Many if not most Americans are now unfamiliar with such events, making simplistic readings of the Declaration too easy to accept.

In the process, Spalding expertly reveals something that is a minor theme of the book—that the American mind expressed in the Declaration had already been formed prior to 1776. As he explains early in the text, the critical event in the development of this mind was the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in

which Parliament ousted Catholic King James II and his absolutist ambitions after the birth of a Catholic male heir. His replacements, Protestants William and Mary, arrived at the behest of Parliament, and Parliament, especially the House of Commons, became sovereign. For the British, this amounted to a parliamentary usurpation of royal authority to itself, with the Crown serving as an increasingly limited executive. For the Americans, this result was a victory of republican self-government against the absolute, arbitrary government always lurking in the temptations behind monarchy.

Spalding's account of the offenses against the Americans demonstrates just how vast was the difference between these two conclusions, with British parliamentary supremacy leading to the desire to reduce the colonies to servile dependencies and the Americans seeing themselves as equal subjects to the British homeland and ultimately deserving of parliamentary representation. In other words, for the British, the Glorious Revolution was old hat, but for Americans it was a pivotal moment. No wonder, then, that the Redcoats sang "Yankee Doodle" when marching through their future former colonies, as the titular character is a backward fool so out of touch that he thinks putting a feather in his hat makes him fashionable or, to use the term of the time, "macaroni."

Charles Rochussen's *Coronation of William and Mary* (1850)

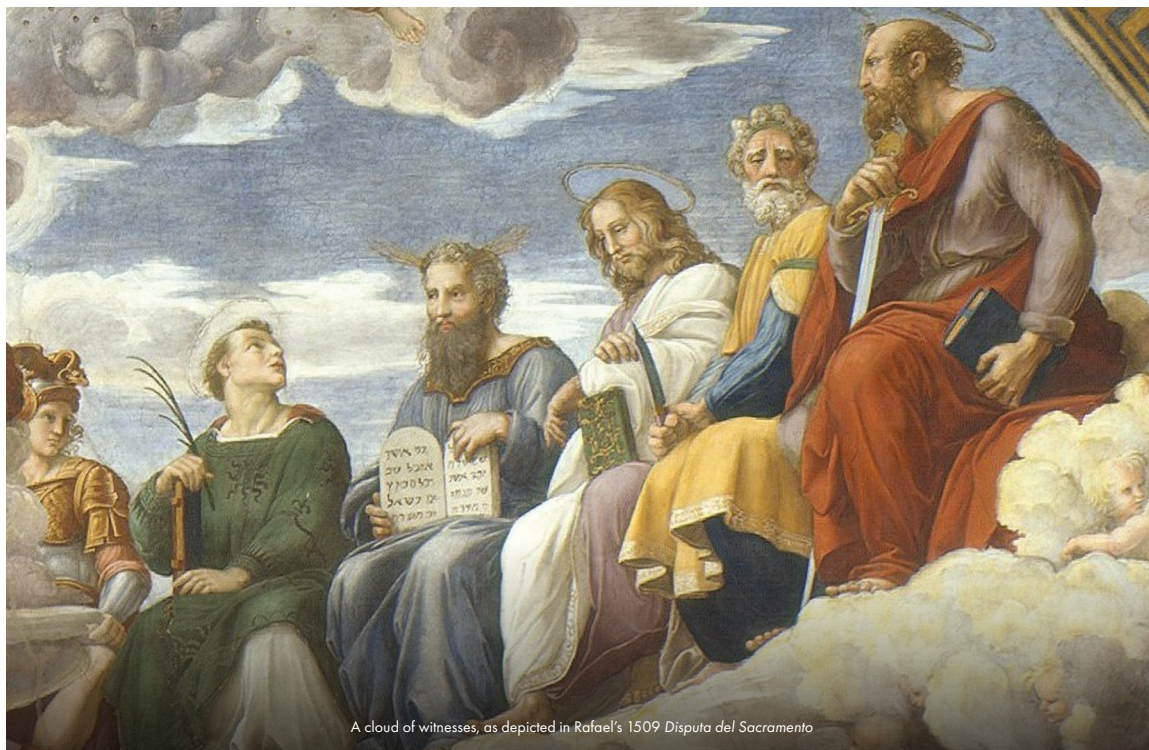


“ THE AMERICAN MIND EXPRESSED IN THE DECLARATION HAD ALREADY BEEN FORMED PRIOR TO 1776. ”

Alas, here is where I should summon some minor issue with the text and blow it out of proportion, but I refuse. Perhaps I am too much in agreement with Spalding to find fault with the book. The only issue I have is that I wish I had written it myself, but I would not have written a manuscript as good as this one. Instead, I will use this concluding part of the review to advise educators to consider using *The Making of the American Mind*. It is not too difficult for gifted high school students, but educators themselves should read the book to appreciate how tightly the Declaration is interwoven into the ideas and events of the period. It is also a great book for college professors teaching introductory courses on American government and American political thought, and it is especially valuable in the civics institutes like those at the University of Texas, Arizona State, and my own Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee.

The Declaration of Independence must become real to Americans again, and that requires a serious effort to recall the eternal truths expressed in its first two paragraphs and the historical knowledge about what events led to their profound expression during that hot summer of 1776. That Spalding has written the best text to serve us in that effort is one more example that Americans should continue to rely firmly “on the protection of divine Providence” such that this nation shall long endure. **RL**

James M. Patterson is associate professor of public affairs in the Institute of American Civics at the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is also president of the Ciceronian Society and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia.



A cloud of witnesses, as depicted in Rafael's 1509 *Disputa del Sacramento*

History and Identity

A morally informed historian, amateur or professional, will avoid both cynicism and nostalgia and seek to understand and to identify with our forebears, judging as we would wish to be judged.

by **BRIAN A. SMITH**

MORE THAN MOST disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, history has been victimized by ideological pressures that have undermined its presence in public life throughout the Anglosphere. Mythmaking that looks to the past in search of heroes and villains abounds, and in recent years this sort of pseudo-historical writing has done much to harm public debate, particularly in the United States. Whether it is the damage that progressive critical-historical scholarship has done to public belief in the American political order or the excessive nostalgia with which many conservatives look upon a bygone era, a reasonable understanding of the past in public life is often made impossible.

In *God and Country: Upholding Faith, History, and National Identity*, John D. Wilsey offers some remedies to these dangers. The book introduces readers

to the discipline of history with a particular emphasis on how Christians ought to approach the study of the past and what they might learn from it. Wilsey's concern for the fate of history as a discipline runs in two somewhat different directions. First, he's convinced that without developing certain virtues, Americans will continue to disrespect and misunderstand their past. As he puts it, the "virtue-less historian is like a boorish, loud, selfie-stick-toting tourist tramping through the past, oblivious to the dignity of the dead and the gravity of their time." Second, he's equally concerned that his fellow believers underestimate history's importance as a foundation for belief, as "a great many Christians think history contributes little to our fulfilling the Great Commission, or more generally to our lives in the here and now."

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In a brief text that seems equally aimed at seminarians, history students, and curious autodidacts, Wilsey offers a tour of the practice of historical thinking and is especially good at highlighting what it takes to mine wisdom from the past. Alongside this he offers an account of the moral and theological understanding those who study the past ought to bring to bear on the subject. As fallen people, we owe our equally sinful ancestors an attitude of charity, and Wilsey ably demonstrates why this is the case.

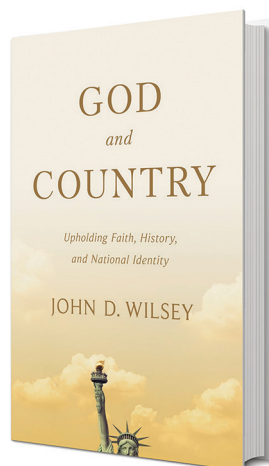
Christianity, he asserts, is a historical religion, as the Bible is not just a message of hope but also “the record of the redemption of humankind, accomplished by God through Jesus Christ in space and time.” Believers ought to study the past because through it “we can see the credibility of God on display through His kept promises.” For this reason, Christians should develop their historical understanding and do so in a manner that cultivates certain capacities and virtues.

Were it simply a reminder of the ethics and skills that ought to inform the historian’s art, this would still be a worthwhile book. But what sets Wilsey apart is his emphasis on history as a deeply personal and not abstract field of study. He recounts stories from his family’s history throughout, an approach that emphasizes how our most immediate links to the past are often familial and quite tangible. In one chapter, Wilsey recalls time spent at his grandparents’ home, and especially his discovery of his grandfather’s footlockers from World War II: “The odds and ends contained in that attic, and all throughout the house, gave me a sense of my place in my family, my country,

and my world as a boy and a young man.” His family’s history and their reckoning with the legacies of the American South recur throughout, breathing life into his arguments and reminding readers of what is at stake in doing history well: Even when we are not directly descended from the people we study, we do well to remember that all historical actors have been persons who lived in complex intertwining relationships and that we are all caught up not only in the consequences of those relationships but in the ever-expanding network of their relationships with one another throughout the generations.

This sense of the personality of history is well-grounded in theology. As a discipline, history is not just the way we make sense of the past; it is part of our need for the truth: “As image-bearers, we crave the truth. History for us fallen people is, first, the pursuit of truth in the past for the purposes of the present.” History matters in this regard because in forgetting our past we tend also to abandon something that matters far more: “Due to our sin nature, we are also prone to forget the past....Moses closely linked forgetting the past with forgetting God.” Beyond this, Wilsey suggests that history itself offers a source of understanding and wisdom that modern thinkers often discount or neglect.

This claim puts him at odds with a range of thinkers from the Enlightenment onward. David Hume famously argued that we cannot trust any apparent causal connections as a basis for certain knowledge, and that what we refer to as causation in history is “nothing more than correlation between two relating events.” Perhaps even more radically, Gotthold Lessing was convinced that “history and faith are mutually exclusive kinds of truth” and that



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(B&H Academic, 2026)

Christians should rest their faith simply on wonder. Wilsey argues that both are mistaken: “History is...futile if causation has no ontological explanation but is explainable only through the use of our mental habits or customs.” Moreover, Christianity’s claims themselves rest on the foundation that God acted in history to accomplish His people’s salvation. To deny history’s importance would be to deny the validity of the Gospel itself and render meaningless any attempt by believers in the world to bring “the kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven.”

Wilsey goes even further, linking a theological understanding of history to a moral view that emphasizes the interrelationship of the generations:

Christianity denies that the dead no longer matter and the unborn do not yet matter. With Edmund Burke, we affirm that society is a contract between the dead, the living, and the yet to be born. In Hebrews 11, we find that there is a great cloud of witnesses in the past, that though they are dead, they still speak to us.

God and Country’s practical guidance for the budding historian emphasizes a wise, balanced approach that appreciates change over time, the importance of context, the nature of causality, the force of contingency, and the inescapability of complexity. Wilsey’s most valuable contribution here comes through demonstrating how embracing each of these elements rightly depends on the would-be historian’s cultivating certain virtues.

Christians should not be surprised that for Wilsey love is the central virtue, anchoring all the others. He views our predecessors as our extended neighbors to whom love is owed, and in studying them we ought to exhibit other virtues that depend crucially on a rightly ordered love.

Honesty and truthfulness depend on this love. How else can we trust historical inquiry if it is not conducted in a spirit of truth-seeking? He reminds us that all “humans deserve the dignity of having the truth told about them, no matter how much their lives represented evil or good.” Christians can live in the confidence that in reporting the truth, no matter how much it unnerves us, we can be confident in God’s providence and purposes, which place even the gravest evils in the right perspective.

Flowing directly from this is a sense of profound humility toward the past. This ought to chasten

many different impulses: “Love excludes arrogance toward others in the present and those in the past.” We desperately need that check, as we already tend toward what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery. Historical humility cautions against excessive judgment of the past: “We do not suspend our judgment concerning providence from any lack of faith, but rather from humility that holds us back from the sin of presumption,” and an appreciation of contingency “is thus motivated not only by good historical thinking but by fear of God.” But it also demands we check ourselves against an excessive belief in our ability to recognize God’s hand in history: “There is a great irony in the providence of God: we have the deepest assurance of its reality, but it remains a profound mystery to us,” and because of this we need to look to understand causality, contingency, and complexity in human terms.

These attitudes allow us to cultivate other virtues toward our forebears. We can be patient, allowing “the dead to be themselves.” We can demonstrate a sense of fairness in assessing their conduct. We can offer them kindness by refraining “from condemning them, and we acknowledge that our place in relation to them is as their student rather than their judge.” And we can understand them in a way that demonstrates contentment with our own lot by avoiding nostalgia.

The theological virtues that flow from love guard us against cruelty or hopelessness in our pursuit of understanding the past. But Wilsey argues that the classical virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance also play a role. It

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The 1619 Project's creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones



Portrait of David Hume by Allan Ramsay (1754)

takes more than mere intellect to assess evidence: The historian must also have a profound sense of morality to grapple with sinful people's inevitable failures, genuine bravery to confront the past, and a sense of moderation to balance all these efforts.

Absent these virtues, our view of the past will tend toward caricature, and end in a simplistic search for heroes and villains. He aptly calls this the *Star Wars* vision of history:

When we are seeking understanding, we come to the task not as moral judges or moral relativists, but as moral realists. Looking to the past with a moral realist approach gives us the ability to see ethical problems clearly, without considering ourselves immune to engaging in evil actions of our own.

Moral realism informed by all the virtues helps us avoid crafting history undermined by either nostalgia or cynicism. This is important because both these extremes do violence to the past to advance political and social goals. Cynicism like that displayed in the 1619 Project would have us believe we are “overrun by morally backward, ignorant criminals who wielded power over the weak and the marginalized.” Nostalgia is just as dangerous to our souls, as it would lead us to believe “we have fallen from the moral purity of the early times and that our duty is to recover what has been lost.” Both pose a danger to a proper and measured love of our people and history.

This is a vital point for Wilsey, because so much contemporary historical debate undermines

patriotism, which he sees as a rightly ordered love of country, one that flows from an appreciation of its whole history. “Both love of God and love of country involve actual and active love of real people,” past, present, and future. Without this love and the host of virtues it fosters, there can be no healthy affection for one's homeland, and little hope of avoiding ideological enthusiasm of the kind that afflicts our world.

God and Country principally speaks to Americans, and Wilsey is attentive to the dangers of national exceptionalism. We are tempted to indulge in what he calls a “closed exceptionalism,” one that sees America as the special instrument of God's providence, uniquely empowered to act in ways that advance His agenda. Against this excess, he suggests a more modest view so that “Americans gratefully recognize that ours is a great country because of its unique contributions to human freedom, one of the most profound aspirations of creatures made in God's image.”

We are all born into a time and place that is bequeathed to us by generations of forebears. In some cases, that legacy presents people with considerable challenges. Whatever our inheritance, *God and Country* offers us reasons to connect our story with the long shadow of our shared past and extend love to our neighbors of yesteryear. **RL**

Brian A. Smith is senior program manager at Liberty Fund and the author of *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*.



Capitalism's Western Marxist History

What is advertised as a comprehensive global history of the greatest economic engine ever known proves to be little more than a tendentious exercise in ax-grinding.

by BRIAN DOMITROVIC

THE ESSENTIAL FACT about Sven Beckert's *Capitalism: A Global History* is its size and scope. The book is 1,100 pages in length, it has another 150 pages of endnotes in print so small it is unreadable without a magnifying glass, and its acknowledgments run half a chapter long at 3,000-plus words. *Capitalism* weighs about five pounds. As for scope, it is global and covers a thousand years. As Beckert puts it in the introduction, "This book understands capitalism as, above all, a global development whose local articulations can *only* be understood globally" (emphasis in the original). Or, among the many restatements of this point throughout the 1,100 pages: "Capitalism cannot be understood in local, regional, or national terms; it can be understood only by focusing on the permanent combination and recombination of its fragments across the world." If *Capitalism* had come

out not now but perhaps several decades hence, when there are Elon Musk-style colonies in space, presumably it would insist on a universal history of capitalism, and surely the book would be even more extended for it.

Size and scope are in a cooperative relationship with each other in *Capitalism*, as the formal justification for the length is the scope. Since capitalism has always been global, and since its history stretches back to about the year 1000, as the book contends, it must be massively long. And yet *Capitalism* also cultivates the impression that it is not the scope that dictates the size, so much as the other way around—the size dictates the scope. There are references to the author's professorship at Harvard; the acknowledgments divulge that a "team" of research assistants and Ph.D. students is behind much of the research;

we read that substantial funding came to professor, assistants, and students not only to pore over and organize the scholarly literature but also to visit archives at spots in every corner of the world; and that big names in the field saw to it that the author could proceed in his career as he saw fit.

Therefore the argument of *Capitalism*, that the “only” way to understand its subject is to adopt a global perspective, with the corollary that global history requires an enormous amount of research, functions to justify the unique capabilities of the author—namely the time, money, and talents that accrue to one in a well-placed academic sinecure. *Capitalism* presents global history as something that inhales resources to produce.

Next in order of precedence in *Capitalism* is its diction. The following is a list of recurrent words, words that carry the history from the Gulf of Aden at the turn of the first millennium through the rise of slave plantations globally in the early modern era through the urbanization, warfare, and welfare state episodes of modern times. *Forge* (the verb), *spatial*, *swathes*, *Anthropocene*, *Eurocentric*, *foregrounds*, *simultaneity*, *globality*, *logics*, *archipelago*, *nodes*, *islands* (in the metaphorical sense), *zones*, *ratchet*, *shape-shifting*, *Indigenous*, *privatized*, *totality*. But the *palme d’or* goes to *forge*. It is the hero of the intellectual-jargon proletariat that the author works over the 1,100 pages, the plugger that brings this book from start to conclusion. It is, simply, everywhere.

Starting on page one, right after the opening sentence and the passive voice: “We live in a world created by capitalism. The ceaseless accumulation of capital forges the cities we inhabit.” The redoubtable forge (in noun form) was a great exemplar of

capitalism in its rising season, mechanized incredibly so that a factory could whip around a steel ingot like it was a plaything and pound it into super-strong capital goods. A city is a mixture of hard and soft things, of hard buildings and hard roads, and soft plaster walls, ductwork, and the indoors, not to say parks and promenades where many people are about their business and lives. How poetic is it to say that cities come into being by the process of the forge? Not really at all. Here is one more, a passive forge: “This social prominence, largely forged by women’s labor, helped the Fuggers become the most prominent financiers to many of Europe’s leaders, including its popes.”

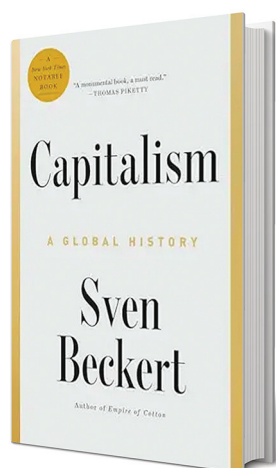
As for the content, which despite the tome’s bulk can get lost on account of the author’s attitude and literary preferences, the role of the first roughly 400 years (approximately A.D. 1000–1400) of *Capitalism* is to serve as a prop to mock Europe. Egyptian, Asian, and other global merchants crossed land and sea with goods in this era, creating the opportunity to hurl these words at comparatively less sophisticated Europe:

The Europeans who inhabited the far western and northern fringes of the Islamic trading universe were unimpressive in terms of agriculture or manufacturing. European traders were late bloomers compared with their Middle Eastern or Asian counterparts, their trading prowess, institutional infrastructure, and urban life no match. European cities were minor affairs next to Baghdad, Aden, Cairo, Hangzhou, and Cambay.

Europe remained a relative backwater of the global economy. Arab merchants did not even bother distinguishing between the various people living on the fringes of their world.... The European traders’ position was so weak that they had to accept inferior goods in exchanges with their Eastern counterparts. Even as their economy commercialized, Europeans looked in awe at the Islamic world.

A few pages later: “The trade networks these African merchants built were sophisticated.”

Is it useful to have a rehearsal of non-European economic vitality from 600 to 800 years ago? Perhaps, but Beckert’s tone in treating this subject is so consistently respectful and flattering that the reader begins to suspect that what is in store in *Capitalism* is not so much history but the arranging of history to fit a



***Capitalism: A
Global History***

By Sven Beckert
(Penguin Press, 2025)

particular opinion about history. After 150 pages, the real prize emerges. The heart of the book, the topic in which the author luxuriates, is the history of the slave economies of the early modern period that Europeans started and led. England's Barbados, Spain's silver domains in the Andes, Dutch exploits in Indonesia, and France's St.-Domingue (Haiti) have top billings in *Capitalism*. A repeat of the book's thesis introduces a reflection on early modern slavery: "Capitalism has just one history—a world history, with one of its key sparks in the forests, barrens, and swamps of the Caribbean islands and the American mainland."

Most important, plantations demonstrated how capital could dominate and control land and labor, putting them into the vanguard of a new kind of production. As the Americas became critical to the forging [*sic*] of a world economy, they demonstrated that creating the new order—a world in which markets dominate almost everything, where almost anything could be bought and sold—took great effort, energy, creativity, and coercion....In Barbados...capitalism rested on enormous violence, massive dispossessions, and coerced labor that let capital owners to "solve" the problem of production by reinventing social structures from scratch. This was possible because...capital owners distant from their homelands could step outside the established order to extract unprecedented riches.

Here is a subsidiary thesis of *Capitalism*: The West became sufficiently materially comfortable so that it could sponsor its vaunted civilization by means of faraway exploitation of people and environments of the most intense degree. "While war capitalism flourished often on an attempted tabula rasa of a completely remade society, the lawless 'outside' provided the foundation for the emergence of what would become, eventually, remarkably liberal and orderly states on war capitalism's 'inside.'"

Without question the slave islands of the 1600s and 1700s produced goods, such as sugar, of distinct value for the metropolitan center over the sea. And clearly these places were in many examples quite fearsome. Yet the development of civilization in 18th-century St.-Domingue, to take that rock of this book's "outside," is a subject well known to French and Haitian memory, not to mention formal scholarship. We miss in *Capitalism* the rich historiography on comparative slavery. It is distinctly concerning that we hear nothing credible about the impress of religion on

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THE READER BEGINS TO SUSPECT THAT WHAT IS IN STORE IN CAPITALISM IS NOT SO MUCH HISTORY BUT THE ARRANGING OF HISTORY SO THAT IT FITS A PARTICULAR OPINION ABOUT HISTORY.
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American slavery. *Capitalism* explicitly equates religion with "ideology," an expedient that results in an incompleteness to its history of especially this topic. The connection of Islamic intermediaries to Atlantic slavery is not a significant subject in *Capitalism*; nor is the slavers' attempt to evade Rome's insistence on sacramental marriage by importing exclusively males from Africa, making reproduction impossible and the demand for new slave shipments sharp; nor is the development of Catholic culture in the slave areas, much at the hands of the Jesuits, that not least in St.-Domingue brought about a sense of communitarianism as well as a growing clarity on the advisability of just wages. What is this about a "tabula rasa"?

Perhaps fearing being Eurocentric, *Capitalism* treats just the fringes of the biggest country in Europe of the early modern period, the Polish-Lithuanian Republic. It confines its discussion to how Dutch merchants set up in Danzig such that "by the seventeenth century, eastern European grainlands were practically a Dutch economic colony." The incredible agricultural productivity within comparatively peaceable Poland-Lithuania during the long era of religious warfare in central Europe that began with the Reformation and culminated in the monstrous Thirty Years War (1618–48) is becoming increasingly clear in scholarship, and was both a vindication of the Noble Republic's principle of religious toleration and the goad that forced England to engage in the agricultural revolution. Wheat cascaded into markets from eastern points on the northern seas, and England

realized it had to match the price and quality of the agricultural trade goods to keep pace.

Yet we get only superficialities in *Capitalism* on this agricultural revolution, that essential prerequisite to urban industrial society. Because of “superior agricultural techniques of new farmers, productivity improved” in England as of 1740 *is about it*. And in keeping with the axiomatic downgrading of religion, the immense migration of European Jewry into Poland-Lithuania in this period is a non-topic. There is almost no Jewish history in this book—on the history of capitalism.

Capitalism loses steam as it enters into industrial society, and deteriorates in attentiveness, over hundreds of pages, through to the end. Once the slave islands of the Caribbean recede into the past, the high dudgeon that sustained the book becomes out of place, and the narrative becomes odd. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York failed in its civilizing mission because it was closed on Sundays, the day workers across the city had off. We hear at length about the Röchling industrial establishment in late 19th- and early 20th-century Germany. There are many examples of surpassingly successful big firms in this era. This is the one that gets the deep dive, perhaps because Röchling gets very involved with Hitler and commits sins in World War II. The large number of more-than-comparable American firms that produced prodigious amounts of industrial goods, including huge hauls sent to thwart the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, would appear to be examples at least as worthy as Röchling of what capitalism was up to through the early 1940s.

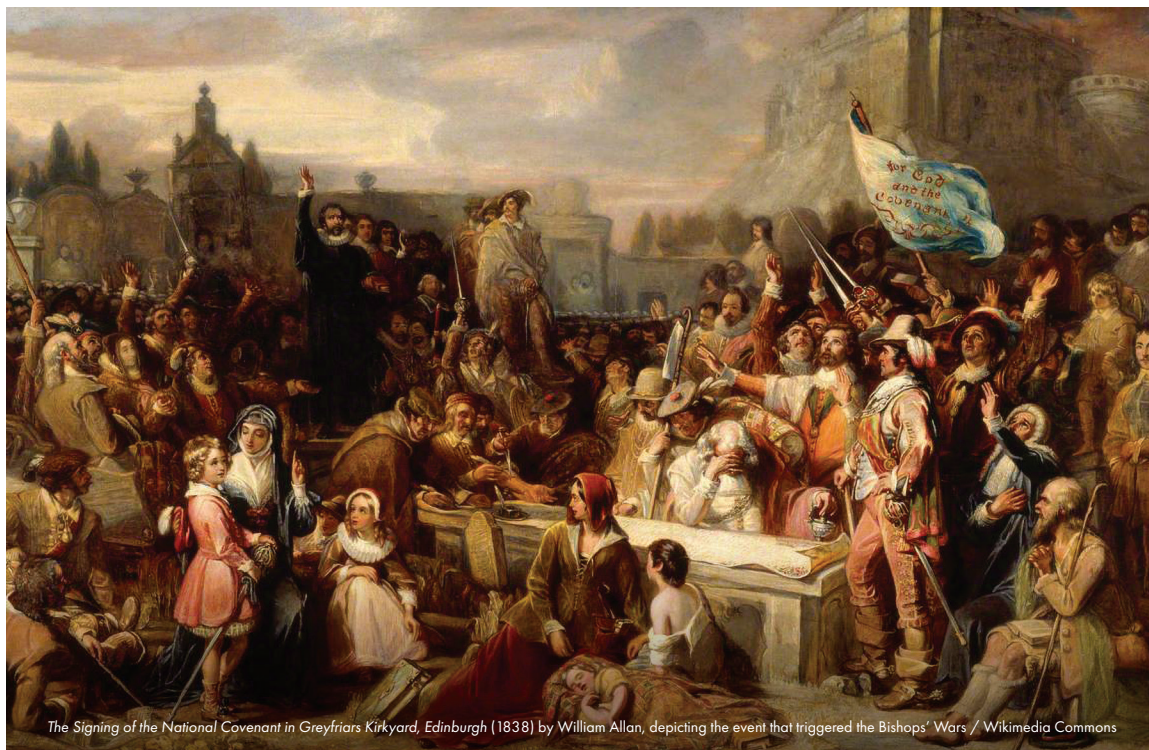
Capitalism extols only one period—that of the post-World War II welfare state. It delves into a sole example, that of Sweden, which mandated paid vacation, provided government housing, and built up its pension system, among other reforms. The results were beautiful prosperity across the population. “The extensive welfare state radically improved the lives of Swedes.” The socialist party in Sweden, the SAP, was responsible for the win. “Since the 1930s, the SAP had called social policy a ‘productive investment,’ meaning that society was made more efficient when citizens could rely on security provisions. And the SAP was right.” Was Labour also right in the United Kingdom as the government, starting in 1945, comprehensively nationalized British industry and the country was the growth laggard in Europe through the 1960s?

The central concern of the last chapter, which covers 1973 to the present, is the “neoliberal”

intellectual movement urging free markets and the dismantling of the welfare state. In choosing this emphasis, *Capitalism* neglects the principal structural development of this period, the rise of the entrepreneurial firm at the expense of the received corporate structure of big, old, large-employer companies. But according to Beckert, the big news beginning in the 1970s was that “intellectuals such as Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises rose to prominence. Despite their differences, they were all utopian thinkers with almost religious belief in markets” (and yet *Capitalism* distinguishes itself by refusing to comprehend religion). Jeff Bezos’s building of Amazon from scratch gets half a sentence. With some other companies, it “arrived on the scene.” We hear nothing of the new low-tax environment that enabled engineering talent to break away from legacy firms and create new enterprises that toppled old ones. This was the actual drama of capitalism in real life in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Instead of recounting such rich history, *Capitalism* gives us barbs about free-market theorists, which is to say merely an attempt at point-scoring in a professorial rivalry.

Western Marxism of the post-World War II variety bleeds off every page of *Capitalism*. “Totality” was a central Marxist concept in the midcentury. Marxists aspired to explain everything—the economy, the world, society, culture—through one interpretive framework: their own. *Capitalism* tries to construct a global totality from scratch and say the assemblage is everything. It picks a million particulars from a thousand years of global history and says, in effect, “disprove the total pattern (or come up with an alternative million particulars that fit your pattern, if you have the time and resources to do it).” Western Marxism’s agit-prop, even in a scholarly guise, was tiresome in the 1950s. To encounter it in the 2020s is anachronistic. *Capitalism* does take swipes at Marx here and there, but it cannot throw readers off the scent. The grand irony of the book’s worldview owes itself exclusively to European culture, to the Marxist counter-dynamic within that culture and whose relevance at present in any place around the world is not at all clear. **RL**

Brian Domitrovic is the Richard S. Strong Scholar at the Laffer Center. He is the author or coauthor of several books, including *JFK* and the Reagan Revolution, *Econoclasts*, and, most recently, *Free Money: Bitcoin and the American Monetary Tradition*.



The Signing of the National Covenant in Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh (1838) by William Allan, depicting the event that triggered the Bishops' Wars / Wikimedia Commons

Presbyterians Aggressive and Moderate

As some in the Reformed tradition argue today for a “Christian nationalism,” with church and state in some form of union, a new history of Presbyterianism insists that a purely voluntary church is the best, if unintended, outcome of a rather messy history.

by MICHAEL J. LYNCH

DARRYL HART'S MOST RECENT monograph, *Protestants and Patriots: Presbyterians in the Age of Revolution*, is perhaps his most ambitious study to date. Having spent his career studying the Reformed tradition—its worship, history, and major figures—Hart has now provided a survey of Presbyterians' relationship to the civil government, rarely sanguine and sometimes revolutionary. The book's ambition lies in the fact that Hart's narrative covers Presbyterianism in England, Scotland, Ireland, the United States, and Canada from the mid-16th to the late 19th century. Hart traces intra-ecclesiastical disputes (such as the

patronage controversy among Scottish Presbyterians that came to a head in 1843) as well as broader conflicts involving the civil magistrate (such as the Bishops' Wars in the late 1630s) and Anglicans (as exemplified in Cartwright and Whitgift's pamphlet war over the Elizabethan Religious Settlement). His basic thesis is that whatever political radicalism one does find among Presbyterians, it originated within the English and Scottish church-state nexus rather than as something inherent in Reformed theology, and that the liberal outcomes were an unintended correction to its theocratic origins.

His whirlwind account begins with Calvin, whom Hart identifies as advocating a form of Presbyterianism that Hart describes as a middle way between rule by bishops (think Episcopalianism) and rule by laity (think Congregationalism). In Scotland and England, Hart focuses on the Presbyterianism of John Knox and Thomas Cartwright, respectively. According to Hart, these two Presbyterians, although sharing the same aim of Calvin—namely, a purely Reformed church—had the added inconvenience of needing to deal with Episcopalians and a monarch, whether the Roman Catholic Mary Tudor or the Protestant Elizabeth. While the choice of highlighting Knox and Cartwright as representative of Scottish and English Presbyterians is understandable, Hart ignores various differences between the two traditions as they developed into the 17th century. For example, while the Scottish consistently complained about the Stuart monarch's claim to be the "head" or "supreme governor of the Church," many nonconformists in England were defensive of this royal prerogative, including Congregationalists and Independents (like John Owen and Philip Nye), not to mention Presbyterians (such as Richard Baxter, whom Hart puts into the Presbyterian camp despite Baxter's openness to episcopal ecclesiology).

It is worth observing that the Catholic bishop Cuthbert Tunstall objected to King Henry VIII's "Head of the Church" title, while English nonconformists in the following century were often begging the king to wrest power out of the hands of the Episcopalian establishment. Indeed, as Jacqueline Rose's *Godly Kingship in Restoration England* proves, in 17th century England it was the conformists, according to the nonconformists, who were most often subverting the rights of the civil magistrate in reforming the church. Given Hart's recurring insistence that royal supremacy was in tension with the church's spiritual jurisdiction, it would have been interesting to see how he would have explained these English nonconformist arguments for royal supremacy.

As Presbyterianism moved into different parts of Britain and its colonies, it was faced with other challenges post-Glorious Revolution and William and Mary's Act of Toleration (1689), which gave most nonconformists freedom to worship so long as they accepted specific oaths of allegiance to the Crown. As Hart demonstrates, most Presbyterians at this point—except for the Scottish, who had secured a Presbyterian establishment in

Scotland—had to reconcile their establishmentarian impulses (i.e., that the civil magistrate must establish and protect true religion in his realm) with the practical realities of being a religious minority excluded from the establishment. What also becomes clear in Hart's narrative is that Presbyterians began to argue for a pan-Protestant establishment. Unsurprisingly, the long 19th century saw a burgeoning of various parachurch ministries and ecumenical endeavors. The hinge of Hart's book, however, is his treatment of the American Revolution and the Irish Rising of 1798. Hart argues that Presbyterian involvement in both was fundamentally different from the earlier theocratic agitation of the Covenanters. Instead, these were *liberal* rebellions, driven by frustration that ostensibly liberal governments were not living up to their own ideals rather than by any desire to erect an established Presbyterian church.

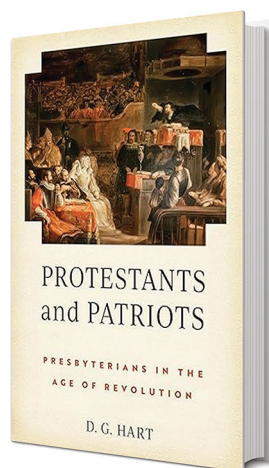
The conclusion of Hart's story sees Presbyterians increasingly giving up any theocratic hope for an established church reformed according to Scripture, and instead opting for what Hart calls voluntarism—the idea that the church is a voluntary association, supported by the contributions and free association of its members rather than by state funding and legal establishment. Accordingly, Hart thinks that, while

Oliver Sheppard's 1898 bronze "Pikeman" sculpture in Wexford, Ireland, symbolizing the Irish Rising of 1798



the Free Church of Scotland, which had broken off from the Church of Scotland during the Disruption of 1843, continued to affirm the establishment principle in theory, it functioned practically as a voluntary communion when it gave up all state-funded support and began to rely on the liberality of its church members. Hart also explains the context of the Irish Church Act of 1869, which eliminated the *regium donum*, a government stipend for churches. Unlike in Scotland, however, such voluntarism was forced upon the Irish rather than chosen. Of course, in America the course toward voluntarism took a third path. Because there never was an established church to begin with—although there were some soft establishments (i.e., generic Protestant ones) at the state level—the American Presbyterians instead vied for a voluntary one that could nevertheless produce national influence. Put another way, there was no move from theocracy to a liberal society because establishment in America was either a nonstarter or unwanted (for practical or ideological reasons).

Hart protests at the beginning of his book that his work is not “a Whiggish one of Presbyterians taking credit for planting the seeds of liberal democracy,” but it is hard not to get the impression that he believes that the doctrine of the church’s spiritual mission is the natural enemy of theocracy and, at the very least, establishmentarianism. Hart does make a point of distinguishing between Presbyterians Aggressive (part one of the book) and



Protestants and Patriots: Presbyterians in the Age of Revolution

By D.G. Hart

(University of Notre Dame Press, 2026)

Presbyterians Modern (part two). The former are described as trying to fit the square peg of theocracy into the round hole of the fundamentally spiritual nature of the church, whereas the latter are presented as having learned the lessons of history—namely that Presbyterianism does not work with the Achilles’s heel of magisterial supremacy over the church. The modern Presbyterian church has, in Hart’s account, learned of the benefits of liberal politics.

This is not to say that the Whiggish, progressive historical framework wholly undermines the book’s basic claim. Hart candidly admits that many of the movements toward a more liberal understanding of church-state relations were as much a product of utility and practical necessity as it was ideologically motivated. If the state refuses to establish true religion, what more is there to do than move to a sort of voluntarism coupled with liberal political policies?

Hart’s newest book is, as mentioned, an ambitious attempt at charting terrain that most scholars have explored only in pieces. By pulling on the thread of Presbyterians’ relationship with the state during establishment, its dissolution, and afterward within the various British and American contexts, Hart presents a compelling story of why it is that Presbyterians jettisoned the establishment principle for ecclesial voluntarism. Whether that story is one of tragedy or triumph probably tells us more about the person doing the telling than the history being told. **RL**

Michael J. Lynch teaches classical languages and humanities at Delaware Valley Classical School in New Castle, Delaware; is a teaching fellow at the Davenant Institute; and is the author of John Davenant’s Hypothetical Universalism.

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**HART ARGUES THAT
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Composite image: Wilfred M. McClay; Hillsdale College campus / Brother Atticus / CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Wilfred M. McClay, Historian of America's Story

Q Many could be forgiven for believing that the Declaration of Independence was a proclamation of victory in the Revolutionary War, but the war would continue for another seven years. Why did the Continental Congress take such a gamble so early in the war?

Let me add to your question the fact that the war had been fully underway since April of 1775, sixteen months before independence had been declared, and the Declaration of Independence adopted. So there is a sense in which it wasn't *that* early in the war. But yes, it was a cheeky thing for them to do, especially when they concluded by pledging their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor.

But the real answer to your question involves the fact that the Declaration was, among other things, a press release to the world, explaining the former colonists' reasons for taking up arms, and justifying their becoming a politically independent entity. The Patriots well understood that their chances of defeating the world's greatest military power were slim, unless they were able to enlist the aid of one of Britain's jealous rivals. The French fit that label especially well, since only a little over a decade had passed since the French had been humiliated in war, and lost the bulk of their North American empire to the British. They were spoiling for revenge. And the lofty language of the Declaration, especially of the Preamble, with its language of universal natural rights, was perfectly calculated to appeal to liberal French sensibilities. The gamble paid off handsomely.

Q Leaving aside the guillotine and attempts to change the calendar, what would you say is the most glaring philosophical difference between the American and the French Revolutions?

I would say that the chief difference is related to those in your question. The American Revolution did not seek to eradicate enemies or overturn the government and revolutionize the social order in anything like a comprehensive way. Instead it sought to restore the status quo existing before the French and Indian Wars, which meant a restoration of their customary rights as Englishmen. That status quo included many years, in some cases more than 150 years, of self-government. In their view, it was the British, not them, who were changing things. The British were attempting to consolidate an empire that had grown up in a haphazard way, without central direction, under a regime that Edmund Burke called “salutary neglect.”

There were many other differences, but that difference seems the most important to me. In a word, it was a largely conservative revolution. This is perhaps less a philosophical difference than a dispositional one. But that disposition is well revealed by the fact that most of the grievances listed in the Declaration involve violations of customary rights enshrined in English law, rather than violations of natural law.

Q The idea of the “consent of the governed” goes back to ancient Greece, limited though that was. How did the founders’ construal of that consent differ? Was it ultimately their appeal to a higher power to secure rights? Or was it that they imbued it with a purpose: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

The answer here can be seen in comparing the Declaration of Independence with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the comparable document of the French Revolution. They are very similar, which is not surprising, since Jefferson and Lafayette were great friends, and Jefferson was a consultant to Lafayette in the drafting of the French Declaration. But there are some powerful differences. Where the American Declaration locates the source of rights in “Nature and Nature’s God,” the French Declaration locates sovereignty in the “nation.” Where the American Declaration grounds the

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legitimacy of government in the consent of the governed, the French locates it in *la volonté générale*. The concept of *la volonté générale* comes from Rousseau—the words are lifted from his *Du contrat social*—and is generally translated into English as “the general will.” This is not the same thing as a majority vote or opinion. Rousseau even says that those who do not follow the dictates of the general will must be “forced to be free,” since freedom is not possible apart from the general will.

The point here is that, unlike the French ideal, which inhabits a thick concept of republicanism in which there is little room for strictly individual rights, and no room for a biblical concept of a providential deity, the American approach begins with the assumption that our individual rights are an endowment from God, the property of each individual person, and are *unalienable*, which means that they are *inherent* in the being of that person, and cannot be taken away or given away.

Q The left has the 1619 Project and the right has a postliberal movement with its contempt for the supposedly failed “liberal” founding. They seem to be opposite sides of the same coin—the founding was a mistake or based on an evil or erroneous foundation. As a historian, how do you account for this phenomenon? Is it just a matter of no longer teaching American history as something to be proud of?

There are lots of things going on here. The 1619 Project was a journalistic hoax, which nearly all reputable historians disavow, but they do so quietly, since they understand which way the academic-political winds are blowing. There are a few exceptions to this, notably Gordon Wood and Sean Wilentz, to whom all honor is due for their willingness to call this out. I do think that there is something important going on, given the extent to which a certain kind of 1619 view has taken hold in the culture, as part of the “racial reckoning” that we have been undergoing. But that reckoning cuts both ways. There was the George Floyd phenomenon, and an uptick in the perennial discussion about reparations for slavery; but there has also been a surprisingly rapid unraveling of the DEI phenomenon in corporate and academic America, and the blatant fraudulence of the leaders of Black Lives Matter, which has done a lot to discredit them and their cause.

As for the “ill founded” argument, I think it is always worth entertaining ways that we should rethink our premises, even about the Founding. There is a great deal about our current economic and social arrangements that is less than optimal, and in some respects intolerable. I am glad that people on the right and left are concerned about this, and exploring alternatives. But almost without exception, these critics fail to present us with plausible substitutes for our existing institutions. My own rather Augustinian view is that our institutions are imperfect, but less bad than the others on offer; and that they will not function properly without the strong countervailing force of religious conviction. I should add that this is *not* anything like integralism, which I reject categorically.

We have gone far enough down the road of moral erosion for me to feel that this view has been proven to be correct. It is not a question of “ill founding.” We have betrayed our excellent Constitution far more than we have been victimized by it. So the task before us is not one of making the world over again, à la French Revolution, but one of bringing about steady improvement, something that a self-governing people is capable of doing, using the guardrails that the Constitution and our ancestral faiths provide.

In addition, I would add that the way history is being taught, or not taught, shares much of the blame in all of this. A coherent society needs to be a community of memory, not just an aggregation of self-interested individuals. But we have precious few remaining shared symbols and shared memories, and

it sometimes seems that the instruction of the young in history, in the rare instances in which it actually occurs, is designed to distance them from the past rather than bring them into shared possession of it.

Q You recently co-edited a book called *Jewish Roots of American Liberty* (reviewed in this issue of R&L). George Washington’s famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, wished everyone “safety under his own vine and fig tree” and that “there shall be none to make him afraid.” There’s certainly much to make us afraid these days, especially for our Jewish neighbors. If you could assume the role of a Washington today, what would you say to your fellow Americans to allay their anxieties about the almost civil-war-like divisions among us?

As I explain in the introduction to *Jewish Roots*, the book was initially conceived as part of an effort to convince Jewish day-school teachers and leaders that they need to include American history as part of their curriculum, precisely because of things like Washington’s letters to the leading Hebrew congregations in the country after becoming the first president under the Constitution. Washington made the point that it was not mere toleration of the Jewish “other,” but support for Jews’ natural rights of freedom of religion, that would govern the policies of the new American nation. And it is true that America has been a haven for the Jewish people, unmatched in that respect by any other host nation in their long and hard history.

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**WE HAVE BETRAYED
OUR EXCELLENT
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THAN WE HAVE BEEN
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Sketch of a young Alexis de Tocqueville by unknown artist



The Thin Man publicity photo (1936)

So we didn't start out intending to write a book addressing the rise of anti-Semitism. But the book has appeared after October 7, 2023, and that has made a great difference. What started out as a book primarily directed to Jews is now a book primarily, or at least equally, directed to Christians and other non-Jews. And we (I very much include my brilliant colleague and coeditor Rabbi Stuart Halpern) have gathered together the work of a number of very distinguished authors who made a pretty compelling case for the Hebraic roots of American ideas and culture, and the value of them to all of us at precisely this historical juncture.

Q Now for some fun questions:
What book(s) have you read at least three times, and why?

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, because it is the single best book on America. I have read C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* a dozen times, and always get something new out of it. And Abraham Joshua Heschel's book *The Sabbath*, which was a revelation to me, and will be to all Christian readers. (I was introduced to it by a Seventh-day Adventist friend.)

Q If you could blow up one public building, à la Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*, without endangering life or risking imprisonment, which one would it be?

What a great question, and yet difficult to answer, because the United States is such a target-rich

environment. Do I only get one? I think every library building at every university where I have ever taught would be a candidate. And just about every building designed by Frank Gehry. But I'll settle for one, as the question requires: The J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington, DC, the home (for now) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I say "for now" because there is talk that the current FBI Director wants it torn down. May it be so. It is hideous, in ways that make the Bastille and Alcatraz elegant by comparison. Its "brutalist" design is true to its name, and manages to evoke all our deepest fears about our government and its transformation into a surveillance state. Taking it down would be a blow for freedom.

Although conscience demands that I state clearly that I don't think much of Howard Roark as a moral exemplar, and, to return to the French Revolution, blowing things up is not generally a good way to effect a moral revolution.

Q What's your favorite B&W film, and why?

That's easy. *My Man Godfrey* (1936). It was the film that made my wife and me fall in love. I also am very partial to movies featuring Asta, whose actual name was Skippy, the wonderful wire fox terrier who resembles my own dog Argos. Some of Skippy's biggest movies were *The Thin Man*, *The Awful Truth*, and *Bringing Up Baby*, all from the 1930s.

I know there are many great B&W movies, serious ones, and I don't mean to leave all of them out. But I guess I have a penchant for screwball comedies. **RL**

George Washington at Philadelphia

In regal blue, with firm-set eye and mouth,
The General departs to take command.
The day is clear and sunlight warms the land.
Cobblestones ring with horse hooves. From the south,
March neat parades of troops with fife and drum
As if assured that victory will come.

Such is the pomp with which our war began.
That mild day presaged many sadder ones,
When armies trudged through rain with heavy guns
And learned how cold and hunger waste a man.
They'd hide, then fight, then vanish in retreat
To slow what seemed inevitable defeat.

Between war's hope and its reality,
How could such men endure, but from a sense
That, by their sacrifice, would soon commence
An age of justice and of liberty,
Dependent not on power, rank, or king
But on that order heaven alone could bring?

For we who follow, we too live between
Those golden words and what such words may cost.
We know the just cause, sometimes, will be lost.
And, to learn what true liberty might mean
We struggle still, we who have understood
This is our country's trial and its good.

—James Matthew Wilson



AMERICAN DYSTOPIA

THE HANDMAID'S TALE AND PURITAN HISTORY

BY DANIEL N. STEIN

Did America's Christian founders create a blueprint for totalitarianism? Were the Puritan colonists of New England religious fundamentalists who oppressed women, blacks, and religious minorities based on literal readings of the Bible? Were they early communists who abolished the free market and stifled commerce in the name of morality? What was their legacy for later Americans?

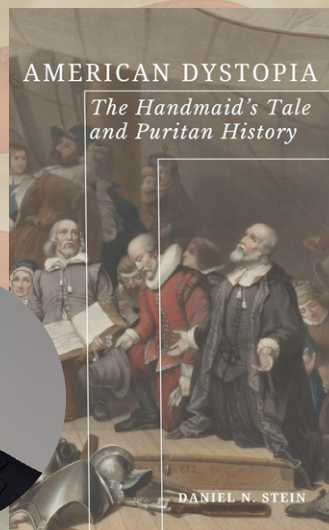
The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel which is taught as an accurate representation of America's Christian origins in high schools across the country. It imagines a future United States where Christian fundamentalists, inspired by their Puritan ancestors, establish a theocratic regime resembling George Orwell's *1984*. Margaret Atwood's book and TV show have inspired a modern protest movement based on fears that a society like *The Handmaid's Tale* is emerging in America today.

Is she right? Is our society in danger of reverting to its Puritan roots? What is the real legacy of this much-maligned religious group?

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on Dr. Phil.



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