AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM:
FROM EXEMPLAR TO EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

Most of the scholarship on American exceptionalism focuses on two main categories: “comparative” and “unique” exceptionalism. After considering the limitations of each, the path forward is set. It will be shown that imperial American exceptionalism was a development in, rather than a constant feature of, the American political tradition.

Chapter One outlines the main problems with the way American exceptionalism is usually addressed by examining the claims of some leading social scientists. The widespread confusion is partly due to the comparative posture taken in addressing the question, which cannot comprehend the political phenomenon for what it is. This calls for an alternate method, which is developed in the latter half of the chapter with an emphasis on America’s heritage of political and religious thought and the contributions of Willmoore Kendall and George Carey, Robert Bellah, and Eric Voegelin.

Chapter Two takes up John Winthrop, said to be the father of American exceptionalism because of his famous simile that the Massachusetts Bay Colony will be as a “city on a hill.” Winthrop is, however no imperial exceptionalist, though aspects of his ideas prepare the way for others’ imperialism.
Chapter Three focuses on the change that occurs in American self-conception during the American founding. An examination of the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the U.S. Constitution, and the Federalist shows a distinction into two spheres of what the Puritans formerly held as one.

Chapter Four covers Lincoln; rather than hewing to the traditional conception of the union as the development and reassertion of a long history of self-government, Lincoln recasts the American founding as the advent of a new kind of politics based on abstract ideas.

Chapter Five takes stock of the imperialism around the turn of the twentieth century, examining speeches by Albert Beveridge, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson. Their imperialism is shown to be a re-combination of some of the central symbols of the tradition, but in a way that justifies actions previously held as illegitimate.

Chapter Six briefly evaluates the limitations of this dissertation and looks ahead to future related work.
To Sarah,

my wife, my best friend, my other self,

a truly exceptional woman
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A budding scholar is so often aware that he stands on the shoulders of giants that mentioning it is a cliché. Yet the gratitude inspired by the cheerfulness and generosity of friends and colleagues can only be repaid in honor, and so I repay here what little I can. I am thankful to: Professor Carey; his cheer, guidance, prudence, and wisdom have taught me what it means to be a good professor; for Father Schall, whose so loved his students that he trusted very few to take the reins when he was away; I am thankful for that trust, and his thoughts on my work; for Professor Mitchell, who kept me honest; for all the professors at Georgetown and at the Catholic University of America; their work as scholars and teachers inspired me to try to follow in their footsteps; for my fellow graduate students at Georgetown, C.U.A., and elsewhere, I am grateful for the spirited discussions, tips, and camaraderie over my years of study; for the Tocqueville Forum, whose support over the years has made my speed and diligence easier to bear for both my family and for me; and, finally and warmly, for my wife and family, whose encouragement and enthusiasm for my work was sometimes the only fuel that kept me going.
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“I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I’m enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world… And if you think of our current situation, the United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional…And so I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships…”

–President Barack Obama

On a trip abroad in his first months in office, President Barack Obama was asked to comment on a topic that is frequently expressed, but rarely discussed by American politicians. The idea of American exceptionalism is of great interest and consequence to the world, but is often as confusing as it is illuminating. The end of his comment reveals
little more than his then-pressing priority of building relationships with other world leaders. Yet as a whole, his words give a key insight into the problem any scholar faces when he takes up the theme of American exceptionalism.

Over its history, the idea has had numerous meanings and undergone several consequential changes. President Obama hit on several of the usual meanings in his answer. Though he begins by, first, affirming his own belief in American exceptionalism, he emphasizes the relative nature of various claims to national uniqueness. This sense of the term “American exceptionalism” has long been embroiled in numerous methodological spats among scholars. It amounts to the insight that “exceptionalism” is largely dependent on one’s point of view.²

Obama almost immediately moves to a second sense of the term, however, when he gives America’s economic and military might as evidence for its exceptional character. Much of the scholarly literature on American exceptionalism treats the term as a claim made in the idiom of comparative political science. If there is a particular characteristic, like its economy or military, that makes America exceptional in the world, then an expert in the social sciences is in a unique position to verify or deny the claim. With surveys, case studies, and other scientific tools of analysis, it is thought, social scientists can compare apples to apples across international borders. And so they have done. GDP may be calculated and military resources may be cataloged; when the

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tabulations are complete, the social scientist can make an apparently objective determination as to America’s exceptionalism. Though Obama touches on this second, empirical sense of American exceptionalism in his very brief remark, it is clear that this is not the usual, colloquial sense of the term. These first two senses of the term, in other words, are not the reason the question was asked by the foreign journalist. The president mentions another sense in his answer.

Many have argued that it is the particular principles or practices in America that make it an exceptional country. Obama notes that America has a “core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality…” It is these, it has often been argued, that form the sure basis of claims to American exceptionalism. Though it was last in the president’s list, it is the oldest of the various senses of American exceptionalism that he offers, and unlike the second sense above, it does not necessarily carry with it the same sense of comparison. Uniqueness in institutions or origins or beliefs are, here, thought to show a key difference in American behavior and the rules it accordingly follows on the international stage. This third sense of the term has been present in America as long as the first European colonies. Yet, although the scholarship is replete with monographs and articles concerning the first two comparative senses of the term above, this third sense has not been explored systematically and rigorously. This dissertation is an effort at such an exploration.
The idea of American exceptionalism is of great consequence for politics today. No less depends on it than our stance towards the world and our own view of ourselves. Seen aright, the history of the idea of American exceptionalism is a sobering reflection on our origin, development, and future as a country. Yet frequently the matter has not been seen rightly. Numerous layers of scholarship obscure the view, perpetuating the notion that the more recent, comparative sense of the term is the only one. These layers will have to be carefully cleared away in order to see the phenomenon for what it is. A consideration of these layers opens up a new perspective on the question of American exceptionalism: the idea of American exceptionalism is seen to originate not in the realm of social science, but in political and religious thought. Because of this, the political theorist is in a unique position to enrich the scholarship on American exceptionalism. His work will eventually help inform the work of the social sciences by distinguishing the religious and theoretical claims from the empirical ones, eliminating some of the present confusion now found in scholarly literature.

Eliminating this confusion, however, is not the only goal of this dissertation. Far from a merely parochial methodological correction—though it includes this—one of the aims of this dissertation is to provide an argument for how democratic imperialism became thinkable in America. This development, it will be argued, is intimately tied up with the various changes that America’s self-conception has undergone from its roots in the first colonies on these shores all the way to the turn of the twentieth century. John Winthrop’s words that his Massachusetts Bay Colony will be as a “city on a hill” serve
today as a shorthand for the claim; they are frequently cited as the earliest articulation of the idea of American exceptionalism. Yet upon examination, his famous words are in fact an exhortation for the new settlers to lead lives of Christian virtue that might present a new way of life as an example to the world. This is a far cry from the imperialistic tone of contemporary claims to American exceptionalism, but there is an intelligible path between these points. An exploration of American exceptionalism on its own terms will have to explain and connect the theoretical and historical dots from exemplar to empire.
CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEMS WITH THE SCIENCE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM:
A WAY FORWARD THROUGH POLITICAL THEORY?

“If only they would hold their tongues, these learned folk!”

–Thomas à Kempis

The Varying Basis for Claims to American Exceptionalism

The question of American exceptionalism has perplexed historians and social scientists for over a century. Part of the confusion arises from the various meanings of the term, though even when there is agreement on the term’s meaning this has not assured similar conclusions on its underlying causes. For a hundred years the scholarship on the
topic has mainly focused on finding what lies at the root of America’s uniqueness. Some have argued that it is America’s lack of a feudal past that sets it apart—along with the Lockean liberal consensus that follows from this. Others have said it is America’s unique foundation in, or aversion to, philosophical politics. Some have argued that it is America’s unique cultural heritage of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire that explains the difference. American uniqueness has been attributed to its unique political system, particularly its federal structure. Still others have claimed American exceptionalism is due to the place of the frontier in American life, or America’s unique economic circumstances—whether it is the character and history of

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3. Some have used “American exceptionalism” as a blanket term for “the idea that America is and would continue to be distinct from Europe,” rightly noting the widely divergent meanings subsumed under the single term. But Diggins does not clearly delineate the various meanings, only cataloging them without much order. See John Patrick Diggins, On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History, (New Haven, Conn., and London, U.K.: Yale University Press, 2000), 102ff.


organized labor, the early advent of universal white manhood suffrage, the degree of upward class mobility, or the abundance of job and business opportunities and American natural resources. But uniqueness can be taken in a number of different ways, a point I will amplify below. There is, thus, little consensus on the nature or the causes of American exceptionalism. On these myriad grounds, and others, many social scientists argue that America is indeed an exceptional country, though the notion is not held universally in academe; numerous historians have come to deny the claim. Ian Tyrell is scholarship, see Larry G. Gerber, “Shifting Perspectives on American Exceptionalism: Recent Literature on American Labor Relations and Labor Politics,” Journal of American Studies, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Aug., 1997): 253-274.


14. See Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” American Quarterly, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Mar., 1993), 2. Though my “boogeyman” will frequently be “social scientists,” I want to address at the beginning that my use of the general term is decidedly not a straw man argument. I take up specific and representative arguments of social science. Why the general term is kept despite the danger of it turning into a straw man is pointed out toward the end of the first part. Namely, my reasons for rejecting the most common approach of American exceptionalism have to do with the core assumptions of social science in general. Mine, therefore, is a genus level critique that requires such a term. It should be noted in passing that despite the terminological similarity, I am not following Dorothy Ross’s
perhaps foremost among these historians, arguing for a new approach to the study of history that would show the chimerical nature of American exceptionalism. Many of these authors imply that the idea of American exceptionalism is uncomplicated, since very few discuss their particular meaning in using the term. That the numerous articles and monographs on the subject do not seem to engage one another, however, suggests the reason that the use of the term, and the ensuing debate, is largely uncritical.

Nearly all the scholarship to date contains an important common thread. On core methodological considerations, even critics of American exceptionalism like Tyrell seem to agree with exceptionalist proponents. All of these scholars understand the term “American exceptionalism” to be a claim in the idiom of comparative political science or comparative history. At the core of the term, it is thought, American exceptionalism means that there is either some standard from which America deviates—perhaps one provided by an historical ideology such as Marxism—or that America deviates from an empirical pattern set by similar countries—as with America’s high rates of imprisonment, etc. These scholars’ primarily comparative tack means that the question of American

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16. Various accounts of American exceptionalism focusing on foreign policy take this same tack, but are often more historically aware than the social science literature. The works of these authors will be discussed mainly in Chapter Three.
exceptionalism is usually taken to be an empirical one, answerable by survey analysis and
the cataloging of various other measurable phenomena. Though the scholarship is fairly
unified on this point, the scholars’ accounts have little to do with one another. Their
methodological unity appears to be their only point of unity. Their conclusions are as
diverse as the data they use. Some have tried to account for and move beyond these
impasses, though with little success. Because of this, a new way of moving forward is
called for. The new way forward should not partake of the same basic assumptions as
these accounts, because a similar inconclusiveness is likely to be the result. This project
is an effort at showing that there can be a new way forward through political theory.

First, I will schematize the various claims to American exceptionalism as they are
found in history and in academic scholarship. It is important to distinguish the main
senses of the term before processing the literature, so that where each argument or author
fits in relation to the others can be more readily understood. After presenting this scheme
I will take up two accounts of American exceptionalism by leading social scientists. I will
argue that an examination of their accounts yields doubts about the ability of social
science to address the whole question of American exceptionalism. Once this is done, I
will suggest an alternative approach to the question, which will serve as the guiding
methodological account for an inquiry into the idea of American exceptionalism as it is
operative in political action and history.
The Two Main Senses of “American Exceptionalism”

There are two main senses of the term “American exceptionalism,” and they divide according to the degree to which each includes a comparative aspect. The sense of the term that is primarily and mainly comparative is the sense in which social scientists most often use it. The other main sense of the term is only secondarily comparative and can be called the sense of American uniqueness or “unique” American exceptionalism.

The “comparative” sense of American exceptionalism is an understanding of the term in the idiom of comparative political or social science, though some historians and political theorists can be placed in this camp. Often, the use of this comparative sense means that a normal pattern has been established in some way—whether through scientific research and induction or through ideology—and that a particularly notable case, i.e. America, deviates from this normal pattern. This sense is primarily comparative because its meaning just is a comparison with other similar things; a sense of uniqueness is only secondarily comparative because setting something out as unique, though it has reference to other things, has it in only a secondary or derivative way.

The comparative sense is illustrated well in many of the essays found in Peter H. Schuck and James Q. Wilson’s recent Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation.17 In essay after essay, one particular American institution, aspect of culture, or public policy is established as the exception from a dominant, usually international, pattern. But the sense employed by social and political scientists is not the

only “comparative” sense of American exceptionalism. Historians and political theorists can also understand the term in this way.

In examining below the origin and evolution of the term in the twentieth century, we will see that the Marxist ideological interpretation of history sets a “normal” pattern from which the U.S. case deviates. The normal pattern is the process described by Marx from simple society through feudalism and capitalism to socialism and communism. This pattern seemed not to hold in America, which stood at the forefront of global capitalism for an extended period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without making the transition to socialism that was expected by 1930s Marxists. This is a comparison of the U.S. against an established pattern, but the pattern is established here by ideology rather than induction. As a rule, then, authors hewing to the comparative sense are seeking predictive power, whether because they are trying to support their own social scientific theory or findings, or because they wish to marshal support for an existing theory or ideology. Thus, the comparative sense of American exceptionalism need not be only methodologically empirical, though it is often so.

The other main sense of the term “American exceptionalism” I will call the “unique” sense. This sense, too, has a comparative aspect, but it is only secondarily so. Usually employed by political actors or more humanistic scholars, this sense of the term

18. Historian Ernest R. May outlines the degree to which political actors in the twentieth century use history as a predictor in politics. See his “Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy, (London, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1973), ix – xiv. He then argues that “previous centuries” cannot be treated similarly, presumably because before the twentieth century a great amount of political reasoning and prediction was tied up with religious thought. Where May leaves off, I will do some exploring.
often has connotations of idiosyncrasy or praise, or has roots in religious thought. And though the comparative sense of the term is not wholly without policy implications, it is the “unique” sense that often forms part of an account seeking to persuade others to a particular political action or behavior. There are three main “sub-senses” under this unique sense. The first is epitomized by John Winthrop.

The first resident Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is often associated with the idea of American exceptionalism. Though much more will be said to evaluate such claims in Chapter Two, here we can anticipate the findings of that chapter by categorizing his claim—and any others like it—as the “exemplary” sense of American exceptionalism. Rather than primarily an exception to a pattern, Winthrop calls on the colonists to set a pattern by responding to God’s call to live lives of high Christian virtue. This sense is somewhat comparative because it is defined with a limited and secondary reference to other peoples. But the meaning of the term is mainly to pick out America—or in this case, the colony at Massachusetts Bay—as unique. God, after all, has chosen them “from among the nations.”

Uniqueness is also the focus and primary meaning when Alexis de Tocqueville—said to be the first to coin the term—speaks of the “exceptional” position of the Americans. He makes the claim throughout his 1835 masterpiece, Democracy in America, often when discussing the unique origins of American institutions and cultural patterns. This is also the sense in which Publius can be called an American exceptionalist, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three. Together, Tocqueville and Publius
could be called institutional or cultural exceptionalists. More will be said of Tocqueville later in this chapter while evaluating whether he can be said to have coined the term.

With Tocqueville and Winthrop we see that this unique sense of American exceptionalism is closely tied to religion, unlike the comparative sense. This is true, too, of the main sense in which unique American exceptionalism is most often employed in contemporary political arguments. Under a third sub-sense of unique American exceptionalism, America is supposed to have a mission to civilize, educate, or otherwise dominate the world politically or economically. This sense seems to surface recognizably at the turn of the twentieth century when the U.S. took possession of Cuba, the Philippines, Hawaii, and other territories; I will call it “imperial” American exceptionalism. This is the main sense in which the idea of American exceptionalism is politically operative, the sense that is of the greatest practical consequence. This sense of the term is of primary concern in this project, though the other senses must be distinguished from it in the first three chapters.¹⁹

For the purposes of this project there are two main senses of the term American exceptionalism: “comparative” and “unique.” The comparative sense includes both empirical and ideological meanings of the term; the unique sense includes exemplary exceptionalism, cultural exceptionalism, and imperial exceptionalism. The last sense, imperial exceptionalism, is the primary focus of the present project.

¹⁹. Some contemporary accounts of American exceptionalism are explicitly noted in Chapter Three.
Now that these have been distinguished, I will take a closer look at the social scientific or “comparative” sense of the term, which is the sense most common in academic scholarship. In the course of that examination, I will take up the claim by some social scientists that Tocqueville coined the term and intended the primarily comparative sense of it. After rejecting that claim, I will show the origins of the term in early twentieth century Marxism; it will become evident that the comparative methods used to explore the empirical or ideological sense of American exceptionalism are insufficient for exploring the other main sense, unique American exceptionalism. It will then be proper to introduce a method for studying the “unique” sense of American exceptionalism, for which the tools of political theory are particularly suited.

The Comparative Sense of the Term “American Exceptionalism”

Though he is far from alone, Seymour Martin Lipset is perhaps the best known of the authors claiming that the oldest use of the term “American exceptionalism” is found in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Lipset argues the point explicitly at the outset of his book *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. In short, Lipset argues that Tocqueville makes the claim in one particular sentence in *Democracy in America* that the U.S. is an exceptional case among nations. Lipset assumes that Tocqueville’s claim is the first in a scholarly field yet to be fully developed in Tocqueville’s day, that of

contemporary political science. Because of this, Lipset does not offer a defense of the propriety of his comparative sense of the term American exceptionalism; he simply takes it for granted.\textsuperscript{21} This reading of Tocqueville serves as the foundation of Lipset’s entire book, which contains chapters that compare the U.S., in turns, with Canada and Japan; the analysis of the other chapters involves more cursory comparisons, though maintaining the deeply comparative approach. There is much at stake, however, in his glancing interpretation of Tocqueville. If he is mistaken, then his method and findings are open to doubt, along with the numerous other authors who have written on the topic from the same comparative, scientific perspective.\textsuperscript{22} A short examination of the passage Lipset uses to justify his approach, in fact, belies the claim as he has made it.

Neither in the edition to which Lipset refers, nor in any of the other major English editions of \textit{Democracy in America} is the particular term “American exceptionalism”

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} For the purposes of this chapter, I will argue explicitly and at length with Lipset. It should be noted, however, that the same critiques of a comparative scientific method could just as well apply to many scholars who write on the topic of American exceptionalism, which, for reasons that will be seen below, has long been the almost exclusive province of social scientists. Michael Kammen has noted the degree to which few historians have continued to pursue the subject and many social scientists have taken it up. It should be noted that although Kammen rightly picks up the distinction between a “cultural” basis for exceptionalism in the original American settlers and a “comparative” basis in social science literature, he does not suggest a way forward that might reconcile and make sense of his two categories. Though Kammen’s article is helpful in its effort to be an exhaustive accounting of the scholarship up to 1993, he seems to have missed the fact that did not escape Byron Shafer in 1991, i.e. that with social science the scale of inquiry greatly influences the degree to which the claim to exceptionalism is confirmed or denied. A change in range results also in a change in the study’s conclusions.
\end{itemize}
used. The point seems a small one when the original French is found and it is noted that the words, as written, do not lend themselves to that two-word term. Because of the wording of the original French, Lipset should perhaps be cut some slack. It should be asked, then, why Lipset so explicitly asserts that Tocqueville coins the term, and in that particular passage. The ambiguity of Lipset’s writing and citation suggest, perhaps, that he did not have in mind the strict invention and definition of the two-word term, “American exceptionalism.” Rather, Lipset may have only been suggesting that Tocqueville’s work as a whole stands for the claim that America is an exception to the general state of world democracies; the particular passage to which he refers only points this up in a particularly direct manner. Lipset would, then, not be citing Tocqueville’s particular passage as the one needful piece of evidence, but citing, by way of an example, a passage that is representative of the whole text. Certainly the English edition used by Lipset suggests this much: “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.” Tocqueville goes on to list several major traits of American life and history that seem highly unlikely ever to occur again:

Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the


pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects…Let us cease, then, to view all democratic nations under the example of the American people, and attempt to survey them at length with their own features.25

The last sentence in the passage should give a clue to the reader that Lipset’s interpretation may not be spot on. Rather than a claim in the idiom of comparative political science, Tocqueville appears to be making a claim for the idiosyncrasy of American politics. If he can be said to embrace the term at all, it would be instead the unique sense of American exceptionalism, as argued above. Democratic politics in one land will not necessarily tell you much about democratic politics in another.26 This idiosyncrasy should caution one against the very comparative method that Lipset pursues.

To be sure, Tocqueville makes numerous comparisons in the book, frequently recalling the character of the French, English, and American peoples side by side. But Tocqueville’s comparisons are not, as Lipset believes, made in the idiom of comparative political science. Careful reading makes it clear that reference to English or French experiences are made in the interest of throwing differences into sharper relief so that


26. It might be said that this particular comment by Tocqueville is aimed at those, like John Locke, who suppose that America presents a picture of the civilized world at its embryonic stage. Tocqueville argues against this view here and elsewhere in Democracy in America, suggesting instead that the country is worthy of study in its own right.
they are easier to see, not to prove a scientific claim through the isolation of variables, as Lipset seeks to do.27, 28

27. At least two authors have taken up the methodological implications of Democracy in America at length. John C. Koritansky argues that Tocqueville’s book was not supposed to be a grand statement on politics in general, but a statement that America’s unique background was necessary to its unique flowering, i.e. Koritansky, too, believes that Tocqueville is pointing out America’s uniqueness or idiosyncrasy. Tocqueville is not a political scientist formulating general laws of politics, but an author defining the nature of political and cultural institutions in terms of their origins. See John C. Koritansky, Alexis de Tocqueville and the New Science of Politics: An Interpretation of Democracy in America, (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1986).

Saguiv A. Hadari concurs with John Stuart Mill that the greatest significance of Tocqueville’s work is not in its substantive findings, but in its new approach to the subject, blending various approaches to social science. Tocqueville, Hadari thinks, successfully defends three moments in conducting social science: formal modeling, hermeneutics, and a normative stand. Concentration on any substantive claim, like that of an empirical basis of American exceptionalism, would thereby miss, for Hadari, the main profit of Tocqueville’s work. See Saguiv A. Hadari, Theory in Practice: Tocqueville’s New Science of Politics, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 4ff.

28. The section in which Lipset’s reference occurs is titled, “THE EXAMPLE OF THE AMERICANS DOES NOT PROVE THAT A DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE CAN HAVE NO APTITUDE AND NO TASTE FOR SCIENCE, LITERATURE, OR ART.” Tocqueville’s point, even in the title of the section to which Lipset refers, is that it is possible to have a democratic people that does not wallow in ignorance and poverty. Or to put it more positively as Tocqueville himself does on a subsequent page: it is possible to have a democratic people that are “enlightened,” and so are less susceptible to the ambitions of despots. (Tocqueville, DA II, 38.) But when it is recalled that Tocqueville cautions against making broad law-like statements, it appears that he is more true to a scientific mindset than was first supposed: he is loathe to draw a broad causal conclusion from what would today be called a “small-n study.” He refuses to make a generalization based on a limited set of data. Rather, he is making a modal claim about democracies and despotism. It is, thus, clear that Tocqueville’s passage is a warning against scientific generalization, rather than something that, as Lipset argues, “could only have arisen by comparing this country with other societies.” The comparisons are not made in order to achieve the result, but in order to make his observations clearer.

Might there be another reason, then, that Lipset suggests Tocqueville as the originator of the term? If Tocqueville first coined the term, and if it can be convincingly argued that Tocqueville is the first comparative social scientist, then Lipset has shown his own preferred methodology to be adequate to the topic—a burden every scholar strives to bear. Without the premises that, (1) Tocqueville was the first to make a claim to American exceptionalism, and (2) that Tocqueville made the claim in the idiom of comparative political science, the preparatory remarks for his book would need to include a justification of his method. Making this particular argument at the outset is a matter of covering all of the bases of his subsequent arguments; with this bald reading of Tocqueville’s words, Lipset seems to have provided a firm foundation for his book. In short, asserting that Tocqueville coins the term in this way saves Lipset some work. He has a real interest, then, in the oversimplification of the matter. In order to show that thinking on American exceptionalism has taken place squarely in the field of comparative political science, Lipset must claim that the idea has no antecedent in American history prior to Tocqueville. This is a task neither Lipset nor anyone else could actually perform, however, since the idea actually has several antecedents.
Perhaps it goes too far to suggest that Lipset interprets Tocqueville in this way only to save himself some effort. Yet even backing away from that claim, it should be said that his reading of Tocqueville is considerably less than full and rich. As it stands, his book is yet another study like those he had published for the previous four decades, marshalling data from several countries and sifting through the results for patterns and outliers.\textsuperscript{29} It is unsurprising that such a method actually finds what it is looking for: a dominant pattern and at least one exception to it. A deeper engagement with the idea of American exceptionalism might have led him to projects not unlike the present one. Since the justification for Lipset’s method can, thus, be questioned, a different method may be suggested. First, however, the true origins of the term “American exceptionalism” should be uncovered.

\textit{Werner Sombart and Marxist Theories of History}

The term “American exceptionalism” is actually a relatively recent one, born out of the twentieth century ideological meeting between communist thought and American

\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, as at least one reviewer has noted, Lipset’s \textit{American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword} contains little that was not previously recorded in Lipset’s \textit{The First New Nation} or \textit{Continental Divide}. See H. V. Nelles, “Review: American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword,” \textit{The American Historical Review}, Vol. 102, No. 3 (June 1997), 749-757. It should be noted that although I am criticizing the extent to which Lipset partakes of the scientific approach, some like Nelles have noted the “pseudo-scientific” nature of Lipset’s work (755). This is due to the extent that he attributes America’s exceptional character to his five very intangible traits and, in the Preface, even the “hand of Providence.” With this critique duly noted, however, it should be noted also that for the purposes of this chapter all that is needed is an example of the comparative view—and Lipset is certainly this, even if his conclusions are rejected by some who share his comparative method.
economic and political success.\footnote{30} Growing adherence to Marxist theories of history led many observers to look forward to the day when America, at the forefront of capitalism on the eve of the twentieth century, would lead the world into the age of global socialism and communism. It was a matter of time only, so the theory went, until America’s highly advanced capitalist economy would create the material conditions necessary to foment the revolution of the proletariat and the consequent first steps toward a world-wide communist order. Yet in the early years of the twentieth century, impatience began to build, leading to inquiry. In 1906 the German academic Werner Sombart published \textit{Why is There No Socialism in the United States?}, a short book that essentially answers the title question as if it were a trick question. At the end of the work Sombart says, in effect: “Wait, and there \textit{will} be socialism soon.”\footnote{31} If Sombart was not convinced of the fact of comparative American exceptionalism—past or present—his book nonetheless became

\footnote{30} See Diggins, \textit{Ground}, 104-105. The Oxford English Dictionary, for one, does not observe a use of “exceptionalism” until a newspaper article penned by Jay Lovestone in 1928. It should be noted that the OED’s reference, like Lipset’s, is not to the two-word term; this is of little consequence, since Lovestone’s and Tocqueville’s meanings are, given the surrounding texts, considerably different. The Marxist theory of history requires an accounting for why the U.S. did not seem to follow the general pattern. Thus, the note of comparison, of a mental “control group” and “experimental group” is present from the inception of the term in American Marxist usage, though not in Tocqueville’s passage.

\footnote{31} Daniel Bell notes that the problem with Sombart’s writing is that, as with “every good academic, theory triumphed over existent reality—it is the heritage of Hegel.” See Daniel Bell, “The ‘Hegelian Secret,’” in \textit{Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism}, ed. Byron E. Shafer, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 52-54. Sombart’s book was also published in German under the title, \textit{Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?}, (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1906), and had its roots in a series of articles written for the \textit{Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik}, Volume XXI (1905), the periodical led by both himself and Max Weber, and in which Weber’s noted essay, \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism} was first published in two parts (1904 and 1905). Weber and Sombart both wrote their now-famous monographs in the wake of a visit to America for the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. For more on the link between Sombart and Weber, see Edward A. Tiryakian, “American Religious Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration.” \textit{Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science} 527 (May 1993): 40-54.
the touchstone for a long (and ongoing) exploration of the topic. Much of the scholarly literature on American exceptionalism is centered on the question of America’s unique economic history, mechanisms, and policies. The permeability of economic classes, or the lack of economic classes at all, the causes for failure of the various socialist activists, and even the famous theoretical arguments of Louis Hartz all have their origins in thoughts similar to those Sombart wrote at the dawn of the twentieth century. One can see at least the shadow of a Marxist theory of history in how Hartz takes Europe as the historical norm from which America deviates.

The orientation toward Marxist-style history has been one of the most enduring features of the scholarship on American exceptionalism. By this I mean precisely the manner in which Hartz uses Europe as a touchstone in studying America. The approach is comparative at the deepest level, and the heart of it is a presumption that history follows a particular, determined course that may be discerned in examining Europe. Cognizance of this fact brings out important questions of methodology that should be addressed: what has been the relationship between Marxist theories of history and the questions asked, methods used, and answers found in the social sciences regarding American exceptionalism? If Marxist-style theories of history have indeed provided guidance to the

32. For Hartz, America was unique in the world because its own particular liberalism was not born out of a struggle against aristocracy or a traditional way of societal life. Because America had no feudal past, it could have no radical future. There was no need to pull down the existing edifice, as there was in Europe, because the status quo in America already complied with liberal demands. Hartz argues that, thus, liberalism arose on American shores undisputed, so that it had neither the radical policies nor the often-violent tendencies of its Continental counterparts. Hartz, among others, argues that the Marxist theory works very well for Europe, but not elsewhere. Even scholars like Hartz who were not devoted to a Marxist theory of history find themselves responding to it nonetheless. See Hartz, 9.
social sciences, then are there certain phenomena or factors that have been overlooked because they lie outside Marxism’s criteria of relevance? If the Marxist theories of history have indeed provided guidance to the social sciences, then what might fill the void now that they are increasingly displaced? Because most scholars seem to take for granted that their own use of the term “American exceptionalism” is, unproblematically, the same as others, there have been only a few accounts of the possible range of meanings of the term. To begin an answer the above questions, these accounts will be considered.

*Social Science’s American Exceptionalism*

In the editor’s introduction to *Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, Byron Shafer notes three possible ways to take the term “American exceptionalism”; in the course of laying them out, Shafer exhibits some consciousness of the problems associated with treating the idea while simultaneously failing to overcome these problems. Reviewing his argument will show how this is so. Each of his three senses, he thinks, requires a modification of one’s method of study. The first main sense of American exceptionalism is “simple distinctiveness,” by which Shafer means the “dictionary sense of being clearly and recognizably different from elsewhere.” But for the purposes of social science, Shafer notes, this sense is problematic because all societies, “observed closely enough, are distinct, while all societies, observed with sufficient

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33. I will argue below that this is the case, especially in reference to the role of religious thought in America, generally, and the case of the idea of American exceptionalism, more specifically.
distance, are simultaneously similar.” The claim to American exceptionalism may be, Shafer notes, entirely dependent on the scale of one’s inquiry. But if the term is truly a claim to American uniqueness in only a secondarily comparative way, then the scientific method may not be able to study this sense of American exceptionalism at all. The need for comparison, then, means the claim to “simple distinctiveness” must be abandoned by social scientists because there can be no deep investigation using their tools. The social scientist will have to employ a different sense of the term.

Shafer proposes a second main sense of the term American exceptionalism that “revolves around the assertion that there is a general model of societal progression for

34. In a widely cited journal article, the previously mentioned historian Ian Tyrell famously argues for a new, “transnational history” in which the parochial national biases are done away with. These narrow viewpoints are to blame for erroneous claims to American exceptionalism, Tyrell claims, essentially arguing that the persistence of claims to American exceptionalism is the result of either bad or ideological history. Instead of narratives focused on the nation-states, which are increasingly unimportant as historical forces, Tyrell suggests a more adequate perspective would take a much wider view. See Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” American Historical Review 96, (Oct. 1991): 1031-72.

35. Science requires an experimental group and a control group, which are found inductively in biology or physics, but only with difficulty in the social sciences. When Lipset argues in his book that, “to know one country” is to “know no country,” he is repeating the common scientific orthodoxy that one cannot see the significance of a particular phenomenon except in contrasting it with other controlled instances. While this method is effective for claims to significance in the natural sciences—with their phenomena and data so far removed from everyday life, and the consequent lack of context to render the data intelligible—the same cannot be said for the social sciences, which take the occurrences of everyday life to be the phenomena explained and data interpreted. The very data considered in the social sciences are simultaneously created in their consideration. In trying to interpret human action, in other words, the interpretation becomes a new ground for subsequent human action. The “laboratory” of the social sciences is not closed and pure; the scientific method cannot apply directly, then, but only analogously.

In her review of Lipset’s American Exceptionalism, Mary Nolan notes the degree to which Lipset cites, unproblematically, the similar answers given by respondents from different countries. Noting that “the answers elicited are not easily comparable” because of their “distinctive political and discursive contexts,” Nolan doubts that there can be an adequate measure—especially across different cultures—of amorphous phenomena like “patriotism.” Lipset does not apparently see a problem with this. See Mary Nolan, “Against Exceptionalisms,” The American Historical Review, Vol. 102, No. 3 (June 1997): 769-774.
developed nations in the world—and the United States does not fit this model.\textsuperscript{36} Shafer thinks this second sense has two branches, one self-congratulatory and one more pejorative; John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” belongs to the first, Shafer says, and has to do with the unique opportunities available in America and nowhere else; various American theorists of Marxism belong to the second sub-branch, which is said to have saved Marxist history from being proven wrong by America’s persistent capitalism.\textsuperscript{37} The initial problem posed by the first sense of the term above may be solved by Marxist theories of history, since there is for the convinced Marxist a standard progression of history; it can serve as the normal pattern from which the U.S. seems to vary. \textit{This} seems to be the connection between Marxist theories of history and the methods of the social sciences.\textsuperscript{38} Put otherwise, a thoroughgoing Marxist cannot be a thoroughgoing scientist, and vice versa—though milder versions of each could, and certainly do, coexist. Shafer thinks the “Winthrop branch” of this second sense is as untenable as the Marxist branch because it has been shown over time that the U.S. is

\textsuperscript{36} This is what I have called above, simply, “comparative” American exceptionalism.

\textsuperscript{37} Shafer’s schema muddles the key theoretical differences between Winthrop and Marxism, a difference my own scheme above can account for. Further, Shafer seems to place Winthrop in the camp of empirically comparative American exceptionalism, which I will show in Chapter Two is simply incorrect.

\textsuperscript{38} They are mutually reinforcing. But here there occurs a further problem, because for Marxists there can be no lasting deviation from the pattern. Seeming contradictions to the trajectory of history, like that of America, will always be dismissed or explained away as only apparent problems or delays in the manifestation of the true pattern. And this is just what we saw with Sombart. The logic of history is taken as a given, not introduced as one datum among many; thus, even though \textit{historically} the term American exceptionalism has its roots in Marxist-style theories of history, the claim is not ultimately tenable in the context of social science. This quality—taking the theory for granted and dismissing counter-examples—is what leads many to dismiss Marxist history as ideological, and therefore incompatible with science, which should, by definition, be falsifiable. Note the similarity on this point to what Daniel Bell calls the “heritage of Hegel” in note 31, above.
ultimately very similar to other developing nations. Since many nations in the contemporary world seem to exhibit the “unique” characteristics of 18\textsuperscript{th} century America,\textsuperscript{39} and since Europe no longer seems destined for radical communism, the credibility of both branches of Shafer’s second sense of “American exceptionalism” has declined. This, too, is a dead end for social scientists, he thinks.\textsuperscript{40}

In introducing a third main sense of the term, Shafer offers an apology for the route taken by the authors in his book. This third sense is an examination of “peculiarly American approaches to major social sectors—to government, to the economy, to culture, to religion, to education, and to public policy, as we have isolated them in this volume—and to their interaction in the larger society around them.”\textsuperscript{41} That is, Shafer’s third main sense of the term is a specific example in the social science scholarly literature that seeks to avoid the problems of the first two senses. It looks to keep its scope neither too large nor too small (in order to avoid the fault of Shafer’s first sense of American exceptionalism) and to focus on the empirical realities of American life (to avoid the fault

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{39} N.B. This is a direct departure from Tocqueville’s passage above, cited by Lipset. Shafer is not arguing against Tocqueville so much as missing his point. Tocqueville is taking seriously the factors he names, among which are America’s “Puritan origins.” Since it is clear that this characteristic would be difficult to find repeated, it is also clear that Shafer is not taking such considerations into account.

Note also the degree to which Shafer has muddied the important difference between the comparative and unique senses of American exceptionalism.
\end{quotation}

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{40} Lipset and others have long operated as if this were not the case. They have continued to explore Sombart’s main thought ever since its debut. See, for example, Selig Perlman, \textit{A Theory of the Labor Movement} (New York: The Macmillian Co., 1928); Jean Heffer and Jeanine Rovet, eds., \textit{Why is There No Socialism in the United States?} (Paris: L'école des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1988); and Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, eds., \textit{It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States}, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).
\end{quotation}

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{41} Note the term “isolated” and its connotations of scientific method and finality.
\end{quotation}
of Shafer’s second main sense). Scholars will particularly avoid ideological history by avoiding history altogether, seeking rather to measure American life and evaluate the claim to American exceptionalism by examining data. While his approach seems to answer the objections some have raised, it is focused throughout on the social scientific angle of the question, which is far from the only one.

**Problems with the Science of American Exceptionalism**

Though persuasively written, one of Shafer’s most important assumptions is not explicit and it is, interestingly, the same as Lipset’s. Namely, Shafer assumes that the methodology of empirical social science is adequate to the task of exploring the phenomenon of American exceptionalism. And this is because both of these social scientists hew to a similar but narrow sense of the term. Shafer’s third, favored sense of the term assumes that various disparate aspects of American life may be isolated and examined as such. The isolation should allow for cleaner, clearer interpretations of the data that each author in his volume supplies, and an overall affirmative or negative judgment on the question of American exceptionalism. Yet Shafer’s new method does not succeed. It is aimed at furthering the scholarly debate through agreement to certain

42. All quotations are taken from Shafer’s very brief introduction. See Byron E. Shafer, *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), v - xi. It should perhaps be noted that, though Lipset contributes a large essay to this volume, the essay appears in an updated version as the first two chapters of his own *American Exceptionalism*. The later version has, therefore, been used in this chapter.

In an earlier article, Shafer essentially repeats his apology for a new, albeit still comparative perspective; see Byron E. Shafer, “‘Exceptionalism’ in American Politics?”, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Sep., 1989): 588-594.
baseline assumptions, but even the eight authors in the volume do not all agree that America is exceptional. Now, it could be argued that methodological consensus and not agreement on findings was Shafer’s main goal. If this is so, then Shafer may be said to have gained a real, if limited, victory. A methodological consensus among a group of social scientists amounts to an agreement on the merits of the basic assumptions of the scientific method, which is hardly a monumental achievement. As long as a methodological consensus is centered on a comparative and scientific mode of inquiry there is little reason to believe that the question of American exceptionalism will become any less interminable than already found. The innumerable threads of social reality create so complex a fabric that their mere observation and description is always bound to turn up new “empirical evidence” for and against American exceptionalism.

A common set of meanings and assumptions is, however, a worthy goal. Finding a broadly acceptable framework would mean that the energies of many scholars could be focused on the same data or phenomena, and that findings would be debatable because of the new consensus on the scope and meaning of the term and idea. As it stands, the numerous volumes and articles on the subject take a comparative “look at American exceptionalism” from myriad different viewpoints, which results in competing monologues instead of arguments. The framework would necessarily be broader than the

43. Witness Andrew Greeley’s extended apology for the methods of social science, and his contention that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, 95-102. Greeley should be praised for his methodological self-awareness and rigor; but his own exhibition of these makes all the more glaring the lack of it in the other authors like Lipset.
social sciences, since as Lipset has pointed out, social scientists are not the only ones taking up American exceptionalism as a theme.\textsuperscript{44}

The main problem with the science of American exceptionalism as it has so far been conducted is, then, that it does not seem to be capable of accounting for the phenomenon fully. A great deal of what seems to fall under the head of “American exceptionalism” is not treated by social scientists. As was suggested above, it was the peculiar concatenation of social scientific methodology and Marxist theories of history that led to the prevalence of the comparative aspect of the idea of American exceptionalism. Tyrell sees that the previous explanations are no longer tenable, and so seeks to put new ones in their place. To understand American exceptionalism, however, perhaps it is not a change within the method of social science that is needed, but a move away from scientific analysis. If Shafer is right that various different senses of American exceptionalism require different methods, perhaps there is an important sense of

\textsuperscript{44} Lipset notes that any claim to American exceptionalism, “only has meaning in a comparative context,” and that within that context there have been three main “traditions” of interpretation. The first, that to which Madsen’s book belongs, is mainly followed by students of history or literature and “deals with the founding myth of the United States as a society.” The second is “Tocquevillian”; it looks at the practices of various countries and sees the U.S. as “sociologically unique.” This is Lipset’s chosen tradition. The third, Lipset says, is mainly covered in the socialist and communist literature. It follows Sombart and has mainly to do with the failure or success of labor parties in the U.S.

Though Lipset introduces his own three-fold distinction of the possible methods or meanings of the term “American exceptionalism,” all of them are comparative to the core. Even with the first of the three, which seems the least scientific, the fundamental presumption is that examination of data—in this case the various national “myths of origin”—will yield a pattern from which the U.S. deviates. See Seymour Martin Lipset, “[Review of Madsen’s American Exceptionalism],” The Journal of American History, Vol. 87, No. 3 (Dec., 2000), p. 1019. The notion that comparisons of this kind are fruitful is at the heart of the method of the social sciences, as has been alluded to above when defining the various sense of American exceptionalism.
American exceptionalism—the sense that explores the practical and moral ramifications of America’s uniqueness—that social science cannot detect at all.

*Bellah, Voegelin, and Basic Symbols*

Thus far, it has been shown that the usual methods of social science, far from leading toward consensus, tend to encourage the perpetuation of debate and the proliferation of accounts of American exceptionalism. The argument is borne out by the numerous scholarly books and articles that intersect very little or not at all. Some scholars have sought to establish a common method in order to revive the somewhat stagnant subject, but the consensus established has only amounted to a common endorsement of the general methods of science. I will now outline an alternative method that partakes of two similar methodological accounts in their approach to specifically understanding America. Robert Bellah’s method in *The Broken Covenant* and Willmoore Kendall and George Carey’s method in *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* share common roots in the work of Eric Voegelin. Voegelin’s approach, especially as adapted by Kendall and Carey, will open up a new avenue of inquiry for the student of American exceptionalism, with some important modifications suggested by Bellah’s work. This new hybrid method will be able better to evaluate the sense of unique American exceptionalism that is the most often politically operative. It will give a fuller sense of the term and allow for an inquiry into the theoretical and practical significance of the idea in ways that social scientific or “comparative” sense of the term cannot.
Robert Bellah has long been one of America’s and the twentieth century’s most respected sociologists. Bellah’s most famous scholarly contribution is his work on “civil religion.” Though he cannot claim original conception of the idea, from the 1960s onward his work has set the tone for its treatment. And though the perspective of his scholarly corpus can generally be called comparative, his book *The Broken Covenant* focuses on the American case in its peculiarity—heeding Tocqueville on the point that has gone unheeded in the work of Lipset and others.

In his updated preface to *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah speaks of how interest has replaced virtue as the basis for freedom. Capitalism, utilitarianism, and science, Bellah argues, have united under a pseudo-religion of technical progress to displace the original consensus, which, following the Pilgrims, was broadly Christian and covenantal.\(^{45}\) Clearly these observations are not strictly measurable, scientific, and comparative. Bellah denies, however, that his book is a work of political theory, arguing instead that it concerns myth.\(^ {46}\) Though it seems clear that social science cannot take up the subject of myth—for how might the usual tools of social science study myth, as such?—it is far from clear that political theory cannot consider it. Eric Voegelin, in fact, convinced a generation of scholars that a society’s myths are the very kinds of things that ought to be studied by political theorists. Since one of Bellah’s seminal articles founds its analysis on


\(^{46}\) Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 3.
some of Voegelin’s insights, it is unsurprising that Bellah’s approach in The Broken Covenant also seems to follow the general lines of Voegelin’s work.

After an initial apology for a new focus on myth, Bellah observes that “America as a nation began on a definite date, July Fourth, 1776.” Though many believed that the general newness of America meant that the political order here was a beginning ex nihilo, Bellah points out that the earliest symbols in the American tradition are Christian, and so point back beyond the first European settlements on the continent. This is a point echoed by Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey in their book, The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition. Basic Symbols, too, follows in Voegelin’s footsteps, explicitly taking up his method of examining symbols and myths. Since the use of Voegelin’s method is, in Basic Symbols, more explicit and more resembles the method I

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48. Bellah, Broken Covenant, 3. Such an observation is surprising at the head of a book that also argues for a recovery of some of the thinking of the Pilgrims. (xxii) Yet Bellah acknowledges that, “In human affairs, no beginning is absolutely new,” (4) suggesting that he chose that date for America’s beginning on fairly technical grounds. Kendall and Carey, and I following them, take issue with marking this date as the country’s moment of origin or birth. Bellah’s caveat that “no beginning is absolutely new” shows, however, that he, too, sees that the Declaration of Independence is not strictly and solely the country’s beginning in any but a technical sense—though I dispute even this point in Chapter Three below.

49. Bellah, Broken Covenant, 9ff.


51. Kendall and Carey, 18ff.
will take up, key parts of its account should be recalled—keeping in mind that Bellah’s account is similar in most important respects.52

Following Voegelin, Kendall and Carey note that it is through symbols that “a people becomes a people, that is, gets itself politically organized for action in history.” “Political philosophy,” they write, “…is a tardy development in the history of a people, and, moreover, a development precisely out of the stuff of symbols and myths.”53 In this way of thinking, then, it is myopic only to consider a people’s political philosophy when trying to understand their political theory and behavior. When theorists seek to plumb the depths of a people’s thinking on politics only in comparison with the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, and other philosophers, they obtain only a narrow, late, and reified account of a people’s self-conception. Such has been the case with the American political tradition for some time; only the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist are thought to be relevant—if even these—and only in terms of their meaning in the light of various ideas and movements in eighteenth century philosophy. It is for this reason that Kendall and Carey go beyond a consideration only of documents. Kendall and Carey begin with what they consider to be the most basic symbol, the Mayflower Compact, and continue through colonial period as the people of the colonies find their own political footing. Such an approach avoids some of the pitfalls of the more dominant approaches to American political thought; the antinomy often perceived between the

52. For a discussion of their points of disagreement with each other, and my own with each of them, see below.

Declaration and the Constitution, for example, is shown to be false if both documents are understood in the light of the whole tradition that preceded them.\textsuperscript{54}

This shows that the determination of which symbols are most basic is vitally important for understanding a people as it is. Peoples exist in history, and so an understanding that takes this into account will be more accurate than one that does not. Voegelin’s insights—first, about the role of symbols in politics and, second, about the relationship between symbols and philosophy—show that it is only with an approach like Kendall and Carey’s that a particular tradition of political thought, as such, can be made truly clear. The historicity of a tradition means that the method of examination should capture the phenomenon \textit{as} historical and \textit{as} developing.\textsuperscript{55}

Voegelin’s “symbols” are historical by nature, and this is the chief advantage of his insight. The antecedent symbols, which contain the possibilities of the consequents, are “compact”; these compact symbols undergo a process of “differentiation” over time, a process that is mostly opaque until it has happened.\textsuperscript{56} One advantage of this

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\item \textsuperscript{54} The presence of clauses in the Constitution that protect slavery, for example, are taken to contradict the equality clause in the Declaration of Independence. But understanding these documents as political acts and not as rarified treatises of political thought helps to ameliorate the sense of contradiction.
\item \textsuperscript{55} The difference might be likened to the distinction between the video of an entire sporting event and the snapshots of its pivotal moments. The moments are important, but absent the context of the rules of the game and the flow of events in the match, a snapshot is unintelligible. A purely philosophical method is limited to particular moments in time—and late moments at that, as has been pointed out. A method that can better account for the history of a people and their ideas will understand those ideas as they have actually existed. This is why it is sometimes said that Voegelin’s method may be more empirical than the empiricists’.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Kendall and Carey, 24. Chief among the insights that this allows is the clarification that state, society, and church were not differentiated for the earliest inhabitants of North America, including the Puritans. Just so, their thoughts on church governance, social norms, and governmental laws and
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conceptualization of history is that one can, looking backward, see the various lines of development without claiming that the development was strictly necessary. In the case of the United States, this means that one can probe the various compact symbols of the colonies, as Kendall and Carey do, without also arguing either that the manner or the fact of their eventual emergence as the U.S. was inevitable.  

Though taking up Voegelin explicitly, Kendall and Carey note that his method does not come to them with an explicit “set of rules” for determining which are the foundational symbols of a political tradition. They infer two rules, therefore, from Voegelin’s practice in his own work. First, one should, “begin at the beginning,” though they find that this is no easy task. Taking a late symbol as the basic one would give the whole analysis a false color, while picking one that is too early would mean that the people is not yet really one people. Finding a happy medium is a difficult but necessary part of this method. Second:

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57. On “compactness” and “differentiation,” see Kendall and Carey, 24.


59. Contrast this with Bellah’s seemingly effortless choice of the signing of the Declaration of Independence as the true beginning of the U.S. as a nation, which accordingly emphasized its clauses at the expense of the colonial tradition.
Unless we can see a correspondence between the symbols we have in hand and the people’s action in history, the symbols we have in hand do not in fact represent that people, and we must look a second time for the symbols that do in fact represent them.  

This second rule, that is, establishes a manner of evaluating whether we have a real, operative symbol, or merely an empty concept. A symbol will be manifest in the actions of a people, and so careful attention must be paid to a people’s history when interpreting their words. At the beginning of the second chapter of *Basic Symbols*, Kendall and Carey add two strictures of their own: they will “keep to this side of the Atlantic,” since they are looking for the basic symbols of the *American* political tradition and they will keep to the “same literary category,” focusing on “public documents of self-interpretation.”

This serves as a basic outline of Kendall and Carey’s approach. It should be clear at this point, that an approach based on Voegelin’s insights is not only a perspective of potential profit for examining the idea of “unique” American exceptionalism, but also an interesting and fruitful approach to political ideas and history in general.

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60. Note the necessary ambiguity of Kendall and Carey on this point, a point at which Bellah’s choice makes more sense. The “people” of the Mayflower Compact does not seem to be the same “people” as the one indicated in the Declaration of Independence. The “people” of the Declaration, however, does seem to be the same as that of the Constitution and today. To remedy this, Kendall and Carey note they will have to “show some kind of historical continuity between the beginning we seize upon and that much later moment at which the people is in fact constituted as a people for action in history” (26).


The Idea of American Exceptionalism is Historical

Once the layers of scholarship that treat the idea of American exceptionalism as “comparative” are peeled away, it is readily seen that history is an important component of it. The idea of American exceptionalism has a history and a pre-history. Tracing these will mean correcting the conventional thoughts on various aspects of the idea; understanding these thoughts will help its implications to be understood more adequately.

It has been noted that this project’s approach is particularly Weberian in its focus on the evolution of ideas and the interaction of ideas and historical events. Weber’s most famous work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, was, he said, “a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history.”\footnote{Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons, (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 90. Weber goes on to disclaim in that passage, however, that he is taking an evaluative stance. I, too, am seeking mainly to delineate the history of American thought and action in regard to what I have called “imperial” American exceptionalism.} Like Weber, though I seek to understand the complex interrelation of ideas and history, I disclaim any attempt to “deduce” an “historically necessary result.”\footnote{Weber, 91.} That it seems an idea and course of action are related and that events and ideas developed in certain ways does not mean that they did so necessarily. This is what was meant when I said that neither Kendall and Carey nor I would argue that “the manner or the fact of” the colonies’ “eventual emergence as the U.S. was inevitable.” Unlike Weber, who seems to
argue that certain events, ideas, or habits cannot be deposed or reversed once they are formed or regnant, I do not argue for such impossibilities.\footnote{This is a point to which I will return in Chapter Six.}

While it was important to pause the discussion of Kendall, Carey, Bellah, and Voegelin in order to make these methodological points explicit, that discussion should be finished before the implications of these considerations can be seen fully. To that end, I want to point up some differences between Kendall and Carey’s account and Bellah’s, and then the difference of each of these from my own.

Some Revisions to Kendall and Carey’s Approach

Bellah’s approach diverges from Kendall and Carey’s in a few ways. First, and most obviously, Bellah does not restrict himself to “public documents of self-interpretation” like the Declaration and the Constitution, including instead some very interesting passages on, among other things, the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address.\footnote{See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” The Robert Bellah Reader, ed. Robert N. Bellah and Steven M. Tipton, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006): 225-245.} Though Bellah’s reason for this is not explicit, I argue that it is nonetheless intelligible if Voegelin’s interpretive framework is taken as a given.

Voegelin’s method of examining myths and symbols is geared precisely toward obtaining a more historical—and, therefore, more theoretically sophisticated—picture than might be obtained from comparison only with pieces of philosophy or sets of empirical data. An understanding that is both theoretically sound and historically
sensitive will be better than one emphasizing only one or the other because both attributes are important for understanding ideas. This is one of the core principles of Basic Symbols, which examines the American political tradition for its inner coherence and continuity. Yet it might be asked whether Kendall and Carey are too narrow in at least one respect.

Because Basic Symbols builds its inquiry on official public documents, it appears that their approach does not closely follow Voegelin. In one of the more famous passages in Order and History, for example, Voegelin examines at length a poetic suicide note apparently written by an ancient Egyptian. Voegelin places a great deal of weight on this very obscure writing, arguing it was a moment in which the conscious self almost sprang forth into history. Attributing this kind of significance to such an obscure text suggests that Kendall and Carey have perhaps been too narrow in their choice of symbols. They chose only the most prominent founding documents, even if some of them are obscure to us today. Though the objects of Basic Symbols’ inquiry certainly qualify as symbols, there are others, too, worthy of consideration, and there might be grounds for faulting Kendall and Carey in their omission. For one, Voegelin’s use of the Gettysburg Address as an example of a “symbol” in The New Science of Politics seems to have escaped Kendall and Carey’s notice, though it should have led to a wider net for their inquiry.

Kendall and Carey note, however, that they are seeking to keep their account relatively simple and non-controversial, and so they try to include only those documents.

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to which few if any would object. Nevertheless, in this project, I will try to strike a middle ground between Kendall and Carey’s criteria and Bellah’s. Whereas Kendall and Carey only use documents that seem to be, in a word, self-consciously symbolic, Bellah’s selection of songs and speeches that do not fit this criterion suggests that a document, speech, song, or work of art might become a symbol without being first intended that way. This seems to be an insight not present in Basic Symbols, but that would have enriched its thesis because it would have drawn the authors to account differently for their claims to “derailment.” In this, Bellah’s symbols and myths seem to more closely imitate Voegelin’s selections, though none could claim to match Voegelin’s own eclecticism. Some of the mismatch between Voegelin and the other authors is doubtless due to a difference in aim.

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68. Kendall and Carey, Basic Symbols, 30. Moreover, it is clear that any one project can only encompass so much material before the effective and prompt articulation of an argument is jeopardized. Scholarly responsibility, then, sometimes entails the omission of even seemingly pertinent materials, and there seems to be little reason to doubt that this explains the narrowness of materials chosen for Basic Symbols.

69. This is how I will treat Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in Chapter Four. This distinction is another sense in which my method or approach could be called Weberian, since Weber makes a very similar distinction in Protestant Ethic. Notice the difference between treating historical phenomena in themselves and as historically significant: “Judgments of the importance of a historical phenomenon may be judgments of value or faith, namely, when they refer to what is alone interesting, or alone in the long run valuable in it. Or, on the other hand, they may refer to its influence on other historical processes as a causal factor. Then we are concerned with judgments of historical imputation. If now we start, as we must do here, from the latter standpoint and inquire into the significance which is to be attributed to that dogma [i.e. predestination in Calvinism] by virtue of its cultural and historical consequences, it must certainly be rated very highly.” See Weber, 98-99.

   In Chapter Four, this shows up as the difference between what Lincoln was trying to do, and what was actually done by him in his recasting of the founding.

70. “Derailment” is, of course, another Voegelinian term that suggests a certain tradition may run off its rails, i.e. change the course that it previously followed. The word has connotations of real disaster, and it seems that these connotations were intended. The complex relationship between differentiation and derailment will be taken up in the course of this dissertation, but especially in Chapter Five.
Voegelin seeks to formulate and discuss a “theory of politics” that “penetrates to principles,” which requires that same theory to be also a “theory of history.”71 His Walgreen Lectures, later *The New Science of Politics*, convincingly develop and reinforce just this view. Bellah, on the other hand, has his sights set a bit closer to home. Rather than an inquiry on the level of grand theory (and across all human history), Bellah’s work centers on explaining what he called the then current “time of trial” in America,72 which meant for him only taking on American history and symbols. Rather than pointing up the historical movements of the human soul, Bellah confines his study to the particular political situation in America over its history. This could mean that Bellah’s project, like Kendall and Carey’s, is not strictly Voegelinian. Yet it is clear that all of these insights can enrich the discussion of American exceptionalism; their unique approaches help to begin filling a void left by the social science scholarship, and can advance the discussion to a point of fuller understanding.

Because their focus is solely on symbols from these shores, and not international banks of survey data, an inquiry into American exceptionalism based on the approaches of Bellah and Kendall and Carey will not focus on the comparative sense that previously bogged down the work of Lipset, Shafer, and others. The idea of American exceptionalism will be open to examination as a claim to uniqueness, with serious consequences for evaluating and understanding political action.

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Now that a sketch of the method to be pursued in this dissertation is complete, an overview of the whole is in order.

A General Sketch of the Dissertation

I have argued above that a good understanding of the idea of American exceptionalism has, to date, not been provided for a few reasons. First and foremost among these is that the topic has long been thought of as mainly a problem in political or social science. It has been supposed by social scientists to be a “comparative” issue from the very advent of the term, and, other than the somewhat insubstantial public policy debate, American exceptionalism has been largely left in these scholars’ hands.

If, however, the “unique” sense of American exceptionalism can be distinguished from the “comparative” one, then it becomes obvious that the idea of American exceptionalism has a long history predating the advent of modern social science. Following the work of Robert Bellah and Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, the distinction leads to a clearer view of the nature of claims to American exceptionalism in the course of American history. Rather than a claim in the idiom of contemporary social science, American exceptionalism was, in the beginning, a claim made in the idiom of political and religious thought.

If we are to look for the “basic symbol” in regard to American exceptionalism—that first, foundational articulation of the notion—we need look no further than Bellah
indicates: John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity.” The worldview of the New England Puritans, especially as it bears on history, is the earliest recognizable instance of a thought like “American exceptionalism.” It should be noted at the outset that Winthrop’s sermon “Christian Charity,” which contains the famous phrase calling the Massachusetts Bay Colony a “city on a hill,” is not about America at all. Though it has been construed as such in recent years, it must be recalled that, when he spoke those words in 1630, an autonomous and independent country on the Western shores of the Atlantic could scarcely have been thinkable. Conditions were hard, and even if they had not been, many conceived of the project at Massachusetts Bay as a kind of pilot program. The community and way of life was to be developed and practiced with a view to returning to England; they would be welcomed as rulers and lawgivers to re-make society in New England’s image. The colonists were to serve as an exemplar to the world, but their failure in the task would be equally exemplary of what God does to those who disobey him and squander his friendship. Winthrop’s “city on a hill,” far from a license to do as they pleased, was a deeply held covenant that each individual in society was party to, with God as its executor.

The central Puritan idea that lends itself to being the precursor to later conceptions of American exceptionalism is not, then, Winthrop’s famous passage. It is

73. Recall, again, that our “differentiated” categories of political, social, and religious thought are distinct, whereas the old Puritan mind’s compact version contained both of these without distinction. Though without using this terminology, Perry Miller notes this phenomenon in his Errand into the Wilderness, “The Puritan State and Puritan Society,” Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1956]), 142.
rather his views on history and politics as a whole that demonstrate the Puritan confidence in being God’s chosen people, the New Jerusalem from the Book of Revelation. One can see, at a glance, the surface resemblance between contemporary conceptions of American exceptionalism, mostly to do with America’s right to vast influence on the international stage, and the pride of place in salvation history claimed by the Puritans. The contemporary conception bears the impression of the original, even if, as with an old coin, some of the originally sharp features have worn away. One of the most conspicuous features of New England Puritan society was its imitation of the societal order of the Pentateuch in the Old Testament, especially the conception of the order itself as a covenant with God. Like all covenants of that type, rich rewards were associated with its fulfillment and bitter punishments with its breach. Yet if one side of the two-pronged conception is worn away, a kind of simple chosenness only remains. Without forbearance to God, without his being a party to the operation of society, chosenness is mere specialness and specialness becomes license. If the goal of the original covenant was the perfection of the community, but a possible chastisement from God no longer reins in the desires of a “chosen people,” it is little wonder that Bellah can

74. One contemporary scholar of Jewish political thought thoroughly explores the background of the Puritan understanding of societal order. Though Berman does not write with the Puritans in mind, the similarity is evident with even a cursory comparison. Recall also that both groups use the same text as the foundation of their thinking. See Joshua A. Berman, “God’s Alliance with Man,” Azure, No. 25 (Summer 5766 / 2006): 79-113.
draw a line from the “exemplary” politics of the Puritans to the imperial actions of some figures from the Progressive Era.\textsuperscript{75}

The line, however, is not direct and causal. There were two major modifications in American history that were necessary for the evolution to take place as it did. First, a subtle change had to be made in the purpose of government. Society had to be reoriented, on the one hand, away from temporal perfection as evidence for eternal salvation and, on the other, toward seeing government as encouraging virtue and good order only here and now. Concretely, this meant a transition was effected from conceiving of God as pilot of the ship of state to conceiving of God as granting man the ability to conceive of ways to build and pilot the ship himself. One still believes, in both cases, that God is in control of history. But His approach to governance, by the time of the framing of the Constitution,

\textsuperscript{75} By way of introducing what Bellah calls the “ambiguities of chosenness,” Bellah writes: “An extreme example will put the issue sharply. Senator Albert J. Beveridge delivered a speech on the floor of the United States Senate shortly after his return from a tour of the Philippines in January 1900. He referred to the wealth of the islands and their importance to the United States, to the indolence of the natives and their incapacity for self-government, and to the war of subjugation which the United States Army was then waging against the Filipino independence movement. The American opposition to that war, he said, in terms we have become familiar with in late years, was ‘the chief factor in prolonging it.’ Warming to his subject he laid down the justification for annexation in the following words:

God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No. He made us master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigned. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as his chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.

[Bellah continues,] Even though the biblical imagery has been muddied over with 19th-century racism, a subject to which we will return, we can see in grotesquely heightened form precisely the arguments used to justify American treatment of Indians and blacks from the very beginning.” (Bellah, \textit{Broken Covenant}, 37-8). Beveridge’s contribution to the idea of imperial American exceptionalism will be explored in Chapter Five, below.
came to be thought of as indirect, as achieved through the arrangement of American circumstances in a particularly advantageous way. Rather than interrupting history to achieve his ends, God—often referred to merely as “Providence” during the Constitutional period—comes to be thought of as working through history. This leads, however, to the second main step between the Puritans and the Progressives.

It is a short step from, on the one hand, seeing God as using history to achieve his plans to, on the other hand, scouring history to reveal what God’s plans are, have been, and will be. It is an even shorter step from discerning God’s plan for history to seeing history itself as having its own plan, logic, and direction. The only necessary step, it seems, is to see that all sorts of ungodly things happen without interruption or decrease. Doubt is thus raised as to whether or not God is in charge of history. This removal of God from any active role in history was partly achieved in the first step above, when the Constitutional generation relegated God to a powerful but passive role. To go from passive to absent is the more decisive move, but it is hardly surprising given the first.

By the time, and in the figure, of Abraham Lincoln, we begin to see the removal of God from the conception of America’s place in the world. Though the change was started in the Constitutional period and a kind of balance was sustained for a time between the new humanistic focus and the older conception of a Christian- and virtue-based political order. Just like the conception of a covenant before it, the conception of

76. I am here following Bellah’s analysis, though I disagree that a “synthesis” was effected in the Declaration of Independence. “Balance” is the better word. See his Broken Covenant, 27.
government as the “deliberate rule of a virtuous people,” would not last. In Lincoln’s re-interpretation of the framers, we have a prominent view of America as an idea, as a proposition. A proposition, it will be noted, is a human creation; hence we have the implicit excision of God from the American political order. With the re-casting of the framers as philosophers advocating abstract propositions, there is the consequent casting aside of God and the limits he placed formerly on the political realm. This does not mean that Lincoln ceases to speak of God and his importance to and involvement with America. Far from it: Bellah has not without reason called Lincoln the “first and best civil theologian in American history.” But the God Lincoln describes is, ultimately, one that may be deleted from the story without losing conceptual coherence.

Once God has been removed from the public life of the American political order, an interesting thing happens. In the Progressive Era, God sneaks back into American politics through the private back door. No longer guiding the everyday course of events, nor even arranging American circumstances beneficently, it comes to be thought that God has inspired the propositions and ideas upon which the country was founded, and that this divine sanction gives special license to the few who truly understand it. Here surfaces the idea of imperial American exceptionalism. Rather than a passive beneficence or an active

77. Kendall and Carey, ix.
78. Bellah, Broken Covenant, 179.
79. Indeed, this may be part of what makes him, for Bellah, the “greatest” civil theologian, since a civil theology is just one that is not particular but general. He seems to follow the lead of society rather than vice-versa, though the relation is admittedly a two-way one. These themes will be taken up in Chapter Four.
choosing and binding into a covenant, and rather even than a pure “uniqueness” based on America’s founding principles, America comes to be thought of as God’s right arm on earth. The sanction comes to mean a severing, once and for all, of the ties that reined in American ambition previously. So ends the course from the “exemplary” exceptionalism of Massachusetts Bay to the imperial exceptionalism of the Progressives, though the course does not follow any direct lines of ascent or decline. Various conceptions are posited, abandoned, recovered, and recombined in new ways. The imperial combination partakes of the earlier ones, and showing this is one of the main aims of this project.

Now, with this glimpse of the whole, the course ahead is clear. We turn to a detailed look at each of the four periods mentioned above, beginning with John Winthrop and the Puritans in Chapter Two. Next, an examination of the separation of the political and religious spheres in the Constitutional period will be taken up in Chapter Three. Following upon this, consideration of Lincoln’s importance and innovation will be possible in Chapter Four. The Fifth Chapter will take up the turn of the twentieth century and the degree to which their imperial views proceed and diverge from what came before. Finally, in Chapter Six, I will reflect on the themes of the nature of historical change in a political tradition and the prospects for recovery of a more coherent operative set of symbols in America.
CHAPTER TWO

JOHN WINTHROP’S “CITY ON A HILL” AS EXEMPLARY EXCEPTIONALISM

“...he hath not dealt so with every nation, neither have they known his judgments.”

– Psalm 147:20

“Hear this word that the Lord pronounceth against you, O children of Israel, even against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will visit you for all your iniquities.”

– Amos 3:1-2

Introduction

Two key documents penned by John Winthrop constitute the seed of the idea of American exceptionalism. These documents contain the same elements Kendall and Carey found in the Mayflower Compact; they give a ‘sense’ of the community on the

question of political order.\textsuperscript{81} It might be said that in using documents that are the product of one hand rather than many I am diverging from Kendall and Carey; whatever symbols I may find will, thus, be false ones, since they are not the acts of a “deliberate assembly”—one of Kendall and Carey’s chief symbols of the American political tradition. On the contrary, the early colonists at Massachusetts Bay seem to have had a conception of representation that allows Winthrop’s documents to stand in for the community. Further, the symbols found upon the documents’ examination form a line of continuity with both the other documents of the period and the later documents of the founding generation.

After showing the sense in which Winthrop’s writings may “represent”\textsuperscript{82} the people of his colony, I will turn briefly to the distinctions between Winthrop’s Non-Separating Puritans and the earlier Separatist Pilgrims that originally arrived on the Mayflower. This will help throw the Puritans’ position into sharper relief before examining the two documents at hand: “Reasons to be Considered, And Objections With Answers,” and “A Model of Christian Charity.” I will conclude with a discussion of their significance for the idea of American exceptionalism.

\textsuperscript{81} Kendall and Carey, 31-2.

\textsuperscript{82} I intend the term’s peculiarly Voegelinian meaning.
In taking up the modified Voegelinian interpretive method of Kendall and Carey, I am committed to examining whatever symbols can be found that articulate how, at each period I will take up, the American people (or the people of the colony) saw themselves. What were they doing? Why? What significance did it have? With this approach, the real political theory of a people is examined, rather than merely one person’s political thought. I am looking for language symbols that were operative for each group—the language symbols that are not dead letters, but that sprang forth as active principles of the life of the community. These symbols need not fit exactly with the standard to which Kendall and Carey adhere in their work, because the kind of representation they detail has not always been the operative mode of representation at each stage of American history (or, for that matter, human history).

Though Kendall and Carey are right to point out that the rule of a “deliberate assembly” is a crucial symbol in the American political tradition, this point need not mean that this is the only kind of symbol in the tradition. Now, there could be many different layers of representation in any society, with different ones dominating at particular moments.83 I do not mean that only a single mode of representation is operative or accepted at any one time. In the case of the generations after the founding period, the

83. It is interesting in this connection to ponder the representativeness of President of the United States. Here is an individual man who, in some sense, represents all Americans. Yet his representativeness does not cancel out the representativeness of each U.S. Congressman or Senator. See Chapters Three and Four for further discussion.
representation of the people is thought most appropriately to be achieved by the people. And though it seems that there are intimations of this form of representation even early on in the life of the colonists at Massachusetts Bay, it is Winthrop himself who articulates the aims and direction and purpose of the new community at its earliest stages.

Voegelin writes that “In order to come into existence, a society must articulate itself by producing a representative that will act for it.” Recall that in The New Science of Politics Voegelin is inquiring into “the nature of representation as the form by which a political society gains existence for action in history.” It is in articulating itself as a society, then, that a given people unite for action in history. If the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay are a distinct people, then a symbol must be found that articulates who they are. Now, Kendall and Carey dwell at length on the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut (1639) and the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641). But following their method and words of caution, it ought to be asked whether or not there are earlier symbols in the political life of the colony. Because of the importance assigned to

84. Voegelin notes that the logic of representation reaches its limit in Lincoln’s “masterful, dialectical concentration” in the Gettysburg Address. See his NSP, 40. But a people so heterogeneous creates problems for governing. If a people is not to be torn apart by the contentions of everyday politics, distinctions will need to be made—both in institutions and in the people's self-conception. This is just what happens in America. See Chapter Three.

85. In 1633, there was a revolt in favor of wider suffrage in the colony, which has been pointed to as an precursor of the later American emphasis on popular rule.

86. Voegelin, NSP, 41.

87. Voegelin, NSP, 1.

88. See Kendall and Carey, 26.
Winthrop by many scholars, it ought to be asked why Kendall and Carey do not consider him. The answer is readily found.

Kendall and Carey have already established a frame through which to view their data: namely, those documents that no one could dispute were foundational, from the Mayflower Compact onward. The “Fundamental Orders” and the “Body of Liberties” are the next chronological symbols that fit that bill. Yet in narrowing their frame, something important is missed. What is missed has to do with Voegelin’s words quoted above. In the course of *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin makes it clear that, although Western societies tend toward the full articulation of the people as its own representative,89 a people does not always represent itself in history. It is frequently an individual leader or king that represents the people to themselves, to others, and to God. This is why sacrifices to God must, often in human history, be offered by the king. It is only in his person that the task can truly be completed on behalf of the whole people. Just so, John Winthrop—though no king—stands with the other leaders of the *Arbella* fleet as the representative of the whole people to themselves and to God. He, who would shortly be extolled as a new Nehemiah and who invites comparisons to Moses, articulates who the Massachusetts Bay colonists are as a people, what they aim to do, and where they fit in the sweep of history. In performing especially this last task, he interprets his people “as representatives of a transcendent truth.”90 Thus, an examination of Winthrop’s writings

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90. These are Voegelin’s words, not Winthrop’s. See Voegelin, *NSP*, 1.
may stand in for the truth of the way of life at Massachusetts Bay. It serves as an operative account of their life, especially, because Winthrop is not only their mouthpiece but also the head of the colony’s body politic, along with the other magistrates. And though he does not occupy the position wholly by himself, his primacy goes unchallenged at the earliest stages of his time as Governor. There is a moment in which his representativeness has the authority of acclamation, and that is the moment under examination here.

“American Exceptionalism” and its Roots

In the previous chapter I discussed the origins of the term “American exceptionalism” in early twentieth century American Marxist thought. This made clear the distinction between the term “American exceptionalism,” which is relatively young, and the idea of it, which is much older. Though many have held John Winthrop up as the first American exceptionalist, particularly for his now-famous simile that the colony at Massachusetts Bay will be as a “city on a hill,” a few reflections are sufficient to initially draw that claim into question. The claim will be fully addressed later in this chapter.

First and foremost, the idea of American exceptionalism is, strictly speaking, concerned with the exceptional nature of the United States of America. Yet Winthrop had never heard of the U.S. The fledgling colonies on these shores, even if some could be grouped together by their common English origin, had very different aims. These little dots of civilization punctuated only the slightest part of the vast continent, and the future
political order of the Constitution was still one hundred and fifty years away. Even the 1620 founding of the Pilgrim colony at Plymouth was quite different in character from the colony at Massachusetts Bay. The aims of the Massachusetts Bay colony are on display in a document called “Reasons to be Considered, And Objections With Answers,” which lists nine major reasons in favor of the Winthrop fleet’s emigration, and addresses several of the most strident objections to the venture. In understanding the arguments of this document, Winthrop’s vision for the future of the colony may be glimpsed.

Second, when it is asserted that Winthrop was the first American exceptionalist, the claim almost invariably rests on the self-evidently exceptionalist quality of his phrase “city on a hill.” An examination of the whole sermon and the context of that particular line will dispel the careless anachronism of these arguments. In an extended consideration of the sermon, I will show that the phrase, “city on a hill,” far from making a claim to exceptionalism, makes the opposite claim: that the new colony—if it lives according to its initial mandate, or if it transgresses that mandate—will yield foreseeable, not exceptional, results. Winthrop’s exceptionalism is exemplary, not imperial. The work the colonists undertake is not private; yet it does exclusively belong to them, at least at this early stage. This is tied to the Puritan theory of history, which is tied to Winthrop’s articulation of the covenant and its function in history. Thus, the claim that Winthrop’s “city on a hill” phrase has something to do with American exceptionalism is right, but usually for the wrong reasons.
After a consideration of these documents in themselves, their relevance to the present thesis will be discussed. I will argue that their bearing on the idea of American exceptionalism can only be fully seen when the character of the early Puritan political order is well understood. First among the documents I will consider at length is the “Reasons,” which was circulated in the late summer and fall of 1629 in England as Winthrop made preparations to join the new colony, and then to head it up. After that, I will take up Winthrop’s departure sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” which, as will be seen, can be treated as a kind of foundational document. Taken together, the documents operate in the same manner as the other symbols Kendall and Carey find to be the core of the American political tradition.

*The Origin and Outlook of the “Reasons”*

For several reasons it might be said that the first document we are considering can by no means serve as an American symbol. First, it was written by Englishmen, in England, for an English audience. Second, in no way does the document constitute a political act, unlike the Mayflower Compact, Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, or the Massachusetts Body of Liberties. In answer to these objections, I submit, first, that the men of the colonies at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay were Englishmen, too. Though in a strange land, they came to it with their English thoughts, habits, expectations, and goals. They saw themselves as Englishmen, as many in the colonies would for the next

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century and a half. Yet just as much, or perhaps even more so, the colonists at Massachusetts Bay saw themselves as Christians; they embarked upon a Christian mission, not an English one.\footnote{It could be argued that the Christian impulse here is peculiarly English. Christians do not exist in a vacuum and their national cultures play an important part in forming their religious practices and beliefs. English colonial expansionism, then, combined with Christian universalism, could be uniquely responsible for the practical historical result. Deborah Madsen argues along these lines in \textit{American Exceptionalism}, (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). Yet it is important to recall that the symbols we seek are the self-articulations of a people. If actors in history could not have taken a perspective at the time of their action, that perspective could not possibly have been a part of the action itself. Thus, we should take the Puritans’ word that theirs is a Christian mission and action, and not an imperial one.} We may call the “Reasons” a symbol of American exceptionalism because of what it represents.

The Puritan project has always been a staple in the American imagination, generally; understanding it is indispensable for understanding the idea of American exceptionalism. And though it might not look like a political act, the “Reasons” is indeed a document that seeks to persuade peers to undertake a common task. It is an argument both justifying a venture and recruiting others to join in it. If it is not itself a political document, it is at least a document of pre-political action, and it would seem that the same kinds of Voegelinian arguments about symbols apply to it. Further buttressing the claim is the development of the “Reasons” through several changing drafts—a sign of at least limited deliberation and concert.\footnote{See \textit{WP}, 106-145. On this logic, it might be tempting to read the “Common Grievances” (ca. 1624) similarly as an early or inchoate symbol. But note that it cannot qualify as a symbol on Voegelinian grounds because it was not associated with any political action.} Third, as Perry Miller has noted, “as for the Fundamental Orders themselves, we should observe that they were not invoked \textit{in vacuo}, but only after the colony had been in existence almost three years; they were not dictated
by an a priori philosophy, but were rather the legalizing of existing practice. This means that to understand the Fundamental Orders more adequately, we must first understand the early practices of the colony. But these practices can only be understood now by understanding contemporary accounts, of which the “Reasons” and the “Model” discourse are two prominent and authoritative examples.

Before understanding these accounts, however, several points about the difference between the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay should be brought out in order to make clearer the nature of the Massachusetts Bay project.

Separatist and Non-Separatist Puritans

The key difference between the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay is in their different practical approach to a problem perceived in common. Though both saw the English Protestant church as increasingly corrupt, the Pilgrims argued that only separation from that body would allow for a truly Christian life, while the Puritans were decidedly and emphatically Non-Separatist. The groups’ own experiences help account for this difference in character. The Pilgrims fled to Holland and then New England in search of a space in which to worship as they saw fit. They viewed the old political and religious order of England as corrupt beyond regeneration.


95. Though both groups were considered “Puritans,” the conventional name given to the settlers at Plymouth helps reduce the awkwardness of writing about them. I will use these terms throughout the project.
and, therefore, saw only the most drastic of remedies as adequate to addressing the illness. They would cut themselves off from their former head, and form their own pure, distinct, and separate society; thus, the corruption of the rest of the body would be unable to reach them. This meant that the Pilgrims viewed the interaction of religion and politics very differently from the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay. The Puritans saw corruption in England, but thought it not beyond cure. Though they, too, left English shores, their aim in leaving was the regeneration of the Christian mode of living. They would seek refuge in the wilderness from the coming “calamity”. When this happened, the Puritan colonists would be waiting to welcome their Christian brothers and sisters, already having made the wilderness more hospitable for them.

The key difference in religion led to a key difference in political thought and practice. Though Kendall and Carey are right to say that the Mayflower Compact is “in some sense” the articulation of a religious society, they are also right to comment that the Pilgrims’ aims are somewhat amorphous. This lies in stark contrast to the explicit aims of the Puritans. God, for the Pilgrims, seems to be a witness to their political founding. But as Perry Miller has noted, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay saw

96. Kendall and Carey argue that the Mayflower Compact connotes no notion of “choseness”—which differs widely from Winthrop’s writings. Neither is there even an inkling that the Pilgrims stand as the vanguard of human history, unlike the Puritans. See Kendall and Carey, 40-41.


98. Kendall and Carey, 36.

99. Note the Pilgrims’ frequent generic claims to “justice” as opposed to the peculiarly Christian charity of Winthrop. See Kendall and Carey, 38ff.
themselves not as *imitating* the covenant God first made with Abraham, but as *renewing* and *recasting* that same covenant according to the will of God *today*, just as Moses and others recast the initial Abrahamic covenant.¹⁰⁰ This meant that the Pilgrims viewed their work as significant mainly, and perhaps exclusively, for themselves. The Puritans, however, viewed their work as significant for *all* Christians, even if it practically consisted of an intense *inward* focus. Keeping in mind these differences, we turn to the Puritans’ own account.

*The “Reasons” Considered*

First among the reasons given to “justify” the settling of the colony at Massachusetts Bay is the benefit of carrying the “Gospel into those parts of the world, to help the coming of the fullness of the Gentiles.”¹⁰¹ Their mission is missionary. Note here that such a provision is curiously missing from Winthrop’s “Model,” however, and it is puzzling that that later document—so clearly intended as the setting out of their new way of life—does not focus on the propagation of Christian truth. When the rest of this first major reason is given, however, it becomes clearer why the first two clauses do not make another appearance in “Model.”

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¹⁰⁰ This notion appears to have come down from the English Puritan William Ames. See Perry Miller, “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,” *Errand*, 68-69.

¹⁰¹ *WP* II, 138. The text of the document is clearly divided by sections and numbers. Unless I am directly quoting the material, I will provide these numbers as an indirect reference to the text.
This missionary first reason is rounded out by saying that this spreading of the Gospel will have the effect, also, of raising “a bulwark against the kingdom of Antichrist which the Jesuits labor to rear up in those parts.” The phrase connotes a Puritan participation in the ongoing global contest between Catholics and Protestants, marking out New England as a new front in the conflict. Loren Baritz notes the ironic similarity to the Jesuits’ commission. The Puritans’ emigration was no retreat; this was not possible: “The Puritan could not separate himself from sin because he had a commission similar to the Jesuits’ to fight the good fight. According to the English Puritan preachers, the business of the Christian was relentless war against the forces of evil.”

Eager to dispel the appearance of retreat from sin, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay argued that they would outflank it by establishing an extremely strong foothold in the new world.

The ongoing fight against the forces of the Antichrist, i.e. the Catholic Church, had, they thought, reached a turning point with the emigration of the Arbella fleet. This was the latest episode in both the Reformation and in salvation history. Just as Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers began the process of freeing the Christian world of the

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103. Robert Kagan misunderstands Perry Miller when he quotes him as evidence that the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay were performing a “flank attack” on pernicious forces. The military metaphors are significantly overshadowed by the very unmilitaristic “tactics” deployed: living excellent lives of Christian virtue. When he calls the 1630 Puritans the “first imperialists,” claiming they were “global revolutionaries” (8), Kagan misunderstands their mission. Rather than “establish a base from which to launch a counteroffensive across the Atlantic,” I will show that their aims were far from imperialistic. As they understood themselves, their project was, in fact, exemplary, which Kagan explicitly, though inexplicably, denies. See Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America’s Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 8.
pernicious influence of ‘popery,’ so also would the Puritan colonists’ efforts redound to that goal. Just as the Reformers called for a rededication to the central principles of the faith, so also did the Reformers’ movement itself stand in need of reinvigoration.¹⁰⁴ The English church seemed to be edging toward rapprochement with Catholicism. Though the Massachusetts Bay colonists did not go so far as to believe that separation from the English church was the only way to reform—they were decidedly against this—their strategy did involve a retreat from its midst. It was thought that a new land, isolated from the pernicious tendencies of the Arminian powers in London and Canterbury, could provide shelter from the coming “general calamity,” portended by the ascendancy of these forces.

Despite the military metaphors, however, the Puritans were not sailing to New England to engage in armed conflict with the Catholic missionaries there. Neither were they emigrating only for the purpose of conversion and the spread of the Gospel. They were setting up a bulwark, a point of resistance that is stationary by nature. They are setting up a colony that will run according to a new way of life, which will in turn serve as a bulwark. Sharing the Gospel in New England will come as an organic outgrowth of the life of the new community, rather than the other way around. Spreading the Gospel will be one with the maintenance of their community and the preservation of their main

¹⁰⁴. As Bercovitch has noted, “For Winthrop and Mather, the progress of the American theocracy, church, and commonwealth together, is part of ecclesiastical history.” See Sacvan Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), 73.
mission there: fulfilling the covenant with God upon which they are about to enter.\textsuperscript{105} Early on, then, the chief purpose of the new colony is the setting up of a new way of life. This new way of life has significance for all Christians, but it is an inwardly-focused project, both individually and corporately: the only avenue for its achievement is the living out of Christian virtues by every colonist; in this, the community will become an example to all.

\textit{The Corruption of the Church and Winthrop’s Implicit Theory of History}

The corruption of the churches of Europe, and the consequent “coming calamity” is the second of the Puritans’ nine major reasons for emigration.\textsuperscript{106} To worship God in a purer church would be easier in the New England wilderness because of both the greater distance from insidious forces and the superior membership of the new church. This church-founding and advancement into the wilderness would be of service to the church universal, since the church in New England would be preparing a place to which future numbers might flee. Even in what they saw as a unique role for themselves in salvation history, then, the Puritans did not consider themselves a wholly independent church setting out on its own. Rather, they were the vanguard of the whole Christian church,

\textsuperscript{105} Hugh Dawson has suggested that the explicit absence of calls to evangelization in “Model” means that it is not a concern. To the contrary, Winthrop mentions the “increase of the Body of Christ,” which, while surely suggesting in part the education of Puritan children, cannot but mean conversion of the native Americans as well, especially given the prominence in the “Reasons” and in the charter, and the call to evangelization at the heart of Christianity. See \textit{WP II}, 293. See also Hugh J. Dawson, ““Christian Charitie” as Colonial Discourse: Rereading Winthrop's Sermon in Its English Context,” \textit{Early American Literature}, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1998): 117-148.

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{WP II}, 139.
clearing the path to make future emigrations easier for the rest. This is very different from the Pilgrims at Plymouth, who sought to form their own separate church because of their views on the lack of potential for the church in England.

The third reason justifying emigration is the material situation on the ground in England. The presence of too many people on too little land, Winthrop says, has caused a degradation of respect for human life and a decrease in the ability to care for the poor. At first it is surprising that such an apparently mundane reason for emigration ranks third in importance on a list otherwise preoccupied with more transcendent reasons. Yet in this mundane impetus we see what has been called the Puritans’ “typological” view of history.107 It is often said that Christians have two sources of revelation: nature and the Bible. The former is constituted by all the wisdom man can obtain through sound deliberation upon his observations; it is the source of natural law. Not all Christians, however, affirm the pair; some hew exclusively to the Bible.108 Such Christians view the book of nature as unreliable because correctly reading it requires belief in the reliability


108. As Perry Miller notes, the “federal theologians” so important to Winthrop and many Puritans could not say that the natural law was “immutable and eternal,” though they could say it was “generally reliable.” See Perry Miller, “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,” Errand, 94. In fairness it should be noted against Miller’s fairly simplistic view of natural law thinking that even Aquinas allows for a the flexibility of the natural law according to developments in understanding. See Summa Theologiae IaIIae, Q. 94, a. 5, especially ad. 3.
of human reason, about which there are many views.\textsuperscript{109} Nevertheless, here Winthrop evinces his belief in what could be called a “third book:” the book of history.

God sometimes arranges circumstances in such a way as to goad men in one direction or another. Winthrop believed \textit{just this} was happening in the clearing out and opening up of the New England wilderness. This, combined with the relative exhaustion of the English soil, the crowding of English land, and the relative poverty of worthy citizens in England was taken as a clue to the will of God. It was only in reading \textit{this} book (and confirming it in scripture) that such insights could be gained.\textsuperscript{110} Though it does not seem that John Winthrop turned Biblical exegesis “inside out” by transferring the “source of meaning from scripture to secular history,” as Sacvan Bercovitch has written of Cotton Mather,\textsuperscript{111} it could be said that Winthrop has opened to door to Mather’s more extreme move. This seems to have been a fairly unique view even in Protestantism, as Bercovitch has noted:

In this vision of the Theopolis Americana the idea of national election takes on a literalness undreamed of by Luther or Foxe. It is the kind of literalness, in fact, assumed by the colonists about themselves. Luther believed that the Germans might help create the first truly Christian kingdom; Foxe and Milton hoped that England would lead the world in the destruction of the Antichrist. The New England Puritans gave America the status of visible sainthood. The subsequent impact of their concept cannot

\textsuperscript{109} While Calvinism’s “total depravity” is sometimes taken to mean that man can do nothing in this life but for the grace of God, it is also taken to mean that \textit{all} of man’s faculties—including his reason—partake of the fall from grace. This means that none of man’s natural faculties is at all a help in attaining salvation. Such an understanding opens the door to doctrines of natural law, but does not go as far as implying or requiring it.

\textsuperscript{110} N.B. “Reasons” 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 all contain hints of this inchoate theory of history.

be overestimated. Whatever the extent of its influence, it contributes significantly to the link between the New England and the American Way, to the usurpation of American identity by the United States, and to the anthropomorphic nationalism that characterizes our literature—not the secular anthropomorphism of parenthood (British homeland, German fatherland), but the eschatological anthropomorphism of spiritual biography: American dream, manifest destiny, redeemer nation, and, fundamentally, the American self as representative of universal truth.¹¹²

Though Bercovitch’s assertion might suggest otherwise, the notion that America is a “redeemer nation” need not mean that either the Massachusetts Bay Colony or the United States of America becomes an imperial power. That requires a corruption of the original Puritan understanding under discussion here.¹¹³ Yet the charge of imperialism is one Puritan scholarship has had to deal with, not least because of Winthrop’s ideas about justice toward the Indians.

Conceptions of Property and the Benefit of Founding New Institutions

By way of heading off objections about the ownership of New England’s land, Winthrop cites God’s injunction in Genesis that man should “increase and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it.” The cultivation of the earth, he argues, redounds both to man’s material benefit and God’s glory. Furthermore, the land in New England lies uncultivated while England’s land groans under the pressure to feed its inhabitants. It would only be right to move westward and improve New England’s unenclosed—and,

¹¹². See Bercovitch, 108. Recall the point about “representation” and truth. See above, 52-54.

¹¹³. The corruption of this idea will be discussed below in Chapter Five, especially.
therefore, free and unclaimed—land; doing so is to act as a good steward of God’s gifts in Creation.\textsuperscript{114}

This argument is first among the “objections” considered.\textsuperscript{115} Winthrop repeats emphatically the fact that the lands in New England lie uncultivated and unenclosed; this means they belong to no one person, and may be taken if, first, they are improved and, second, enough common land is left for the others’ subsistence. After giving several Biblical examples to support his argument, Winthrop notes that the natives possess the primitive right to the open land, but argues that if they are left with enough open territory upon which they can hunt and live, then their rights have not been violated. He adds, further, that the “natives” will benefit from the new colony’s presence because they can be taught English agricultural techniques whereby to improve the land, and that the number of “natives” in the land has drastically decreased of late because of a plague sent by God. Note, again, in this last point the reading of history as a book of revelation: “God hath consumed the natives with a great plague in those parts [New England], so as there be few inhabitants left.”\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{114} Winthrop’s implicit theory of property here might bring to mind Locke’s in his \textit{Second Treatise on Government}, yet Winthrop’s precedes Locke’s by sixty years. This says as much about Locke as Winthrop, since Winthrop’s source in a certain interpretation of scripture is an element shared with Locke’s account, though this is only infrequently recalled. Many prefer to place Locke in a firmly naturalistic pose.

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{WP} II, 140-141.

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{WP} II, 141. Cf. Bercovitch, \textit{Puritan Origins}, 99-103. This differs significantly from the imperialism around the turn of the twentieth century, which gives as its justification mainly U.S. economic gain, a theory of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, and an amorphous sense of transcendent purpose. Much more will be said on this in Chapter Five.
Winthrop’s fifth “reason” concerns the extent to which the church members have grown “intemperate” in England. Luxuries have become near necessities, but this means that there are fewer resources with which a man might be generous toward his family and the local poor. Further, because of the luxuries, there is a greater temptation to cheat and deceive one’s partners in business. All of this could be remedied, Winthrop implies, in the rougher environs of the New England wilderness; luxuries, not being present, would not be such a problem, and the membership of a close-knit Christian community would be less likely to cheat and deceive each other.

Sixth, Winthrop laments the corruption of the seminaries and schools, which give only “evil examples” to the students, who become, in turn, “perverted” and “corrupted.” Reiterating his point about the high cost of living, Winthrop complains not only about the schools’ corruption, but also about the heavy burden of their cost. Winthrop implies again, that opening new schools in another location, with different personnel and greater ease of oversight, could solve such a problem.

Winthrop argues, seventh, that it is an “honorable” and “worthy” thing for any Christian to help in the building up of a new local church. Eighth, Winthrop exhorts any “godly” Englishmen of “wealth and prosperity” to join the colonists, and, in so doing, to set an example of trust in God. Since it would mean emigration into a very uncertain territory and life, the prominent citizens would be hazarding much greater risks

117. Interestingly, this point seems to push back against the idea that—as far as churches go—this one in New England is particularly special. In this “reason,” Winthrop suggests to the contrary the colony’s church will not be different and special.
than if they remained in England. All the more, then, Winthrop argues, will their example be noted, applauded, and effective. Winthrop also argues that the whole venture might be redeemed if more prominent Puritan citizens join him. The low character of the “adventurers” who usually populate such colonies is often a reason given for their wretchedness. If more prominent ministers and citizens do not go, the colony in Massachusetts would more resemble Virginia than Winthrop believes wise, in both perception and fact—a point he repeats in the objections below.

Ninth, and very important, Winthrop implies that this venture is itself a part of God’s plan for the Christian church, giving the early commitment of so many prominent Puritans as evidence. Here again we see on display his reading of the vicissitudes of history as a clear signpost for the will of God.

Objections and Answers

Winthrop’s nine main reasons in favor of the founding of the colony are followed by ten objections to the venture, with answers for each. I have already traced the first objection concerning the ownership of the land in New England; I will briefly consider the other nine.

The second objection noted was widespread at the time: if things are bad in England, then should not her best citizens stay and try to forestall the coming “calamity”? Winthrop answers that their leaving is another sign that the calamity is coming; their departure is not its cause. Staying would not necessarily prevent the events that their
exodus portends. Perhaps, Winthrop argues, such an exodus will give pause to those not now living lives of Christian virtue; they might reconsider their ways and reform their lives, which might ultimately benefit England. Moreover, the good of the church universal redounds to the good of all, and the success of this new local church in New England is certainly good for the church in general. Further, Winthrop argues that the opportunity to preach to New England’s “natives” constitutes part of the Christian vocation and should not be overlooked. A third objection notes that even if the situation in England is bad—note that Winthrop is having his fictional interlocutor concede Winthrop’s point about the intelligibility of history and the will of God—perhaps it is too early yet to flee into the wilderness. Winthrop answers that it is only prudent to go ahead and leave when safety is more assured, rather than await the calamity and risk the inability to escape.

Winthrop’s fourth noted objection is perhaps the most interesting, especially near the end where he makes a point sometimes denied in the scholarly literature about the self-conscious differences between the Massachusetts Bay colony and other colonies. 

118. Ivy Schweitzer has argued that, in the “Model” discourse, “Winthrop outlines his rationale for translating the original royal charter of the Company of the Massachusetts Bay, a commercial enterprise, into a theologically based social, economic, and political program for the new commonwealth in New England” (445). And again: “Subtly, through the strategic repetition of the first-person plural pronoun and verbs enacting connection (“knits,” “bonds”), the elite stockholding “company” dissolves into a diverse but now unified spiritual state” (451). Though she notes that the “import of this crucial vision” is “still under debate,” it is not clear that Winthrop ever saw the colony as anything but a religious mission. In the two major documents under consideration here, Winthrop is unequivocal that the colony is explicitly and primarily a religious venture. It is religious; it is political. These are not in conflict with each other for the Puritans, even if they are for many contemporary readers. See Ivy Schweitzer, “John Winthrop’s “Model” of American Affiliation,” *Early American Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2005): 441-469.
The other colonies have either fared O.K. or else suffered on account of “their own sloth,” as in the case of Virginia. Moreover, Winthrop notes, the argument that some particular colonies have not succeeded says nothing of the impossibility of success for a new one. Winthrop also cautions against the possibility of putting too much stock in a limited perspective; even the apparently degraded colonies, e.g. Virginia, might ultimately be brought to “good use.”

Most interestingly, Winthrop notes three reasons that colonies like Virginia have failed, and why, to the contrary, the Massachusetts Bay colony will not. First, “their main end was carnal [i.e. commercial] and not religious.”¹¹⁹ Winthrop here clearly states that the main end of the Massachusetts Bay colony was religious. We have already seen that even the commercial considerations were viewed in terms of Providence and salvation history. But up to this point Winthrop has not been so explicit in both marking out the colony as primarily a religious venture, and in rejecting the commercial benefits as the “main end.” Here he does so, eliminating any ambiguity. The third main reason Virginia failed was that “they did not establish a right form of government.” The new colony’s form of government would be a mixture of the institutions of religion and politics. The particular balance effected will, Winthrop thinks, prevent Massachusetts Bay from the same pitfalls as Virginia.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹. *WP* II, 143.

¹²⁰. It should be highlighted, however, that Winthrop does not believe that the proper structure of government is the sole problem to be overcome. The virtue of the citizenry will have to remain extremely
The fifth through ninth objections deal with the potential difficulty encountered in the new colony. Were not these, too, signs that the venture was not currently the right course of action? Though the objections strategically concede Winthrop’s peculiar view on the intelligibility of history, Winthrop carefully rejects each one. The fifth objection mentions the difficulty of the settlement, to which Winthrop replies in stereotypically Puritan fashion: yes, it will be difficult; “so is every good action.” Similarly, the sixth objection holds that the magnitude of the task is above the capability of those undertaking it. Winthrop answers that weaker and smaller groups have done greater things than this. A seventh objection continues the theme and notes the absence of “natural fortifications” in New England. After mentioning the greater distance between the new colony and its enemies in Europe, Winthrop exhorts the reader to faith: those who are skeptical should “trust in [God] and not in outward means of safety;” they should know that they would not be sent to such a land without God also providing for their needs. Again, eighth, Winthrop’s objector observes the possibility—recalling the fifth “reason,” above—that the colonists have grown too soft and comfortable in England to undertake the hazard of the wilderness. Yet Winthrop replies that God may be sending them thence to purify them, just as he sent the Israelites into the desert to wander. Moreover, plentiful though the land will be, there is not yet enough excess for luxury. The difference will help the colonists live lives of simple virtue, and require them to work hard for what they do obtain. Ninth, Winthrop notes the possible objection that the whole venture is so difficult firm, lest the colony become an example of failure for all nations and ages. See discussion of the last part of “Model,” below.
that, in setting out to do it, they are presuming upon a miracle by God for their very survival. Winthrop answers that they are making sufficient provision—in planning and in procurement—for their defenses and other needs.

Last, Winthrop moves away from the theme of difficulty and hardship and addresses the objection that the colony’s failure to do well will bring scandal upon all Puritan ministers, who have invested so much in it. Without denying the possibility of failure—even implying it is a distinct possibility—Winthrop rejects this point by arguing that no entire profession is judged a failure on account of a single particular failing. Concerns about the difficulty of the task or the possible shame that accompanies the failure to complete it are unfounded.

Reformation, History, and Religion

After such a detailed analysis, it is helpful to take stock of the main points of the document, especially looking ahead to the other points of analysis yet to come. First, it should be recalled that Winthrop has placed his colony in direct line with the aims and trajectory of the entire Reformation. The way of life they will pursue and cultivate is a direct consequence and crowning achievement of Reform, and though there is no guarantee of success, still their work is good and right. The second main highlight is related to the first: Winthrop’s reading of history. The concrete circumstances of politics, economics, and other mundane events are taken to be signposts for God’s will here and
now, just like some parts of the scriptures.\footnote{121} Third, it is important to notice that the project, even from its conception in the time before Winthrop was elected Governor, was intended as a religious and \textit{not} a commercial venture.

The religious character of the new colony is confirmed by extended examination of Winthrop’s most famous writing, his 1630 lay sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” which should now be taken up.

\textit{The Background of “A Model of Christian Charity”}

Many busy months intervene between the composition of “Model” and the “Reasons.” Soon after the “Reasons” were apparently submitted to the governing board of the Massachusetts Bay Company, Matthew Craddock—who had until then been the company’s Governor—resigned and Winthrop was elected in his place.\footnote{122} Upon election Winthrop had thrust upon him both the spiritual and material preparation of the fleet to make the journey and to found the colony. In the spring of 1630, the momentous day arrived and hundreds of colonists set sail for New England.

There has been a controversy about the delivery of the “Model,” which should be noted at the outset of its treatment here. There is no reason to doubt Winthrop was its

\footnotetext{121}{Some have suggested that this point, in particular, accounts later for the loss of Puritan faith and the subsequent breaking of the original covenant. See Daniel Boorstin, \textit{Genius}, 36-40, 52-55. Nevertheless, it is enough at this point to notice the notion itself. It will be important in subsequent chapters.}

\footnotetext{122}{The group of prominent Puritans that joined the company at the same time as Winthrop made two demands: that the actual charter accompany them to the new colony, and that the day-to-day governance be transferred there as well. Though he was the sitting Governor, Craddock had no intention to emigrate, which led him to resign that post in order to guarantee keeping the new members.}
author—this has never been in dispute. But Hugh Dawson contends that the text itself suggests it was not, as it is purported, written “on board the Arbella.” The title and date were later inscribed on the oldest surviving copy of the “Model” discourse in a different hand. Dawson argues forcefully that the sermon was likely not delivered on the Arbella, since it was only one of a great many ships making the journey and the text of the sermon seems to be addressed to all the colonists. Dawson is convinced that the sermon was delivered before departure, which means it was addressed both to the colonists and to all who were gathered in Southampton to see the colonists off. With various textual observations like this one, Dawson seeks to effect a reinterpretation of a great many lines in the famous sermon. Yet for the purposes of this chapter and this dissertation, the controversy is of little consequence. For reasons already discussed, it is enough that Winthrop penned the words and preached them to the whole body of the colonists. Even if only some of them heard it initially, it is clear that copies of it were made and circulated both in England and New England; the oldest manuscript in existence appears to be one of these copies. If Winthrop set out this vision for the new colony in public, which no one disputes, it can easily be considered an overt political act and, thus, qualify as a Voegelinian symbol. In any event, Dawson’s own refrain about the ambiguity of Winthrop’s language is more than enough ammunition for Dawson’s critics.

“Model” and the Aim of the Present Project

Recall that we are looking for the operative symbols in regard to the notion of American exceptionalism. We are very near to their initial discovery. The method taken up in the first chapter dictated that we examine, especially, theories of history. We have already begun this in treating Winthrop’s “Reasons.” Yet more remains to be said, especially about “Model” as a kind of founding document.

Once the inquiry is fully under way in Basic Symbols, Kendall and Carey mark out four main structural elements that characterize documents of political order in the American political tradition. It is my argument that—though Kendall and Carey find remarkable continuity between the 1620 Mayflower Compact, the 1639 Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, the 1641 Massachusetts Body of Liberties, and up through the 1789 Constitution—they have missed another set of symbols by jumping from 1620 to 1639. Winthrop’s writings circa 1630 follow the pattern Kendall and Carey delineate, though perhaps not as cleanly as they or anyone using their method would prefer.

The strand of the American political tradition that begins with Winthrop develops ultimately into the imperial American exceptionalism found in the Progressive Era. Contemporary aggressive forms of American exceptionalism as a foreign policy stand at the very end of this strand.

One of the most noticeable things about “Model” is its rigorous reasoning. In a series of objections and answers, Winthrop argues forcefully for the vital importance of mercy in the new community and the degree to which love must be its animating
principle. Some have said that such arguments for unity are far from unique in the period; vast records of similar speeches by ships’ captains are readily found. Yet this begs the question of this particular sermon’s current renown all the more, especially given its suppositions about society—so different in many respects from America’s contemporary consensus (or lack thereof). The answer lies in the notion of the covenant, and the role “Model” plays as a foundational document for the idea of a Christian political order in America.

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125. Voegelin’s method seems to imply the destruction of consensus through fragmentation over time. While the consensus relative to Winthrop’s vision for society has certainly been destroyed, it is difficult to imagine even a single fragment of society living according to his vision. Thus arises the question of the necessary scale of a consensus, and the degree of breadth required for it to become a true symbol. Can a small remnant or splinter group constitute a core from which a society’s symbols can be gleaned? Is broad consensus possible today? Or is it anachronistic to believe this kind of consensus was ever achievable? These interesting questions must be left unanswered at this point. They will be raised in Chapter Six.

126. The idea that the Puritan political order was a strict Christian theocracy is made more important, ironically, by those who argue for fairly strict versions of the secularization thesis. To advance this thesis, there has to be a noticeably linear decline in Christian belief and practice, which means that the theory requires both the absence of Christian belief and practice today (or at least a low ebb of it) and the ubiquity of it at some point in the past. Without this, the theory loses traction. Thus, there is an interest in making Winthrop look like a religious fanatic. And though by today’s standards he probably would be one, several scholars have remarked about the surprisingly separated character of the institutions of church and state in the early days at Massachusetts Bay. See, for example, Richard J. Hoskins, “The Original Separation of Church and State in America,” *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1984): 221-239. It ought to be kept in mind that his ideas may have lagged behind some of his contemporaries in regard to the proper balance of church and state, but that even granting this, there would not be many in the colony that disagreed with him for a few generations.
Plan of the “Model” Discourse

While the relatively short “Reasons” required a nearly line-by-line treatment because of its richness in relevant concepts and symbols, the much longer “Model” need not be identically pored over. The sermon, or “discourse” as Winthrop calls it, seems to be divided into three main sections. Though the first two are important for both understanding Winthrop’s vision for the new society and understanding the sermon as a whole, the third section dwarfs them in significance and density. Thus, the third section will be treated at length; but some reflection on the first two parts is also in order. The first section proceeds from the sermon’s opening point about the inequality of men to a discussion of the consequent need for mercy in society. As the discourse goes on, it is clear that mercy, the real lasting source of which is love, ultimately finds its importance in the unity of the new community. All the arguments about that outward manifestation of love, i.e. mercy, and the inward love granted only by Christ’s possessing the soul127 are aimed at the radical unity of the people of God at Massachusetts Bay.

The second part of the discourse is a necessary consequent of the first: in considering the vital importance of mercy in society, Winthrop reasons to the insufficiency of mercy alone. Mercy needs to spring from love if real unity and harmony are to be achieved in society. The third section similarly follows on the second, putting Winthrop’s skill as an orator on full display. After setting out the importance of mercy and love to society, Winthrop speaks on behalf of the people in covenanting themselves

127. WP II, 290.
to God in preparation for the founding of the colony. The last section, it will be seen, much resembles the form of the other “basic symbols of the American political tradition.” It is an explicit reenactment of the ongoing covenant between God and man. But before that third section is detailed, some key points about the first two sections should be noted.

*Unity as a Symbol*

In a discourse about unity, it is perhaps surprising to begin with the presupposition of the unchangeability of diversity. Yet that is Winthrop’s famous and clever beginning: “God Almighty in his most holy and wise Providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection.” Immediately after these opening lines, Winthrop makes the decisive move (and in this we see, again, his skill as an orator): just as he did in the “Reasons” and just as he will do again in the body of the “Model” discourse, Winthrop raises a strong objection to his main concern.

Without explicitly framing the entire discourse as another sequence of question-answer-objection, it follows that form nonetheless. The implicit *question* is how the colonists before him will live together in harmony, and serve as a “model of Christian

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129. *WP* II, 282.
charity." His answer is an account that links love and mercy to unity. The former two needed no justification to a crowd of Christian believers; using these as firm premises, Winthrop makes the case that mercy and love ought to guide the colonists into unity as a people, thus turning Christian virtues toward a mundane political good. It is in this context that he raises what could be a devastating objection: how can any community truly be unified if all in it are destined to diversity of station, some rich and some poor? How, in other words, might we reconcile the natural divisions among men with the natural need men have for each other, for living together, for unity? We have already seen his answer: we must live in mercy and love, as made possible by grace; grace, made possible by God’s love for us and our covenant with him.

*Mercy and Love*

The crucial principle of mercy stands at the heart of Winthrop’s treatment of several very practical questions, answers, and objections about lending, giving generously, and forgiving debts. Mercy, which he elsewhere calls the outward manifestation of love, means for the Christian a generous spirit, especially as regards the needs of his neighbors. If anyone asks us to lend to him, we should do it regardless of his ability to pay. If he cannot pay, we must give him whatever he needs as a gift. If it seems he can pay, but ultimately he cannot, we must take it as a loss. Any property we

130. “The third consideration is concerning the exercise of this love, which is twofold, inward and outward, the outward hath been handled in the former preface of this discourse.” See *WP* II, 290.

131. *WP* II, 286.
have is ultimately God’s to take and use to his own purposes, and so we must not jealously try to hold onto it as if it were our own.\footnote{WP II, 285-286.} We must always take scripture as an example to be imitated, and Winthrop cites two passages in particular.

The “primitive church” had “all things in common;” the Puritans, so often imitators of the ways of the Old Testament, also sought frequently to imitate those early Christian communities who shared all they had.\footnote{WP II, 287.} In seeking to live like the earliest Christians, the Puritans were, again, following the lead of the Reformation, which was premised in part on the idea that the contemporary church had strayed too far from the ancient example. Generations of tradition had accreted onto the precious relic of the church, it was thought, and the way to return to its origins was to chip off the extraneous layers. In some sense, then, reforming the church meant turning back the clock on church practice, and Winthrop is calling his hearers to truly accomplish this in their own community. They would strive as much as possible to have “all in common,” according to the scriptural model. Winthrop knows, however, that living thus is no easy task, and so he immediately cites a second passage from scripture.

This time Winthrop recalls the Old Testament example of Nehemiah, and the gargantuan task laid upon his shoulders to lead Israel out of captivity in Babylon and back to their Promised Land to rebuild God’s temple. The task required vast resources and each Israelite was called upon to hand over anything that could be of use. Just so,
Winthrop suggests, the task ahead was indeed seemingly greater than any of them could accomplish. But it was God’s command and He does not command in vain. This does not mean that God accomplishes it for them: they may be required to undergo significant hardship.134 But the work is good work, just as Nehemiah’s was. These are hard things to hear, and more, hard things to do.

Winthrop had an answer, too, for those difficulties: God will come into the souls of the colonists and infuse in them his own spirit of love, which is the real foundation from which all these outward manifestations of love spring forth. Though in Adam we have all been “rent” from our Creator, Christ comes “and takes possession of the soul, and infuseth another principle[,] love to God and our brother.”135 It is in taking up the theme of love that Winthrop’s central theme of unity begins to become apparent.

Love, Winthrop quotes from scripture, is the “bond of perfection.” First, he writes, “it is a bond, or ligament. 2ly it makes the work perfect.”136 Already in setting “ligament” as synonymous with “bond,” Winthrop introduces the analogy of the body. Here we see, finally, how he will reconcile the contradiction with which he began the discourse. Though man is always prevented from natural unity with his fellows because of natural distinctions between them,137 their distinctions are meant to work together for

134. See “Reasons,” Objections 5 – 9, WP II, 143-144.

135. WP II, 290.

136. WP II, 288.

137. Early in “Model,” Winthrop introduces a contradiction between the “Law of Nature” and the “Law of the Gospel,” affirming the former as the “golden rule” which tends toward unity and the latter as
the harmony of the whole, not against each other in disharmony and division. Winthrop argues there, at the head of the sermon, that God is greater glorified in having men achieve his ends for him, rather than accomplishing them directly through his own power. Just as earthly “princes” are more glorious if they have many servants, so much greater is God’s glory because his plan requires the working together of all men. The diversity of the people, further, means that God’s diverse gifts and man’s diverse virtues—God’s creation—are reduced to a unity of purpose. And though it is often man’s partiality that renders possible the full flowering of Christian charity, man’s gifts and virtues may also show God’s glory. Yet even here, Winthrop argues, God’s glory and not the individual good of any one man, is the purpose. Thus, if Christian charity, i.e. love, is the principle that knits together the community, they can overcome the natural divisions of rich and poor, high and low. Love must be the animating principle of the community if they are to accomplish and fulfill the covenant they are making with God in the course of this journey. Love, as the bond of perfection, will bridge the gaps between them and reduce all their individual gifts, virtues, vices, and privations to the unity of God’s plan for man.

fundamentally divisive because of its insistence on loving enemies (since to be an enemy is to be radically divided from another). The rest of the discourse, however, speaks of the unifying nature of God’s love, the church, the covenant, etc. And, further, Bercovitch has noted that most Calvinists conceived of grace as unifying and nature, dividing. See Bercovitch, 14. So, while noting the point in passing, I will take the greater thrust of the discourse, and the authority of the secondary literature, as the guide for my interpretation.
After reasserting the importance of an inward infusion of love in each colonist and its necessity for unity and the success of the colony, Winthrop undertakes the enactment of the covenant on behalf of the people in the third and final part of the discourse. Interestingly, he does so according to a pattern nearly identical to the one laid out by Kendall and Carey in *Basic Symbols*.

In detailing what will be the dominant structure of documents in the American political tradition, Kendall and Carey identify four main parts:

\(a\) a part in which the signers identify themselves, say who they are; \(b\) a part in which they state the *purposes* for which they undertake the business in hand; \(c\) a part that contains an oath creating the body politic; and \(d\) an addendum to the oath, in which the signers clarify their obligations under the oath, letting us know what kind of thing the new body politic is to be.\(^{138}\)

Winthrop begins the third major section of the discourse by noting the necessity of making “some application” of its principles and arguments. This application will be “propounded” in four parts: “first the persons, 2ly, the work, 3ly, the end, 4ly, the means.”\(^{139}\) The similarity is striking. The structure Kendall and Carey first perceived in the Mayflower Compact and which they subsequently found in the other major

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138. Kendall and Carey, 32.

139. *WP* II, 292.
documents of the American political tradition is also found here in what amounts to the true founding document for the people of Massachusetts Bay.\footnote{140}{It might be said that Kendall and Carey’s method would demand colonial charters be used in making this kind of claim. I submit that, counterintuitively, the various charters are not central to the colonists’ way of life. Winthrop and others disparaged the colony of Virginia as a primarily commercial colony, but one of the first lines of its charter then in effect said that the propagation of the Christian faith was that colony’s purpose. Charters, as Ronald Dale Karr has pointed out in a different context, were written in fairly standard forms and language. Explanation of the difference in colonial practice, then, should be sought in terms of the colonists’ different thoughts and actions; in the case of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, this means turning to Winthrop. See Ronald Dale Karr, “The Missing Clause: Myth and the Massachusetts Bay Charter of 1629,” \textit{The New England Quarterly}, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Mar., 2004): 89-107.}

First, Winthrop identifies the parties to the covenant: “we are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ.”\footnote{141}{\textit{WP} II, 292.} Even if they become strangers somehow in the new land, or if some members come and go, they are hereby included in this unifying covenant of love and life in common.

Kendall and Carey’s second “part” can be found in Winthrop’s “2ly” and “3ly.” The Massachusetts Bay Colony, setting out “by a mutual consent through a special overruling Providence, and a more than an ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical.”\footnote{142}{\textit{WP} II, 293.} This is what they will do in the New England wilderness. That government will necessarily be animated by the spirit of love Winthrop has already discussed in the first two parts of the discourse. But this has a consequence not yet explicitly stated. In the main, Winthrop has focused on the relation of mercy, love, and unity. But in bringing up the matter of government, a new possibility rears its head: what
if the people do not in every instance live up to the model he has set before them? What if they fail to follow these guidelines to the letter? “In such cases as this,” writes Winthrop, “the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which not only conscience, but mere civil policy doth bind us; for it is a true rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.”¹⁴³ The presence of government suggests the need to correct sometimes the mistakes of the colonists. Winthrop here reserves this right to government and places the colony’s authority over personal, private judgments into the covenant itself.¹⁴⁴ After identifying the parties to the covenant, Winthrop moves on to articulating its purpose.

“The end,” of the colony at Massachusetts Bay, Winthrop says, “is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord[,] the comfort and increase of the Body of Christ whereof we are members[,] that our selves and posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world[,] to serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.”¹⁴⁵ This is a dense and deliberate statement. It should be examined carefully.

First, the colony is a project to “improve our lives.” They are, first and foremost, leaving England in order to better achieve the salvation of their own souls. As has already been seen in the “Reasons,” this is not the sole purpose of the new community: the first of

¹⁴³. *WP* II, 293. The good of the whole cannot be achieved at the expense of the part, he seems to say; they are inseparable, they are one.

¹⁴⁴. One can, perhaps, already anticipate the protests of Roger Williams.

¹⁴⁵. *WP* II, 293.
the “reasons” had to do with evangelization of the “natives” in order to head off the progress of the Catholic missionaries, thereby taking a place on the front lines of the Reformation. But the articulation here begins with the “improve[ment of] our lives,” and this is not for themselves alone, but “to do more service to the Lord.” This will result in the “comfort and increase of the Body of Christ whereof we are members,” and the community will serve as a refuge from the “the common corruptions of this evil world.” Their task is the foundation of a place, set apart, for growth in holiness. The image is reminiscent of the “bulwark” Winthrop discussed several months before in the “Reasons”. The colonists want to establish a safe haven of Christian living. The aim is to fortify their new home against the “evil world” and for themselves and their posterity, a place made secure in, and with the help of, living “under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.” Participation in just this kind of community will allow them to “serve the Lord and work out our salvation.” It was the opportunity to live in such a place that led them to hazard the dangerous journey and to weather the rough conditions of the frontier.

Though the Puritans’ project has sometimes been thought of as utopian, it was not. They were seeking not so much to reenter the Garden of Eden as to leave behind the City of Cain, and thereby to be more assured of passage into the New Jerusalem. Though their crass conception of Indian property rights has sometimes been thought to justify the label “imperialist,” it does not. We see here that their mission was closed in upon themselves. Their task was self-improvement and the setting up of a bulwark, as much for the working out of their own salvation as for combating the spread of “Antichrist.” Lest
their means be called into question, Winthrop specifies them immediately upon explicating the “work” and “end” of the covenant, and this clarifies just this important point about the Puritans’ inward focus.

The means to becoming this ideal Christian community in which they can live out their lives and work out their own salvation is, in short, the unity so prominently discussed in the rest of the discourse. “For the means whereby this must be effected,” Winthrop writes, “they are 2fold, a conformity with the work and end we aim at.” In other words, the task will be accomplished, the covenant will be fulfilled, if the new community is one in support of the covenanted government and the covenanted vision of its purpose. Only in the double conformity of the “work” and “end” can the colony succeed. The colonists will have to be radically one on matters of government and on matters of the ultimate grounding of the colony. They will have to be one as a body is one, and the animating principle of this body, its soul, must be love. This means actually practicing the virtues that most Christian churches only profess:

[W]e must not content ourselves with usual[,] ordinary means whatsoever we did or ought to have done when we lived in England, [but] the same must we do[,] and more also[,] where we go: that which the most in their churches maintain as a truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice, as in this duty of love[,] we must love brotherly[,] without dissimulation, we must love one another with a pure heart[,] fervently we must bear one another’s burdens, we must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren.  

146. WP II, 293. Emphasis added.

147. WP II, 293.
This will not be easy, but it is necessary—all the more necessary, first, on account of the “more near bond of marriage” the colony is about to undertake in this covenant; second, because of the observed consequences of failure for even those who have strayed from God in good faith;\(^\text{148}\) third, the many blessings God has already granted them means that he deserves some measure of grateful obedience.\(^\text{149}\)

After all these considerations, Winthrop finally comes to what Kendall and Carey call the “part that contains an oath creating the body politic:”

Thus stands the cause between God and us, we are entered into a covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles[, we we have professed to enterprise these actions upon these and these ends, we have hereupon besought him of favor and blessing.\(^\text{150}\)

The “articles” that will need to be “strictly observed” have been laid out in the discourse.\(^\text{151}\) The colonists must do nothing less than live perfect Christian lives. Yet to them this did not, perhaps, seem as impossible a task as it may sound. The love of Christ,

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\(^{148}\) WP II, 293. Winthrop refers perhaps to the “calamity” mentioned in the “Reasons” and its being brought on by figures, perhaps, like Charles I and William Laud.

\(^{149}\) “The elect,” writes Bercovitch, “must repay God in time…for what he granted them from eternity, by making palpable the fruits of their calling.” They were obligated to do service to God, even though it could not possibly achieve their salvation. Again, “Gradually, they rewelded the sundered bonds of grace and works, though the notion of mutual obligation.” See Bercovitch, Puritan Origins, 80.

\(^{150}\) WP II, 294.

\(^{151}\) Perry Miller elucidates the meaning of Winthrop’s “the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles”: God “left the particular form to be determined by circumstance—this was one important human art on which the Puritans said the Bible was not an absolute and imperious lawgiver—but He enacted that all men should be under some sort of corporate rule, that they should all submit to the sway of their superiors, that no man should live apart from his fellows, that the government should have full power to enforce obedience and to inflict every punishment that the crimes of men deserved.” See Perry Miller, “The Puritan State and Puritan Society,” Errand, 142-143.
which is “infused” into the soul of every regenerate believer is the “bond of perfection” and can produce the ability to live lives in perfect community, because it dissolves natural differences into the unity of mercy and love.

Immediately after the moment of covenanting, Winthrop explains how God’s approval will be ascertained: he says, “now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this covenant and sealed our commission.” Here Winthrop glimpses again into the mind of God by reading the book of history: if the colonists make it across the Atlantic, they will know God has “ratified this covenant.” If they do not make it, they will know they have come to some disfavor with God and he has not sealed their covenant. Either way, the events of visible history are taken as evidence of the will of God. In this, it could be said that Winthrop is following the custom of calling natural forces as “witnesses” to the covenant.152

The Surprising Historicity of the Covenant’s Blessings and Curses

After the enactment and ratification have been achieved, Winthrop follows with another traditional element of Old Testament covenants: a statement of blessings and curses that will attend the parties to the covenant upon, respectively, its fulfillment or

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152. See Joshua A. Berman, “God’s Alliance with Man,” Azure, No. 25 (Summer 5766 / 2006): p. 93 and note 56, in which the author points to Deuteronomy 4: 26; 30:19; 32:1; Isaiah 1:2; Micah 6:1-2. Each of these passages speaks with the voice of God calling natural forces as passive hearers of a threat or promise by God. Winthrop’s usage differs in that he speaks of events in history—that is, a disastrously tumultuous journey across the ocean, or a calm one—as confirming or denying God’s involvement in certain actions. By calling concrete events as active witnesses to the covenant, Winthrop has done something entirely different from these Biblical passages, and this makes a very great difference in the attendant theory of history. He has given the covenant, in yet another way, a uniquely historical character, which is also borne out in the next part, the series of blessings and curses.
breach. There are three rounds of blessing and cursing, though the first is incomplete. In stereotypically Puritan fashion, Winthrop begins with a dour statement:

But if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us[,] be revenged of such a perjured people[,] and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.153

There is no mention here of the blessings of the covenant’s fulfillment, but instead a summary of the articles that will require “strict observance,” beginning with a quotation from Micah:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God, for this end, [1] we must be knit together in this work as one man, [2] we must entertain each other in brotherly affection, [3] we must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities, [4] we must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality, [5] we must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own[,] rejoice together, mourn together, labour and suffer together, [6] always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.154

These articles, each of which has been alluded to and mentioned previously either in the body of the discourse or in the “Reasons,” stands in for the fourth part that Kendall and Carey identify as constitutive of symbols in the American political tradition: “an addendum to the oath, in which the signers clarify their obligations under the oath, letting


us know what kind of thing the new body politic is to be.” First and last Winthrop calls again for the whole people to be “knit together in this work as one man,” and to be “members of the same body.” In this way they will “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” In the last clause of this passage, the principal symbol of the whole discourse is laid bare. But being a unified community—note that here and elsewhere, even the specific word “community” connotes the oneness he seeks—can only be achieved in the manner he has laid out in the discourse and in the covenant just given them. But covenants have consequences, and the second round of praising and blessing, which follows on this summary of the covenant’s articles, illustrates these consequences fully for the first time.

If these articles are met and the covenant fulfilled, then the colonists will reap the benefits of a truly chosen people:

[T]he Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his own people and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of his wisdom[,] power[,] goodness[,] and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with, we shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England.155

That the God of Israel would dwell among them puts the new Puritan covenant in line with the Old Testament covenants, each of which the Puritans conceived as a renewal or reenactment of the one covenant that God first made with Abraham. Notice, then, that the covenant itself is an historical endeavor—it seeks blessings and stipulates curses that are

alike manifest in history, not in the atemporal and ahistorical hereafter. God’s dwelling among them, his blessing them in “all our ways,” his revealing of himself to them in a newly intimate fashion, even the Old Testament-style metaphor of infused military might: in some sense all of these things are spiritual or atemporal blessings (with the possible exception of the incredibly inclusive blessing “in all our ways”). The last blessing listed here cannot but be temporal and historical: “when he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England.” The praise of other men can only occur in the context of history. What is perhaps the key blessing, however, is shown to be decidedly ambiguous. The ambition to be admired and set up as an example is tied up with the round of “cursing” immediately following this last blessing. It contains the most famous line of the entire discourse, which is also historical in nature.

In mid-sentence Winthrop switches from the coming praise of the nations to their cursing of the new community:

[F]or we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world, we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God’s sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us ‘til we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.156

156. WP II, 295.
Far from a statement of imperial superiority or design, the most famous words John
Winthrop ever spoke are a warning against the failure to be a good example to the world.
Winthrop wants to sear in the minds of his hearers the dire consequences of failure, the
terrible blame that will be assigned to them if they do not meet the high bar God has set
for their community. If they fail, they would be responsible for others cursing the “ways
of God.” This, too, then, is an historical consequence. In the first round of cursing
Winthrop has mentioned that their failure would mean incurring God’s wrath. Near the
end of this second round he says that forsaking the covenant will also mean being
“consumed out of the good land whither we are going.” But here we see in very sharp
relief that the project at Massachusetts Bay is not one only for the members of the colony.
Upon their success depends God’s favor among men. Though they are to focus only on
their community—on being unified in work and end and action—it will redound to the
benefit of the world and accrue either to God’s glory or shame.

It is true that the phrase “city on a hill” could just as easily be included in the
blessing passage immediately before it. Yet this ambiguity may be deliberate. To be party
to this covenant, to be a chosen people, to be set up on a hill by God, is to enter a
profoundly ambiguous state. Here is the full meaning of what Robert Bellah called the
“ambiguity of chosenness”: blessings attend our satisfaction of God’s demands; the worst
curses and his wrath attend our failure. Here is the symbol that Bellah believes persists

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through American history, albeit rent in two and only selectively preserved beyond its inception here in the early Puritan period.\textsuperscript{157}

The ambiguity is reiterated with a third round of blessing and cursing. If we keep the covenant, we will “live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it.” “But,” Winthrop counters, “if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship…other gods[,] our pleasures, and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.” Here, too, in a document and people ostensibly centered on more transcendent things, we see the surprising historicity of the blessings and curses. The implication of comfortable and fruitful living in New England is the third blessing; another threat of “perishing” in the foreign land is the third curse.

Now that the meaning of the symbols has been partially explicated, a fuller discussion of their importance to the idea of American exceptionalism is possible.

\textit{Covenants and a Theory of History}

The relationship between claims to American exceptionalism and theories of history was partially explored in the opening chapter in the discussion of Marxism. Winthrop’s peculiar theory of history has been pointed out in passing in the course of examining the documents above. The relation of these, however, has yet to be made fully

\textsuperscript{157} Others, too, see the ambiguity. See Madsen, 18-20. See also Baritz, 16-17.
explicit. To do so at this stage is to risk the injection of a tone of historical inexorability into the discussion of American history. I do not intend this, and will try to avoid it. Nevertheless, there is great value in looking beyond the Puritan period, in order to make the points of interest here more intelligible.

In many instances, the claim to American exceptionalism today involves positing a theory of world history, or western history, from which American history deviates. Marxism is the easy and appropriate example. The economic classes throughout the world are locked in a struggle for ascendancy and, at the end of the capitalist stage, the underclass will overthrow the overclass and install itself as a dictator, enacting socialist policies designed to hasten the onset of communist society. Two aspects of the theory bear striking similarity to Winthrop. First, the possibility of the theory at all relies on the intelligibility of history, the idea that the vicissitudes of history actually have an order and logic that may be discerned. We have seen this in Winthrop’s discussion of the economic situations in England and New England and in his comments on the illnesses that beset the “natives” of New England:158 Winthrop believes these portend the unfolding plan of divine Providence: England is about to succumb to a great calamity. He, just like the Marxist theory, believes history has an intelligible purpose. As Bercovitch has put it, the Puritans saw themselves as representatives of all humanity: “The local emphasis was by no means parochial. The destiny of Christ’s people in

158. See “Reasons,” 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9, WP II, 141.
Winthrop also believes, like the convinced Marxist, that history can be helped along if it is read correctly. Winthrop’s exodus makes possible the establishment of a bulwark in the wilderness, which serves as the latest episode in salvation history. Some have seen in this, and in his talk of a “commission” distinct from the covenant, a capitulation to Arminianism. While Winthrop would certainly and vehemently have denied it, it seems clear that his theory of history is at least open to that charge. In his defense, however, it could be said that his theory does not claim to sway history, but only to read it and, thus, provide the opportunity to act in accord with it.

_American Exceptionalism and Winthrop’s “City on a Hill”_

A plausible first-blush reading of Winthrop’s phrase “city on a hill” has been enough to make plausible the claim that he is the first American exceptionalist. After

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160. Perry Miller has suggested that many of the Puritan theologians were “dangerously close” to Arminianism, though they did not see this. See Miller, “The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,” 78.

161. A recent and typical example is sufficient. In his book _Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion_, (New York: Doubleday, 2007), David Gelernter unproblematically asserts that Winthrop “foresaw” the city on a hill that American would become (17), which is in fact problematic for reasons discussed earlier in this chapter. Gelernter says that Winthrop senses he is “onto something big” (23) and that Winthrop was the first to begin “weaving the American creed,” though it was the “revolutionary generation that finished it” (40). In the concluding pages of the book, Gelernter makes plain the chief source of his interpretation: “In one of his favorite, best-remembered phrases, [President Ronald Reagan] told the world that America was and must always be the ‘shining city upon a hill.’ ‘The phrase comes from John Winthrop,’ he explained, ‘who wrote it to describe the America he imagined.’” Offered virtually without comment, the reader is left to conclude that Gelernter is following Reagan’s interpretation of Winthrop’s words. Yet as has been shown, Reagan’s common understanding of the phrase is distant even from a plain reading of the document from which it is drawn.
an in depth examination of the context of the term—both in the document and in the
context of Winthrop’s larger vision for the colony at Massachusetts Bay—it is clearer
than ever that this claim is misguided. As was noted at the head of this chapter, Winthrop
could not possibly be an American exceptionalist as such. The United States of
America—doubtless the referent in discussions of American exceptionalism—does not
exist when Winthrop founds the colony that will precede it by a century and a half. Yet it
could perhaps be argued that he is a “Massachusetts Bay Colony exceptionalist,” seeing
his own colony as special in the world and in human history. This is also not the case.

The context of the phrase “city on a hill” makes Winthrop’s meaning fairly clear.
It falls in the middle of his three rounds of blessing and cursing at the end of the
enactment and divine ratification of the covenant. Rather than a statement, then, that
some set of rules applies to some nations or churches but not to Massachusetts Bay—
rather than a “comparative” sense of exceptionalism—it states something entirely
different: the world is watching us and waiting to evaluate until we succeed or fail. It is a
statement not of any radical freedom from the rules and constraints that apply to other
peoples, but of the radical boundedness and circumscription of the colonists’ lives that
was just effected by the covenant. The phrase, rather than a license for the colony to tell
the world how to live, is a dire warning of the terrible consequences that the colonists
will face if they fail to live lives of complete Christian virtue. The passage is inwardly
focused, an admonition for the Puritans to live up to their agreement with God, not an
outwardly focused justification for double standards or imperialism.
The phrase is actually an allusion to scripture and its context there sheds further light on Winthrop’s meaning. The reference is to Matthew 5:14, which is a verse from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In preaching to those present Christ says:

Blessed are ye when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you for my sake, falsely. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the Prophets which were before you. Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill, cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.162

Tradition has long interpreted this passage as speaking to preachers—and the Geneva Bible commentary, which Winthrop and most Puritans would have known well, does not depart from that tradition. Those who are reviled and persecuted on Jesus’ account are those who, by the nature of their office, would be constantly out in plain view. The words here are a recognition of that, and an exhortation not to shrink from their public ministry in the face of being reviled and persecuted. “A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid;” just so, a preacher is by definition a public person. His witness is out in the open, necessarily, and it is not incongruous with the role that Winthrop foresaw for the new colony.

162. Matthew 5:11-16. Text taken from Geneva Bible cited above. Emphasis in original. In the 1560 version, the Geneva Bible offers this commentary on the imagery of salt and light: “Your office is to season men with the salt of heavenly doctrine” and “Because you are seen far off, give good example of life.” In the 1602 version, the Geneva Bible’s commentary is similar, but different. Regarding salt: “The ministers of the word especially...must needs lead other [sic] both by word and deed to this greatest joy and felicity. Your doctrine must be very sound and good, for if it be not so, it shall be naught set by, and cast away as a thing unsavory and vain. What shall you have to salt withal? And so are fools in the Latin tongue called saltless, as you would say, men that have no salt, or savor and taste in them.” Regarding light: “You shine and give light, by being made partakers in the true light.”
Massachusetts Bay would be a light to the world. It was going to show the world, in the flesh, the perfect Christian commonwealth. But this community “cannot be hid,” and this is why the phrase is found at the end of the discourse and as part of the covenant section on blessing and cursing. The failure of so public a venture, of so ambitious an effort, would be as widely noticed as it was disastrous. It would bring scandal to Puritans and ministers everywhere.163 A city on a hill cannot be hid, so their very public mission will meet with either a very public success or a very public failure.164

The full context of the phrase, thus, makes clear that the Puritan project at Massachusetts Bay was not a design on worldly power. Neither was it viewed as an easy task vouchsafed by a generous God who would accomplish their work for them. Winthrop is keenly aware of the cost and very real possibility of failure. But these do not convince him to refrain from entering into the effort. If this phrase’s direct connection to the idea of American exceptionalism is denied, then the connection to the idea of the Puritans to that the idea of American exceptionalism is called into question. Despite the fact that the superficial connection is properly denied, however, a deeper connection may be affirmed.

163. N.B. Winthrop has reversed himself from the “Reasons,” where he was trying to persuade prominent Puritans and ministers to accompany him. There he says that failure will bring no shame on the ministers, but here he warns that it will. One can account for the discrepancy when the difference in aim is noted. In the “Reasons” Winthrop was recruiting. He needed to make it easier to join the venture, and so he played down the possible risks. Here he is guiding his colonists, trying to persuade them to work tirelessly for the colony’s success, thus making it easier to succeed.

164. Dawson points up the distinctively non-utopian character of Winthrop’s thought in other documents. See Dawson, 137 especially note 22 on that page.
Exemplary Exceptionalism and the “End” of the Massachusetts Bay Colony

John Winthrop argues forcefully in both of the documents considered that the chief end of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was religious. The new community would embody a perfectly Christian way of life through its ordinances and “strict performance” of the articles of their covenant with God. This embodiment would, if successful, mean the new community was a light to the world; if unsuccessful, they would be a byword to the nations. Either way, the particular work in Massachusetts has broad, even universal significance. Here, then, we are faced with the very center of the idea of American exceptionalism: the claims to universality that lie at the heart of Christianity.

Though meant to be focused on the speck in one’s own eye, it is easy for us to see, and be tempted to dislodge, the beam in another’s. To know and to love the truth of salvation, of nature and grace, of good and evil, brings with it a temptation to hubris and arrogance. To argue that Winthrop and the Puritans were guilty of such arrogance cannot but be true. These were real men and they would admit to their own partiality, vice, and sin—perhaps even with a dour enthusiasm. Yet to argue that their conception of society is at bottom hubristic and arrogant and proud is to make a subtle mistake. To argue thus would mean first conflating all claims to universality and subsequently denying them all based on the account of the Puritans. To argue that the Puritans were imperialistic confuses the universality in their political and historical thought—which is

165. Note the references to this Bible passage by the imperial exceptionalists at the turn of the twentieth century. Whether used in argument against imperial policies, or rejecting by those arguing for imperialism, the discourse was still shot through with Christian reflection, giving further evidence for the persistence of the theme throughout the American political tradition.
present in various forms in all Christian thought—with the universality present in imperialism, which is of a different character. This confusion is a failure to distinguish between the relevance of universality to cognition or belief, on the one hand, and action, on the other. Winthrop’s conviction that the universal mind of God is discoverable by the particular mind of man in the particular events of history may be false. But arguing for the falsehood of Winthrop’s view need not relegate all views containing an element of universality to the same category of falsehood.

John Winthrop and the colonists were not making claims to American exceptionalism in founding their colony. Neither were they making claims to the exception of their colony to any kind of rules of history. The rules of history, in their mind, were written by the Ruler of history, and though its course might perhaps be discerned partially, the purposes behind it were surely not knowable in any finality.\(^{166}\) But their faith and their knowledge of history led them to believe that the setting up of the colony was a project willed by God. They were to be an example to behold, an example to be imitated—an exemplar to history and to the world. But being hailed as an exemplar is fundamentally different from conquering and ruling an empire.\(^{167}\) The difference is as

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\(^{166}\) Winthrop mentions the limitedness of our perspective in the context of admitting the possibility that the apparently wayward colony of Virginia may serve some good purpose one day. See \textit{WP II}, 142-143.

wide as the character of submission that attends each: submission in one is voluntary, and in the other it is not. The Puritans were exemplary, not imperial exceptionalists.

Perry Miller notes that though Puritan theology is often thought of as deterministic, “we are always in danger of forgetting that the life of the Puritan was completely voluntaristic…The man into whose soul grace had been infused was liberated from that bondage and made free to undertake the responsibilities and obligations of virtue and decency,” which is not possible under determinism. This was, in part, a practical and theoretical rebellion against the absolutism of the Stuart monarchs, Miller thinks, which further buttresses the argument that the Puritans were not about to begin forcing involuntary compliance with their rule. The Puritans wished to inspire obedience, not coerce it.168

Unawareness of the line that divides exemplary and imperial exceptionalism makes more plausible the bristling stand often taken against Winthrop’s universalistic words. Yet Winthrop’s universalism is of a wholly different kind from the universalism of empire. This difference will be discussed more in Chapter Five, when the nature of imperial American exceptionalism comes to the fore. For now, it is enough to note the distinction.

We have seen the role God was thought to play in Puritan society, and the implicit views on history that that entails. We have seen the deep correspondence of the Puritan

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168. See Perry Miller, “The Puritan State and Puritan Society, Errand, 147. The issue of compliance of church members was wholly different, as Miller notes, “To allow no dissent from the truth was exactly the reason they had come to America.” They would have done the same thing in England, “could they have secured the power.” See Errand, 143.
synthesis of theology and history to views of American exceptionalism. We can now begin to see that the contemporary idea of American exceptionalism would not have been possible except for its germination from the seed of the early Puritan synthesis. But it has also been made clear that contemporary imperialistic conceptions of American exceptionalism have not come directly from Winthrop and the Puritans. The idea has undergone major alterations and we are now prepared, after the completion of this initial account, to understand the nature of those changes over the course of American history.
CHAPTER THREE

AMERICA’S SELF-CONCEPTION IN THE FOUNDING ERA:
SEPARATION OF THE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS SPHERES AS DIFFERENTIATION

“There were no more self-confident imperialists than the Founding Fathers.”
–Niall Ferguson169

Imperial from the Start?

Some of the most prominent commentators on the question of American exceptionalism have argued that the principal figures of America’s founding generation were ardent imperialists in word and deed. The claim is well established, it is supposed, by the vocabulary of key figures of that period in American politics. The use of the word “empire” to describe the new country from the Philadelphia convention onward is said to prove the founders’ expansionist ambitions.170 This, along with their historical expansion


170. See, for example, Ferguson, 34, and Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 38. It should be pointed out that this argument is not, however, original to contemporary scholars. In the contentious Senate debates on the invasion of the Philippines, which will be discussed more
across the face of the continent (a policy that was hotly contested at the time), belies claims to the limitedness of America’s polity.

Historical scholarship is often tricky, not least because of the ambiguity and fluidity of language. The relationship between words and actions is even trickier. If even a modicum of modesty and moderation is introduced into the case, it becomes obvious that what has occurred from the time of the American founding to today is not a constant line of imperialistic tendencies and actions, but a change in the meaning of the word “empire.” What is truly needed, rather than a simplistic argument of vocabulary, is a thorough examination of the deep meaning of the most important documents of the period. Only then will the question of the founders’ imperialism be answerable.

*Introduction*

In the previous chapter, the Massachusetts Puritans’ understanding of God’s role in their political order was outlined and shown to be an element of future conceptions of American exceptionalism. John Winthrop’s “exemplary exceptionalism” was shown to have paved the way for imperial exceptionalism because of the elements of universality contained within it. A confusion about the role universality is to play in politics made in Chapter Five, Senator Caffery of Louisiana argues that the Supreme Court’s use of the word “empire” amounts to that body’s sanction of imperial policy. See *Congressional Record*, Volume 33, (Monday, February 5, 1900) 1495. Kagan, Ferguson, and Caffery alike put too much weight on the word and too little weight on its meaning in the context of the actions and documents they examine.

171. Forrest McDonald has pointed out the perils of basing historical arguments on specific words. See his *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Economic Origins of the Constitution*, (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1985), x-xi.
possible the use of Winthrop’s “exemplary” rhetoric for imperial purposes.\textsuperscript{172} From today’s vantage point in history, we hear the imperial ring of Winthrop’s words. But it was the argument of the last chapter that this imperial ring was superadded to Winthrop, that the meaning was not originally imperial but came to be viewed as such. If anachronism can be avoided, then we see that those Puritans were not, in their time, imperialists at all. The same may be seen in the crucial documents of the American founding period.

In this chapter, I will show that the imperial exceptionalism seen later in American history had not yet developed in the minds of the Constitutional generation. Far from imperialistic, the framers’ conception of American order was continuous with the Puritans’ in many ways. One can see, however, some differentiation of the Puritan symbols: Biblical symbols, for example, though scarcely less powerful and prevalent in late eighteenth century America, played a different role in discussions of political order.\textsuperscript{173} Rather than serving as a strict blueprint for the manner in which society would run, these symbols provided inspiration and rhetorical flourish to the founders’ words.

\textsuperscript{172} This topic is taken up more in Chapter Five.

\textsuperscript{173} Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin—perhaps the two most prominent Americans associated with the radical French Enlightenment—wished the Great Seal of the United States to depict the scene from Exodus when Israel crossed the Red Sea. The claim being advanced would have clearly been the marking of a great transition from the old world to the new, from metaphorical slavery to freedom. Despite their desire to so prominently use a Biblical image, it would be difficult to substantiate the claim that these two men saw history, religion, and politics in the manner of the Puritans, who might have been expected to use such a scene to show what the political community was about. Jefferson and Franklin, then, wished to use the image more metaphorically, which illustrates something of the shift that had occurred by their time.
(which were rooted in the extant political tradition and practical experience). The place of God in politics, it will be seen, had changed, and this affects the framers’ conception of history. One of the principal obstacles to the treatment of the founding period is new; it was not an obstacle in treating the Puritans. The relatively straightforward manner in which government and God were related for the Massachusetts Bay colonists no longer obtains for the Americans of the Constitutional generation. A “differentiation” has occurred, and exploring the nature of this differentiation is a new but necessary task for this project.

The pivotal years of the 1770s and 1780s see the composition and adoption of America’s most cherished documents, and it ought to be explored whether these contain the kind of imperialistic exceptionalism so evident in later American history.

To do this, Kendall and Carey’s Basic Symbols will again serve as a guide. After a brief recapitulation of Kendall and Carey’s account of three founding documents between the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence, I will offer my own brief examination of the Declaration, the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, and the Federalist, since the present project, which is at a slight cross-purpose with Kendall and Carey’s, allows for some new findings. After this exegesis, the ground will be prepared for a fruitful comparison of the founders with the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay. This discussion will again raise key questions on the nature of changes in a people’s symbols over time, which will then be discussed. I will conclude the chapter by arguing that the
evidence cannot support what some have supposed—that the founders aspired to be, or hoped their country would later be, and imperial power on the world stage.

Continuity with the Puritans

One of the most prominent features of the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s conception of government is radically different from the political order of the American founding generation. The explicit conception of government as a covenant with God disappeared relatively quickly, even in the colonial political order. The 1639 Fundamental Orders of Connecticut have already abandoned the language of “covenant,” as Kendall and Carey observe. Yet they rightly point out that the fraying of the previous order is not the reason for this. Rather, it is the increasing strength and embeddedness of that order that leads to the absence of the language of covenant from the Fundamental Orders. The political order has not been reconceived as something other than a covenant; its covenantal character is now so integral a part of the political order of the colonies that it may at this point be taken for granted. It is not absent, but implicit. Simultaneously, however, one sees the beginnings of the differentiation of the political order and the social order, though this point must be laid aside for the moment.

Kendall and Carey suggest that the implicitness of the idea of a covenantal political order is due to the fact that “the Mayflower Compact has become a symbol so

174. Kendall and Carey, 43-44.
familiar and meaningful that it is capable of merely tacit evocation.\textsuperscript{175} They go on to argue that the Fundamental Orders introduce two new symbols into the American political tradition, namely, “to maintain the peace” and “union.” As was argued in the last chapter, however, the Kendall and Carey have missed something in skipping over the early contributions of Winthrop. Had they taken up Winthrop’s “Model” discourse, they would not be led here to puzzle at these new symbols, or at the Fundamental Orders’ new way to “assimilate the political and religious order.”\textsuperscript{176} “Chosenness” and the ambiguity attendant to it had long been a key part of the Massachusetts tradition by the time of the Fundamental Orders, and it is this very notion that lies at the heart of Connecticut’s “new way.” Tied to this, however, is also the necessity of maintaining unity as a community—the dominant symbol and thrust of Winthrop’s discourse. It would not be stretching Winthrop’s words too far, either, to argue that the “new” symbol of government, “to maintain the peace,” is part and parcel of Winthrop’s stress on unity. The Puritan community was based on being radically “one,” and the maintenance of unity was the means to this peace.\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{175} Kendall and Carey, 43-44.

\textsuperscript{176} Kendall and Carey, 45.

\textsuperscript{177} This, again, had much to do with the different conceptions of government (and universality) on the part of the Puritans and the Pilgrims. We must wait as long as possible to take up the issue of differentiation, because the differences and similarities between the Puritans and the founders will help illustrate the difference before we discuss it openly. Put another way, we may be able to grasp the difference between differentiation, change, and derailment intuitively and implicitly \textit{before} it is lined out explicitly and rigorously \textit{if} we first explain what the founding generation thought, and then what the differences between the Puritans and the founders were.
Massachusetts’ Symbols and Differentiation

The introduction of the Winthrop symbols into the main vein of the American political tradition poses a problem for the interpretation of that tradition. Namely, the degree to which the Fundamental Orders differs from the other documents—arising out of the soil of the Winthrop deposit—raises the question of whether a derailment has occurred in the tradition, rather than merely a differentiation. Kendall and Carey argue emphatically that the Fundamental Orders are a derailment: “from the standpoint of the later development, Connecticut here offers us an example of what Voegelin would call a ‘derailment’ of the original symbolization, and, at the same time, let us note, a move away from the language and spirit of moderation.”

A few things should be said here before laying aside these points until later.

First, arguing that the Winthrop tradition is a derailment would mean arguing that the other line of the development—from the Mayflower Compact, through the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, and to the Constitution—constitutes a path of unproblematic sequential differentiation. Such an understanding lacks qualification and nuance. Whole documents, it should be said explicitly, need not belong wholly to the categories of derailment or differentiation. Any single document may contain elements of

178. Kendall and Carey, 46. Note the requirement of subsequent history to determine whether a given document or symbol constitutes a derailment. The judgment of a symbol as a derailment or a differentiation is an historical judgment and cannot be made on the fly. This is another way of stating the obvious: the history of the present moment cannot yet be written. But it is important to understand that judgments of history are vitally important for the way we conceive of ourselves as a people and the way we act. Thus, it is highly relevant whether certain theoretical moves in the American political tradition are either differentiations or derailments, and this topic will be revisited several times over the course of the present project.
each. This is largely due to the second main point: these documents are not themselves symbols, but contain symbols. Symbols—e.g. unity—are the main unit of analysis in this inquiry. Once the relevant symbols are gleaned from the founding period, the discussion of derailment and differentiation may become more concrete and intelligible; the discussion should, thus, be put off until then. Third, this discussion of derailment and differentiation lies at the heart of the present project, because it is a key part of tracing the origins, nature, and development of the idea of American exceptionalism at the heart of the American people. Far from a merely academic or pedantic point, the present thesis, upon which great questions of American history and American foreign policy rest, depends upon clarifying these issues.

Returning to Kendall and Carey’s discovery of the basic symbols of the American founding period, we should first recall the main outlines of their argument in regard to the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut and the Massachusetts Body of Liberties. First, already with those documents, religion’s relation to the political realm begins to become distinct. Though the Fundamental Orders clearly possess characteristics that are not part of the rest of the tradition according to Kendall and Carey, they nonetheless articulate a somewhat ambiguous new relationship.\(^{179}\) The political community, it seems, has been

\(^{179}\) N.B. the discussion above about the difference between the Pilgrims and the Puritans in regard to religion and politics.
singled out by God for some reason.\textsuperscript{180} It is possible that many peoples—or all—are called to service and a mission not dissimilar to the one pointed out in the Fundamental Orders. But this sense of uniqueness is not the main relevant aspect of this articulation of religion and politics; rather it is relevant that here politics is in some sense the servant of religion. Put another way, the Fundamental Orders still understand politics as an instrument of God’s plan in history, not unlike Winthrop nine years before. Yet there are palpable changes even here.

Kendall and Carey argue that the basic symbols are, with the Fundamental Orders, becoming more defined. The “better ordering” of the Mayflower Compact has become the “orderly and decent government” of the Fundamental Orders. With this comes the innovation of a written Constitution, which was previously not present in a single document. It is with the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut that the representative assembly is first symbolized in the American political tradition, and from here onward the legislative body is considered supreme.\textsuperscript{181} The movement to legislative supremacy is all the more evident in Kendall and Carey’s treatment of the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, in which “One might well say that the ‘better ordering’ and the ‘thought-to-be-meet-and-convenient-for-the-general-Good’ symbols of the Mayflower Compact have differentiated out into the symbols of an omnicompetent and legally omnipotent

\textsuperscript{180} It is far from clear, as noted by Kendall and Carey, that the particular notion of chosenness belongs to the people of Connecticut exclusively.

\textsuperscript{181} Kendall and Carey, 46-48.
deliberative assembly.”¹⁸² This does not mean that the Massachusetts Body of Liberties is a move toward positivism; government is not held to be the sole measure of ‘justice’ and the ‘general good.’ Rather, the Massachusetts Body of Liberties is an enactment and self-articulation of the supremacy of consent for politics.¹⁸³ Seen in this light, the continuity with the Mayflower Compact is obvious. This point is all the more persuasive when the circumstances surrounding its adoption are recalled.

The colonial period in New England was characterized more and more by a tendency toward self-government. From the early move toward white male suffrage in 1633 to the move for codification of the rules of government almost a decade later, even the Massachusetts Bay Colony—striving so much to remain radically one—no longer found the path to unity exclusively through representation in a single figure like John Winthrop. Unity, as Kendall and Carey write, is now achieved through documented mutual subordination not to a single man’s wisdom and guidance, but “to the transcendent truth of the soul and of society, and because it has demanded of the persons who are individual components that by ‘signing’ they signify their subordination, as persons, to that truth.”¹⁸⁴ Representation itself is reconceived in this period, so that government itself undergoes changes accordingly. If we no longer consider a single man as sufficient to “represent” us as a community, the institutional change is evidence of the

¹⁸². Kendall and Carey, 53.
¹⁸⁴. Kendall and Carey, 56.
change in self-conception, and was effected by the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut and the Massachusetts Body of Liberties.

**Innovation in Representation**

In these colonial documents, then, the people begins to understand an assembly as its “representative”. The unity that has ever been the goal—though in slightly varying senses—of all the political orders considered so far is now considered most appropriately achieved by the election of a supreme representative assembly. This new understanding of ‘representation’ in particular is also a new understanding of politics in general, since politics is, under these documents, not considered a grant of the king, but an activity of the people itself for the people’s own benefit. Here it is not the ‘end’ that is unique or new—it had been the consensus of most Western political thought for centuries that the end of good government was the good of the people—but the ‘means’: the representative assembly. This is a symbol that, though modified in the Constitution to come, will not disappear from the American political tradition.

Kendall and Carey rightly believe the Massachusetts Body of Liberties to be continuous with the Constitution on the question of religion and politics. The Virginia Declaration of Rights similarly separates the two realms; it “drives a wedge between

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186. Even political thinkers in the medieval period, for example, emphasized the principle that all good government is aimed at the good of the people. And this in a period stereotyped as anything but republican.
philosophy, which is the symbol to which it appeals when it speaks of justice, moderation, etc., and religion; and, with recognizably symbolic intent, drains the latter, religion, off for separate treatment." 187 The distinction between questions of “philosophy” and “religion,” or between the “sphere of government” and the “sphere of society” is the “definitive American differentiation,” 188 and is already evident in the Virginia Declaration of Rights. “In the sphere of government, in short,” Kendall and Carey write, “religion is to be given the status it enjoys in the Constitution, which is to say no status at all.” 189

This Virginian understanding is not competing with the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, even though the latter contains much religious language that the former lacks; but they do “understand a Christian commonwealth to be a different sort of thing from what it was in Massachusetts; in the very act of symbolically disestablishing the Christian religion, by separating it from American government, they establish it as the religion, the public truth, of American society, a status which (we believe) it continues to enjoy.” 190


188. Kendall and Carey, 73.

189. Kendall and Carey, 73.

190. Kendall and Carey, 74. See also Thomas E. Buckley, “The Use and Abuse of Jefferson’s Statute: Separating Church and State in Nineteenth Century Virginia,” in Religion and the New Republic, ed. James H. Hutson, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000): 41-63. (Hereafter RNR). Buckley argues that the Virginia separation was not characteristic but unique at the time, even trendsetting in light of the Everson case and the twentieth century balance effected by it (43). Interestingly, however, Buckley agrees that the separation in Virginia between Church and state was promoted and widened and exacerbated by religious, not political, figures. Certain Baptist ministers, especially, wanted to eliminate the competitive advantage that the established Anglican (later Episcopal) Church had over their
While perhaps their point on the ubiquity of Christianity as the “public truth” of American society could be questioned, Kendall and Carey’s basic point about the understanding contributed by the Virginians need not be likewise questioned or rejected. Kendall and Carey are arguing that the Virginians, rightly or wrongly, believed themselves to be establishing a Christian political order, even as they established one that claimed no competence on matters of religion. This point invites reflection on the founding generation’s conceptions of the relation of God and government. On this point, James Hutson is particularly instructive.

In an article aimed at making sense of the founders’ beliefs about religion and society, Hutson finds remarkable unanimity on what might be called the sociological view of religion and politics. From Thomas Paine to Theophilus Parsons, even radically different figures associated with America’s founding believed the effect of religion on society and government to be salutary. This was due chiefly, Hutson shows, to the effect

potential flock (54). Nevertheless, even the strictest separationists thought that the “welfare of the commonwealth” in fact “depended upon religion” (55).

Robert Kagan has also argued that the Virginia and New England cultures were more different than similar, and that it was the former, and not the latter, that was more influential and ascendant. Virginia’s tendency toward individualism and acquisitiveness is tantamount, for Kagan, to imperialism, or at least its predecessor. See Kagan, 10-11.

191. N.B. I am not here addressing the voluminous literature on the “separation of Church and state,” which treats the matter as largely legal in character. My point is that the proper relationship between politics and religion had changed by the time of the founding from what it was in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Noting this change and its consequences will eventually shed light on the question of American exceptionalism.

Though Jefferson’s famous metaphor has become the main standard of interpretation on questions of religion and politics today, and though his conception takes a primarily political tack, we know that from the beginning the most ardent separationists were religious figures like Roger Williams. Williams seems to be the first to coin the phrase for which Jefferson is so famous. See Daniel Driesbach, “Thomas Jefferson, a Mammoth Cheese, and the “Wall of Separation Between Church and State,” in RNR, 84-85.
of the belief in a “future state of rewards and punishments,” which was thought a vital component of the rule of law.\textsuperscript{192} The base of the unanimity detailed by Hutson is, however, telling; it is founded on an \textit{indirect} relationship of religion and politics in which the two are integrally connected, but only through the medium of society. A distinction in the spheres of religion and politics has been made since the Puritans; whether the people acts in its political or social capacities, these capacities are no longer one and the same.\textsuperscript{193}

With these considerations in mind, we are now ready to examine the basic documents of the founding period that have a particular bearing on the development of the idea of American exceptionalism. Each document will be taken up in chronological order and examined for what it shows in regard to the founding generation’s views on universality, history, and the place of God in the political order—the main elements found in the Massachusetts Bay Puritan documents to lend themselves to imperial exceptionalism.

\textit{The Declaration of Independence}

The first major document of self-understanding from the founding period is one that has long been cherished as central to the American political tradition. The Declaration of Independence has admitted of a very wide range of interpretations.


\textsuperscript{193} The point is not lost on Kendall and Carey. See \textit{Basic Symbols}, 45-47 and 55-57.
Considered by some a charter of the elementary freedoms and rights of all humankind, other see it as a simple indictment of a wayward ruler by a people steeped in procedures, law, and the experience of self-government. For many, the Declaration has co-equal status with the U.S. Constitution as America’s two principal founding documents. These and many other interesting points about the Declaration—especially questions about the importance of equality and the existence of fundamental rights—have long been discussed in both peer-reviewed journals and more popular fora. But for the purposes of the present project, and according to the method already laid out and employed in the previous chapter, the old document must be examined with new eyes. The same will be

194. For an extended treatment of the former view and how it came about, see Pauline Maier, *American Scripture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), Chapter 4. A good example of the former view in the scholarly literature is David Armitage’s *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London, U.K.: Harvard University Press, 2007). Armitage’s account goes on to trace the historical influence of the Declaration on other similar documents around the world. Though I do not deny that this account of its influence is much as Jefferson ultimately intended, I do deny that this is a sufficient understanding of the document’s meaning. Its main role in the articulation of America’s self-conception will be taken up immediately below.

Philip F. Detweiler has written that the former view was decidedly not the original view of the Declaration: “In its earliest years, however, the Declaration was not honored as political scripture. In the 1780’s, for example, Jefferson's language in the preamble was not remarked for its peculiar grace or distinction, and few Americans seemed aware that the Declaration would come to be ‘the charter of American democracy.’ In the 1790’s, when its reputation was taking shape, politics made it impossible for men of opposing political views to share the same opinion of the Declaration.

“The changing reputation of the Declaration in the early years of the American republic is of more than antiquarian interest. It is—or should be—of continuing interest to the numerous historians and politicians who confidently paraphrase or interpret the preamble. Customarily we are told what the Founding Fathers meant by a particular phrase. But the Fathers, although they did not ignore the phrases of the preamble, viewed the Declaration principally as a proclamation of independence. Americans of 1776 were not arguing about the meaning of the preamble in the fashion in which they argued some ten years later about the meaning of the Constitution. This fact explains why we have no contemporary commentary, such as The Federalist Papers afford for many clauses of the Constitution, to determine the meaning or application of the preamble of the Declaration. Rather we must base much of our understanding of the specific language of the preamble on the whole body of Revolutionary writing.” Detweiler’s article is an effort to begin to understand the Declaration in this manner. See Philip F. Detweiler, “The Changing Reputation of the Declaration of Independence: The First Fifty Years,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Oct., 1962): 557-558.
done briefly with the Articles of Confederation, the U.S. Constitution, and the *Federalist*, with the aim of establishing a thumbnail sketch of the worldview of the founding generation upon which a comparison with the Puritans may be firmy based. 

*Universality in the Declaration of Independence*

Most Americans, scholars or not, would take it for granted that the Declaration of Independence makes strikingly universal claims about the nature of government and human existence. Yet some words of context and qualification may cast doubt on these impressions.

The Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776 in response to increasing acts of aggression by the British Crown. First penned by Thomas Jefferson and then amended in committee with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, the Declaration was further amended in Congress before the final vote. Thus, the Declaration was a decidedly corporate document, not the work only of Jefferson’s admittedly able hand. This point is significant because it makes even more

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195. For more details on how the Declaration was drafted and its truly corporate nature, see Maier, 143-153. “The more alterations Congress made on his draft,” Maier notes, “the more miserable Jefferson became” (149). More important for our purposes is Maier’s point, following Jefferson, that “As a statement of political philosophy, the Declaration was therefore purposefully unexceptional in 1776” (xvii). It was intended by Jefferson and Congress to be a *summation* of widely held American views and beliefs, not a document meant to foment a revolution that would not have otherwise occurred. Thus, the Declaration is intended as a representative document, though I will argue below that the representation is one of circumscribed purpose.

Robert M. S. McDonald has noted, in an article that in part evaluates Maier’s book, that John Adams resented the reputation Jefferson came to possess as the Declaration’s sole author: “Adams's resentment resulted from confusion as much as jealousy. When he was young, an author was an authorizer,
plausible the idea that the Declaration is representative of the whole people; rather than one man’s political thought, it is truly the political act of a corporate body. The body of Congress was in a real sense its author because it was only in its adoption, amendment, and promulgation that the words became fully operative, fully what they were—a declaration of the several states’ independence. As words, they were little more than ink on paper. But these words were also, taken together and pronounced by the people in Congress, an act. In adopting the Declaration, the American people were declaring themselves united for “action in history.” Theirs was a coming together for one purpose, the purpose detailed in the Declaration: formal separation from the king and people of Great Britain.

Rather than its universality, the fundamental particularity of the Declaration is one of its most striking features. After the introduction and preamble, there are no less than twenty-nine separate charges of wrongdoing brought against the king. Each is concrete and definite, from his failure to rule his subjects by law and his encouragement of “domestic insurrections” in the colonies to his answering the colonists’ repeated petitions...
for redress of grievances only with “repeated injury.”196 Many of the charges, as Kendall and Carey note, point to the main symbol of the whole American political tradition. These crimes constitute contraventions of the colonists’ ability for deliberate self-rule by a representative assembly.197

A reading of the Declaration in its context answers, chiefly, two questions: who are the people speaking, and what are they doing? Immediately, we see that this document is, “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.”198 The document in hand is a joint statement of thirteen distinct entities that are, however, unanimous in regard to the statements below. However the Declaration may be taken afterward—whatever purposes it might later serve—the evidence from the text shows that it is a uniting document not unlike the Mayflower Compact and Winthrop’s “Model” discourse. Though it will not set up a new structure of government, the document is the common action of these thirteen states “in Congress.” The speaker-actors have identified themselves. What are their purposes? If they are not undertaking to found a new political

196. The text of the Declaration, the Articles, and the Constitution are widely available and do not vary from edition to edition. In lieu of citing page numbers from any particular edition—which would impede reading unnecessarily—I have tried to indicate in the text the precise place from which I draw quotations by reference to their internal structures.


198. We know that the document was not approved, signed, and promulgated on the same day. Though adopted by Congress on July 4th, 1776, the heading “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,” was only added when word reached the Second Continental Congress that New York State had approved of the Declaration—the last state to do so. See Maier, 151. This being said, one of the recurrent themes in Maier’s book is the degree to which most of America was already convinced that separation from Great Britain was necessary. Many states and localities had undertaken or were undertaking similar declarations of their own—which shows once more the degree to which the Declaration is “representative” in both the Voegelinian and more colloquial senses.
order, why have they come together? In short, the thirteen colonies come together to “declare the causes which impel them to separation” from the English, a people to which they have formerly been tied with “political bands.”

The purpose of the document, then, is to both enact and explain their separation from England. What follows next is the explanation, which is, first, an accounting of certain political principles upon which the founders base their action and, second, a list of the “long train of abuses and usurpations” that demonstrate the concrete historical circumstances that lead them to the practical conclusion of political separation. This third part of the Declaration constitutes what was traditionally the fourth and last part of such documents in the American political tradition up to this point. The reason for this, though not given explicitly by Kendall and Carey, can nonetheless still be detected in the difference between this portion of the Declaration from other similar documents. This portion of the Declaration takes the form and tone of an indictment. Rather than a positive statement of the principles of American government, we actually have a negative statement of the myriad ways that the colonies have been tyrannized. Rather than a treatise on good government, we have an indictment of bad government, which, though it is not the same thing, serves the same purpose in this case.

Implicit in the indictment, of course, is a picture of good government—a picture we might have already been able to paint, because of its clear presence in the tradition

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199. Recall the four-part division of documents in the American political tradition according to Kendall and Carey. See Kendall and Carey, 32.
leading up to 1776, without reference to the Declaration of Independence. But there are
two more good reasons for leaving the principles of good government implicit. First, and
perhaps this is surprising given the usual readings of the document, the Declaration of
Independence is just what it says it is: a declaration that enacts and explains the
independence of the several American states. As such, the members of the Second
Continental Congress, on behalf of the people of the thirteen colonies, tread no farther
than is necessary to accomplish their stated task. The document has a revolutionary ring
to it, but the document’s efficiency in regard to its task is obvious. There are moments of
waxing eloquence, but every last word is aimed at the double goal of enacting and
explaining American independence from Great Britain. There is nothing there that does
not serve this end.

Though later years of scholarship have accreted layers of meaning to its various
clauses and vocabulary, the plain sense of the document cries out for a straightforward
interpretation. Such an interpretation is further buttressed by the Declaration’s
culminating paragraph that is, without question, in conformity with Kendall and Carey’s
“third point,” i.e. “the oath creating the body politic.” Here we must exercise the same
caution as in the middle part of the document: the Declaration does not so much create a
“new body politic” as unchain one from the other, or one from thirteen others. The only
explicit relation between the colonies as a result of this document is the unanimity in this
one particular act. No further provision for political order among them is provided for.
Yet this smaller act is no less political for not being constructive. Indeed, the absence of constructive clauses, it would seem, suggests the lack of necessity for such construction in a document otherwise very focused on what is absolutely necessary and politically expedient. The last part, the “oath,” is clear and simple, and resembles closely a resolution offered days earlier by the Virginia delegation: “that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved.” Though the largely negative character of this oath is rightfully noticed and maintained, Congress does take a few words to explain, in a tone less than negative, what they mean by the colonies’ new rights as “Free and Independent States”: they “have the full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, [and] establish Commerce.” Note that this is not a list of ends to be accomplished by some newly formed government institution or body. It is a clarification of what was meant by the phrase “Free and Independent.”

Though the Declaration does not establish or found a new political entity, it does establish a new political order. Rather than create new government structures, it relies on the thirteen such structures already in place, raising each of them to the “separate and

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200. Though the imperialists around the turn of the twentieth century hearken back to the Declaration for justification of their imperial project, they do not dream of allowing their annexed territory in the Philippines the power, itself, to “levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, [and] establish Commerce.” This will be done for them. This double standard in regard to the interpretation of the Declaration can be taken as a sign of these imperialists’ stance outside the main stream of the American political tradition.
equal station” of a “Free and Independent” state. The creation of the new order is, thus, more similar to the previous documents than first suggested. When the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, the Virginia Declaration of Rights, or even the Mayflower Compact were articulated, none of them began ex nihilo. Each was an alteration of existing structures, an alteration effected by parties to their upkeep. Just so with Winthrop’s discourse. His blueprint for unity and order might have been taken as mere oratory had he not already been invested with the authority to guide the community and set the people on the path he announced. Each time, the change was not from nothingness to something, but from one set of arrangements to another similar one. This is part of what is comprehended under the term “differentiation,” though that discussion should again be postponed until all the documents are examined.

Before moving on to the other documents, what has been learned so far in regard to the Declaration should be noted. The questions of universality or theories of history may be dealt with quickly and side by side. The second paragraph of the Declaration seems to make numerous universalistic claims, claims that have been interpreted as a kind of charter of human rights. While the literature on the question is vast, the text itself cannot bear this more expansive interpretation. Despite all the use of blanket statements in the Declaration’s second paragraph, each is modified by that paragraph’s very beginning. No matter what influences the founders countenanced in setting down the words as they are, all of them are chastened and subordinated to the concrete aim of the
document by the words “We hold.” Though what is held are “truths” and though these truths are held as “self-evident,” it cannot be said that the claims of the second paragraph serve any purpose but to legitimate the thirteen former colonies’ separation from Great Britain and elevation to the dignity of sovereign statehood. The Declaration is a concrete document of political action, and the universalistic tone is subordinated to particular aims. Thus, interpretations of the Declaration of Independence as a charter of rights for all nations are not in keeping with the understanding of the founders. Long cited as one of the grandest as most universalistic documents of the American political tradition, it is to the contrary one of the most limited and concrete, even in its most rhetorically memorable passages.

We know what the aim of the Declaration is because it is stated explicitly: separation. We learned in the first paragraph that we are dealing with a people that is not English. The second paragraph is a recitation of the main outlines of then-current social contract theory. The debates surrounding the Declaration’s composition and revision show how much care was put into each syllable, and so we can say with confidence that the claims of the second paragraph are included in light of the first, not in spite of it. In other words, these rights asserted—so often controversial and so often said nowadays to be individual rights that are ever-expanding—are in this document referring to the people of the U.S. as a whole, as a unit. This “unanimous declaration” is, again, not a treatise of political philosophy, not a statement of the universalistic principles of good government
for all times and places, but the justification for the U.S. to be independent of and separate from Great Britain.

*History and God in the Declaration*

These considerations about the universalism present in the document have, in turn, a profound effect on the document’s implicit theory of history. In short, there is none. The extent of the document’s historical consciousness is nearly exhausted by its opening words, “When in the course of human events.” The phrase implies that it is not *always* necessary to undertake the kind of action about to be undertaken, but that it is *sometimes* necessary; the concrete charges that follow indicate that late eighteenth century America was one of those times and places. There is no air of inevitability or notion that this move is the last, first, or middle term in any inexorable historical syllogism. What is done in the thirteen states, it seems, stays in the thirteen states. And the message is reinforced by the only use to which the Declaration puts history: as a repository of various political happenings on this side of the Atlantic. There is no grand force of history here, and the document does not situate itself in any kind of line with a future destiny or mission. It should not be said, however, that the document is wholly without reference to the transcendent.

There are two places in the Declaration that speak of God. One is the particularly famous, “Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.” The other is near the end, when the people
appeal to the “Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions.” God, in the latest act of the drama of the American political tradition, has been passed over for the lead and relegated to a supporting role. The first invocation refers to God’s role in creation. It is a nod, perhaps, to the numerous debates on politics and the state of nature, on the one hand, and to the belief of many Christians that God ordained the necessity of government from the beginning of time, on the other. For all the connotations, however, the plain sense of the text must again be recalled. The first appeal to God in this document is a baseline statement of what allows the thirteen new states to become “Free and Independent”. God, in other words, makes possible their action. He even makes it appropriate. But he is not a direct acting partner with them. He is passive rather than active. The second mention of God in the Declaration is not dissimilar to the first. God is being called upon as a witness to the otherwise secular act being undertaken in the Declaration. The Second Continental Congress adopts the Declaration “in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these colonies.” Authority to separate and act together, then, is not a supernatural ability (except in the scanty sense of the Declaration’s first line above). The Congress acts on the authority of the people they represent. But the representatives recognize that their intentions could be impugned. The appeal to God is a testimony to the people’s upright intentions. He serves as proof against detractors, a character witness in the court convened by the just-issued Declaration-indictment of the

201. Here we see in sharp relief the distinction between the political and religious spheres, which will be discussed below.
British crown. These features, and their difference with the old Puritan symbols, will be discussed below. But first, some of the other major political documents of the founding generation must be taken up.

The Articles of Confederation

Concerned, as we are, with finding and examining the chief symbols of the American political tradition, we would be remiss in not pointing up the advent of the first government of the United States as a single political entity. Though the Declaration was certainly an act of the states together, it should be said that in 1776 the states spoke in unison rather than with a single voice. The same can be said of the new document the Continental Congress passed the year after the Declaration, when the same body adopted the “Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union” and sent them to the states for approval. For various reasons—not the least of which were border disputes among the states—the Articles did not become operative until 1781, leaving, until then, the thirteen former colonies to act in the manner each saw fit. Problems with commerce and foreign relations led the colonies to try to establish a common government.

As for symbols contained in the Articles, the document is nearly all bones and no meat. Very few points of interest are present. Its main purpose for this inquiry is found in

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202. It is puzzling that Kendall and Carey do not treat the Articles of Confederation in *Basic Symbols*, since it clearly meets each of their criteria for the kinds of documents they wish to consider. The following considerations show that it would only have buttressed their case. The omission is remedied here, and helps to paint an even clearer picture of American self-conception during this period.
deepening our understanding of the nature of the political order as it was just before and just after the Articles’ adoption. In this capacity, the Articles serve to confirm the picture given by a plain reading of the Declaration. Article II makes abundantly clear that “Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom and independence.” We remember the “Free and Independent” formulation from the Declaration; it is now officially and operatively recognized and preserved in the erection of the new common government.

The states enter into a “firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their Liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attack make upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretence whatever.” Here we see the states’ purpose in coming together and, as might be expected in the midst of a war, the chief concern is “common defense” and binding each to the other so that none will lack the assistance they may all come to need. None of this sounds very different from the Declaration’s formulations; it even sounds much like the Constitution’s, which will be considered shortly below. But the chief difference concerns the manner in which the states come together, which, as Article III plainly states, is “severally.” This is reinforced by the identification of the speaker-actors at the head of the document; we are dealing with the “Articles of Confederation and perpetual Union between the states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts-bay Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland,
Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia."\textsuperscript{203} The document that follows is an action undertaken \textit{by the states}, not the people. It is a "confederacy," not a single country. It is a conglomeration rather than an integrated whole.

The states come together, even in Congress, and even in establishing a new political entity, just as they had in the summer of 1776: as sovereign and independent states. They come together, once again, for a qualified and limited purpose. In 1776, this purpose was independence. In the midst of fighting for that independence, they have come together to better equip themselves to resist the attacks of aggressors. Though the Articles contain provisions prohibiting independent commerce and foreign policy, these provisions are routinely flouted in the coming years, paving the way for further calls to union and, eventually, the U.S. Constitution. Thus, unity was elusive even under the first common constitution of the colonies-turned-states.

\textit{The United States Constitution}

We come now to the document that undisputedly lies at the heart of the American political tradition. Though like the Declaration much ink has been spilled in the Constitution’s interpretation, there are immediately recognizable lines of continuity and divergence from the tradition that leads up to it. Those lines are the chief concern here. Just as at the head of the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation,

\textsuperscript{203} Emphasis added.
we have, first and foremost in this document, the identification of those speaking and
acting: “We the People of the United States.” Here already is one of the most pertinent
differences between the Constitution and the other documents of the tradition. Though
the Declaration and the Articles were documents spoken and enacted by the states
“severally,” the Constitution is for the first time an act undertaken by the American
people as a whole.\footnote{204} Here the states speak not in unison, but with a single voice, or,
rather, the people of the several states speak with a single voice. Here, the old political
problem of reconciling the “many” into a “one” comes to a new resolution. Here the
“many” are not “one” only in action, but in a more direct and fundamental way. This new
government rests, finally, on what the Declaration took as its justification: acting “in the
Name, and by the Authority of the good people of these Colonies.” The people have
come finally to represent themselves in the creation of this document, of this new
political order.\footnote{205} Indeed this seems to be first among the reasons that “the people” now
undertake the adoption of the new order.\footnote{206}

\footnote{204} Now, to be sure, even in acting to raise up a new general government, the American people
does not—in the Constitution or at any time since—truly act as a unit. Participation in federal action is still
mediated through the several states. But the action undertaken is federal action as opposed to state action,
and this distinction is new. Even members of the House of Representatives, tied primarily to a locality and
not a state, still have roles to play as delegates from particular states on certain occasions. See Article I,
section 2.3, 2.4, and 4.4 and Article II, section 1.3, for example.

\footnote{205} Recall Voegelin’s discussion of this point in \textit{NSP}, 40.

\footnote{206} This is, of course, not an uncontroversial argument. The arguments between the “consensus”
and “democratic” historians are well documented. See Merrill Jensen, “The American People and the
11 and 12. Jensen, for one, has taken issue with the idea that there even was an American people at the time
of the Constitution: “the assumption that there was an entity that can be called the ‘American people’ is as

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We know who has come together in the U.S. Constitution; now we must ask: to what end? Whereas with the Articles of Confederation the first reason for coming together was for their “common defense,” the Constitution is “ordain[ed] and establish[ed]” in order to “form a more perfect Union.” Some have seen in these words an attempt by the American people to form a best-possible government; it has rightly been pointed out, however, that the “more” perfect union they speak of is only ultimately conceived in grammatically comparative, not superlative terms. The union they are forming with the adoption of the Constitution is comparatively more perfect than the union that obtained heretofore—especially in terms of unity. With even a cursory awareness of the history of interstate relations from 1776 to 1787, one can hear the exasperation conveyed in the phrase. Wars among the states arising from tariff and border disputes, the lack of a single currency or foreign policy, and the inability for the national

unproved and unprovable as assumptions that there was a consciousness of ‘American nationality’ or that there was a distinctive ‘American character.’ One must generalize, of course, as the Founding Fathers did, but one must not forget, as they did not, that the American people were divided among thirteen states whose interests often clashed, and whose citizens were far more concerned with the affairs of their own states than with that distant and amorphous entity, based on hope and faith, the United State of America. Furthermore, the people in any given state were divided by religion, economic interests, political ideas, and ambitions, and differing combinations thereof” (9-10).

Jensen goes on to relate what he suggests was the “role of the people in the American Revolution,” but there is a problem with his approach. Criticizing much of the history and many views of the Revolution as “elitist,” he does concede that it was often only the elites that left good records of their thoughts. Having no other material to work with, Jensen and other historians are forced to revert to often-anonymous newspaper diatribes and complaints—pieces even he admits are not wed to a strict view of “truth in reporting.” Jensen’s more “popular” history, then, is problematic for reasons opposite to the so-called “elite” histories: though the former’s “representativeness” of the people might be questioned, we can say that they were the definite views of certain people, and people, furthermore, that often had some kind of public endorsement or sanction through elected office. Except on very circumscribed points, its unclear who thought what about the topics Jensen covers; the problem Jensen set out to address with his new method—sorting out who represents whom in history—persists when following his approach. Yet it is this problem that may be alleviated by looking for symbols in the manner I am following in this project.
government to enforce its own decisions were serious obstacles to political cohesion under the Articles. The Constitution was written to fix these problems, in part by addressing the most basic of political questions: how are we to live together? The answer given to that question is somewhat new.

The American people will no longer be unified, be one, only in acting together. They will no longer only act as one as with the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, but, with the adoption of the Constitution, will be one. They will be one people and govern themselves as such. The whole people of the thirteen states will, by this act, be a politically relevant body. With the Declaration and Articles the states remained the only units of political action; with the Constitution the people, taken as one, as a whole, will act together whenever political action is needed (and as circumscribed, of course, by the complicated new state and federal jurisdictions in the body of the Constitution).

The Constitution contains symbols, then, because it is the means by which the American people come together for action in history. This coming together is different in character from that of the Puritans, but it is not radically so; more will be said on this point below. On the question of history as such, however, the Constitution seems to be silent. Much as was implied in the long title of the Articles of Confederation—that the union would be “perpetual,” and hence its existence in history is ambivalent—there is

207. These and other problems are discussed throughout the Federalist, but especially in Nos. 1-20.
little in the Constitution that suggests the role of the new body politic in history. The Constitution, like the Articles before it, has nothing to say about the country’s role in any history but its own.

A few words about the rest of the Constitution’s Preamble will shed light on the document’s scope and whether its provisions are applicable more particularly or more universally. After noting the purpose of the present document to “form a more perfect Union,” several additional purposes are added, though none will come as a surprise to the reader here. The new Constitution will help, “establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” The symbol of ‘justice’ has been constitutive of the American political order from the Mayflower Compact onward and little more needs be said here. Though under the Articles of Confederation the administration of justice seems to have been implicitly the province of the states, the symbol is now adopted by the American people as a whole. “Domestic Tranquility” has long been an aim in the American political tradition, though it has gone by the name of “maintain the peace” in other documents. This symbol shows just how circumscribed the new government was to be; not international or universal but ‘domestic tranquility’ is the goal. After this, the “common defence,” “general Welfare,” and securing of “Liberty” are mentioned, in direct echoes of the Articles. Here again it is instructive to notice that these three goals are each explicitly aimed inward, much as one would expect from a document
focused on political union. The “common defence” is to be provided for, not the protection of all or the salvation of the world. The “general Welfare” of the union is another purpose of the new government, but the generality of this clause could scarcely be said to extend beyond the borders of the already-established states; there is simply no reason to conclude otherwise from the text. The “blessings of Liberty” are explicitly to be secured for “ourselves and our Posterity.” More than with the other clauses, the scope of the Constitution’s action is here clearer than ever. The new government structures are aimed at the people creating them. This is no wide-ranging project in human liberation. The “people” here seek only to provide a just and lasting government for themselves and their descendents. The “people” who undertake to do this simply do not comprehend other peoples under these provisions. Surely, the particular rules and provisions of the Declaration, the Articles, and the Constitution serve to circumscribe the institutions they affect and create; but even the purposes of the union in the Preamble cannot be accurately construed as betraying an impulse for empire.

The mention of “Posterity” reintroduces briefly the question of history, but we find immediately it is in a sense equivocal to that found in the Puritans. While Winthrop indicated the place of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the wide sweep of history, the “people of the United States” only presume to provide for “ourselves and our posterity.” With this new government—though this is not unambitious—this aim ultimately amounts

208. Note the change this undergoes with Woodrow Wilson’s recasting of the U.S.’s role in world politics, which is touched on in Chapter Five, below.
to a hope that the government will be “decent and orderly” and that it will persist as such into and beyond the next generation.

The Constitution, thus, is not particularly universal in scope and has little to say on the question of its own place in history. Likewise, the Constitution is nearly mute on the role God might play in the new order. Much as was implied by the Declaration and the Articles, the real authority for undertaking political action is the people. God has so far served, when present, as a witness to the rectitude of the people’s intentions or the guarantor—from the far off moment of creation—of the legitimacy of self-government in general. Some of this silence on the place of God is broken in the indispensable supplement to the Constitution, the *Federalist*, to which we now briefly turn.

*The Aim of the Federalist*

Unsurprisingly, the outlook of the *Federalist* is very similar to the Constitution. Noting Carey’s point that the *Federalist* does not tell us the meaning of the Constitution, but how and on what basis the government is supposed to work, many of the *Federalist*’s numbers are not directly relevant to the evaluation of the Constitution’s universal scope, place in history, or the role of God in the new political order. A few passages will suffice to shed further light on the aims of the people in the Constitution’s adoption, and it is these that are, above all, relevant to the present discussion. In the first

comments of *Federalist* No. 1, we see already an awareness in Publius of the real consequence of the new Constitution’s ratification. The opening passage demands scrutiny from anyone examining the founding generation’s thought on American exceptionalism. Two elements of the first sentence should be pointed up.

First, the “insufficiency of the existing federal government” is recalled, perhaps to reinforce what will be (as has already been seen) first among the reasons for the adoption of the new Constitution. Second, Publius calls his reader to “deliberate” upon the new Constitution. This is Publius’ reason for writing; he invokes what Kendall and Carey recognize as the supreme symbol of the American political tradition by calling all his readers into a great Constitutional assembly. As far as Publius is concerned, his writing is intended to draw all into this moment of reflection and choice. And this, perhaps, is the point at which Publius could be said to support or articulate the idea of American exceptionalism. He posits it passively:

It has been frequently remarked, that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country to decide, by their conduct and example, the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may, with propriety, be regarded as the period when that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act, may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ *Federalist* No. 1, 1. All quotations of the *Federalist* will subsequently be given by their essay and page number from the edition cited above.
Here we hear Publius putting the moment of the Constitution into historical context. More than in the Declaration or the Articles or the Constitution itself, we seem to see an awareness of the grand importance of the task they confront. In what is perhaps an unconscious allusion to this passage, Godfrey Hodgson argues that, “the Constitution was exceptional not only in its intrinsic skill and wisdom but also because it was almost unique in its historical contingency. Rarely, if ever, had men been able to sit down and devise de novo, on a clean sheet, a new political system for a territory as extensive and as rich in resources as the new United States.”\(^{211}\) Of course, the colonies’ one hundred fifty year political history was anything but a “clean sheet.” The somewhat common view that the Constitution came out of nowhere, “de novo,” is belied even by Hodgson’s own words in a different passage: “the United States did not emerge like Athena from the brow of Zeus, or by a kind of geopolitical virgin birth.”\(^ {212}\)

*The Federalist on Universality, History, and God*

Only a few passages from the *Federalist* are relevant to the development of the idea of American exceptionalism.\(^ {213}\) Its opening passage, quoted above, was seen to be


\(^{212}\) Hodgson, 20.

\(^{213}\) Analysis of the *Federalist*’s contribution to the understanding of the idea of American exceptionalism cannot proceed before its representativeness is first established. Unlike the Declaration, Articles, or Constitution, the *Federalist* is not the product of a representative assembly—or, in the case of the latter two, several assemblies. While those three documents may qualify as the source of the American
tradition’s symbols in a relatively straightforward manner, holding up the *Federalist* in a similar way requires argument.

The *Federalist* is designed to persuade. In reading and understanding its arguments, this point should be taken to heart; it is easily illustrated in examining the passage already quoted above. We know that Publius’ aim is persuasion: he says so explicitly at the end of the first number (*Federalist* 1:4) and this may leaven the reading already begun. If Publius is primarily focused on persuasion of his readers that the new Constitution should be adopted, an emphasis on the importance of the present moment would help Publius’ case by helping dissuade the reader of the idea that the status quo is acceptable or preferable to change. Thus, he attacks those two points in the opening lines. It could be argued, then, that Publius’ words just cannot be representative of the people—and thus cannot be mined for symbols—because Publius presumes in his very posture his own words’ lack of support and representativeness. The point is a difficult one to counter, but not impossible. Understanding why this argument does not preclude us from holding the *Federalist* side by side with the other documents requires a deeper understanding, once again, of the nature of symbols.

Kendall and Carey treated symbols that were, admittedly, easy targets. Such was the nature of their effort, among the first of its kind. It is easy to determine whether some phrase or idea or document was a means to the “coming together” of a people if, in the text of the document itself, such was the explicit claim. All the documents they examine fall into this category—all except the *Federalist*. What reason do they give for its inclusion? The *Federalist* supplies the answers to some of the puzzles presented in the Constitution. The quick adoption of the Constitution suggests these puzzles little troubled the founding generation. And so, the *Federalist*, as a written repository of the tradition that the founding generation carried in their hearts, can help us to see the Constitution with their eyes. The *Federalist*, then, is a part of the Constitution in a sense—the part that was assumed in its drafting and adoption but not written into it (Kendall and Carey, 97-98). And if that was not enough, the *Federalist* has itself taken a high place in our Pantheon of venerated national documents. It is a reminder of how Americans wish to govern themselves, and the relationship is similar to the relation of law and morality (Kendall and Carey, 98-99). Though it does not have the force that comes with arising out of a representative assembly, the *Federalist* operates in a fashion very similar to this, having attained a kind of adoption by acclamation over time though not by formal processes. This suggests something important about the nature of symbols.

Symbols, it seems, need not be only rigorously approved, official, and explicit as such. If the *Federalist* can in some sense be incorporated into the text of the Constitution, then the way is paved for nearly any document, idea, or feature of the political system to become a symbol in the tradition, so long as they can pass the muster of that most democratic of political tools, acclamation. This point will be re-addressed in the next chapter when considering the most famous speech in American history, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The sense in which that speech may represent the American people—note, not an official declaration of the people through a legislative assembly—seems to drain Kendall and Carey’s method of some of its potency. If, in other words, the *Federalist* can become an operative political symbol without first being adopted by the people in a manner similar to the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, or the U.S. Constitution, what is to stop the addition of other potential symbols into that canonical group? Kendall and Carey allude to this point as a possible wrinkle in their account when they write: “And while there are many ways of looking at the Constitution, each with an accompanying morality, Publius’ ‘reading’ of the Constitution has gained such wide acceptance over the years that most individuals find it difficult to read the Constitution with an ‘innocent eye’” (Kendall and Carey, 98). But they do not explain why under this rule the *Federalist* is acceptable—i.e. is a mere differentiation—and other documents like the Gettysburg Address are not acceptable (and must, therefore, be considered a derailment). One sees again the importance of the distinction between differentiation and
somewhat ambiguous, even as it does suggest a place for the American people in the
grand sweep of history. A more rigorous look at Publius’ words, however, draws this into
further question. The passive construction already distances the author from the claim
being made: “It has been frequently remarked...” and “…in this view…” More pivotal
than this, however, is Publius’ choice of words, which places the claim not into the
category of theories of history, but as a statement of modality. Publius notes the
“important question” of “whether societies of men are really capable or not, of
establishing good government from reflection and choice.” The passively recalled
remark is not about the historical significance of the American situation, but more
generally about the human capacity for good government. Implied, perhaps, is the idea
that America is giving this modality its best chance to date. But, read closely, we see
Publius is not at all speaking historically. This is further reinforced later in the same
passage where Publius urges even “wise men” who are “well persuaded of being in the
right” to the prudence of proceeding cautiously and moderately. This is a far cry from the
typological view of history taken by Winthrop and the Puritans, whose certainty in the
will of God and its evidence in everyday events caused them to undertake the peril of
settling and taming an unknown wilderness. Yet the hand of God is not wholly absent
from Publius’ thoughts about his country.

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derrailment in the frequency with which it breaks through the argument. It must again, however, be laid
aside temporarily.

214. Emphasis added.
In *Federalist* No. 2, Publius notes the degree to which “Providence” has blessed America. After first speaking only to the good fortune of America’s various soils and streams and the abundance and opportunity they afford, he goes on to write of America’s people. “With equal pleasure I have often taken notice,” Publius writes:

that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people; a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general liberty and independence.\(^{215}\)

Here Publius seems to see something very similar to what Winthrop saw before him: the hand of God in the concrete events of history. Publius goes on:

This country and this people seem to have been made for each other, and it appears as if it was the design of Providence, that an inheritance so proper and convenient for a band of brethren, united to each other by the strongest ties, should never be split into a number of unsocial, jealous and alien sovereignties.

Similar sentiments have hitherto prevailed among all orders and denominations of men among us. To all general purposes we have uniformly been one people…each individual citizen every where enjoying the same national rights, privileges, and protection.\(^{216}\)

The United States, Publius argues, has long been “one” because of the actions and activities it has undertaken even before the Articles of Confederation: “As a nation we have made peace and war, as a nation we have vanquished our common enemies: as a


nation we have formed alliances and made treaties, and entered into various compacts and conventions with foreign states.”

This much was true, Publius argues, before the Articles. Then came that important document:

A strong sense of the value and blessings of Union induced the people, at a very early period, to institute a federal government to preserve and perpetuate it. They formed it almost as soon as they had a political existence; nay, at a time, when their habitations were in flames, when many of them were bleeding in the field, and when the progress of hostility and desolation left little room for those calm and mature inquiries and reflections, which must ever precede the formation of a wise and well balanced government for a free people.

The Articles, “instituted in times so inauspicious,” stand in need of the remedy supplied by the Constitution. Here we have in Federalist No. 2 something old and something new. Again Publius appeals to the tradition and the importance of deliberation for good government. This is Publius the salesman, once again. So, too, with his points about Providence. But successful salesmen must necessarily operate within the bounds of basic truths. Pitches do not work unless the buyer already believes the premises on which they are based. Thus, we can glean at least this much from Publius’ arguments here: one,


218. Federalist, 2: 6-7. Publius seems to speak here as if the American people came to be as such with the Declaration of Independence. This would seem to be the moment he has in mind in saying that the Articles came to be “almost as soon” as the people gained “political existence,” which would contradict was has been said before about the founders’ view of that document. There is a good reason for this. Keeping in mind Publius’ aim in writing the Federalist, it makes sense to downplay the sense in which the Constitution is an innovation upon the extant order. If Publius argues that the Articles themselves were a union of all the American people as a whole, and that the Declaration of Independence was the American people’s moment of new political existence, the Constitution appears as a mere modification of an existing relation, rather than a new relation altogether. This would be easier to stomach for any of his readers who sought to avoid any radical changes to the political system. Yet the Declaration and Articles are clear in their preservation of the several states’ sovereignty. It is clear, then, that Publius is here either speaking imprecisely or stretching the truth in order to make his case more persuasive.
readers probably already believed in the role Providence played in the American founding and, two, they certainly believed in the vital importance of deliberation in politics (as has already been seen in their longstanding emphasis on the representative assembly). The details of these beliefs are, however, paramount for their relevance to the idea of American exceptionalism.

From Puritan Society to American Society

The nature of belief in Providence—especially its degree of intelligibility—is crucial for understanding the development of the idea of American exceptionalism and its relation to the self-conception of the American people. In the Federalist, just as with the other documents considered from this period, there is little evidence that the old Puritan worldview persists. Their notions of universality, history, and the relation of God to politics are altered chiefly by a revolution in thinking on politics that separated the single Puritan religio-political realm into the two spheres more familiar to us today.

Recall briefly the three characteristics found at the heart of the Puritan political order. First, the Puritans conceived of the universality of the truth operative in their lives in the same way this relationship was conceived for much of human history. A given society could not survive, it was thought, without affirming some particular account of the truth, and so governments had a vested interest in church doctrine, orthodoxy, and the silence of heretics. Puritan society dealt with these problems in the same way they had
long been dealt with: they enforced orthodoxy with the coercive force of the state. If persuasion or threats did not work, then exile was a viable option. Note that this is how Roger Williams’ Rhode Island came to be.

Second, the Puritans were particularly suited for these kinds of thoughts and actions because of their unique conception of history—specifically its clear intelligibility. History’s meaning and course was evident with the proper reading of scripture, they thought, and this certainty meant for them a politics unburdened by the slowing processes of deliberation and consensus. The consensus upon which they based their community had to do with its covenantal foundation, and a strong belief in its mission. All else, it seems, was mainly a matter of execution, which was delegated to a small group of prominent citizens.

Third, the Puritans’ views on history and universality were tied intimately to their views on the role of God in their politics. For them, God was intimately involved in the genesis and maintenance of their political order. His divine sanction was detectible in numerous ways, beginning with their safe arrival on American shores. He was not merely a beneficent preparer-of-the-way, but an intimate partner in the world-changing work they undertook. Much of this, we see, has changed by the time of the American founding generation.

The most important documents of the American founding have little to say about the place of the American people in history, the universality of their task or aspiration, or
the role that God is to play in their polity.\textsuperscript{219} This much has been seen in the course of these documents’ brief examination. The stark contrast between the Puritan and founding periods suggests a deep and significant change has taken place. Though the character of the change will be easier to see in subsequent chapters because of the increase in points of comparison, a few points are clear already and should be set out.

\textit{Unity in Massachusetts, Unity for the U.S.}

The relative absence of religious symbols and meaning in the major documents of the founding generation suggest that the people who now unite for action in history is a different one from before or that something is different about it. The radical unity of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was the paramount good of its political order. It was requisite for their success. The small, homogenous group of settlers could brook no dissent, because their small number and the hard conditions of their life meant any disharmony was a threat to the perpetuation of the community and a threat to their own lives. Unity was the only safeguard for them against the chaos of Indian wars, brutal winter, disease, and an unfamiliar countryside; the contributions of all colonists were vital to the

\textsuperscript{219} I am not unaware of the scholarship on theories of history that were current at the time of the founding. Rutherford Delmage and Stow Parsons, for example, authored widely cited articles on conceptions of Progress and the cyclicality of history. Neither of these articles, however, look at these principal documents of the American political tradition. They base their arguments on gleanings from sermons and philosophers. This is not to say their work is not important or that their work is not true, but that the extent to which it is true need not affect what has been said above. See Rutherford E. Delmage, “The American Idea of Progress, 1750-1800,” \textit{Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society}, Vol. 91, No. 4 (Oct. 24, 1947): 307-314, and Stow Persons, “The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America,” \textit{American Quarterly}, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer, 1954): 147-163.
community. For the Puritans, dissension or jealousy were always possible straws on the camel’s back of the community’s existence; this made the choice between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in effect a choice between earthly life and death.220

The American founding generation confronted a much different problem; threats from without were their main worry. The thirteen colonies faced a choice between a life of submission to an increasingly tyrannical king and open war against his military, one of the most formidable in the world. Their customary life was threatened and interrupted. Their ability to have a say in their own political affairs was under siege. But they had available to them a development in the tradition that was not present in the early Puritans. A distinction in the spheres of politics and religion allowed a different, wider, and more effective union. A series of small, cohesive communities, no matter how unified, could be no match for the British army and navy. All the individual states would need to unite in order adequately to face their common enemy on the battlefield. But union of such a diverse set of people required much more latitude in their unity than was seen with the Puritans.

Though Publius extolled the degree to which the thirteen states were already one, a distinction is necessary to render his statement completely understandable. After all, these are the states that, though they had a common Congress, persisted in wars, border disputes, and commercial conflict. Though on the whole the population is Christian and

220. This, of course, frames the question more sociologically than theologically, which is not the way the Puritans saw it themselves.
English, there are already pockets of foreigners and several states have different established Christian religions. The several states’ inhabitants were certainly not “one” in the manner Winthrop thought necessary for good government. Yet Publius points up their unity in ancestors, language, religion, political principles, and customs. It would be unfair to charge Publius with ignorance of the variation and diversity of the American people on these counts. Another reason must be, and is readily, found: unity is affirmed because they are as “one” as is necessary for political action. It could perhaps be said that, for the Puritans, the only sphere relevant to politics or religion was the same one, the sphere of truth. By the time of the American founding, this sphere has been distinguished along religious and political lines. Even pious religious observers could be in union with the impious in the American order, provided certain baseline political truths were agreed upon. The Constitutional regime is the product of a bifurcation: what is right or expedient or true in one sphere need not create interpersonal conflict in the other. The ravings of a heretic may indeed be harmful to the cohesion of a community, but for the purposes of political union this need not concern a community as large as the one created by the Constitution. Whether the several states may hold themselves to a more Winthrop-style standard of cohesion is irrelevant, since it is clear that this is left out of the picture.


222. Recall that Kendall and Carey divided the spheres into “political” and “social” rather than “political” and “religious.”
for the new federal government. What are the consequences for the new political community and the outlook of the people who make it up?

*The Founders on Universality, History, and God*

The view of the American founding generation on the question of universality in politics should be somewhat clear. The political sphere operates according to a different standard from the religious sphere. While not irrelevant to politics, the religious sphere need not be consulted on the best way to “establish Justice.” Put so plainly in the Constitution’s Preamble, the people are saying, in effect, that justice would be fairly well in hand once the body of the Constitution is enacted and followed. Ensuring “domestic Tranquility,” too, along with providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and securing the blessings of liberty, seem to be considered principally political tasks—both by their presence at the head of a solely political document and in their straightforward articulation without significant qualification. None of these tasks comprehends a people or project greater than basic good order, according to the understanding that had been constant in the colonies for more than a century. Their time as co-equal, sovereign states and colonies had led to disputes and conflicts among themselves, and their security against an external threat required a change in the order at

223. This, indeed, seems to have been the true meaning and purpose of Jefferson’s famous thought that there should be a “wall of separation” in matter of religion. The wall divides not the church from the state, but the federal authority on religion (viz. no authority) from state authority (where churches could be and still were established, even under Jefferson’s famous “Statute of Religious Freedom”), later interpretations of Jefferson and the First Amendment notwithstanding. See Driesbach, 75.
home. The conflicts that might have prevented their unity were dissolved once the
spheres of politics and religion were seen as distinct. Religious questions could be
handled by religious leaders according to the rules and beliefs of the various
denominations, but political questions could be handled together, as one. On political
questions, consensus—ever the goal—was now easier to achieve because its scope had
been narrowed. Agreement on political questions had become easier because political
questions had become more circumscribed. Rather than a perfect Christian community
designed to usher in the millennium, the goal was now a political order decent enough to
allow each to pursue his own personal goals. The Declaration, the Articles, and the
Constitution are not documents authored by a people on a mission. They are the
articulations of a way to achieve political order and stability that, in turn, allow for a
variety of good ways to live. These documents show a distinction that divides human life
according to its more transcendent and immanent ends, religion pertaining to the former
and politics to the latter.

Misconceptions are possible in light of this distinction. It should not be thought
that the founding generation is arguing, as a people, for the irrelevance of religion to
political life. As was seen above, many of the most prominent citizens of the period
argued that religion must be robust in their country in order for the new government to be
successful. No less an authority than George Washington is famous for asserting the vital
importance of religion to good government:
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. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? 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.

\textquoteleft \textquoteleft Tis substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?\textsuperscript{224}

In this passage from Washington’s Farewell Address, one can see the distinction of these two spheres. “The mere Politician” and the “pious man” seem, if not to be different people altogether, at least logically distinct.\textsuperscript{225} It is just this distinction that lets George Washington and his peers erect a government that stands in line with the tradition preceding it, but innovates within its bounds to create a government and social order robust enough to stand up to serious challenges for more than two hundred years.

\textsuperscript{224} George Washington, \textit{Writings}, (New York: Library of America, 1997), 971. One recalls here also the arguments of Benjamin Rush.

\textsuperscript{225} The distinction is an old one. Aristotle distinguished between the good man and the good citizen in \textit{Politics} III. But the distinction seems to have lost currency in Winthrop’s community, which did not understand man’s moral existence as distinct from his political existence.
Neither should it be thought that this separation necessarily portends secularization. As the term is usually used today, secularization entails chiefly a decline in religious practice and belief. In this, America was anything but secular or secularizing on the eve of the Revolution. “Indeed,” writes historian Jon Butler, “one of the great transformations of the eighteenth century centered on the renewal, not the decline, of the state church tradition in colonial America…the state church apparatus found itself strengthened, not weakened [in the founding period].”

The separation does not mean that the founding generation’s religious background did not influence their political thought and practice. As Barry Alan Shain has pointed out, it is perhaps the founders’ Christianity and Protestantism that made bicameralism palatable (unicameralism was thought more proper to an Enlightened society). Further, Shain argues, Americans did not view Christianity as an impediment to good government and society, but rather a boon: “In short, Enlightened authors had embraced an anthropocentrism and anticlericalism in opposition to America’s continuing theocentrism and broad public respect for pious religiosity.” The very structure of American institutions, then, displays the vitality of Christianity on political questions at the time of the founding.


Finally, it should not be thought that the distinction was wholly new. After all, John Winthrop was his colony’s governor, not a religio-political priest-king. Ministers were hired by political bodies in colonial Massachusetts; they were not one and the same. Yet their work was viewed as one. And though the founding generation’s views—like the Puritans—cannot be said to be monolithic, they were at least unified enough for us to see a distinction between their way of life and the Puritans’. The distinction has been much discussed throughout the chapter, especially in terms of differentiation and derailment. A more direct discussion has long been in order and is now possible.

Derailment or Differentiation?

The shift in understanding so evident between the Puritan and founding periods is not so evidently a total shift in direction or meaning. There are points both of continuity and distinction, and distinguishing the change as a derailment or differentiation is no simple task. If a continuity in the principal symbols of the tradition could be found, this would serve as an easy answer to the question. The observed “change” would be more in appearance than substance, and we could see that no derailment had occurred. Yet might not the radical distinction of the relevant spheres of politics and religion lend credence to an argument in favor of derailment?

228. James Hutson illustrates the notable difference on the question of religion between Washington and Adams, on the one hand, and Madison and Jefferson, on the other, by labeling them, respectively, “cooperationists” and “separationists.”
The principal symbols of the tradition, even in regard to the question of American exceptionalism, have not changed from the Puritan period to the period of the founding. Transcendence and universality have not been abandoned, but they have been separated out of the political sphere, except at its periphery. A typological theory of the intelligibility of history has changed to the view that “Providence” has—note the new passivity—arranged the current circumstances for a certain purpose, which may or may not be entirely known. This more moderate stance is nonetheless continuous with what came before, being a difference in the degree of certainty and intelligibility, rather than a difference in kind from certainty to uncertainty.229 Accordingly, the role of God has changed—he is more passive than active in politics and history—but he is not absent from society and life.230 George Washington’s thought on religion and politics was, we know, largely typical of even otherwise very divergent figures like Theophilus Parsons and Thomas Paine.

The distinction of the spheres presents a profound change from the Puritan to the founding generation. But it is a change that does not alter the general course of the American political tradition. No longer is politics the vehicle for man’s transcendent

229. This is a marked departure from Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, discussed in Chapter Four, which speaks of the utter inscrutability of God’s plan to man.

230. Whether or not this change has its roots in the history of theology is not my main concern. Whether the separation of the spheres was justified on largely theological, philosophical, or political grounds is irrelevant to the important facts that, first, the separation was widely held to be proper and, second, the separation was enacted in America’s fundamental federal law. For a further discussion of the theological aspects of the question and a critique of the prevailing Weberian views on politics and religion, see Joshua Mitchell, “Protestant Thought and Republican Spirit: How Luther Enchanted the World,” American Political Science Review, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Sep., 1992): 688-695.
purposes, but it can facilitate those purposes by refraining from meddling in them. The spheres of politics and religion are no longer considered identical, but neither are they independent. A differentiation has occurred, but it is not yet different enough to be considered a derailment. The distinction is made based on the degree of consistency from one period to the next. The coherence and continuity is too great here to see in it a derailment, but this judgment will be rendered more plausible in comparison with subsequent periods.

The Founders: Imperial Exceptionalists?

Now that the changes between the two periods taken up so far have briefly been analyzed, an early judgment may be made on the central question of the present project. Is there anything in these changes that paves the way for later generations’ claims to American exceptionalism, particularly the more aggressive, imperial variety? The answer is yes, though the reason why will only fully be seen in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter Two I argued that the characterizations of the Puritans as closet (or, for some commentators, quite open) imperialists was due to confusion about the nature of the

231. This is markedly different from the Progressive Era when government is once again invested with universal significance, though the task is more profane than sacred at that point. See Chapter Five.

232. This makes even more obvious the status of “differentiation” and “derailment” as judgments of historical phenomena. Judgment as to one or the other may only be made from a distance in history. The flow of events, influences, and lines of development must be traced over more than a few points of data in order truly to see the trends for what they are. For the purposes of this thesis, all four periods examined are required to present a full picture of the development of the idea of American exceptionalism. At this early stage, however, a relatively limited judgment about the continuity so far may already be made, even if it will be rendered more plausible with more time.
universality present in the written accounts of their political life. In this chapter, I have shown that the founders, too, are anything but imperialistic, and this is for two main reasons. The Puritans were certainly unable *practically* to found an empire; no one believes or argues otherwise. The claims about their imperialism usually imply they justified empire theoretically or philosophically. This, with close reference to the inward focus of their project, was seen also to be false. It is just the same with the founders. Though emerging as a distinct sovereign power, with the ability to resist one of the world’s great empires by force, the United States was set up not to expand but to last. Its principles of self-government and local control were aimed at circumscribed goals that involved only the order of their own lives and societies and the preservation of that order. Such is on display from the people’s very mouth. Their only “mission” is order, which is necessary for securing the blessings of liberty, along with their other circumscribed aims. But if they were not explicitly imperialist, might they have been so in secret, building into their government the future possibility of a great empire? This, too, can be rejected, for if the people was truly to set itself on the road to expansion, particularly of a more virulent kind, the institutions they created do not lend themselves to it. The best candidate among U.S. institutions is the office of the president, about which little is said in the Constitution save his role in executing the will of the people as pronounced in the laws of Congress. Any evidence for the founders’ imperialism is necessarily found, then, outside the most important documents of the period.
Thus, neither the Puritans nor the founders were philosophically or practically equipped for the kind of imperial exceptionalism that develops later in American history. But key developments in this period will, in time, be seen as ingredients for the imperial exceptionalism that emerges around the turn of the twentieth century in America. The thoughts and changes and actions of the American founding generation do not constitute and did not cause the later development of American exceptionalism. But the latter could not have happened without the former. Yet to understand this fully, we must move to the next relevant period in American history, the time leading up to and including the Civil War.
CHAPTER FOUR

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE IDEAL UNION:

THE PHILOSOPHIZATION OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION

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“No more can I think of Port William and the United States in the same thought. A nation is an idea, and Port William is not. Maybe there is no live connection between a little place and a big idea. I think there is not.”

– Jayber Crow

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Introduction

Up to this point, the present project has taken us from the western shores of England to the eastern shores of New England and further south to Philadelphia. The movement has run from the early seventeenth century American wilderness to a late eighteenth century center of advanced civilization. The next jump requires a plunge into yet another new century and milieu, into a time and situation of great consequence for the present project and the country upon which it is focused.

This chapter assesses the changes, if any, from the founding period to the Civil War period as articulated by that period’s most prominent spokesman, Abraham Lincoln. Now that the project has gained some trajectory from the materials already examined, the
way forward is fairly clear. We will assess the manner in which these materials may be representative of the people—and whether, consequently, they will or will not be a reliable source of symbols. After concluding that they may be, the three major speeches of Lincoln’s presidency will be taken up and examined according to the criteria already established in previous chapters. This will allow, at the end, both some conclusions to be drawn about the entire project through this period and a glance ahead to the next and final period of American history we will take up.

Sources of the Idea of American Exceptionalism

The ground covered so far has paved the way for the analysis of this chapter. A thorough analysis of the writings of John Winthrop yielded three main elements by which he could be called the father of American exceptionalism. The role of the Puritans’ particular conceptions of the role of universality, history, and God in their politics seemed to create a worldview that is one of the sources of the idea.\textsuperscript{233} Symbols, recall, are conceived at the coming together of a people for action in history. The unity of the new colony was the main concern, for it was the only way to achieve their end, the founding of a new kind of politics that would be an example to the world. The sense in which unity was to be maintained was, recall, in common work and belief. All were to work for the same religio-political end via the same particular means: submission to the covenant laid

\textsuperscript{233} As argued in Chapters One and Two, Winthrop is decidedly not the father of all conceptions of American exceptionalism. The exemplary Puritans, the comparative social scientists, and the imperial exceptionalists are all speaking of something very different, though all are usually elided together. Distinguishing these is one of the main points of this project.
before them in the early days of the colony. The tremendous cohesiveness required by the covenant represented, perhaps, a fatal flaw to the system; unity did not long exist along these lines.²³⁴

By the late eighteenth century, a broader unity was thought necessary for the preservation of the extant order. Though the preservation of the colonial order by means of apparently fundamental changes seems counterproductive, the colonists saw the acts and emerging patterns of imperial Britain as radically and unacceptably innovative. Guarding against pernicious innovation required casting off British rule altogether and innovating themselves in setting up a new kind of government with aspects of other various regimes mixed together and balanced. The American federal structure of government was neither wholly old, nor wholly new. It was an attempt to balance the efficacy of a national power among the nations of the world—particularly in matters of commerce and war—with deference to local control and existing structures of power in the bodies that had already been governing the former colonies. This new limited unity was a political aim very different from the radically cohesive oneness of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but it achieved some of the same basic purposes. Even in its youth as a country, the United States became increasingly secure economically and militarily and was able to meet the challenge of an admittedly distracted or weakened England. Even this limited oneness was not uncontroversial, but it was made possible

²³⁴ Though unity of the Puritans was not achieved for long, its early place in the history of political entities on these shores has given it a special place in the imagination of anyone who ponders the history of American political thought. This point is made very famous by Tocqueville, but has been echoed by many others.
through particular compromises that circumscribed it within definite boundaries, as shown in the new union’s Constitution. Yet the nature and conditions of the bond enacted in that document were, by the mid-1800s, under serious dispute.

At the center of the debate, then and now, stands Abraham Lincoln. His words and actions determined both the course of the conflict and how that conflict has been viewed ever since. In this chapter, the latter is particularly of interest. For though the symbols we are able to discover in the most consequential speeches of his presidency are corroborated by the various actions undertaken by the government while he was in that office, the depth of our understanding regarding Lincoln’s place in American history and the history of the idea of American exceptionalism remains my primary concern. This chapter, then, is not concerned with the constitutionality or morality of Lincoln’s actions.

Neither is the present chapter an evaluation of Lincoln’s greatness or efficacy as a chief executive or commander-in-chief—such books have been written and rewritten and will continue to be. Furthermore, I am not concerned with treating whether Lincoln himself was an “exceptionalist”—just as in the previous chapter I did not conclude one way or another that the American founders were believers in American exceptionalism as we know it today.\textsuperscript{235}

\textsuperscript{235}. Though I concluded that there that the expansionism of which they are often accused is often mistakenly brought as evidence of their supposed imperial exceptionalism, my primary focus was the possible role they will play in the future conception of imperial American exceptionalism. To argue they were not \textit{then} imperialists is not the same as arguing that their words cannot, centuries later, be used as grounds for the imperialism of others.
My concern throughout this project has been to uncover the ground upon which the late claims to American exceptionalism might be founded, especially in terms of the symbols of the American political tradition. Lincoln plays a role in making such claims possible, though, to be clear, it is not a direct and deliberate role. The kind of American exceptionalism we will see most clearly in the Progressive period is still not present in Lincoln’s own thought or time. Yet it is telling that some of the most prominent figures of that period were infatuated with all things Lincoln. Tracing a direct link, however, is not my main concern. Of considerably more interest is the degree to which Lincoln represents a new moment in the coming-together of the American people—a “second founding” or “re-founding”, a fixing of the mistakes of the founders eight decades before. As I will argue below, most important in this respect is the reordering and reinterpretation of America’s founding documents, and the consequent new view of the

236. N.B. that the Progressive period could be called something of a high water mark for Lincoln enthusiasm. The Lincoln penny and Lincoln Memorial were spearheaded and introduced in 1902 and 1904, respectively. Merrill D. Peterson has noted the links between Lincoln and figures in the Progressive Era. See his Lincoln in American Memory, (Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 163-165, 186, and 384-385. I do not intend to either directly add to or subtract from this interesting subject in the course of this project.

manner in which political unity was achieved and is to be maintained. George D. Fletcher has argued in his book *Our Secret Constitution* that the country’s central Constitutional event, *the* event from which it has received its present meaning, is not the original founding but the Civil War. In the opening passage of this interesting book, Fletcher writes that the Civil War, “began with one set of purposes and ended with another. The original motive for resisting Southern secession was preserving the Union. The resulting and final idea was to abolish slavery and reinvent the United States on the basis of a new set of principles.” The change is evident in and effected by Lincoln’s main presidential speeches, which are the main focus of this chapter.²³⁸

*The Approach of this Chapter*

Lincoln’s speeches will be evaluated in two ways. We will first seek to understand whether any changes have occurred in the basic symbols of the tradition.

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²³⁸. See George D. Fletcher, *Our Secret Constitution: How Lincoln Redefined American Democracy*, (Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2. What Fletcher accounts for as the distinction and transition between the extant and “secret” constitutions, I describe as a process of differentiation and derailment of the American political tradition. The importance of an initial deposit of one idea in terms that are later re-read very differently is highlighted by both his book and the present work.


Upon examination, it will be clear that Lincoln’s use and interpretation of the Declaration of Independence is very different from the one that came out of the Continental Congress. The change amounts to a derailment of the tradition, as the previously basic symbols are displaced by new ones. This is the first main view we will take of Lincoln’s contribution. But this view raises serious questions, which lead to the second view we will take.

Looking ahead in American history shows just how much more prevalent Lincoln’s understanding of the Declaration is over its original composers’ intent. The now-joined “Lincoln-Declaration”—which amounts to an effective new reading of the Constitution since it widens the scope of the task of government—displaces previous views of America. Thus, from a point of view after Lincoln, he seems to be wholly in line with the “American political tradition” because the changes he effected have helped to bring about that tradition as it is known today. In other words, Lincoln is viewed as central to the tradition because he has become the main authoritative interpreter of the tradition. But here arises a problem. We make different judgments of the phenomena examined based on which perspective we take. If we view the tradition from the perspective of the founders, Lincoln appears as a divergence from the principal symbols of the tradition; if we view the founders from the perspective of Lincoln, then Lincoln

239. Others have concurred in this view. See M.E. Bradford, “The Heresy of Equality: A Reply to Harry Jaffa,” in Deutsch and Fornieri, eds., 98-115; Kendall and Carey, Basic Symbols, 144-156. See also some newspaper commentary of the period, which makes clear that although Lincoln’s view soon took hold it was not universally accepted at the time. See David Herbert Donald, Lincoln, (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 465-466.
seems to be in perfect harmony with the tradition, which makes it appear as if no derailment has taken place at all. Our point of evaluation in history, coming after the derailment, views the derailed “tradition” as *the* tradition and the previous line as somewhat foreign. The advantage of this project’s approach, however, is that this distinction between the main line of the tradition and its derailment can be seen more clearly, showing each stage in American history for what it is.

Understanding whether Lincoln represents a differentiation or derailment of the original tradition presupposes both a thorough understanding of the original tradition, which has already been found in Chapter Three above, and a thorough understanding of the nature of Lincoln’s representativeness, which will follow soon below. After the manner in which he is representative is explained and the choice of which particular speeches ought to be examined is justified, those speeches will be taken up with a degree of care similar to previous chapters. In doing this I am well aware of the volumes upon volumes that have been written on Lincoln and his words. Though from time to time I will note points of disagreement or divergence with the scholarly literature, my main concern—as with the previous chapters—is to advance my own thesis by laying out a thorough understanding of Lincoln-as-representative.

*Abraham Lincoln as Representative*

In Chapters One and Two above, I discussed the varying criteria used by Eric Voegelin, Robert Bellah, and Willmoore Kendall and George Carey to find and evaluate
symbols and their representation. I sided mainly with Kendall and Carey, though I critiqued the narrowness of the materials they chose because it did not allow for the examination, particularly, of Winthrop’s important contribution to conceptions of the American political order and the idea of American exceptionalism. Bellah’s much more expansive criteria seemed to open the door too widely to any and all materials with language symbols; he did not stipulate any subsequent corroboration by political action, as Kendall and Carey did. What, for example, is the political act of founding or identity picked out and enacted by the words of the Battle Hymn of the Republic? Bellah offers none. Bellah’s use of President John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address falls to a similar critique, but this does not mean that the use of all presidential addresses need be wholly rejected.

Some of the documents examined so far have been obviously representative of the oneness of the American people—none more so than the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution has been in continual force for more than two hundred years, and the official changes it has undergone do not amount to any great change in the identity of the people who are its author. While Kendall and Carey seem satisfied, on these grounds, that the question of the American political tradition is consequently a settled one, a serious challenge is posed to this view if only the scope of representation in the American political tradition is widened slightly.

The founders made the amendment process difficult by design in order to avoid the kind of quick, sweeping changes that might imperil a popular form of government.
Yet changes in the letter of the document are not the only factor affecting the way the document is received. Attitudes toward the law, if changed, may change the way it is interpreted and enforced. Such changes need not pass muster in front of a legislative assembly, but need only be so widespread in society that the new view becomes authoritative and operative. This is precisely what happens with Lincoln.

It should be said that though the president serves in a primarily executive position in the order of the Constitution, he also stand in as representative for the country as a whole. Congress’s actions are rightly regarded as representative because all corners of the country play a role in enacting them; but the president is the only single figure elected by the American people. Each state takes part in the same process. His speeches may give a contemporary sense of the meaning and nature of the Constitution, then, in a way that approximates the process of making symbols. If widespread attitudes toward and interpretations of the country’s founding documents and symbols affect the meaning and operation of those symbols, then the very influential words of a president should be examined to see whether a shift in the country’s unity and identity has taken place. I wish to argue that this is just what happens with Lincoln.240, 241

240. I should note here that Kendall and Carey did not neglect mentioning Lincoln’s contribution to the basic symbols of the American tradition. They merely saw the symbols he introduced as a derailment of that tradition. It was not, in other words, a case of symbols arising from illegitimate sources, or announced by the wrong person or body—which their methodological considerations may have led the reader to believe. Though in their view Congress may be the only legitimate source of symbols in the American tradition, the nub of the matter is that the symbols Lincoln introduces—notably the high importance of equality for the American political tradition—are discontinuous from the previous tradition. The train of U.S. history would need to leave the track it had been running along in order to follow Lincoln’s lead. Indeed, it did so: thus, the “derailment.” See Kendall and Carey, Basic Symbols, 145 inter alia.
If Lincoln’s speeches are to be taken up, however, then just which ones? A president’s inaugural addresses and annual messages to Congress would seem a natural fit, as these are the occasions upon which, more than any other time, he would make statements in his official representative capacity. An examination of his annual messages to Congress, however, yields few details relevant to the principal aims of this project. Of his inaugural addresses, the second is better known than the first. Yet the First Inaugural is important for the understanding it gives of the nature of the American union. The Gettysburg Address, the most famous speech in U.S. history, cannot fail to make the list of relevant speeches. It rings still in American hearts and minds, painting a specific

241. To avoid mistakes, a president’s own concrete political aims ought to be pointed up so that there is no confusion between the aims of one man and the intentions of the whole people. Reinhold Niebuhr notes the interplay between personal conviction and public purpose: “Lincoln’s passion for saving the union was viewed by some critics as a personal concept of the irrevocable character of the covenant of the Constitution. A very high-minded leader of the secessionist states, Robert E. Lee, had a different conception: though he detested slavery, he felt himself bound in loyalty to his state of Virginia rather than to the nation. Since the Civil War itself, not to speak of the many unifying forces which made the nation one, subsequently altered the loyalties of our citizens, making state loyalty subordinate to national loyalty, it is safe to say that if Lincoln’s conception of the irrevocable character of the national covenant was a personal conviction, it was eventually transmuted into a national one. In his First Inaugural Lincoln argued in favor of the irrevocability of the covenant in words which many of his contemporaries did not accept but which we take for granted…” See Niebuhr, 381. N.B. that though Niebuhr is correct about both what Lincoln means and the change that occurred in the wake of the Civil War, Lincoln’s interpretation is inaccurate, making the change not necessarily an ambivalent one. Nonetheless, I provide this passage to show the relation of Lincoln’s personal influence on the nation’s course and shape, even long after his death.

242. Though they contain some memorable phrases, Lincoln’s annual messages do not have the force of the speeches examined below. A case in point is helpful for understanding. The famous phrase in which Lincoln seems to call America the “last best hope of earth” occurs in one of these annual messages. Yet context makes it unclear whether this is a statement generally about liberal democracy or, even more generally, about liberty in the abstract. Such considerations prevent scrutiny of these speeches from being fruitful. Nevertheless, as William Lee Miller observes, speeches are potent tools of political action, and Lincoln was known to be keen to use them as such. See William Lee Miller’s “Lincoln’s Second Inaugural: The Zenith of Statecraft,” in Deutsch and Fornieri, eds., 346. The Lincoln text can be found in His Speeches and Writings, ed. Roy P. Basler, (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 688. Hereafter, this edition will be used for all citations of Lincoln’s speeches.
picture of who we are as a people, or role in history, and our place under God. The Second Inaugural is said by some to be an emendation of the Gettysburg Address; it will be treated in this capacity. These three speeches will be examined in chronological order and compared with one another and the findings of previous chapters.

Lincoln’s words are neither few in number nor narrow in scope, nor generally lacking in usefulness, erudition, insight, or interest. I am tempted, as are all who study Lincoln, to draw upon all his speeches, letters, addresses, and proclamations in order to sketch a picture of the man often regarded as America’s best statesman. I hope, however, that it is obvious already that such a course would take me far afield from my main purpose; in taking into view only those most prominent and influential pieces, the Lincoln who is representative for us today is made so manifest as to justify the truncation of the full Lincoln present in the historical record.

The First Inaugural

Upon reading Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, we are struck, first, that there is much of profit to be found. As Lincoln indicates early in the speech, his chief concern is to soothe the anxieties of those who had worked strenuously against his election because of their fear of losing their property or way of life. After assuring his hearers that he was elected by law and intended to execute the law as it stood—referring to the fugitive slave clause of the Constitution, etc.—he moved on to the imminent “solution” already undertaken by several states before he took office: secession. He rejects secession as a
“legal impossibility.” Lincoln then gives a thorough account of the nature of the American political order in light of these considerations.

Relying primarily on a consideration of the nature of all governments, Lincoln argues that it could not be lawful for any one member state of the United States to disconnect itself from the others. Such a disconnection would amount to a toppling of the American political order, and it would be achieved by a vast minority power. This scenario is especially disturbing, Lincoln argues, in light of the importance that the American order accords to the rule of the majority. Therefore, “the Union of these states is perpetual.” Thus far, Lincoln’s considerations have been more general than particular.

Seemingly anticipating his de-emphasis of the U.S. Constitution in the Gettysburg Address, and echoing the many previous speeches in which he emphasized the constitutional role he saw for the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln speaks of the manner in which the American people brought forth their government. “The Union is much older than the Constitution,” Lincoln says.

It was formed in fact, by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured and the faith of all the then thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was “to form a more perfect Union.”


244. HSW, 582.
Lincoln goes on to argue that if the Union could indeed be unmade “by one, or by a part only, of the States,” it would be “less perfect than before the Constitution, having lost the vital element of perpetuity.” If the perpetuity of the union was shortened with the adoption of the Constitution, Lincoln argues, then one of the Constitution’s aims is subverted in its very adoption, which is absurd. Those who argue for the legality and propriety of secession, then, are inconsistent because they accept this inconsistent conception of the union. But this raises the question of whether Lincoln’s own corresponding view—that the “union” can be properly said to begin in 1774—is sound. Many have remarked on the somewhat “mystical” quality Lincoln attaches to the union. Yet in taking Lincoln at his word we see what he considers the nature of the union in “legal contemplation,” i.e. by law. He seeks to uncover the juridical origins of the country in history and pinpoints the Articles of Association of 1774—one of the early acts of the First Continental Congress—as the moment of origin.

Pointing to this moment is, however, somewhat disingenuous. A lawyerly tone draws the attention of Lincoln’s hearers away from his actual argument. Emphasized, consequently, is his story of the gradual development of “the Union.” The dates and the documents are familiar to nearly all—all except the relatively obscure moment that Lincoln argues is the true point of origin for the country. The manner in which he lists the various events and dates draws attention away from the fact that Lincoln uses the term “union” in several equivocal senses in his succeeding sentences. But to understand this,

245. This is usually in reference to the famous saying of Alexander H. Stevens, who asserted that Lincoln invested the Union with “the sublimity of religious mysticism.” Quoted in Peterson, 194.
we must understand the sense in which each was meant to bring about a political “one,” which varies with each of the moments Lincoln lists. The “union” of the U.S. Constitution was certainly preceded in time by the Articles of Confederation, the Declaration of Independence, and even the Articles of Association, but these documents—as was seen in Chapter Three—do not enact the same political order at their respective moments. I wish to argue that the progression Lincoln gives, rather than a continuity, is one of change. Admitting such a change would, however, undermine Lincoln’s point.

*The Changing Sense of “Union”*

   The union he now headed as president was distinctly different and new compared to the Articles of Confederation. This transition marked the first moment on Lincoln’s timeline that there would be a government with a truly national identity. Yet these Articles were not in effect until their late ratification by Maryland in 1781. Lincoln’s date, 1778, was the year that the Continental Congress *passed* the Articles of Confederation for consideration by the several state legislatures. The Articles preserved the individual sovereignty of each member state, unlike the 1789 U.S. Constitution, which established a truly national sovereignty for the first time. And if the Articles of Confederation did not speak of the same particular political order as the Constitution, neither did the Declaration of Independence or the earlier Articles of Association. These two moments were particular political acts—done in concert, assuredly, but each for
limited, particular purposes. Neither the Articles of Association nor the Declaration of Independence presumes to set forth a new political order, which is easy to see upon reading them, though each seeks or achieves the *cessation* of a certain political order. Thus, Lincoln supposes the various “unions” he lists to be merely stages in the same one union; this is, however, seen to be an equivocation because of the very different character of the unions indicated.

If the union of which Lincoln speaks is equivocal, even in “legal contemplation,” then why pursue this line of reasoning? His purpose is made clear at the end of the paragraph. The object of the U.S. Constitution was, among other things, to “form a more perfect union.” Rather than acknowledging that the union had heretofore been imperfect—the clear implication of the Preamble’s words in the context of the Articles’ operation—Lincoln seizes upon the necessarily perpetual quality of governments in some general philosophical remarks. Lincoln then points to the use of the word “perpetual” in the long title of the “Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union between the states of,” etc. Finally, Lincoln emphasizes the superlative quality of the word “perfect” in the Constitution’s Preamble. Now, anyone wishing to emphasize the perpetuity of the Articles of Confederation has to reckon with the fact that only six years elapsed before there was a successful attempt to begin the process of scrapping them. Lincoln does not do this. Neither does he explain what the possible difference in meaning might be between “more perfect” and “perfect” in the context of the Preamble. It had been more conventionally understood that the union among the states was not previously robust.
enough to achieve the true purposes of such a union; the last phrase of the Preamble implies this and suggests that the document it heads is the remedy.

Note also that Lincoln cites 1787 instead of the Constitution’s ratification date of 1789—again the date of the document’s passage rather than its date of operation; it is again easy to see why. Any concession that the states are major actors in the creation of the union would seem to make him vulnerable to the arguments of the secessionists. Since the First Inaugural is, in the main, an argument against secession, Lincoln’s choice of dates is anything but arbitrary or merely inaccurate. In trying to make a certain point, he is altering the relevant dates in his timeline. Thus, the purpose that Lincoln has in mind, the establishment of the legal impossibility of secession, colors his argument. “The Union is unbroken,” Lincoln says on his own narrow technical grounds, despite the fact that at least six states had already declared their own independence from the union.

Lincoln’s supposed “mystical” belief in the American union is, at least here, giving ground to the perpetration of a legal fiction. He wants to persuade his hearers that the states had little role per se in the creation of the union, and that they cannot, therefore, achieve its undoing. It is difficult to establish this with reference to the relevant documents. With a new interpretation of the same old documents, however, Lincoln’s favored point is more easily made.

The existence of “the Union” before the Constitution is an interesting political problem. Lincoln gives a view contrary to the founders, who saw themselves as “one” only for a few specific tasks before the adoption of the Constitution—first independence
and military resistance, then coordination of foreign policy, a uniform currency, etc. Lincoln does not wish to leave open the possibility that the union was the creation of the pre-existing colony-states. This would mean that the states, at least arguably, could in some way “alter or abolish” the union they created (in the words of the Declaration). But, Lincoln wishes to argue, if the union is itself the creator of the political order, not only for the U.S. Constitution, but also of its precursors, then there could not possibly be a constitutional means for destroying the order created in the Constitution, except as provided for in the amendment process. Granting this, Lincoln seems to implicitly argue, abolishing the Constitution would only revert the States to the previous order under the Articles of Confederation, which was the order of “the union” before the Constitution. But here Lincoln’s logic encounters a problem: if “the Union” came before the Constitution, where did the Union come from? Lincoln answers clearly: the Articles of Association of 1774.  

The Birth of the Union

For the Lincoln of the First Inaugural, it was from 1774 forward that the states were in some sense “one” and “the Union” was born. This line of reasoning gets Lincoln where he needs to go constitutionally, but the “in some sense” is all-important. The qualification of the colony-states’ oneness varies from moment to moment in the 1770s and 1780s. It moves on a sliding scale in documents Lincoln mentions here.

246. Lincoln famously revises his position, in the Gettysburg Address, to the Declaration of Independence in 1776.
The “Articles of Association of 1774” were drafted, passed, and signed by the Continental Congress in order to persuade the King of Great Britain to repeal the Intolerable Acts. They were aimed at “redress[ing] the grievances” of the colonies; more specifically the articles aimed to stop those acts “which threaten destruction to the lives, liberty and property” of the colonists.\footnote{Journals of Congress: Containing their Proceedings from September 5, 1774, to January 1, 1776. Volume I, (Philadelphia, PA: Folwell's press, 1800), 32. All citations from this source have been updated with modern spellings where appropriate.} One hears already the formulation famously modified by Jefferson. But, very different from the Declaration of Independence, these representatives in Congress address their grievances to the king and in the same breath profess continuing allegiance to him.\footnote{Journals of Congress, 31.} They convene “a continental congress.”\footnote{Journals of Congress, 31. Emphasis added.} Their purpose is circumscribed and limited. They want to vindicate and regain their traditional rights as Englishmen—trial by jury, etc.—and they say so. All of this is done in the same way they will later declare their independence—in Congress, in writing, with the signatures of those present—reenacting the by-now American way of conducting joint action. The important difference here is that the Congress has still not asserted independence. They still claim to be “his majesty’s subjects in North-America.”\footnote{Journals of Congress, 32.} Far from constituting itself as a people distinct from the English, this body is, in this act, seeking resolution and reconciliation with Britain after being wronged by it. This is not
the act of a distinct people, or a people wishing to become distinct from their fellow subjects in England. They want continued union with the Crown.

Though Lincoln asserts “the Union” is born with the adoption of this document by the Continental Congress, all that comes from these Articles is a politico-economic act in concert, differing little from the Declaration of Independence in form, though it is very different in content. Just as with the Declaration, no new order or government is set up. Even where the Articles of Association instruct representatives to be elected, it is explicitly for the purpose of enforcing the “non-importation, non-consumption, and non-exportation agreement” set forth here.\footnote{Journals of Congress, 34.} Further establishing the character of this “union” is one of the last few clauses, which encourages the various colonial legislatures to pass any measures that are further required to enforce the present agreement,\footnote{Journals of Congress, 35.} which would be unnecessary if this body were now in the position of speaking for the union as a whole.

Because the ground has already been covered in Chapter Three, I will only briefly recall here that the Declaration of Independence is a similarly definite, rather than indefinite and “perpetual,” political act. Rather than an act of founding and origination of a political order, it was the opposite: the cessation of a present or previous political order. To be sure, any act declaring a certain order over and done with implies by negation the rising of a new one. Yet as was seen before, the new order was one in which the several

\footnote{Journals of Congress, 34.}

\footnote{Journals of Congress, 35.}
states were now “free and independent.” And far from becoming one—except in the particular act then being undertaken—the sovereignty of the several states is asserted and affirmed. In geometrical terms, the Declaration of Independence is the endpoint of a line segment along a continuum of time, not the beginning of a ray.

The “Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union” much more resembles a geometric ray, to further pursue the analogy, but quickly becomes a line segment. The order of the Articles of Confederation, argue the framers of the Constitution, was plagued by the problems arising from its preservation of local sovereignties. The 1787 convention in Philadelphia started somewhat anew. Thus, though Lincoln asserts the long perpetuity of “the Union,” the truth of his statement requires a repeated equivocation of the central term. Such an equivocation drains Lincoln’s argument about secession of its persuasive character.

Lincoln’s present argument, though it is built upon some unsteady ground, is not wholly wrong. Secession may in fact be legally impossible, but the union need not have pre-existed the Constitution in order to establish this. The Constitution is not properly undone by any one state or any group of states, just as Lincoln says, because it contains within it the means for altering or abolishing it, by which none of the secessionists wished to abide. This means that the lawful way of altering the extant political order was avoided altogether, weakening the hand of the secessionists. These considerations will be more important when consideration of the Gettysburg Address is taken up below. Before this may be done, however, there is more to say of the First Inaugural.
Lincoln’s next argument concerns the nature of the principles of the Declaration—which he clearly has in mind but does not cite by name—and their relation to the Constitution and the then-present political order. “All profess to be content in the Union,” says Lincoln:

[I]f all constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right, plainly written in the Constitution, has been denied? I think not. Happily the human mind is so constituted, that no party can reach to the audacity of doing this. Think, if you can, of a single instance in which a plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied. If, by the mere force of numbers, a majority should deprive a minority of any clearly written constitutional right, it might, in a moral point of view, justify revolution—certainly would, if such a right were a vital one. But such is not our case.253

Here Lincoln discusses the claims and arguments of the Declaration of Independence on the right to revolution. He says that if some “clearly written constitutional right” is denied, then revolution is justified “in a moral point of view.” Lincoln’s modification of the terms is interesting. Where the Declaration speaks of a government becoming “destructive” of the Creator-bestowed and “unalienable” rights of “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” Lincoln speaks of a “clearly written constitutional right.” These are not identical. The Declaration’s rights seem to be natural rights, rights that are certainly political in that they form the bedrock foundation of politics, but are not necessarily written out explicitly and officially. Lincoln, in other words, seems to foreclose the possibility of extra-constitutional revolution.

253. HSW, 584.
If Lincoln is here arguing that the principles of the Declaration point to the irrevocability of the Constitutional order (except by Constitutional means), then he would seem to be of one mind with the founding generation—though with an important caveat. The apparent distinction between what seems like a “natural law” justification of revolution contained in the Declaration and the constitutional justification mentioned by Lincoln is eliminated when the founders’ full understanding of law and constitutions is made explicit. As Philip Hamburger has written forcefully in another connection, the general principles of the natural law were not thought to be extra-constitutional by the founders. Far from it. The amorphous nature of the British constitution had taught our founders that not all laws could be provided for ahead of time, and that the various provisions implied by an understanding of the natural law were thus part of the very constitution they wrote out and ratified. Just so, in arguing that only the violation of a “plainly written provision of the constitution” might justify revolution, Lincoln is arguing for a more positivistic understanding of the U.S. Constitution, which the founders would reject.\footnote{254 See Philip A. Hamburger, “Natural Rights, Natural Law, and American Constitutions,” \textit{The Yale Law Journal}, Vol. 102, No. 4 (Jan., 1993): 907-960. Publius’ view on the lack of necessity for the Bill of Rights is also instructive on this point. See \textit{Federalist} No. 84.} Such an understanding means, to Lincoln, that secession is not constitutionally possible. And if a positivistic understanding of the Constitution is the right one, then he is right. But if the founders’ understanding of the Constitution is not so positivistic, then here lies a point of divergence between them and Lincoln. But since we know that in this address and in all public statements Lincoln was always very careful to convey his
precise meaning, it can only be concluded that he would reject the founders’ broader constitutionalism. We must take Lincoln at his word and conclude that the more positivistic interpretation of Lincoln’s words is the right one.

Returning to the general nature of the union and its relation to government, Lincoln says that “unanimity is impossible.” The only real choices are majority rule, despotism, and anarchy. Lincoln sees the secessionists as choosing anarchy—an intransigent minority’s only live option—over majority rule. The only constitutional option for the majority in this situation is for the Union to “constitutionally defend and maintain itself,” which, being spoken by Lincoln here, suggests the possibility of action by the president. Lincoln notes at this point that he will not antagonize the intransigents unnecessarily, and that among other things the mail service will continue even in those states that have voted for secession. But today’s reader is perhaps not mistaken in hearing Lincoln’s words as a threat—or at least a promise that secession is not be the final word on the nature and requirements of the Constitution.

Union will be maintained on Lincoln’s watch, then, either by acquiescence of the minority to the majority or through some other means available to him as president. The nature of these other means is not specified, but can be imagined. Further clarifying and reiterating his meaning throughout the address, Lincoln says that, “whenever they [the American people] shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or

255. HSW, 583.
overthrow it."\(^{256}\) He welcomes amendments because that means the perpetuation of the union, even if its operations change slightly. This is to the advantage of those involved, he says, considering the very sure disadvantages of disunion.\(^ {257}\)

Beginning his conclusion, Lincoln reiterates that he is not seeking to resolve entirely the disagreements now flaring up because of his rise to the presidency:

The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people, and they have conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this also if they choose; but the executive, as such, has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer the present government, as it came to his hands, and to transmit it, unimpaired by him, to his successor.\(^ {258}\)

Thus leaving the fate of the union ultimately in the hands of the people, he also alludes to the people’s “ultimate justice,” which will bring about a peaceful outcome. In what eventually comes to be seen as his own characteristic fashion, Lincoln raises the possibility that either “North” or “South” has God on its side; in either event, he says, “that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail.” Lincoln lays the challenge before his “dissatisfied fellow countrymen” to avoid civil war. Gazing ahead beyond the present

\(^{256}\) HSW, 586-587. Emphasis in original.

\(^{257}\) HSW, 586.

\(^{258}\) HSW, 587. At the time, Lincoln was being urged by some Northern radicals to broker conditions for Southern secession, by way of purging the union of the moral pollution of slavery and slaveholders.
conflict, Lincoln is confident that the union will persist once all have been touched by the “better angels of our nature.”

Universality, History, and God in Lincoln’s First Inaugural

Once again I return to the theme of my entire project and look for what changes, if any, have been wrought from the founders’ generation to Abraham Lincoln’s in terms of the three main elements found in the Puritan period and traced through the Constitutional period’s most important documents. It is important to note briefly these changes alongside the treatment of each document, even as the connection of the three speeches considered in this chapter will require some common analysis below.

The main change from the Puritan to the Constitutional period is a differentiation of the spheres of religion and politics from one another; in Lincoln’s First Inaugural we have no reason to believe this has changed. (The same cannot be said of the Gettysburg Address.) If Lincoln can be supposed to offer a definition of who we are as a people in this address, it is not yet clear that that definition differs significantly from the founders

259. HSW, 588. In an interesting reversal of Federalist No. 51’s “If men were angels, no government would be necessary,” Lincoln suggests that the problem the union faced had its solution in the better part of our nature. This runs opposite to Publius’ solution, which depends on the constancy of the worse parts of human nature, where “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”

See Gregory Weiner, “Madison's Metronome: The Constitution and the Tempo of American Politics.” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2010), which details the importance of delay in the political thought of James Madison. Delay has a salutary effect upon deliberation, Madison thought, and this helped especially in the formation and success of salutary majorities. This seems to be part of Lincoln’s point in the passage above. Yet Lincoln ends with a somewhat ambiguous appeal to the “better angels of our nature.” While on the one hand this suggests the intervention of a source of guidance beyond our own character, on the other hand Lincoln could be supposed as speaking of strictly human possibilities. It may well be that Lincoln simply uses the phrase as a rhetorical flourish in an appeal to what is best in his fellow citizens.
in terms of universality. It might perhaps be said that the universality to which he appeals is a general or more philosophic, as opposed to a Christian or theological, kind of universality. Though differentiated into political and religious spheres, the universality of the founding period seemed everywhere still to be the universality of Christianity. Here Lincoln seems to try to speak from a more general point of view, attempting to drastically widen the scope of American politics. Although Lincoln calls upon “Christianity” (by which he seems to be the moral codes it inculcates) and “a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land” to temper the hurry that might lead to bad decisions by some, the main thrust of his words indicates a broader, more philosophical basis. Yet the scant evidence so far for the claim weakens such a conclusion. More definitive evidence will be found below. Thus, the picture from this first speech is muddled. Lincoln has something in mind similar to the founders for God’s role in the polity; God will be active only insofar as he influences the citizens privately—but this activity is vital for the public good. The gesture towards angels in the last line is not narrowly Christian; it as much connotes a humanistic as a Christian point of view. Little here seems to be said of America’s role in history, though this and the other two themes will figure largely in the second and third speeches considered in this chapter.

260. William Wolf writes of Lincoln’s views in the First Inaugural: “Vox populi, vox dei meant for Lincoln that, if not thwarted by man’s rebellion, God so guided the consciences of men in history that the people’s verdict was properly their response to His guidance.” Wolf’s interpretation, while based firmly on the text of the First Inaugural, seems to be overstated. Lincoln’s point is not as well developed as Wolf claims, even if the thrust of its logic would seem to move in the direction he indicates. See Wolf’s The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), 116.
The Gettysburg Address

In the best-known piece in all of American oratory Lincoln captured a particular vision of America’s origin and future, and how these two were linked in the war he was then prosecuting. In considering what has been called “the American manifesto,” we see that Lincoln speaks at once to who we are as a people and who we ought to be. While volumes have been written on the Gettysburg Address, I confine myself to the role this speech has in the development of the ideas to which I have had constant reference throughout this project. As it turns out, this is no small role.

The opening lines serve not only to situate this speech in American history, but also to frame and interpret American history altogether. In saying that, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation,” Lincoln points to the adoption of the Declaration of Independence as the moment of birth, the moment of union for “the Union.” While both the present and the previous chapter have already served to make this very claim problematic, there can be little doubt that Lincoln means to argue just this: the Declaration of Independence was the defining point of origin for the United States, and that moment gives the union its course in subsequent history.

In the First Inaugural, Lincoln supposed that 1774 marked the advent of the union. His purposes there were clear upon: he wanted to establish the constitutional impossibility of secession. Here, too, Lincoln’s aim is clear. In framing the Declaration as


262. See Kendall and Carey, “Appendix I,” 156.
the founding moment in American history, America can be given an original and abiding mission that culminates in the war he is currently waging. In saying that the nation was begun with the Declaration, Lincoln can also say that the nation has been and ever shall be “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Now, many critics have seized on the ambiguity of this formulation. These critics react largely against the notion that America was ever supposed to seek, as a country, to ensure economic, racial, or any other sort of equality as a lived condition of every individual citizen. While it cannot be said that any aspect of the present address has gone unnoticed or underanalyzed, I want to call attention to the most important feature of this first sentence for my purposes.

Lincoln claims that the country was, from its beginning, a nation “dedicated” to a “proposition.” The content of that proposition is not my main concern; more important is

263. Willmoore Kendall writes: “The proposition ‘all men are created equal’ is so ambiguous as to merit classification as, for all practical purposes, meaningless and therefore useless—especially if, in reading it, we take into account the time at which it was written. The phrase ‘all men,’ to begin with, is by no means so simple and unambiguous as (for reasons too complicated to go into on this occasion) it is likely to seem to the unsuspecting undergraduate in 1967. The Declaration’s Framers might have written, but chose not to write, ‘each man is created equal to every other man,’ and they might have added, but did not add, ‘and therefore ought to be treated, for governmental purposes, as the equal of every other man.’ Much has been made, as some of you know, even or perhaps especially by the glorifiers of the Declaration suppressed the passionate denunciation of slavery that Jefferson wrote into the original draft (how could they, critics ask, been so ‘inconsistent,’ or, variously, how could they have been so ‘hypocritical’—is it not obvious that if you believe that ‘all men are created equal’ you have got to denounce slavery?). Either the one, or the other: they were poor logicians, or they were hypocrites, that is, vicious men paying the vicious man’s normal tribute to virtue…There is, in other words, a third possible explanation for the suppression of Jefferson’s denunciation of slavery, namely, that the men who approved the Declaration did not mean by ‘all men’ what their critics mean by ‘all men,’ but rather, like the Levellers, something more like ‘all men that count.’” See “Equality: Commitment or Ideal,” in Deutsch and Fornieri, eds., 69-70.
the very notion that a nation could be dedicated to a proposition at all. I do not wish to argue that no one admires or agrees with Lincoln when he says this. Today, most do. Based on what we have seen with the previous analysis of the Declaration and the other central documents of the American tradition, however, I wish to argue that, in saying this, Lincoln is wrong about the United States.

America as an Idea

Students of the Declaration, as was seen before, need not and indeed should not follow Lincoln’s interpretation, despite its ubiquity in the scholarly literature and popular

264. It could be argued that Lincoln did not come up with this particular interpretation of the Declaration of Independence himself, but that he merely popularized it. Because it was both “in the air” in the Republican circles he ran in politically, and in the party platform even before his time at the top, Lincoln’s role in this very substantial change could be minimized. Yet for my purposes, what matters is precisely that Lincoln popularized this view—not whether he thought of it first. Whether it was original to him or not, this would not change the fact that the argument has found its *locus classicus* in his line from the Gettysburg Address.

See the Republican Party Platform of 1856, which gestures in this direction, even if it does not exactly spell out Lincoln’s thought:

“Resolved: That the maintenance of the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Independence, and embodied in the Federal Constitution are essential to the preservation of our Republican institutions, and that the Federal Constitution, the rights of the States, and the union of the States, must and shall be preserved.

“Resolved: That, with our Republican fathers, we hold it to be a self-evident truth, that all men are endowed with the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that the primary object and ulterior design of our Federal Government were to secure these rights to all persons under its exclusive jurisdiction; that, as our Republican fathers, when they had abolished Slavery in all our National Territory, ordained that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law, it becomes our duty to maintain this provision of the Constitution against all attempts to violate it for the purpose of establishing Slavery in the Territories of the United States by positive legislation, prohibiting its existence or extension therein. That we deny the authority of Congress, of a Territorial Legislation, of any individual, or association of individuals, to give legal existence to Slavery in any Territory of the United States, while the present Constitution shall be maintained.”
imagination.\textsuperscript{265} It can be seen upon with a careful reading of the Declaration that their interpretation relies upon either a partial reading or a deliberate misreading of the documentary tradition.\textsuperscript{266} Rather than seeing the Declaration in terms of its own sources, Lincoln exhorts us to consider it as a gift “brought forth on this continent.” From where? This detail is left ambiguous. The First Inaugural’s emphasis on generality, however, leads the hearer to conclude that the ambiguity is perhaps a device intended to suggest an abstract origin for the Declaration. “Brought forth” from where? Usually, it is supposed, from Thomas Jefferson’s reading of John Locke’s political philosophy.\textsuperscript{267}

With these words Lincoln has achieved single-handedly what in his First Inaugural he encourages the Southerners to work for in the amendment process: a recasting of the political order of the United States. But he has achieved it not by law, but by altering the meaning of the law and Constitution in the opinions of the citizenry. Lincoln gives the U.S. a new origin in 1776—rather than in the gradual development

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{265} Even those who share our political heritage—and who should, consequently, be able to see the error involved—have unproblematically accepted Lincoln’s views on the nature of the American political tradition. See, for example, G. K. Chesterton, \textit{What I Saw in America}, (London, U.K.: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922), 6.

\textsuperscript{266} Garry Wills, for one, asserts this interpretation is deliberate on Lincoln’s part. It was, Wills says, “one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked.” See his \textit{Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America}, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 38. Deliberate or not, my main concern is its error.

\textsuperscript{267} While I do not seek to deny entirely the influence of John Locke on the American founding, I do deny that understanding his thought is sufficient for understanding the tradition of American political order. This is something often denied implicitly in both scholarly and popular circles by the distinct absence of understanding of the lived American tradition in self-government from the colonies onward. As I have emphasized and Kendall and Carey and others have long argued, the American political tradition is intelligible as an organic growth from the lived tradition of British-inspired constitutionalism.
\end{quote}
from a centuries-long tradition of self-government and self-understanding—and with this comes a mission. The country, previously only dedicated to its own perpetuity, is now set on a course for the realization of a state of universal equality. Where before the union was concerned only with its own order, it is now concerned with the concrete realization of an abstract idea. Now, in other words, the union may in principle become preoccupied with the order of the entire world.

With this claim, Lincoln epitomizes a point by Voegelin and echoed by Kendall and Carey with special reference to the American tradition: “political philosophy, as most political scientists understand the term, is a tardy development in the history of a people, and, moreover, a development precisely out of the stuff of symbols and myths.”\(^{268}\) The authors continue:

> We must not, when we stand in the presence of an original compact set of symbols, look for what we fashionably call political principles; the principles come only later, as a result of what Voegelin calls critical clarification of the symbols—or, if you like, as a result of what happens to the symbols when political philosophers and pundits go to work on them, and spell out their content in what we may call propositional form. The critical clarification, which may be skillful or unskillful, faithful to the original symbols or unfaithful to them, etc., comes later, after the symbols, but always proceeds with the symbols as its raw material.\(^{269}\)

Lincoln seems not to be interpreting the symbols, but reifying them in a way that changes their meaning. And, thus, in one stroke Lincoln achieves a re-founding of the country in a manner contrary to what he exhorted was the way to avoid the Civil War. Rather than

\(^{268}\) Kendall and Carey, 21.

\(^{269}\) Kendall and Carey, 25. Emphasis in original.
deciding together, constitutionally, how the American people is to be “one,” Lincoln has revised the Constitution himself with this recasting of the Declaration. Union is now achieved not through juridical means of representation and consent, but in common dedication to a common idea. Whether a recent emigrant or the scion of one of the country’s oldest first families, all citizens are now “one” only in this belief in the idea of America. Rather than through common deliberation, Lincoln’s radical unity is attained by reducing all parties to a predetermined uniformity that stifles the possibility of deliberation. Where the previous symbol was deliberation, which presupposes an open-ended outcome, the new symbol is radical, complete, abstract uniformity in political principle and action. Where the tradition previously held up a process of common decision-making as its central symbol, now a universal end takes that spot. America is now not a people, as the Constitution had it, but an idea.  

*America’s Test and the World’s*

While for my purposes the conception of America as an idea is by far the most important aspect of the Gettysburg Address’s influence, several other clauses and ideas in it are relevant to the present analysis. The second paragraph begins with the framing of the entire Civil War as a world-historic test of the possible success of the kind of venture he just described. While this point *seems* to echo the passage from *Federalist* No. 1

270. Glen Thurow argues that this move was necessary in order for Lincoln to achieve his practical political end of perpetuating the Union. See his essay, “The Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence,” cited above, 68-70.
discussed in Chapter Three, Lincoln’s phrase has a more ultimate meaning. While Publius, too, seems to believe that America’s success is an important test case for the possibility of freely chosen government (“conceived in liberty” in Lincoln’s words), Lincoln attaches to that same notion the possibility of any government being dedicated to a proposition. He places America at the pivot point of world history in regard to the success of this kind of venture. But Lincoln’s and Publius’ difference in what they consider the venture to be is again on display.

Publius speaks of whether a government may be based on “reflection and choice;” the success of the Constitution will show whether man is capable of self-government through deliberation. Lincoln, on the other hand, frames the Civil War as a test of whether a free country that is dedicated to a proposition “can long endure.” Lincoln’s test is different from Publius’ because Lincoln’s conception of America is different. Lincoln believes that America is primarily an idea, and that the present conflict is a test of whether this unique human venture can succeed. Publius sees America as a concrete political union, arising from and based on a particular instance of “reflection and choice.”

271. Compare the relevant passage from Federalist No. 1, which reads: “It has been frequently remarked, that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country to decide, by their conduct and example, the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may, with propriety, be regarded as the period when that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act, may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.”

272. Now, it might be said that Lincoln’s “conceived in liberty” carries the same meaning as Publius’ emphasis on “reflection and choice.” That may be so, but it does not change the fact that Lincoln has appended to his “conceived in liberty” the additional qualifier “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” His meaning at most includes Publius’ and goes beyond it, which means that they do not at all have the same meaning.
Publius believes not that America stands at the fulcrum of world history, but that it occupies a uniquely advantageous position for the possibility the establishment of government by deliberation, as opposed to the usual route of “accident and force.”

Likewise Lincoln draws the soldiers that fell at Gettysburg into his idea of America. In reiterating his point with this new additional element, Lincoln gives considerable persuasive force to the account. Not all who heard Lincoln’s words, however, were persuaded. Contemporary accounts show that some were aware of what Garry Wills has called Lincoln’s “open-air sleight of hand.” Rather than dying to “uphold the Constitution, and the Union created by it,” wrote one newspaperman in the wake of Lincoln’s address, the president supposed that the soldiers died “to dedicate the nation to ‘the proposition that all men are created equal,’” a notion the writer considered offensive, innovative, and absurd.

Some have noted the absence of the words “under God” from Lincoln’s prepared text and their presence in the delivered remarks. This is seen as a sign that this addition was an afterthought, vindicating the post-mortem accusations of Lincoln’s profound lifelong skepticism. Though I do not wish to insert myself into the controversy over either these words or the even larger debate about Lincoln’s personal religious belief, I

273. Wilbur F. Storey of the Chicago Times, quoted in Donald, 466.

274. William Wolf has noted that, “The conflicting evidence on Lincoln’s religion is incredibly complex. One could ‘prove’ about anything by selecting what he wanted from the sources. The fair-minded investigator must finally admit that the only really reliable testimony, with few exceptions, must be gleaned from Lincoln’s own speeches and letters.” Wolf’s book is an attempt to operate along these lines; the present work is the same, though with a different set of aims and concerns. See Wolf’s The Almost Chosen People, 26.
can say that their presence here reflects well, at least, upon Lincoln’s grasp of and representation of the American people. Americans, before him and still today, seem to wish to hear that God has a role to play in our history—whatever it is.275

Lincoln famously closes the Gettysburg Address by saying that those who would give witness and honor to the war dead ought to take on the dead’s supposed mission in life: ensuring the perpetuity of a nation dedicated to the proposition of equality. Though he does not use the same word, a similar meaning rings through the Gettysburg Address and the First Inaugural. “Shall not perish from the earth” and “perpetuity” both have the quality of a geometric ray, to recall the earlier analogy. Yet here the image is not so dry and mathematical. Standing up to dedicate a cemetery on the very ground where so many died, Lincoln seeks to honor the dead by persuading his hearers that the dream of those fallen soldiers might be realized—and that if it is not realized there would be drastic and dire consequences for all governments, both now and in the future, for all mankind. Rather than a detached consideration of the nature of governments in general, as with the First Inaugural, Lincoln seeks colorfully and forcefully to persuade his audience of his particular interpretation of the U.S.’s history and future in the Gettysburg Address. As has been noted by Garry Wills and others, Lincoln seems to try and effect a total revaluation of the entire American political order—past, present, and future. As has also

275. Historian Sarah Vowell writes, in the midst of a discussion of belief in America’s chosenness and its terrible mistakes, particularly the prisoner abuse scandal at Iraq’s Abu Graib prison: “I hate to admit it, but I still believe that, too. Because even though my head tells me that the idea that America was chosen by God as his righteous city on a hill is ridiculous, my heart still buys into it. And I don’t even believe in God! Why is America the last best hope of Earth? What if it’s Liechtenstein? Or, worse, Canada?” See her The Wordy Shipmates, (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 71.
been observed, English usage is enough to confirm Lincoln’s lasting influence. While in its youth as a republic, the United States were referred to in the plural, which is today awkward and incorrect. The “United States” changed to a singular noun in the wake of this president and this speech.

*Universality, History, and God in the Gettysburg Address*

It is clearer with the Gettysburg Address than with the First Inaugural that Lincoln’s conception of universality is not merely a Christian universality differentiated into religious and political spheres as the founders’ was.²⁷⁶ Here Lincoln sees the U.S. in ultimate terms: it is to play a role in world history, i.e. the concrete events of the political world, and in history itself. Its success is the first link in the chain of world’s future political possibility. America, in Lincoln’s contemplation, stands at the center of history, at least in respect to the question of liberal democracy. As William Lee Miller has noted, “Lincoln was himself not only a thoroughgoing believer in the founding’s universal

²⁷⁶. It is once again tempting to multiply citations to various speeches and letters in which Lincoln repeats or reiterates his attachment to the founders’ abstract “philosophy.” The nature of the present inquiry, however, both obviates and precludes such multiplication. If I am seeking the operative symbols of the American political tradition, none are perhaps more operative or potent than the various phrases in the Gettysburg Address. Further, insofar as symbols become operative in their constant repetition, it is the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln’s Inaugurals, and neither his more obscure speeches nor his completely obscure personal letters, that give symbols their meaning and force. This is the case, but need not have been so. A letter of Thomas Jefferson is the source of his now very famous and ostensibly authoritative statement that there should be a “wall of separation” between politics and religion for the federal government. The prominence of the phrase and letter was achieved by the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Everson* ruling in the 1950s. Just as that phrase and letter became a pretext for certain political action in regard to religion, so also have these three speeches become an authority on the nature and scope of America. Thus, I confine myself to these three addresses.
moral truths, but [also] their most eloquent spokesman.” 277 This is reflected, Miller notes, in the universal significance Lincoln gives to American success at the end of the Gettysburg Address. But this is not without its problems:

But there certainly is the danger of pretension in all that. An Englishman, for example, might have objected to the idea that the continuation of the United States was the sole test for the whole history of liberty, not for this nation or this continent but for the entire earth and for any nation “so conceived.” Citizens of many other countries might find it overreaching for an American to claim that his country is the last best hope of earth. The proud claim that we are the bearers of a universally valid form of government, and even that we are the sole bearers, has had its unfortunate effects upon this country’s behavior before and after Lincoln. 278

This is a position that will ultimately determine the fate of many around the world, and though it has become ubiquitous and orthodox as the interpretation of the Declaration and the American founding, all ought to question whether this was the intention of the founders or was rather an innovation upon their words. 279 As elsewhere in this project, the three main elements are found to converge somewhat. Universal significance is given to the particular moment in world history. This moment and the actions taken now are thought to affect all subsequent history. As Glen Thurow has argued Lincoln’s words are aimed at giving politics in America a new and much more expansive meaning: “The

277. William Lee Miller, 349.

278. William Lee Miller, Deutsch and Fornieri, eds. 349. Though Miller’s article was originally published in 1980, one can imagine the events of the twenty-first century that might fall to this same criticism. John Patrick Diggins comments, too, on this point; in discussing his own work as an historian and his aim to interpret American history, Diggins notes that though he seeks consensus, “consensus hardly implies uniformity, nor does exceptionalism imply superiority.” Both consensus and exceptionalism, then, can be signposts or tools for the historian, but they are not necessities. See his On Hallowed Ground, 124.

279. Lincoln himself helps raise such a question, for, as he says in the opening paragraphs of his First Inaugural, “the intention of the law-giver is the law.” See HSW, 581.
viewpoint of the [Gettysburg] Address, which takes its bearings by the nation founded ‘four score and seven years ago,’ expands politics until it absorbs even the meaning of life and death.”280

Though much of relevance was said of the relation of history and universality to the American political tradition in the Gettysburg Address, the passing reference to God leaves little on that topic to analyze in this speech. Much remains to be said, however, of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

*Lincoln’s Second Inaugural*

Two and a half years of war and controversy separate Lincoln’s First Inaugural from the Gettysburg Address. Eighteen more months elapse before the delivery of his last major speech and the third under consideration here. Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address is the only speech ever to challenge the Gettysburg Address for the foremost spot in the American imagination, though the former cannot be said to overtake the latter in influence. With a bloody victory all but assured, Lincoln speaks mostly of the future reconciliation of the two warring sides.

Insofar as the Second Inaugural represents a departure from or a contradiction to the Gettysburg Address, it may provide symbols that advance the present inquiry.281 If


281. Glen Thurow, who has given one of the most complete analyses of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address side by side, argues that the two speeches purposefully contradict each
the symbol presented by the Gettysburg Address is that of a country dedicated to an abstract proposition, rather than one ruled by the deliberation of a virtuous people under God, then in some sense the Second Inaugural does say something different about who we are as a people.

One of the chief themes of the Second Inaugural is the reconciliation of North and South, though even in his consideration of this theme, a more fundamental theme lies in the background: “The Almighty has his own purposes.” Up to the point in the speech when he utters that sentence, Lincoln has concentrated on treating the South with forbearance and a degree of generosity; the rest of the speech after that sentence indicates that a particular view of history, specifically God’s role in history, is the principle that allows for this generous treatment. God, Lincoln affirms, is in charge of even terrible events like the war that North and South are passing through. This fact makes the war no less terrible, but it does render the two sides more equal in the wake of the war than a victor would typically concede or allow. Though Lincoln himself said early in the speech that one side “would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish,” he immediately follows this juxtaposition with a passive construction: “And the war came.” The war, terrible as it is and had been, was more an act of God than an event in purely human history. The terribleness of the war, even the occurrence of the war itself, falls equally on the shoulders of both sides because it is, simultaneously, equally the fault of both sides and neither side.

I do not need to dwell on the theological soundness or implications of Lincoln’s argument here. For my purposes, it is enough to understand his meaning. The whole address is an antidote for the poisonous aspect of victory, that tendency to absolve oneself of any wrongdoing when a terrible contest has been won. In explaining how God is in control of these events, the guilt of the participants is reduced. Lincoln need not have been so generous toward the South in this speech. He was, in fact, vilified for it in his time. And the policies put in place after his death fell far short of the standard he offers in the Second Inaugural. But it cannot be denied that the speech itself is shot through with a surprising amount of humility. Lincoln is humble in regard to the North’s actions and motivations in the war, as has just been seen. He is humble in the face of the South’s positions and institutions: “let us judge not…” And he is humble in regard to whether man can ever know God’s purposes in this life: “If we shall suppose…” Lincoln is again humble in not claiming for his side the righteousness and vindication that a victor might be tempted to claim: “Both [North and South] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other…the prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.” God’s will in history is, for Lincoln, a fairly inscrutable thing. We may

282. HSW, 793. Emphasis added.

283. HSW, 793. Far from claiming God’s favor for either North or South, Lincoln calls attention to the hubris involved in any belief in one’s own chosenness. This is perhaps what Lincoln had in mind in the famous line from his 1861 address to the New Jersey Senate, just before his presidential inauguration: “I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle [i.e. the American Revolution].” See HSW, 575. Emphasis added.
speculate on it, but certain knowledge is not for us to have.\textsuperscript{284} This does not mean, however, that we are left without direction.

In Lincoln’s chastened or qualified view of what God allows us to see, there seems to be a glimmer of true light: “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right…” We should have “malice toward none” and “charity for all” because God does, in perhaps limited and indefinite ways, give us some knowledge of what is right. This is the ground upon which Lincoln can show the way forward out of the human-created terribleness that was the Civil War. We must “bind up the nation’s wounds,” “care for him who shall have born the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” God gives us our direction here: charity and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{285}

It has been supposed that the somber, backward-looking Second Inaugural in some sense contradicts the Gettysburg Address’s forward-looking focus on the mission of the country. Yet the core meaning of each—at least insofar as it tells us who we are as a people, insofar as they contain symbols—need not be inconsistent. The circumstances of the two speeches are very different and this gives to each a very different aim. In the midst of war, a commander-in-chief gives ultimate meaning to the sacrifices just made, and the others that are sure to follow. Though at the Second Inaugural Lincoln had not

\textsuperscript{284} Stewart Winger has argued that a strained, lifelong examination of the issues both within and without the Christian tradition eventually led Lincoln back to the bosom of Biblical faith, whence his more universal, yet still Christian standpoint in the Second Inaugural. See Winger’s \textit{Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics}, (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 208.

seen the last deaths of the war, he could see they were on the horizon. Now was not the
time to rally the troops for more. Now was the time to “bind up the nation’s wounds,”
which could only be done as one. The oneness of the two sides had been torn, and healing
this rift was only possible with a superabundance of the qualities and virtues Lincoln
extols. It is vital that this happen, even on the standard and with the concerns of his
earlier speeches. The separateness that was the conviction and aim of the secessionists,
Lincoln seems to say, should not be allowed finally to triumph because the partisans of
“union” refused to humble themselves back into unity with their former enemies. And so
we see in the three major speeches of Lincoln’s presidency an enduring theme: the union
is paramount and should be preserved at even a very dear price—in blood and in the
humility of a victor.

*Universality, History, and God in the Second Inaugural and Beyond*

What, then, does the Second Inaugural add to our understanding of the American
people’s new understanding of themselves? How does it affect their conception of the
role of universality or God in government? Where does it place them in history? We have
to say that, as an historical judgment, the Second Inaugural does not add much to our
account.

If, as Thurow has argued, the Second Inaugural was in some sense intended as a
rejoinder to or contradiction of the Gettysburg Address, then it must be said that the
Second Inaugural was not completely successful. Lincoln’s uncommon generosity toward
the South would not be matched by his successor or the decades of decisions after him. The vindictiveness of the victor is not present in the Second Inaugural—this is perhaps its most salient quality—but it is present in the wake of Lincoln’s death, the manner of which perhaps further exacerbated the North’s desire for lordng it over the South. This lack of correspondence between the verbal symbol, i.e. charity and generosity and forbearance for one’s enemy, and the policies that come after it disqualifies the Second Inaugural from full force as an operative symbol in the tradition. The Gettysburg Address, on the other hand, has been enormously influential in the ways that the government acts. The increased and ever increasing centralization of power, the alteration in how the federal structure of government was viewed and treated, even our pattern of speech have been affected by the Gettysburg Address. Everywhere America became more an idea than a people.

Because the Gettysburg Address has won out in terms of symbolic power and influence, a definite change has occurred in the conception of universality from the founders’ period to Lincoln’s. In the Puritan period, all in society aimed at the same trans-historical religio-political goal: the Massachusetts Bay Colony would be a new way of life for all Christians. The new balance and structure of government would please God and bring many blessings upon the venture. By the founding generation, these views had changed. It was not so much that questions of government and religion had come to be answered differently, however; it was more that they had come to be seen as different and separate questions. Political and religious questions were separated, which, while leaving
intact a similar, chastened view of the possibilities for government, changed the way
government was thought of. With Lincoln, we have another change.

The spheres of religion and politics were, for the founders and for many over the
course of Western politics, divided along transcendent and immanent, spiritual and
temporal lines. In Lincoln’s time, this distinction, having already been made, made
possible a new confusion. In a moment when the events of a temporal or political sphere
seemed to need to acquire universal or transcendent significance, Lincoln made it so in
the Gettysburg Address. A quality previously reserved to the religious sphere in America,
universal human achievement, was fused with the political sphere. In an instant Lincoln
achieved a relation of these spheres that the founders would not have tolerated because of
their own Christian worldview. Purposefully or not, then, Lincoln effects a move away
from a more Christian conception of universality in government to one that is less so.

If the political and religious spheres are in some sense fused back together, it
might seem that the conception of universality in the Gettysburg Address is a hearkening
back to the old Puritan tradition of holding the spheres undifferentiated, holding them as
one. Just as John Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay colonists saw themselves as
enacting an aspect of salvation, i.e. universal history, so also it appears that Lincoln
places America as a nation at the center of this kind of timeline. Once the change from
the Puritans to the founders had occurred, however, the primitive order could not be
returned to in precisely the same manner. The un-differentiation of the spheres would
require more than infusing politics with a transcendent mission. In fact, Lincoln’s move
is possible only after such a differentiation because the Christian worldview that informed the original differentiation would not have allowed this kind pseudo-religious mission to be given to government. The move requires a misunderstanding of the distinction of the spheres and their relation, which requires the distinction’s prior occurrence. This misunderstanding is achieved both in the moment of and in the wake of the Gettysburg Address.

It should be noted that the Second Inaugural does not place America at the center of universal history; with its logic, it rejects all thinking along these lines as hubris. Far from placing America at the fulcrum of history, the Second Inaugural places America on a vast sea, listless and under the near total control of whatever storms God wishes to send. Water may surely be treaded in such circumstances, but there is no illusion that this affects the course of the water or the size of the waves. Even treading water has limited influence on one’s position, and cannot be kept up indefinitely.

It seems that Thurow’s judgment of the contradiction of the two speeches is in some senses accurate. But recalling what Voegelin said of political philosophy it ought to be asked whether, in regard to America’s self-conception, such a contradiction matters. Political theorists often seek a systematic quality in their subjects and theories. Contradictions are sometimes considered weaknesses and sometimes considered necessary. But, for politics, are they problematic? In this case, the answer is no. The American people developed a handy way of admiring both the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural: they simply adopted one as politically operative, as a new symbol
in the American tradition (though no one now sees it in its newness) and forgot about the other. This is not to say that the Second Inaugural has been forgotten in the Pantheon of great American oratory. But it has not given direction to American politics like the Gettysburg Address.

A few more words might be said of Lincoln and the Puritans. If the Puritan covenant contained both blessings and curses, and if the founding generation was supposed to have dropped God’s curses out from the political realm, it might be supposed that Lincoln takes a combination of both approaches. It would be easy to mistake the mission of the Gettysburg Address or the woe of the Second Inaugural as similar to the Puritans’ covenantal blessings and curses, respectively, but each lacks a necessary quality. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln seems to have given America a transcendent mission, though without being either charged with its execution by God or becoming beholden to God for any failure in it. In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln speaks of curses, of punishment, of woe; but none of these are delivered intelligibly, according to the terms of any covenant or any conceivable reason. Far from a previously agreed-upon consequence of the covenant’s breach, the woe of the Second Inaugural comes from beyond the veil of human ignorance. “The Almighty has his own purposes,” and these are inscrutable to man. Thus, while some elements of Lincoln’s speeches roughly appear to correspond to the old Puritan framework, they are very different in character, and this affects what they say about mid-nineteenth century America’s sense of the role of universality, history, and God in the life of their country.
Derailment or Differentiation?

It remains now only to reiterate why, by and large, the “Lincolnian” contribution to the American tradition is a derailment of that tradition. The differentiation of the spheres of politics and religion is more complete and more total with this new way of conceiving who Americans are as a people. No longer is America only a people seeking a political order that would make possible lives of Christian and traditional living, as it was for the founders. Neither does the worldview Lincoln articulates go back entirely to the undifferentiated union of the two spheres. Now each sphere seems to be put in the service of a single, abstract, transcendent mission. Thus, there is a con-fusion of the spheres.

A further question about the nature of the distinction between derailment and differentiation is brought to mind in a passage of Lincoln’s own First Inaugural. Lincoln reflects on the relationship between the force of law and the consent of the people:

[The fugitive slave clause of the Constitution, and the law for the suppression of the foreign slave trade, are each as well enforced, perhaps, as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people imperfectly supports the law itself. The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over in each. This, I think, cannot be perfectly cured.]

286. Dealing with historical judgments means we are not dealing with Lincoln’s thought as such, but largely its reception and effect. Though this has been said before now in various other connections, notably in Chapter One with reference to Max Weber, the point bears repeating here, and the use of the adjective helps make the point.

287. HSW, 586. In using Lincoln to make what I take to be a very “un-Lincolnian” point, I am not trying to point up an inconsistency in the man. I am showing, merely, that the historical record of his thought and action is broader than the traditional and politically operative view of him, even as the latter view is the one I mainly deal with.
Because the basic symbols of the tradition are such by virtue of the consent and practice of the people—indeed by their declaration in word and deed that such and such is a law unto themselves—then such symbols seem open to new interpretation and even revision as the result of a change in the temperament or opinion on the part of the people. If all cease to believe in and obey the law, it could become a dead letter. It may cease to be politically operative and effective. It, perhaps, ceases to be a symbol. If, as has been pointed up, the Gettysburg Address’s interpretation of the Declaration of Independence and the American founding are now the orthodox opinion, how is it that they do not now represent only a differentiation of the tradition, a new iteration of the American people’s self-understanding? The answer, interestingly, lies elsewhere in Lincoln’s First Inaugural and depends upon the nature of the union as a concrete political act and entity.

Early in the speech, speaking of the various silences or ambiguities in the Constitution, Lincoln says: “If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the government must cease. There is no alternative; for continuing the government, is acquiescence on one side or on the other.” We must decide in common, as one, the fundamental questions of our common life. As Lincoln rightly says, unless we do this, we do not answer this challenge but avoid it—and are left only with the choice of despotism or anarchy. This must be viewed from another perspective. The secessionists have, in refusing to acquiesce at all, precluded the possibility of their own self-government.

288. HSW, 585.
When some disagree with the general or specific direction that our common government takes, the minority has already agreed at the outset that their disagreement would not be grounds for separation. This is the very essence of a symbol: it is a coming-together for action in history. It is an outward statement of who a people is, and when some seek later to renege on their ancient agreement, the others must call them to account. Just as Kendall and Carey wrote of the signers of the Mayflower Compact, so also Lincoln asserts the following of any who are party to an act of political union:

We the signers will, we are saying, keep on deliberating about what is for the general good; we the signers accept that—it is as old as Aristotle—as the standard to which we must subordinate our deliberations; but decisions do have to be made about the matter from time to time, and the best we can hope for at any moment is not laws that are meet and convenient to the purpose named but laws thought to be that. What we promise to obey, then, off in the future, is the results, fallible and subject to revision as a matter of course, of future deliberations of a certain kind—so that, if, off in the future, one of us the signers is to take exception to a law on the grounds that it is not for the general good, not meet and convenient, he will be told: We did not promise laws that are meet and convenient, but only such laws as are thought to be; it is enough if a given law reflects the general thinking amongst us as to what is meet and convenient; it is that which you have promised to obey.\footnote{Kendall and Carey, 35.}

The ancient consent that still binds the government together in Lincoln’s time and ours is not revocable on the grounds that it is not thought to be the best possible government. One must accept the bad with the good. Lincoln understands this. He must abide by it. We must hold him and his followers to account by arguing that his speeches truly do represent a derailment of the American political tradition. For all the continuity with the
tradition to be found in the First Inaugural, the Gettysburg Address is a fundamental break with the previous tradition. The latter represents, among other things, a foreclosure of the deliberation that is the tradition’s central symbol. Lincoln’s images and words and interpretations do amount to a derailment, and if this is still seen as problematic, a further reason illustrates why it is not.

It might be supposed that Lincoln’s contribution cannot properly be called a derailment because it does not fit the bill of a true symbol. It is not representative of the people in the same way as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or any of the obvious choices. Yet Kendall and Carey, and I following them, include the Federalist as a symbol in the tradition. Or, to be clearer, the Federalist is a symbol in the American political tradition insofar as it modifies the way the Constitution is seen, which it surely does. We do not see the Constitution alone when we look at its articles and clauses. We see the Federalist-Constitution. We live under the Federalist-Constitution because it is not the Constitution, simply, that determines how we act in concert; it is the Constitution as modified by the Federalist. Now, in just this way, Lincoln’s contribution modifies the central symbols and documents of the American political tradition. Just as “we cannot look at the Constitution with innocent eyes” because we have read the Federalist, neither can we look at the Declaration of Independence without hearing Lincoln’s interpretation.

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290. Kendall and Carey, 98.
of it. The charging of those words with a universalistic mission is superadded, but we do not any longer see it as superadded, and we certainly do not act like it. We act as if what Lincoln says of the American political tradition just is the American political tradition. And this is so even though, as we have seen in this and previous chapters, there are serious discrepancies between the two.

The federal government has long seen its role as the great equalizer in American society, even if the principle of equality is for some only limited to “equality in opportunity.” Policies, especially in the twentieth century, show this clearly, as several removes are necessary to justify today’s vast government bureaucracy (and its bloated budgets and programs) on the grounds of maintaining order.

No, the union is thought of as “brought forth” abstractly and philosophically. It is “dedicated” to a proposition. And it is in this, as we will soon see, that Lincoln is one of the chief sources of what will become the idea of imperial American exceptionalism.

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291. This is echoed by Pauline Maier in the introduction to her book American Scripture, though she believes the change Lincoln effects to be legitimate and salutary. I disagree. See her American Scripture, xx.

292. Whether Lincoln’s “equality” was a liberal “equality of opportunity” or not is not my concern here. My concern is only that previously the government was not “dedicated to” a “proposition” at all, and that this is now the orthodox view of the “tradition.”

293. This has been noted by many, but two examples link the phenomenon with Lincoln. Don E. Fehrenbacher argues for its advent in Lincoln’s time, noting Clinton Rossiter’s agreement. See Fehrenbacher’s “Lincoln and the Constitution,” in Lincoln in Text and Context, (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 119. Later in the same essay, Fehrenbacher more delicately echoes the point: “It is accordingly possible to conclude that Lincoln’s use of executive power was wise and appropriate in its context, but not an unmixed blessing as a presidential tradition” (122).

Arguing the same point with different evidence, Thomas J. DiLorenzo notes that it was a lifelong commitment to economic planning and centralization that had the greatest effect on the consolidation of power in the American political order. See DiLorenzo’s The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War, (Roseville, Cal.: Prima Publishing, 2002), Chapter 9.
Chapter Five

An Imperial Combination:

Toward a Contemporary Conception of American Exceptionalism

“The universe seemed especially kind to the western heroes who were still at that old American task of refashioning the earth for the betterment of humanity. The task was as old as Winthrop, but the tools of the nineteenth century were new. The railroad spike had replaced the Bible as the (hopefully) irresistible American talisman. The secret of the laws of nature and nature’s God seemed to be revealed, and apparently limitless power was entrusted to the nation. The power to be and to do, the power to make and to stand erect, the power to be free in a world enslaved by its own history—Americans commanded the powers of the earth for the benefit of those who were strong enough and wise enough to come and share in the work and the profit of building a different and more humane earth.”

- Loren Baritz

“[W]hen the Protestant millennialist theory was formed, logically there came with it a need to find a new chosen nation, or nations. If history is theodicy, if redemption is historical as well as individual, if evil is to be finally and decisively bound through great conflicts, God must operate through cohesive bodies of men; there must be children of light and children of darkness geographically, and the City of God and the City of the World should be susceptible of being designated on maps.”

- Ernest Lee Tuveson


Introduction

From the beginning of the present project, the argument has been building toward a contemporary conception of American exceptionalism. The objective has been constant: to identify the various elements that seem to make up the idea and then to trace their evolution through the course of American history. Though the ideas do not cease to change after the turn of the twentieth century, the particular combination seen at that time is recognizably similar to today’s imperial conception of American exceptionalism.

After a reflection on the nature of the present inquiry and problems implied by its method, some background on the Spanish-American war will be given. This is necessary because the results of that conflict present a unique occasion for America’s new self-conception to be put into political action. A floor speech by Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana has come to be regarded as the *locus classicus* of period’s justification for American imperialism. It was delivered in support of a resolution he introduced, which called for the annexation of the Philippine Islands as American territory. After examining that speech, a brief treatment of some official statements by Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson are sufficient to show that Beveridge was by no means alone in the period or in government. Political decisions were based on this account of American self-conception, and understanding it will help us to understand where the ideas and policies came from, what they entail, and where we might go from here. The last point will be treated more fully in the next and final chapter, though the reflections near the end of this chapter will begin this work.
Challenges of Treating a Derailed Tradition

Continuing with the line of analysis that has so far been pursued presents a few challenges, though they are not insurmountable. First and foremost is this, and all relate to it: in looking at a period of American history after its political tradition’s derailment, how is it that anything substantive remains to be said of that tradition, properly speaking? A derailed tradition is something different from what it was before. Pointing up the derailment seems to be among the last possible things that could be said, based on this pattern of thought. Indeed, something like this point seems to have stood behind Kendall and Carey’s apparent satisfaction with only treating the ‘basic symbols’ of the tradition and not moving beyond the effects of the derailment in the wake of Lincoln’s presidency. An analogy helps further to illustrate the methodological problem at hand.

If a tightly spun thread begins to unravel, it often happens that the unraveling thread has no clear core. The thread is not what it previously was; its unity has turned into a plurality, and though it is still loosely connected, the loosened strands can no longer perform the function they previously did as a unit.296 If the American political tradition were a thread traveling along an axis of time, the unified strands represent a certain settled account of the way politics was conceived in the tradition. It need not have become what it was all at once—such a simultaneous birth and maturity is decidedly not what happened in America. The strands cohered over time. But as I have argued above,

296. This distinction is not dissimilar to that between ‘wholes’ and ‘heaps’ in Aristotle, though here the element of history and change over time would be foreign to him. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VIII, chapter 6.
there was a time when the tradition unraveled, or became derailed. And this presents a problem for treating the “tradition” at any point after its unraveling. The difficulty is especially apparent if you see that it is problematic even to speak of the tradition being derailed, since even this seems to indicate that some things change and some do not, without indicating, further, the nature of the change.

“Derailment” seems to indicate that the ‘vehicle of tradition’ keeps moving, but in a new direction. What changes is the vehicle’s direction, it seems, rather than the vehicle itself. Yet the tradition just is a vehicle, in a sense. It is a set of symbols that help explain how a people is politically one. It is a means by which history and a people’s role in it is made intelligible. Now, “derailment” also connotes the cessation of motion or, more specifically, a crash. The vehicle of the tradition, not being designed to go in this new direction, or “off the rails,” has run aground and cannot continue. To move forward requires rebuilding the vehicle so it can now function in a new way. To push the implied metaphor to its limits, this would mean building a car from the parts of the now-useless train. We see, then, that this analogy is inapt.

The image of an unraveling thread seems much more suited to the phenomenon. Wholeness is lost, but the elements are not wholly discarded. They are still present, though now coherent with each other to varying degrees; they are certainly no longer a unit. Broad agreement on the symbols that make up the tradition is gone, not to mention a consensus interpretation of those symbols. And so the various elements of the old, unraveled tradition can be clung to with varying degrees of coherence. The original unity
may be achievable in principle, even if it is difficult to achieve in practice. But more likely is a diversity that seems, to each particular group, a matter of one orthodox position against a number of heterodoxies. To speak more plainly, the unraveling of a tradition presents an opportunity not only for a new consensus, but also for the advent of multiple new separate ‘consensuses.’ Where once there was unity, there may now be plurality, and this seems to be what happened in the wake of the American tradition’s derailment. Very widely divergent accounts of who Americans are as a people are now possible, each with some real grounding in the people’s imagination.

Now, the derailment or unraveling of a tradition is its cessation of being, if not the cessation of the being of the elements that make it up. The strands may still intersect and, in some ways, reinforce each other in a now less coherent set of separate unities. But they cannot serve as a robust source of guidance for the political life of the community as a whole. Increasingly, competing accounts of the tradition will each seem to rest on solid ground (to mix metaphors) rather than to form a single account possessing exclusive foundational status. To speak once again of the American tradition, we are left with multiple constitutional moralities, each entrenched and self-assured that it has a monopoly on the truth.

Any analysis of the frayed thread, i.e. the American political tradition after Lincoln, must be conducted without the illusion, then, that it represents a coherent, consensus unity itself. The symbols reused in making it up are not necessarily coherent in the same way as before, or even coherent at all. But they do correspond to particular
actions taken by the community, and they can be treated as symbols for this reason. There is still a logic and a perceptible self-conception that can be gleaned from major political actions and actors of the day, and these will be the focus of the present chapter.

The myriad strands making up the thread of the American political tradition will, in this period, not be wholly unfamiliar. Some of the old persist into the new. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the notion of America as a chosen nation are present here. But there are new elements as well, and even these old ones are recast with new and different meaning. Though we are no longer, in other words, dealing with the “American political tradition” properly speaking, since we took that term to refer to the consensus of action before the derailment in Lincoln’s presidency, we are nevertheless dealing with some of the same old elements of that tradition, elements the reader of this work will find familiar, even if they are combined in ways that fall outside the tradition.297

In this chapter, we will finally see a moment in American political life when the idea of imperial American exceptionalism is recognizable. Or, to take into account what has just been said about the delicacy of discussing unraveled traditions, we will see in this period around the turn of the twentieth century an array of ideas we mostly recognize as the contemporary conception of imperial American exceptionalism. I will proceed in the

297. Ultimately, these new combinations are necessarily outside the tradition because the line of continuity and understanding has been broken. This calls into question, of course, the privileging of any particular settled order as a tradition. If there seems to be a settled order, and if that settled order cannot be called something other than American, then how could the order of the founders be more American or more traditional than the order of the Progressive Era? The answer is necessarily found in the analysis, with recurrence to the principle of continuity over time.
usual manner, picking out the salient texts from American history and analyzing what is old and what is new in each. It should be clear from what has already been said that, though in this period the American political ‘tradition’ is a derailed tradition, the tradition-as-it-was still constitutes a rich store of symbols and understandings of life, politics, God, history, universality, and other concepts that can be recombined in more or less traditional ways.

*Problem and Solution Similar to Previous Chapter*

In the previous chapter, we saw that the period of Lincoln’s presidency presented an apparent problem for strictly using Kendall and Carey’s method of inquiry. Since they focused wholly or mainly on foundational documents, it was easy to know which documents to include and exclude.298 But in Lincoln’s presidency there was no new American political order put in place in an official document. Rather, Lincoln’s recasting of the existing documentary heritage effected a revision—that is, derailment—of the tradition as it was. His words have achieved, especially since his time, a status similar to *The Federalist* in coloring our view of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, though unlike *The Federalist* the coloring seems to obscure the original picture rather than clarify it. The problem of choosing which documents to examine persists in the

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298. Recall, however, that their criteria for inclusion was faulted for neither accounting for the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, who are so important for America’s self-conception, nor for even thoroughly adhering to their own criteria and analyzing the Articles of Confederation. The present project remedies these omissions in Chapters Two and Three.
period now under consideration, since there is again no explicit re-founding document in the Progressive Era. But the solution, too, is similar to that of the previous chapter.

Symbols, it has been seen above, correspond to and often embody political action. Whether the action is a relatively easy case, as with the “coming together” of the U.S. Constitution, or a harder case, as with the several wars and actions undertaken around the turn of the twentieth century, the actions are accompanied by articulations of their meaning. These articulations detail, first, what is being done and, second, evoke the nature of the people doing it and their political union. Beginning with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War and continuing through the entrance of the U.S. into World War I, the American people sees itself very differently from the previous periods examined. The different self-conception is evident in their actions.

The Outbreak of the Spanish-American War

On April 19th, 1898, the U. S. Congress passed a resolution declaring war on Spain. It was the culmination of some months of agitation for intervention in Cuba, famously stirred up by the interception of unflattering Spanish diplomatic documents, the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana’s harbor, and the exaggeration of Spanish atrocities in the “yellow journalism” of Hearst and Pulitzer, which popularized the call

299. U.S. Congress, Congressional Record, 56th Cong., 1st sess., Washington, D.C., Volume 31, (April 19, 1898), 4066. Hereafter, citations for the Congressional Record will contain only the volume and page number of the bound edition.
for war. President McKinley signed the declaration of war the next day, and the Spaniards declared war on the U.S. within one week’s time. It is interesting to learn from Congress what it sought to achieve in war.

Congress summarily declared Cuba an independent political entity, demanded Spain leave the island, and authorized the use of force by the president to enforce this resolution:

A joint resolution for the recognition of the Independence of the people of Cuba, demanding that the Government of Spain relinquish its authority and government in the Island of Cuba and to withdraw its land and naval forces from Cuba and Cuban waters, and directing the President of the United States to use the land and naval forces of the United States to carry these resolutions into effect.

Resolved, etc., First. That the people of the Island of Cuba are, and of right ought to be, free and independent.

Second. That it is the duty of the United States to demand and the Government of the United States does hereby demand, that the Government of Spain at once relinquish its authority and government in the Island of Cuba and withdraw its land and naval forces from Cuba and Cuban waters.

Third. That the President of the United States be and he hereby is directed and empowered to use the entire land and naval forces of the United States, and to call into the actual service of the United States the militia of the several States, to such extent as may be necessary to carry these resolutions into effect.

Fourth. That the United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said island except for the pacification thereof, and asserts its determination when that

300. As David H. Burton has written, “When the fuse of war was lighted by the loss of the Maine, more and more did the mood of the nation come to resemble that of Theodore Roosevelt. The American Republic was ready to take the plunge. It was the right and duty of a great nation to expand; the responsibility that expansion entailed…could not and should not be avoided.” See his Theodore Roosevelt: Confident Imperialist, (Philadelphia, Penn: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 56.
is accomplished to leave the government and control of the island to its people.\textsuperscript{301}

In doing this, Congress considered more than two dozen bills and resolutions, all eventually referred to a single House committee. Though the various debates were not at all unreflective about the gravity of such a foray into international politics, the resolution itself makes no mention of the authority by which Congress acts. Indeed, though some found in the country’s foundational documents an abstract justification for a right to revolution—and this is implied when the resolution mimics the Declaration of Independence in saying Cuba “is and of right ought to be free and independent”\textsuperscript{302}—it must be admitted that the “liberation” of another state from colonial rule is fundamentally different from America declaring itself to be “free and independent.” We see already part of the major change in American self-conception effected in this period: the final paragraph of the Declaration has been radically universalized. Rather than the stirring conclusion of a compelling indictment-act, Congress now implicitly affirms that the

\textsuperscript{301} Cong. Rec., Volume 31, (April 18, 1898), 4062. The “Teller amendment” that is incorporated above as the fourth resolve of Congress’s resolution was added just before the declaration of war was approved. It state that the U.S.’s only purpose in Cuba was to settle the dispute between Spain and Cuba, and then to leave the island to its own self-government, prohibiting annexation. It has been argued that Senator Teller of Colorado mainly wanted to protect his state’s beet sugar industry from the potential flood of cheap sugar can from Cuba, and this is not improbable. Whatever the reason, the U.S. government abided by the letter of the resolution, only intervening when the government of Cuba later collapsed in 1902. A similar amendment never passed in regard to the Philippines for reasons that will become apparent when considering Senator Beveridge’s famous floor speech.

\textsuperscript{302} For the debates on the resolution, which passed nearly unanimously, and direct comparisons of the Cuban situation to the achievement of American independence, see Cong. Rec., Volume 31: 3810ff., 3813ff., and 3820ff.
Declaration is a charter of independence for all peoples, and that the U.S. is willing to put its diplomatic and military power to this task.\textsuperscript{303}

After naval routs in Cuba and the Philippines—which was also caught up in the conflict with Spain—Spain accepts provisional terms for a truce on August 2\textsuperscript{nd}, paving the way for an “independent” Cuba and a subjugated Philippines.

Though all did not go well in Cuba, the case of the Philippines was both more problematic and more telling in regard to the change in America’s self-conception. The country was divided against itself on the question of empire. But, “the public was, by and large, faced with a \textit{fait accompli} that, although theoretically reversible, had the initial impetus of its very existence to carry it along.”\textsuperscript{304} In the peace treaty Spain had “ceded” the Philippine Islands to the U.S.\textsuperscript{305} What was to be done, then?

There seemed to be four possible ways of disposing of the Philippine problem. The first, returning the islands to Spain, found favor nowhere. The second, selling or otherwise alienating the Philippines to some other power, seemed to invite a general European war; and it would hardly be more justified than remaining in possession ourselves…The third possibility, leaving the Philippines to themselves and giving them the independence [that formerly exiled leader and now prospective native governor] Aguinaldo’s men had been fighting for, was equivalent in the

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\textsuperscript{303} Note that, though the universalization of the Declaration was begun by Lincoln, it could scarcely be said that he intended the interpretation that is operative in these international interventions. Nonetheless, the relationship between his interpretation of the Declaration and the American founding does seem to pave the way for just this sort of action because of the great expansion in scope it gives to our government, and the universal and historical significance of America that, then, becomes his legacy.
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\textsuperscript{305} See Article III of the treaty at Yale’s Avalon project: “Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain; December 10, 1898” <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp> (last accessed 29 March 2010).
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minds of most Americans to leaving them to anarchy or to conquest...The final possibility was American possession, in the form of a protectorate or otherwise.306

The last option was ultimately pursued, but not until after vigorous and fruitless debate in Congress. In a speech on the floor of the Senate, Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana delivered what has come to be viewed as a crystallization of the new imperial self-conception of the American people, justifying the annexation of the Philippine Islands as U.S. territory.

Beveridge’s Imperialism and the Philippines

In early January of 1900, Senator Beveridge took to the Senate floor to speak on behalf of a joint resolution he had introduced only a week before. Relatively simple in expression, the resolution read:

Be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress Assembled, That the Philippine Islands are territory belonging to the United States; that it is the intention of the United States to retain them as such and to establish and maintain such governmental control throughout the archipelago as the situation may demand.307

Beveridge begins his address by noting that certain “hurtful resolutions” had been introduced in the Senate, and that “every word” of these debates “will cost and is costing


307. Albert J. Beveridge, “Our Philippine Policy,” in The Meaning of the Times, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1908), 58. The text here is identical to the official version in the Congressional Record except in being truncated near the middle where Beveridge reads several redundant letters from figures knowledgeable about the Philippines, and except for the floor speech’s conclusion. The full text may be found at Cong. Rec., Vol. 33, (Jan. 9th, 1900), 704-712.
Beveridge then moves on to found his argument on the Constitution, which he says calls the Philippines, “territory belonging to the United States.” Now, the Constitution does not single out the Philippines, particularly, as Beveridge suggests; his hearers would know this, which means simply that Beveridge is hereby referring to the part of Article IV, Section 3 that gives Congress the authority to legislate in regard to territories, as opposed to states, which have their own legislatures and are guaranteed a “republican form of government.” Beveridge is beginning, then, with the premise that Congress has the power to regulate the Philippines. But this is problematic.

If, as he asserts, Congress already has the power to rule over the Philippine Islands, then presumably Beveridge’s resolution is moot. If the Philippines are already U.S. territory, then the Constitution does clearly allow Congress to regulate them. But, as is obvious from the very fact of his introduction of the resolution, the Philippines are not yet technically the territory of the U.S. He takes for granted that which he hopes to effect. If his first argument were correct, the action he urges would be unnecessary. Beveridge is being somewhat disingenuous. Now, it is true that the peace treaty with Spain that ended the Spanish-American War “ceded” the Philippine Islands to the U.S. But a treaty does not have the same force as a law. Beveridge knew this, and was trying to remedy the problem with this joint resolution.

Imperialism and Economic Gain

The speciousness of his constitutional argument quickly gives way to one of two main arguments in favor of annexation. The relation of Beveridge’s racial theories to his imperialism will be pointed out immediately below. While those points are woven throughout the speech, Beveridge dwells on the possible economic impact of annexing the Philippines in a more concentrated passage near the beginning.

Beveridge’s main economic argument is found early in the speech, and is a kind of précis of what he will elaborate upon in the body. “Our increasing trade henceforth must be with Asia,” Beveridge says.

More and more Europe will manufacture what it needs, [and] secure from its colonies what it consumes. Where shall we turn for consumers of our surplus? Geography answers the question. China is our natural customer. She is nearer to us than England, Germany, or Russia, the commercial powers of the present and future. They have moved nearer to China by securing permanent bases on her borders. The Philippines give us a base at the door of all the East.309

Beveridge continues:

These islands are a self-supporting, dividend-paying fleet, permanently anchored at a spot selected by the strategy of Providence, commanding the Pacific. And the Pacific is the ocean of the commerce of the future. Most future wars will be conflicts for commerce. The power that rules the Pacific, therefore, is the power that rules the world. And, with the Philippines, that power will be the American Republic.310

309. Beveridge, 59.

310. Beveridge, 60. One can see already that Beveridge has notably departed from the American political tradition in several ways. Basing his argument on the expansion and aggrandizement of American political power is very different from the aims and concerns of the periods of American history treated in previous chapters. Yet there are elements that are similar, even if as a whole his view is very different. Weaving together the themes we have so far seen in the other texts pertaining to the idea of American exceptionalism, Beveridge sees the movement of history, guided by God, as giving to America both a
Beveridge proceeds to make a long list of the natural resources and material advantages that would accrue to the U.S. if it annexed the Philippines. Good farming, abundant coal seams, copper, gold, lumber, fibers, a vast expansion of the customer base for U.S. manufacturers into Asia: all these could be gained with the passage of this resolution, he argues. Empires, it has long been noted, have as one of their chief features the kind of economic colonialism here on display. A concentration of power over vast tracts of land means that the riches of any one area are all employed for the sole good of the imperial center. Resources from the provinces are appropriated to enrich the center; excess goods are sold back to the provinces whence their raw materials came, adding another mechanism for the central concentration of wealth. Such is often the reality of imperial operation, if not always one of the main justifications or features of its self-conception. Yet here Beveridge is unabashedly imperial. But these are not the only arguments he gives in favor of annexation; there numerous non-economic arguments as well.

*Imperialism and Race*

The Congressional debates over Beveridge’s and similar resolutions invariably include recourse to the supposedly intrinsic superiority of the “Teutonic” or “Anglo-

mission and the ability to accomplish it. “We shall not dispute the divine meaning of the fable of the talents” (60), Beveridge says later on, arguing in effect that because we have “been given the Philippines by God,” we should use them to increase either our material wealth, or our power on the world stage, or our territory, or all of these.

311. Beveridge, 61-2. In responding immediately to this particular charge, Senator Hoar of Massachusetts remarks that in scriptures it was Satan himself who offered worldly luxury and wealth to Christ, though at the price of Christ denying who he was.
Saxon” race over others. It is a key feature of Beveridge’s speech, echoing a prominent line of thinking around the turn of the twentieth century.

After briefly giving the economic argument above, Beveridge looks to the case of Hong Kong, where, he says, “our constructing race has builded [sic] one of the noblest cities of all the world,” despite the extreme tropical conditions.312 Since Hong Kong was a British colony, it is clear that Beveridge’s racial thought is by no means confined to Americans only; it is race, which is held in common with the British, that is the important factor for understanding his arguments.

The Filipinos, Beveridge says, are a “barbarous race, modified by three centuries of contact with a decadent race,” i.e. the Spanish.313 A people barbarous by nature and influenced by decadence, he goes on to say, are totally incapable of self-government. Beveridge next suggests that “civilization” demands that the Filipino race “shall be improved.”314 Granting them self-government when they are ill-prepared for it “will drive

312. Beveridge, 63. It should be noted that many racial theories at the time were tinged with a strong sense of geographic determinism. The climate, it was thought, produced the character of the people and their ways. Beveridge is seeking to make his racial argument over and against these deterministic arguments, saying that it only takes the right race to civilize areas previously thought incapable of it. Thus, climate should in no way give Americans pause in taking possession of the Philippines.
313. Beveridge, 65.

314. Beveridge, 68. Beveridge does not personify “civilization” like this elsewhere in his speech, and the reader is left to conclude from the context that this is simply an alternative reference to the Anglo-Saxon race.
us to our duty in the end,“ which is to rule over them until they are as capable of self-government as the Anglo-Saxons, a feature that took “us a thousand years to reach.”

Beveridge continues his account: “Self-government is a method of liberty—the highest, simplest, best—and it is acquired only after centuries of study and struggle and experiment and instruction in all the elements of the progress of man. Self-government is no cheap boon, to be bestowed on the merely audacious.” We cannot simply grant the Filipinos self-government; we must imbue them with it over a very long time. Repeating the same theme, Beveridge says that, “in dealing with the Filipinos we deal with children,” suggesting that an American takeover of the islands is salutary and necessary, though he gives no specifics about how the Anglo-Saxon race had any similar tutelage.

Nevertheless, Beveridge wishes America to “do our part in the world-redeeming work of our imperial race.” It is the charge of “our governing race” to rule over

315. Beveridge, 68.

316. Beveridge, 71. Emphasis in original.

317. Beveridge, 72. Interestingly, a similar argument to the contrary has come to be coupled with the idea of American exceptionalism in recent times, justifying the kind of imperialism of which Beveridge would approve, but on grounds he would not.

318. Beveridge, 73. It should be noted here that the view that self-government takes time to learn is not and idea necessarily connected with imperialism. This notion only becomes imperial when the task of raising the world to self-government is taken on by a single people as a mission that allows or even requires the violent violation of the sovereignty of other peoples. The difference, pointed out by Beveridge’s opponents at the time, is the same as that between raising a child and keeping a slave—though even this supposes that, like children, the U.S. had some sort of obligation to rear the world’s other countries.

319. Beveridge, 76. Richard M. Gamble has noted the degree to which a kind of Darwinized theory of salvation took hold during this period, making such utterances not uncommon. See his The War
peoples like the Filipinos just as America ruled the Indians and inhabitants of the
Louisiana Purchase, in order to prepare them properly for the civilized enjoyment of
American life.\footnote{Beveridge, 79.} This is why interpretations of the Declaration of Independence that
might forbid such imperialism are wrong, Beveridge says; they do not recognize that
America has long held these racial views, which are implicit in the founding documents
themselves.\footnote{Beveridge, 84.} Not even the relatively dry proceduralism of the Constitution escapes the
all-explaining principle of race: “You can not interpret a constitution without
understanding the race that wrote it.”\footnote{Beveridge, 84.} Beveridge believes that the peculiar meaning of
the Constitution is only fully grasped when it is recalled that “God has not been preparing
the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and
idle self-contemplation and self-admiration.” He goes on:

\footnote{For Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation,
(Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003), 30.}

320. Beveridge, 79.

321. Now the believability of arguments like Niall Ferguson’s and others, who see America as
imperial from the beginning, is easier to understand even in the face of the contrary facts present above.
The argument has been made for over a century. We encounter, then, something similar to what has
happened in the wake of Lincoln. Just as Lincoln’s revision and reinterpretation of the founding swept
away the original views without calling attention to the changes, so also does Beveridge present his view—
which we can see is new in important respects, having already thoroughly understood the main elements of
the tradition in previous chapters—as the one true view of the American political tradition. This study seeks
in part to give a more sophisticated view than one gets from simply taking Lincoln, Beveridge, and others
at their word, which, as has been pointed out before, is usually aimed at some concrete contemporaneous
political end.

322. Beveridge, 84. While it must be conceded that questions of race \textit{are} raised by the
Constitution’s provisions regarding slavery, it must also be admitted that such questions are there not
essentially but accidentally racial. It certainly happened that the slaves in question were of a different race
from the drafters and ratifiers of the Constitution, but this is not the sense in which the slaves are treated in
that document. Beveridge is here arguing that which particular race \textit{wrote} the U.S. Constitution affects the
\textit{meaning} of the words on the page, which is a very different claim from merely recognizing that the
Constitution raises questions about race.
No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples.

Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen Nation finally to lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all [the] profit glory, happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world’s progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: “Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things.”

Thus, all the main themes of Beveridge’s speech are interconnected, and it is not possible to speak of his views on race entirely separate from his views on the nature of history, or the place of God in the American political order. We turn now to those two elements, first examining them in Beveridge’s own terms, and returning later to note Beveridge’s points of departure and continuity with previous American history.

God, History, and Imperialism

We see, then, that Beveridge claims not only economic improvement and opportunity as a legitimation of the imperial act of annexation, but he also claims the sanction of God. God has, through the vicissitudes of political history, “been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples.” And, further, he has not done so without a purpose in mind; he has given to them a mission to civilize the world, redeeming it. Thus,

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323. Beveridge, 84-85. The “senile peoples” to whom Beveridge refers could perhaps be the European mainlanders, for whom he hardly has any compliments, but could not plausibly be counted among the “savage” peoples. This would further reinforce the reading of “civilization” in Note 312 above as a euphemism for “Anglo-Saxon.”
we begin to see the role that the ideas of God and history may play in justifying imperialism, though up to this point in American history they have not played that role.

Beveridge exhorts his countrymen to “gratitude for a task worthy of our strength” and urges “thanksgiving to Almighty God that He has deemed us worthy of his work.” And it is clear to Beveridge, just as it was clear to the Puritans, that God spoke to America through the events and trends of history. “These islands,” he said, “are a self-supporting, dividend-paying fleet, permanently anchored at a spot selected by the strategy of Providence.” God ordered the physical location and the character of both Americans and Filipinos, he avers, for the mutual benefit of both in an imperial relation. And the mission does not stop at material beneficence or political development.

In discussing the progress the British have made in Hong Kong, Beveridge challenges directly the charge of American imperialism: “If this be imperialism, its final end will be the empire of the Son of Man.” Whether Beveridge means that the Christianization of the Filipinos (many of whom were already practicing Catholics after centuries of Spanish rule) is the inevitable effect of America’s economic and political largesse, or he means that any unpleasantness associated with the means of Christianization is justified by that particular end, we see here that Beveridge claims for

324. Beveridge, 59.

325. This is treated in Chapter Two above. The differences between the two will be pointed up below.

326. Beveridge, 60.

327. Beveridge, 63.
the imperial project the divine sanction of God. He takes the missionary component of the Christian faith to be identical or nearly identical to economic and political imperialism. Though the character of these views is very different, it is clear that there are points of correspondence with the original and derailed American political tradition. Before moving to that discussion, however, it should be noted that it is Beveridge’s conception of universality that makes the difference; it, too, is taken to justify imperialism. Evangelization was traditionally linked to conversion and, in turn, understood as primarily inwardly focused. In place of the humility to first remove the beam from one’s own eye, now evangelization is taken to justify political imperialism. Whereas the universality of Christianity was, early on, an impediment to imperialism and expansionism in America, now it is taken to be the heart of imperialism’s justification.

*Imperialism and the American Political Tradition*

Clearly showing his break with the specifically Christian character of the American colonial inheritance and political tradition, Beveridge argues that:

It is not true that “charity begins at home.” Selfishness begins there; but charity begins abroad and ends in its full glory in the home. It is not true that perfect government must be achieved at home before administering it abroad; its exercise abroad is a suggestion, an example and a stimulus for the best government at home. It is as if we projected ourselves upon a living screen and beheld ourselves at work.\(^{328}\)

\(^{328}\) Beveridge, 77.
It will be instructive, in other words, and redound to the benefit of American self-government to try this experiment in the government of others. Interestingly, Beveridge acknowledges one of the central points of the present thesis: that America was not traditionally an expansionist political order. But he quickly brushes aside the point:

Self-government and internal development have been the dominant notes of our first century; administration and the development of other lands will be the dominant notes of our second century. And administration is as high and holy a function as self-government, just as the care of a trust estate is as sacred an obligation as the management of our own concerns.329

Disregarding the American political tradition as it had been understood—and as he still understood it then—Beveridge openly and explicitly recognizes that the resolution he advocates lies outside of it. The old tradition may be used when it is convenient and should be discarded when it conflicts with the moment’s (or the master race’s) political will. This is precisely Beveridge’s main point in discussing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Though, as I have argued above in Chapter Three, the Declaration was a concrete political act of separation, this is not the usual view of that document today. Many, following the same lines of argument Beveridge traces, believe that that limited and particular document is, in fact, rather a charter of the political freedom of all peoples.330 It

329. Beveridge, 77-78.

330. Senator Hoar disagrees with this, agreeing, notably, with Kendall and Carey’s argument in Chapter Five of Basic Symbols. On April 17th, 1900, Hoar says: “The confusion of the argument of our friends on the other side comes from confounding the statement in the Declaration of the rights of individuals with the statement of the rights of nations, or peoples, in dealing with one another. The whole
can be read, in this way, to undermine Beveridge’s point. For if all peoples are properly free and independent, then they should be able to frame a government for themselves, “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.” We know already of Beveridge’s estimation of the Filipinos’ abilities in this area. He now speaks directly to such a point in regard to the Declaration of Independence: “The Declaration of Independence does not forbid us to do our part in the regeneration of the world. If it did, the Declaration would be wrong.” It may be discarded, he says, just as the Articles of Confederation were discarded. But in this Beveridge compares the supposed theoretical justification for the freedom of all peoples with a concrete political structure that hardly functioned and was replaced by the common consent of the bodies that mainly controlled it, the state legislatures. To this, Beveridge might respond only that his original point on

Declaration is a statement of political rights and political relations and political duties. First. Every man is equal in political rights, including the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, to every other. Second. No people can come under the government of any other people, or of any ruler, without its consent. The law of nature and of nature's God entitle every people to its separate and equal station among the powers of the earth. Our fathers were not dealing in this clause with the doctrine of the social compact; they were not considering the rights of minorities; they used the word "people" as equivalent to "nation," or "state," as an organized political being, and not as a mere aggregate of persons not collected or associated. They were not thinking of Robinson Crusoe in his desolate island, or of scattered settlers, still less of predatory bands roaming over vast regions they could neither own nor occupy. They were affirming the right of each of the thirteen colonies separately or of them all together to throw off the yoke of George III and to separate itself or themselves from Great Britain. Now, you must either admit that what they said was true, or you must affirm the contrary.” See Cong. Rec., Vol. 33, 4384-4285.

331. Beveridge, 78.
self-government still stands: only those capable of self-government have a right to it, and the Filipinos are incapable of it.\textsuperscript{332}

Just as the Declaration should be abandoned if it gets in the way of performing “the regeneration of the world,” so also should the Constitution be laid aside when it is counter-productive:

And if the Constitution had not had the capacity for growth corresponding with the growth of the Nation, the Constitution would and should have been abandoned as the Articles of Confederation were abandoned.

For the Constitution is not immortal in itself, not useful, even, in itself. The Constitution is immortal and even useful, only as it serves the orderly development of the Nation. The Nation alone is immortal. The Nation alone is sacred. The army is its servant. The navy is its servant. The President is its servant. This Senate is its servant. Our laws are its methods. Our Constitution is its instrument.

This is the golden rule of constitutional interpretation: \textit{The Constitution was made for the people, not the people for the Constitution.}\textsuperscript{333}

Beveridge has broken with one of the key features of the American political tradition, which is the hierarchy of the various forms of law. Written into the Constitution, and having been an operative tradition well before that, foundational documents and existing law were always treated with an amount of humility and respect. Beveridge ignores this tradition and steps outside of it, and this is due to a familiar reason. Here we see stronger than ever the role race plays in Beveridge’s thinking. Stronger than even the traditional role for the rule of law, considerations of race should govern how we act more than our

\textsuperscript{332} Beveridge reiterates just this point, in fact, directly after the section on the Declaration of Independence. See Beveridge, 79.

\textsuperscript{333} Beveridge, 82. Emphasis in original.
previously given, covenantal word. The Constitution, it is seen, is subject not mainly to revision according to its own provisions, but according to the desires of the “Nation” that was its author, namely the Anglo-Saxon settlers of America. This rejection of history is, however, fairly selective.

There are times, some already noted, when Beveridge sees history as the unfolding of God’s instructions for America. When he speaks of the “strategy of Providence” locating the relative proximity of America, the Philippines, and China, this is partly what he means: that God made it so with the purpose of guiding our actions. He also speaks of nature itself and the timely progress of technology, which now enable us to reach the Philippines relatively quickly through steam-powered ocean travel. The ease with which this can now be done and the specific moment of this innovation says to Beveridge that God has indicated *this* is the right course. Nature itself seems to demand it. And if this were not enough, near the end of the speech Beveridge lays bare one of the central assumptions of the whole set of arguments he is making:

Blind indeed is he who sees not the hand of God in events so vast, so harmonious, so benign. Dull indeed is the mind that perceives not that this vital people is the strongest of the saving forces of the world; that our place, therefore, is at the head of the constructing and redeeming nations of the earth; and that to stand aside while events march on is a surrender of our interests, a betrayal of our duty as blind as it is base. Craven indeed is the heart that fears to perform a work so golden and so noble; that dares not win a glory so immortal.  

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334. Beveridge, 86.
The events of history manifest the “hand of God,” and show us the way we ought to go. And, make no mistake Beveridge says, “Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night;” God has said to us, “I will make you ruler over many things.” Americans are the chosen people. They are the fulcrum of history, the right arm of God. They represent truth in its fullness and disagreement must be pushed aside as the falsehood it is in order for their righteousness to triumph. That righteousness is the true and main concern, with all others taking a back seat. And lest it be thought that Beveridge is alone in these arguments, numerous other Senators and Congressmen join him in the debate.

Many disagree, and this shows that Beveridge does not express the unanimous declaration of America’s self-conception in this period. Recalling, however, the analogy of the unraveled thread above, we saw from the beginning that treating a now-derailed tradition was bound to be fraught with a lack of consensus. Those disagreeing with Beveridge and his views largely agree with the tradition, which shows that the American political tradition’s derailment is not so much a transition from one consensus to another, but the destruction of one consensus and the proliferation of numerous competing

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335. Beveridge, 85. Now, the Christian belief in Providence might be said to lend itself to such a view. But this is not necessarily so. In the Christian tradition, generally speaking, man sees Providence at work retroactively. Here Beveridge not only argues this, but also goes further to suggest that he sees where it is going. The hubris of such a suggestion is obvious, and buts up against traditional Christian self-estimations, which are always to be governed by a great degree of humility.
accounts, each with a number of adherents. What we have now is an unraveled tradition.\footnote{336. This means that part of the “symbol” framework is being modified. Unity or unanimity is no longer the case in American politics. One could also have said this in regard to Lincoln, but Lincoln’s views become a near-consensus in the generations that followed. The same cannot be said of the imperialism of this period, which was neither at the time nor since has become a consensus view of who we are as a people. Thus, there is no need to explore the degree to which Beveridge, et al., are representative, since no one view is any longer representative at all.}

But Beveridge’s account has something that the competing accounts do not: execution and operation. Though the resolution he introduced never passed Congress, the plan proceeded largely as he wished. Congress’s inaction allowed President McKinley to act according to his discretion, in which he yielded to Beveridge and figures in the administration like Theodore Roosevelt.\footnote{337. See John M. Dobson, *Reticent Expansionism: The Foreign Policy of William McKinley*, (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Duquesne University Press, 1988), 121.} This set into motion a pattern notably followed by each of the presidents of the period, and a few illustrative quotations help to show that the imperial set of mind was not at all confined to the Congress. It became the operative principle of American political action in this period.

\textit{President McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt}

In 1898, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt was riding high. Having come home from the Battle of San Juan Hill as an American war hero, he set to parlaying his celebrity into the prize he wanted most of all: the governorship of the Philippine Islands, recently ceded...
to the U.S. by Spain in the war he just helped to win. Various intraparty political machinations led instead to the governorship of the State of New York and, in 1900, the Vice Presidency. Upon entering the country’s highest office when McKinley was assassinated in September of 1901, he inherited an administration that had already formed its habits of governance, and this was no different in regard to the matter of the Philippines.

There was, in fact, no comprehensive policy toward the Philippines at this time. As John M. Dobson has observed:

The possibility that American annexation [of the Philippines] might foment a long, costly, and bloody war with the Filipinos was not widely recognized at the time [i.e. the end of the Spanish-American War]. In the end, the decision was strictly an American one, arrived at on the basis of quite limited information. How and why the United States reached that decision are questions that have intrigued historians for ninety years, with no consensus in sight.

Never the theoretician, Roosevelt’s words and acts in regard to America’s imperial possessions largely maintained the status quo. The main aim of a somewhat aimless policy was to acquire and maintain territory in the East that could further and facilitate

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338. Oscar M. Alfonso, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Philippines, 1897-1909*, (Quezon City, The Philippines: University of the Philippines Press, 1970), 28-30. David H. Burton further notes: “Roosevelt’s imperialistic rationale, insofar as it had become explicit when he took over direction of affairs in 1901, was compounded of a sense of the superiority of the white race (especially the Anglo-Saxon Americans) and the persuasions of democracy, of western man’s urge to dominate and his wish, often more than a pious one, to be the preceptor of less able people and less fortunate human beings.” Burton goes on to note that Roosevelt, like many of the period, saw no contradiction between race superiority and democracy, between domination and protection. See Burton, 61-62.


340. Alfonso, 212-213. David H. Burton wonders whether Teddy Roosevelt can be considered “representative,” but he closes the question as soon as he raised it, writing, “To such questions perhaps no certain answers can be given.” See his Introduction, viii.
trade and the increased exportation of American manufactured goods.\textsuperscript{341} Much like Beveridge, McKinley believed the U.S. was only imperial insofar as the Christian “missionary sentiment” could be called imperial.\textsuperscript{342} At the time many, including McKinley himself, believed that the U.S. would be welcomed as liberators and saviors after centuries of Spanish rule;\textsuperscript{343} the Americans would work “selflessly” to civilize the Filipinos, and these benefits would engender trust.\textsuperscript{344} Any material gain, in this mindset, is either considered serendipitous windfall or just reward.

Teddy Roosevelt’s presidential addresses are shot through with the same aim and expectations, beginning in his first major speech in office, his 1901 “First Annual Message to Congress.” Roosevelt wanted “to make them [i.e. the Filipinos] fit for self-government after the fashion of the really free nations.”\textsuperscript{345} Just like Beveridge, Roosevelt believes that the question of others’ self government is tied to their race, and their race’s history: “what has taken us thirty generations to achieve, we cannot expect to see another

\textsuperscript{341} Dobson, 110.

\textsuperscript{342} Dobson, 115.

\textsuperscript{343} Dobson, 110-111.

\textsuperscript{344} Dobson, 114.

\textsuperscript{345} It may be lost on some that Roosevelt and the other figures of this period do not use the word “nation” in the general sense in which it is used today. He intends usually the more technical and narrow sense, which is tied to biology and has a strong racial tone. Theodore Roosevelt, “First Annual Message to Congress,” \textit{Works of Theodore Roosevelt}, Vol. 15, National Edition (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 111.
race accomplish out of hand, especially when large portions of that race start very far behind the point which our ancestors had reached even thirty generations ago." 346

Roosevelt said that the U.S. had been behaving and was continuing to behave with a “disinterested zeal,” an example unparalleled in history. To leave abruptly, as some called for, would be to risk “murderous anarchy,” he thought, which would in turn be a “crime against humanity.” 347 This kind of undertaking, or any “wars with barbarous or semi-barbarous peoples,” are a “most regrettable but necessary international police duty which must be performed for the sake of the welfare of mankind.” 348 In a policy formulation that would develop over time as one of the orthodox defenses of moves like the annexation of the Philippines, Roosevelt, already in 1901, says that he is merely applying the old Monroe Doctrine to a new situation: “In other words, the Monroe Doctrine is a declaration that there must be no territorial aggrandizement by any non-American power at the expense of any American power on American [i.e. North or South American] soil.” 349 Though he applies this only to Cuba at first, by 1904 Roosevelt expands it to justify the “police power” of a reluctant U.S. against any “free nation” that does not use its freedom responsibly. 350

Now, Roosevelt knows the objection, referenced above, that in adventuring abroad we are contravening Christ’s admonition to first take care of ourselves before presuming to fix others:

Ordinarily it is very much wiser and of more useful material betterment to concern ourselves here at home than with trying to better the conditions of things in other nations…Nevertheless there are occasional crimes committed on so vast a scale and of such peculiar horror as to make us doubt whether it is not our manifest duty to endeavor at least to show our disapproval of the deed and our sympathy with those who have suffered by it…There must be no effort made to remove the mote from our brother’s eye if we refuse to remove the beam from our own. But in extreme cases action may be justifiable and proper.\(^{351}\)

While recognizing with Beveridge that the traditional stance of America had been not to intervene in such situations, Roosevelt seems to make an argument different from Beveridge. The “crimes” committed are too great to ignore in this situation; the crimes he speaks of are, however, not enumerated here and the criminal remains unnamed. Though elsewhere Roosevelt acknowledges the material riches of the islands, much like Beveridge, he does not use that as justification for taking or maintaining the Philippines. Staying and continuing to hold the Filipinos in subjection is justified, he argues, because of the “good we are able to do in the islands,”\(^{352}\) not least our effort “to develop the natives” so they can one day achieve self-government.\(^{353}\) The mission, then, is civilizing


\(^{352}\) Roosevelt, “Fourth Annual Message,” 263.

them and cultivating them in America’s own image—though without ever extending the possibility of statehood, a fact that Beveridge’s opponents thought very telling.\footnote{See Cong. Rec., Vol. 33, 4281.}

In Roosevelt’s Inaugural Address, he reflects on the special challenges and successes of the American political tradition. Though we inherited a tradition, we “have had to pay few of the penalties which in old countries are enacted by the dead hand of civilization.”\footnote{Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” 267. Alexis de Tocqueville seems to articulate something very similar in the “Author’s Introduction” to his Democracy in America, though with a different aim: “A new political science is needed for a world itself quite new. But it is just that to which we give least attention. Carried away by a rapid current, we obstinately keep our eyes fixed on the ruins still in sight on the bank, while the stream whirls us backward—facing toward the abyss.” See Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. J. P. Mayer, 12-13. Neither Roosevelt nor Tocqueville believes we can understand American politics unless we understand the sense in which it has been cut off from previous political ways. Though this is many times accepted as a truism, the present project has been seen to qualify the point in important ways.} The new century presents perils, “the very existence of which it as impossible that they [the founding fathers] should foresee.”\footnote{Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” 268.} But these perils must be met with the same “spirit” as the previous ones, especially the maintenance of virtue, and the order already regnant, which is good and should be maintained.\footnote{Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” 268.} We will achieve all this, Roosevelt concludes, by cultivating “the qualities of practical intelligence, of courage, of hardihood, and endurance, and above all the power of devotion to a lofty
ideal, which made great the men who founded this Republic in the days of Washington, which made great the men who preserved this Republic in the days of Lincoln."³⁵⁸

Later in the same year, Roosevelt delivered his “Fifth Annual Message to Congress” and sought to rebut the criticism that the Monroe Doctrine was expansionist. He was simply pushing the limit of the full flowering of the “Golden Rule,” which he says is the ideal standard in the international political order.³⁵⁹ Roosevelt denies outright that action in Cuba is imperial: “It must be understood that under no circumstances will the U.S. use the Monroe Doctrine as a cloak for territorial aggression.”³⁶⁰ Yet he makes no parallel claim for policy toward the Philippines. Roosevelt, right through the end of his administration, denies self-government to the Philippines, which he thought remained incapable of it.³⁶¹ Though Roosevelt seems to have firmly set and expanded the policy of international policing in the presidency, he is not the last president to act similarly. Though Woodrow Wilson repudiates the racial aspects of Roosevelt’s and Beveridge’s thinking, this comes simultaneously with an even more grand and idealistic vision for the role of the U.S. in world affairs.

³⁵⁸. Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” 269. Emphasis added. N.B. Roosevelt explicitly buys into and endorses, reflectively or not, the Lincolian narrative that the most essential part of America is its ideality. He also lumps Lincoln together with Washington without considering that each operated according to a different interpretation of what America is. Furthermore, Roosevelt makes no distinction between the founding fathers’ actions and the imperial actions he advocates.


³⁶¹. In regard to the second takeover of Cuba, see his “Sixth Annual Message to Congress,” 389. The same subject is treated again in the “Seventh Annual Message.” See the “Eighth Annual Message,” where T. R. reasserts the “Golden Rule,” (535), but still denies—now in 1909—that the Filipinos should govern themselves (538-539).
A relatively brief look at some of Woodrow Wilson’s actions and words is sufficient to understand that he falls in a clear, if loose, association with Roosevelt and Beveridge on many of the ideas discussed above. But his more ideal, more expansionist views are concentrated toward the end of his political career. Even late in his career, on the occasion of his “First Inaugural Address,” Wilson sounds a decidedly conservative note. He advocates “restoration” over “revolution.”

“We shall restore, not destroy,” he says.

We shall deal with our economic system as it is and as it may be modified, not as it might be if we had a clean sheet of paper to write upon, and step by step we shall make it what it should be, in the spirit of those who question their own wisdom and seek counsel and knowledge, not shallow self-satisfaction or the excitement of excursions whither they can not tell. Justice, and only justice, shall always be our motto.

This incremental approach and chastened worldview, however, began to erode even by the time of his second term.

In his “Second Inaugural Address,” Wilson sounds much more like Teddy Roosevelt and William McKinley in protesting any assertion that America works only for its own aggrandizement. It is not selfish motives, but the tragic circumstances of the world that draws the U.S. to assert itself:

We may even be drawn on, by circumstances, not by our own purpose or desire, to a more active assertion of our rights as we see them and a more


immediate association with the great struggle itself. But nothing will alter our thought or our purpose. They are too clear to be obscured. They are too deeply rooted in the principles of our national life to be altered. We desire neither conquest nor advantage. We wish nothing that can be had only at the cost of another people. We have always professed unselfish purpose and we covet the opportunity to prove that our professions are sincere.\textsuperscript{364}

International problems may require engagement by the U.S., since “We are provincials no longer…There can be no turning back. Our own fortunes as a nation are involved, whether we would have it so or not.”\textsuperscript{365} And though the “principles” of non-conquest are “deeply rooted” in America, Wilson argues that, nonetheless, America can be absolutely sure of its righteousness: the “principles in which we have been bred,” are “the principles of a liberated mankind.”\textsuperscript{366} We know better, perhaps, than other non-liberated peoples what should be done. And if necessary, Wilson suggests, we will do it. The necessity came, at least in Wilson’s mind, less than a month later, when he asked Congress to declare war on Germany.

In his request for the declaration of war, Wilson actually disclaims, unlike Beveridge and Roosevelt before him, American uniqueness in regard to righteousness. We are “only a single champion” of “right,” not the only one.\textsuperscript{367} Yet in stating the objectives and risks of the present situation, he suggests an ultimate goal as the guide:

\textsuperscript{364} Wilson, “Second Inaugural Address,” 308.

\textsuperscript{365} Wilson, “Second Inaugural Address,” 308-309. Note the more contemporary and less racial connotation of Wilson’s use of the term, “nation.”

\textsuperscript{366} Wilson, “Second Inaugural Address,” 309.

\textsuperscript{367} Wilson, “Address to Congress, April 2nd, 1917,” 340.
We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included; for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion.  

Wilson sets the country to war not against a particular enemy but for a universal and abstract goal. His own aim is not a particular cessation of certain unjust circumstances and actions—as we might expect would be his goal from his “First Inaugural”—but to “bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.” The finality of this goal approaches the same ambition that Beveridge had for a politically effected “regeneration of the world.” The finality Wilson seeks is so fundamental and so ultimate that it could not be achieved except with the mobilization for total war, if even then. Yet this result was not the sole product of Wilson’s mind. It was the product of

368. Wilson, “Address to Congress, April 2nd, 1917,” 346. Now having heard a litany of similar expressions, one is left with the suspicion that these figures “doth protest too much.”


370. As Richard M. Gamble has noted: “While progressive Christianity’s skill at reconstructing institutions would become clear as it tackled first the church, then American society, and ultimately international affairs, its theology was grounded in a few elemental assumptions about the way the world worked. First among these assumptions was a belief in inherent, inevitable spiritual progress, in the gradual tendency of the physical universe and of human history toward the good, a process that determined the manner in which God achieved His will. For the progressives, the world was in motion. But this was not a random or inscrutable movement. Creation, humanity, and history were not merely changing; they were changing in a clear direction, toward a knowable goal, toward nothing less than the kingdom of God on earth. This idea of purposeful, teleological change dominated the intellectual world of the late nineteenth century. The law of evolution that was thought to control the natural world was presumed to direct the spiritual world as well.” See Gamble, 30-31. Emphasis added.
decades and centuries of change in the American political tradition.\textsuperscript{371} He stands at the end of the process of the dissolution of the tradition, direct heir to Lincoln’s conception of America as an idea: “Sometimes people call me an idealist,” Wilson once said; “Well that’s how I know I am an American. America, my fellow citizens,…is the only idealistic nation in the world.”\textsuperscript{372} He, along with Roosevelt, Beveridge, and their political allies during the period, took the words of the founding and infused them with new meaning:

The vision of America as the enforcer of justice and the scourge of tyrants is a noble one. It goes back, in rhetoric at least, to the early days of the republic and corresponds to the image of the United States as standard-bearer of freedom for peoples everywhere. It was not, however, until recently that this patriotic self-image was translated into a program of action and America was declared to have a responsibility to bring her concept of democratic self-government to peoples everywhere.\textsuperscript{373}

\textsuperscript{371} Robert Nisbet seems to make just the same point, though from the middle of the twentieth century: “The single most powerful cause of the present size and the world-wide deployment of the military establishment is the moralization of foreign policy and military ventures that has been deeply ingrained, especially in the minds of presidents, for a long time. Although it was Woodrow Wilson who, by virtue of a charismatic presence and a boundless moral fervor, gave firm and lasting foundation to American moralism, it was not unknown earlier in our history. The staying power of the Puritan image of America as a ‘city upon a hill’ was considerable throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. America the Redeemer Nation was very much a presence in the minds of a great many Americans. American ‘exceptionalism’ began in the conviction that God had created one truly free and democratic nation on earth and that it was to the best interests of all other nations to study America and learn from her.” He goes on, a little later: “Ever since Wilson, with only rarest exceptions, American foreign policy has been tuned not to national interest but to national morality.” See his \textit{The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America}, (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1988), 29-30.


\textsuperscript{373} Steel, 308. Though contrary to the main point of this project Steel believes this transition happened finally with the massive industrialization and mobilization associated with the Second World War, his and my point still stand. A great change has occurred. But there is room for doubt that Steel is right about its timing; it has already been shown above that the theoretical differences between the traditional American understanding and an imperial one are palpable in the wake of the Spanish-American war.

Godfrey Hodgson puts it this way, though he too puts the transition later than has been argued above: “It was not until the twentieth century that this combination of exceptionalism with at least a theoretical universalism—a belief, that is, that the United States has a special destiny to bring freedom to
Recognizing that a change has occurred from America’s earliest days to Wilson’s idealist foreign policy, and having seen the key texts over the course of American history that epitomize this change, an analysis of these changes is now possible and proper.

Elements of the Puritans?

We have already seen that the imperial politics of the turn of the twentieth century seemed to posses an understanding of history not unlike the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay. Where the Puritans believed that events in history were telltale signs of the future—another book of God’s revelation when coupled with the Bible—Beveridge and others in his period believed much the same, but without recourse to the Bible. When Beveridge speaks of the progress of the Anglo-Saxon race toward its present work of taking responsibility for the development of other races, he equates the particular circumstances and events of his time with the unerring plan of God.\(^{374}\) Because it happened, Beveridge takes for granted that it was God’s will.

The Puritans, however, did not take for granted that God’s will would be achieved. As argued in Chapter Two above, they were highly aware that upon them much depended. They could fail, and, if they did, the results would be calamitous.

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\(^{374}\) Just as with Lincoln, the theological roots of these claims, while interesting and important, are not directly relevant to the point being made here. Thus, I only acknowledge, while passing over it, that this aspect of my account could bear more detail, though as part of a decidedly different project.
Nevertheless, God would assist them if they remained righteous. And though Roosevelt urges his fellow citizens to virtue in his “Inaugural Address,” this is as close as he comes to the Puritans’ view of their possible failure. The Puritans believed that God gave to them a high mission to improve themselves and build a perfect community of Christian charity that would serve as an example to the world.

Beveridge and the others see their mission as directed outward rather than inward. It is evident that Teddy Roosevelt, perhaps the least ideologically pure of the three men examined in this chapter, perceives this distinction between an inward and outward focus when he refers to the Biblical passage about the “mote” in another’s eye. But he allows that this admonition should not be so rigid as to prevent the U.S. from invading and governing other peoples as subjects, or engaging in “international police action” when he saw fit. In other words, Roosevelt seems to stand for moderation in all things; even extreme acts of imperialism are sometimes permissible. Thus, the least extreme of these three represents, still, an extreme departure from the main line of the American political tradition.

Thus, though the political actors of this period are highly aware of and explicit about the role of God, that role is very different from the one conceived by the Puritans, and it leads to a very different practical outcome. One understanding of the “Christian sentiment” leads to the development and cultivation of a close-knit community focused on its own salvation; the other understanding leads to the takeover and subjugation of

375. David H. Burton argues that, “In matters of state his mind simply did not operate on a theoretical plane.” See Burton, 62.
other peoples and the exploitation of their land and resources. In one view, God plays a role that limits the actions of the people. In the other view, God grants them full license to expand and rule over others. On the one hand, God serves as supreme judge and arbiter of all order, giving blessings and protection, and expecting great strides toward community cohesion and holiness. On the other hand, the actions undertaken are said to have the full, unconditional endorsement and sanction of God’s Providence, so that little could or should slow or stymie them. In one, the sense of universality serves as a check upon the scope of government and purpose of politics. In the other, the government is invested with a more than exemplary significance; government is, in this period around the turn of the twentieth century, thought of as the embodiment of the transcendent will of God, and its triumph is his, swerving for no obstacles.

376. It could be objected that the Puritans colonized New England and were imperial in regard to the savages there. This argument is taken up in the debate over Beveridge’s resolution. Senator Pettigrew of South Carolina makes a distinction between “expansionism,” by which he means the westward movement of the U.S. across North America, and “imperialism,” which pertains more to the Philippines and like situations: “I might say here, Mr. President, that I allude to those who advocate the conquest of the Philippines as imperialists and not as expansionists, for the reason that expansion implies the enlargement of the same thing, the adding of more of that which you already have, the acquisition of countries holding a population capable of living and supporting our Constitution to be admitted as States into the Union; while the imperialist doctrine is the acquisition of tropical colonies where it is admitted that self-government can not exist, as we understand it under our Constitution; and therefore the people must be governed perpetually and forever as crown colonies of this Republic. The holding of such countries, the conquest of an unwilling people, their retention in subjugation by a standing army, means of necessity not a republic where all the people must be consulted, but a despotism where the will of one man can march armies, declare war, and act with great rapidity. A republic is naturally slow in action, because the people must be considered and must be consulted.” See Cong. Rec., Vol. 33, 806.
Abandoning the Founders

Just as key aspects of the Puritan worldview are taken up, in a modified way, by Beveridge and the others, so too are the founders both exalted and rejected in this period. Where the words of the founders are thought to have the air of expansion, the founders are heralded. Where they could be said to slow the imperialism of Beveridge, he urges that they are merely “wrong.”

The limitedness of the political sphere was an inheritance the founders cherished. A Christian view of the world, though now not enacted politically and formally, served as the governing principle on the relation of politics to life, and the relation of America to the world. It was an operative principle of the regime that only in an inward-focused excellence would an outward effect be proper or possible. Such a reading requires a fresh reading of the founders, as has been provided above. But there is evidence beyond the countries basic founding documents. This is exemplified in the famous Fourth of July oration by John Quincy Adams:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will be America’s heart, her benedictions, and her prayers. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and by the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standards of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force…She might
become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit.\textsuperscript{377}

Abandoning this view required the theoretical moves that have already been discussed. But here we see an explicit articulation of the general character of America’s self-conception in founding era. Transcendent ends are not yet subsumed into the immanent, political realm. It was shown in Chapter Three that the separation of the spheres of politics and religion was put in place on Christian grounds and maintained by the concerned conviction that this balance of transcendence and immanence was the best way to order politics. Such a view was rejected in the imperial actions of the turn of the twentieth century. The Constitution, Beveridge argued, should be wholly subject to whatever the people wished to accomplish. And in this it is clear that Beveridge rejects—or at least fails to recognize—that the separation and limitedness of government is precisely what the founders wished to accomplish. But such a recasting of the role of America in the world required first a recasting of the nature of America in general. Such was Lincoln’s accomplishment.

\textit{The Embrace of Lincoln’s Idea of America}

When Lincoln spoke of America as “dedicated to a proposition,” he effected a revolution in America’s self-conception. He made it possible to think of America as “one,” but now upon a new basis. Rather than because of the concrete political union that

\textsuperscript{377} John Quincy Adams, Address in Washington, D.C., July 4th, 1821, quoted in Steel, xi.
Americans had formed, Lincoln proposed that they were all united by sharing the same ideas about America, and subscribing to them, being dedicated to them. This was, perhaps, seen as vital for a people whose previous concrete union had been rent asunder atop the altar of war. Lincoln held out the possibility for reunion, if only all parties could change their minds and, as he had it, dedicate themselves in common to the idea of America. But in making this move, Lincoln made it possible to conceive of America as something transcendent. The very quality that seemed most advantageous for his purposes served another purpose as well. In order to make the several states once more thinkable as a unit, Lincoln made it thinkable that anyone who adhered to an abstract belief could be politically “one.” Lincoln made thinkable the idea that America was not at all “provincial,” not at all subject to the “dead hand of civilization,” as Wilson and Roosevelt put it, respectively.

The Elements in Place

After running through some of the most important moves in the history of the American political tradition, an answer begins to emerge to the question, “How did we get here from there?” “Here” is the thinkability of imperial American exceptionalism. “There” is its initial unthinkability. We have seen that the difference between exemplary exceptionalism and imperial exceptionalism consists, in American history, in the difference between the respective conceptions of God, history, and universality that are operative in the political tradition.
What we mean by “American exceptionalism” today is often American imperial exceptionalism. That is the sense in which the term is most controverted, the sense with which it gains the most traction. At the beginning of the present project, that sense of the term was distinguished from the other senses that are not treated here. And at the beginning of this project we said that if we were able to trace some of the roots of the particular idea of imperial American exceptionalism, we would have a better grasp of what it meant for the future of the American political order. We would better be able to answer the question, “Where do we go from here?”

One arrives at the turn of the twentieth century in this inquiry and sees many of the same elements and developments observable at several stages of previous American history, but in new combinations and with new attendant interpretations. The now-disparate strands of the tradition do not seem to form a single coherent thread, but their loose association can be recognized as having come from a previous particular tradition. The strands are made more intelligible now that we have recognized their former coherence. The unraveling is clearer to us who have seen the thread as it was before.

Before moving on to some concluding thoughts, however, the unraveling nature of the tradition at this point in history should be touched on. There was a sense of urgency in the debate over Beveridge’s annexation resolution; it seemed as if the U.S. stood at a crossroads, or perhaps at a dangerous precipice. Walk one way and the result is the dissolution of the Republic. Walk the other way and hope may be preserved.
On February 20th, 1900, Senator Kenney of Delaware delivered a rejoinder to Beveridge:

Mr. President, does not this cry for conquest take us back through the centuries until we find ourselves in that time of the Roman Republic, when by the ambition and greed of some of her sons was begun her conquest of the world—the beginning of her end? In that history can we not see ourselves and read our future? New territories were conquered and their people enslaved. Military governors were sent to rule over them. Strange laws were enacted for their government and alien judges sent to administer them. The religion and manners of the conquerors were enforced; in a word, all the miseries which follow in the train of the conqueror and oppressor came to the peoples to whom Rome brought the blessings of her civilization. Rome then thought herself trusted of the gods for the civilizing of mankind throughout the world, but soon was taught her mistake. In her struggle to destroy the liberties of others she lost her own. Man's unalienable rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—then, as many times since, asserted itself [sic] and the conquered became the conquerors, the slave the master. And Rome, the mistress of the world, repudiated and despised, passed—a page in history. In imperialism she found her end.378

The American political tradition was clearly no longer univocal. It had changed; it had unraveled, and was without a clear core.

When the ideality of Lincoln is combined with the now limitless license granted to a mindset with all the privileges, power, and confidence of chosenness—and without any of the previously attendant possibilities for punishment—and when government is no longer seen as wholly separate from more transcendent purposes and concerns, then the imperial politics of this period is possible. The evidence already shows clearly that the humility and questioning of the Puritans is gone. The ultimacy of the goals achievable by

politics means the conception of what is possible for government has been drastically expanded from the time of the founders. And the Lincolnian view of the abstract foundation of the American political order made expansion even more thinkable on the grounds of realizing “lofty ideals.” The argument here is not that the imperialism of this period had to happen, but that these developments in American history and American self-conception were necessary to make this imperialism possible.

More must be said in the final chapter about the evolution of tradition in general, the advent of the contemporary idea of imperial American exceptionalism, and what this project can contribute to the political way forward.
“Now we face overwhelming evidence that we are not smart enough to recover Eden by assault, and that nature does not tolerate or excuse our abuses. If, in spite of the evidence against us, we are finding it hard to relinquish our old ambition, we are also seeing more clearly every day how that ambition has reduced and enslaved us. We see how everything—the whole world—is belittled by the idea that all creation is moving or ought to move toward an end that some body, some human body, has thought up. To be free of that end and that ambition would be a delightful and precious thing. Once free of it, we might again go about our work and our lives with a seriousness and pleasure denied to us when we merely submit to a fate already determined by gigantic politics, economics, and technology.”

–Wendell Berry

To have one’s fate determined by what Wendell Berry calls “gigantic politics, economics, and technology” has been the increasing lot of those living under the American political order. What began and for decades persisted as an order actuated by the effort for consensus has become instead a splintered, unraveled, derailed tradition characterized by deep disagreement and enmity rather than friendship among citizens. At

home and abroad power is exercised whenever it can be seized, and this pattern of political thought and order, it can be seen, has its roots in the ideas and actions discussed in the chapters above.

We have seen in the course of this dissertation that the justification for American empire on the basis of American exceptionalism was a long time in the making. Understanding the role that American political history has played in the development of the idea of American exceptionalism has required a deep engagement both with various figures throughout American history and with some of the numerous scholarly works that have either clarified or obscured our view of the question. That a project is intelligible as a whole, however, does not mean that it could not be improved or clarified. Since the main argument of this dissertation was summed up at the end of Chapter Five, here I want to consider the significance of what has been found.

In this brief conclusion, I want to point up some areas that could be, but were not, treated in detail in the course of this dissertation, for reasons I will provide below. Second, some words will be offered on what could make this project more complete. Third, I want to dispel what could be a few misconceptions of the argument of this dissertation as a whole. And finally I will reflect on the practical consequences of the theoretical underpinnings and findings of this work, seeking at least to intimate an answer to the question, “Where do we go from here?”, which is as much as can be done in a work like this one.
A Pair of Worthy Parallel Projects

There seem to be two main aspects of the present inquiry that I have not covered in detail that could be fruitfully explored. First, I have mentioned in passing throughout the dissertation that the questions I am dealing with have significant theological implications in addition to the obvious practical and political ones. The nature of Puritan chosenness and the evolution of that particular idea up through the turn of the twentieth century could be explored as a separate project. Though it would bear on the present one, it would not be identical. Similarly, an exploration of the divide between politics and religion before, during, and since the founding period would help to clarify the founders’ political ideas. In the preceding chapters I have tried to set forth the relation of these as clearly as possible without going very far down this road. This particular road could, however, be traveled further and would serve to support the present thesis in a variety of ways. The nature and depth of the movements in theology during Lincoln’s lifetime might shed light upon his thought. But the light may have overwhelmed the present inquiry and served to distract from, rather than enhance, the understanding of the topic at hand. Similarly, Progressive era ministers and theologians were prolific in writing on themes relevant to imperialism. Some work has been done in this area and an exploration of it could be profitable; but it seems to be beside my point here. 380 In this project I have sought not to engage theological ideas for their relevance to politics, but to engage any ideas in the American political tradition that seemed most relevant to the question of the

380. See, for example, Richard M. Gamble’s The War for Righteousness, op. cit.
development of imperial American exceptionalism—*but only insofar*, I should note, as they were relevant to that question. I believe I have done this in the course of the chapters above.

In addition to the importance of theology, I have alluded to and touched on various theories of history throughout the dissertation. From a consideration of the Marxist view of history in Chapter One and the Puritans’ “typological” history in Chapter Two to a short comment on some of the founders’ views of history as variously cyclical or progressive in Chapter Three, there is much more that could be said about this connection. Yet not all of what could be said would be relevant to the development of the idea of imperial American exceptionalism; I have included anything that seemed obviously relevant to my account and sought to add little else.

*The Next Step for this Project*

The most obvious next step for the present inquiry is to bring the framework and findings of this dissertation up to date. Readers today will perhaps have perceived an affinity between the rhetoric and action of the politicians in Chapter Five and some of the recent words and actions of the U.S. Government. These connections should be explored and pointed up. But so far I have tried only to draw connections among the major changes in the American political tradition and the idea of imperial American exceptionalism. This has been largely accomplished even without extending those connections to the present time. The closing pages of Chapter Five took these changes as
their theme, examining the significant changes that have taken place in Americans’ self-conception from colonial times to the turn of the twentieth century. The past of American’s self-conception has, then, been treated already. Yet some reflections on the practical theoretical import of this project—how, in other words, this affects the future of Americans’ self-conception—should be given. In the course of this, some of the political acts appropriate to this self-conception will become apparent.

*Not a Dismissal of All Other Work on the Topic*

As I sought to make clear from the start of this dissertation, my particular schematization of the various claims to American exceptionalism was not meant to reject all previous work on the topic as wrong-headed. I wanted to show, instead, that there are deep differences in everyday usage of the term that have profound consequences for both scholars and citizens. Eliding them together has furthered neither the scholarship on the topic, nor the practical application of our self-conception in domestic or international politics. Distinguishing between the many senses of the term clarified the scope of my own argument and showed its relation to the work that already exists in the field. Putting each argument in its proper place clarifies each of them and makes it easier to begin a deep consideration of the topic itself without speaking in circles.

Without the scheme I laid out in the opening pages, or one much like it, claims to comparative exceptionalism are easily confused with claims to American uniqueness. This means that often an argument given in support of exemplary American
exceptionalism (‘America as a biblical ‘city on a hill’’ or ‘America’s political and economic success has made it a model for the world’) is mistakenly founded on evidence that properly falls under the empirical sense of American exceptionalism (‘America has the greatest upward class mobility in the world’). Arguments about America’s current exceptional economic circumstances (‘America’s gap between rich and poor is widening faster than any other country’) bleed into evidence that American institutions are unique (‘America’s openness to laissez-faire policies has caused the income gap and its acceleration’). Arguments that America’s institutions are unique (‘America was founded as a liberal order’) bleed into arguments that we are the sole rightful hegemon in international politics, now or ever (‘America’s deeply held liberalism means its international actions are always salutary’). Grouping the myriad claims together in this manner shows more clearly than in everyday speech the confusion that often ensues in discussions about American exceptionalism. But, in distinguishing among these and the other varieties of the term, we are better able to see which particular piece of evidence supports which sense of American exceptionalism; thus, we are more able to speak clearly and meaningfully with each other about it.

Distinctions between the various senses of the term allow us to see that the idea of American exceptionalism is woven throughout scholars’, pundits’, and citizens’ accounts of American political action, but that the clarity of such accounts requires the various senses of it to be pointed up. I presented the scheme in Chapter One as a way to distinguish the particular type of American exceptionalism upon which I wished to focus.
from the several senses of the term heard most frequently. What I have called imperial American exceptionalism is the most often politically potent sense of the term, and the one that is presented most often as unproblematic. The idea is often today invoked as either something that all truly patriotic Americans should believe in or something that all right thinking citizens should reject. This sense seemed, accordingly, to warrant the most scrutiny if the real gravity of the term was to be found—since it was the most used and least well-defined of the senses in use.

My own account and others have been thrown into sharper relief because of the array of distinctions that began this inquiry. If a certain account uses different senses of the term synonymously, then this fact can now be pointed up and the real contributions of such an account can be made all the clearer. Conclusions rigorously gleaned from a detailed statistical analysis, for example, may still be illuminating and may still rightfully fall under the heading “American exceptionalism.” But such conclusions need not simultaneously fall under the heading of “imperial American exceptionalism.” Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a statistical argument that supports an imperial position. I want to reiterate, however, my conviction that the terminological imprecision found in any such accounts does not mean that they are wholly inaccurate as far as they go. This is one misconception that I have sought to avoid, but it is not the only possible one.
Not Another Version of the ‘Secularization Thesis’

This dissertation is not a simple rehearsal of the tired secularization thesis, though it could be misunderstood as such. Even the titles and main arguments of Chapters Three and Four might lend themselves to this impression. But when the “separation of the political and religious spheres” was discussed in Chapter Three, I took pains to make clear that such a separation was founded as, and only agreed to because it was then seen as, a boon to the extant Christian cultural and societal order. The separation evident during this period, then, is anything but evidence for secularization. It is likewise with Lincoln.

Though it is right to say that I argue that the “philosophization of the American political tradition” is achieved at the expense of the previous American priority of religion, I do not argue that this was the direct aim or result of Lincoln’s words or influence. Neither does this amount to a secularization of the tradition. Lincoln sought an abstract basis for politics because it allowed him to achieve a concrete political end: the effective prosecution of and end to the Civil War, resulting ultimately in the reunion of North and South. Changing the American people’s perception of their union from concrete to abstract meant that no new concrete political act—a la a new constitutional convention—was required in order for the Southern states to “re-enter” the union. In Lincoln’s contemplation, the states that had “seceded” had never left. But Lincoln sought to heal the rift that had clearly formed in America despite whatever the constitutional
classification of the rift would ultimately be. The healing would come, he thought, with
the new sense of unity effected by a consensus built around his words and his vision.

No new consensus resulted, however; instead, the fraying of the thread of the
American political tradition meant that multiple accounts of America’s self-conception
each competed for subscribers. *This* was the result of the “philosophization” of American
politics. These aims and results are, then, not necessarily either secular or secularizing.
Rendering America as an abstract idea need not have ultimately resulted—and did not
proximately result—in secularization. The immense importance of religion to the
imperialists covered in Chapter Five is a potent counterpoint to any who would criticize
my argument as another iteration of the secularization thesis.

*Not an Argument for Historical Inexorability*

I want to make it clear, too, that the argument I have made is not meant to support
the belief in inexorable historical processes. I touched on this in Chapter One when I
discussed the modified Voegelinian method I have used throughout this project. This
method allows for discussion of the historical relations of ideas to one another and ideas
to historical events without also drawing lines of necessary causality between them.

The story of the development of the idea of imperial American exceptionalism did
not have to occur exactly as it did. The development of the ideas from the Puritans and
the founders through Abraham Lincoln to the turn of the twentieth century could have
happened differently. But the end of this line of development, i.e. the Progressive era
imperialists, would not have happened in the same way without the peculiar beginning it had with the Puritans. If the Puritan worldview was not initially deposited into the tradition and then modified over time, then the various strands of the tradition that ultimately form the worldview of the Progressive era imperialists would have necessarily been made up of different elements, if it were to materialize at all, in this imaginary alternate universe. These different elements would have, necessarily, required a different balance in order to be coherent. The balance may have never been imperial. But though this follows from my argument, it is mere abstract speculation and to the side of my main point. My main point is this: the argument I have tried to provide throughout the dissertation is one about modalities other than necessary historical causality. If, in other words, we take for granted the initial deposit of the Puritans and the contribution of the founders and the change effected by Lincoln on the American political tradition, then the imperialism of the Progressive era is more intelligible than otherwise. Again, this does not mean it was inevitable or that it was the product of an inexorable historical process. This line of thinking, in fact, pushes against such conceptions of history.

I am arguing, then, that when Wilson sets the country to war not against a particular enemy but for a universal and abstract goal that this is not the inevitable consequence of Lincoln’s redefinition of America as an idea. But I am arguing that Lincoln’s move is part of Wilson’s; it is implied in it. Wilson’s move could not have been made without Lincoln’s, though of course it is possible to imagine either Lincoln or Wilson acting differently in some alternate universe. Again the main point is that if
Lincoln had acted differently, Wilson would have to have acted differently, because the tradition would have been different. The possibilities for political action, accordingly, would have been different. The arguments Wilson made and the actions he took would have been less palatable to the American people if Lincoln had not argued and acted in the way he did.

As was implied throughout this project, and as should now be made explicit, the relation of ideas to other ideas and to events in history always requires an agent. The main theoretical factor in any political decision is the understanding of particular citizens or officials—not an abstract accounting of the full theoretical dimensions of a certain idea. In other words, it was the founders’ reception of the colonial political tradition that helped them form their own ideas of the appropriate scale and operation of politics—even before each was steeped in the Enlightenment philosophy of the day. And even if nearly all the elites of the day were schooled from a very young age in the texts of Hobbes, Locke, Bolingbroke, and Montesquieu, still the institutions operative around the founders were not themselves born out of those books. The institutions extant in colonial America were adapted from the Bible, from British experience, and from generations of colonial political practice. All of these strands were combined by the founders with

381 By this I do not mean to subscribe to any “great man” theory of history. I am making a more general claim than this. I am not arguing either for or against the idea that historic changes must needs be ushered in by singular "great" figures, though I am admittedly unconvinced it is true. Nor do I mean to agree even with historians like Richard Hofstadter when he argues that the agitation for invasion and dominion in the Philippines was primarily the achievement of a very small group of national elites. See his “Cuba, the Philippines, and Manifest Destiny,” 163. In this case, the argument would be that elites are sometimes—and particularly in this American moment—the “swing votes” on the direction of the country. Again, I am arguing mainly that ideas exist in history, particularly in political history, in the minds and practical actions of certain agents, and not absolutely or up in the ether.
elements of the thinking of their own day into a unity that amounted to a practical consensus about how politics should run. Agents were then, as now, the most important theoretical part of the practical equation.

Re-Spinning the Thread

In Chapter Five above, the analogy implied by the Voegelinian term “derailment” was critiqued and revised. Instead of the derailment of a tradition, I preferred to speak of a tradition’s unraveling. Though I pointed out at the time that one of the advantages of this revision was that it seemed more accurately to depict the process of the historical change of ideas, here I wish to reflect on another advantage: the new analogy seems also to describe a way forward.

Just as “derailment” seemed to imply that the tradition had gone disastrously off track, so also it is implied that the solution, if there were one, would be to “get back on track,” to rejoin the tradition as it had been. In Chapter Five I wrote that the options before the heirs to a derailed tradition were not so simple as that. Rather than merely being faced with a choice between reversion to a previous way of life, on the one hand, and the construction of an entirely new way, on the other, it seemed that a derailed or unraveled “tradition” itself could become a resource for elements that may be bound together into a new balance, if not into an entirely coherent tradition. More concretely, if Lincoln’s words represent a derailment of the American tradition, it is just not true that each and every element of that prior tradition is necessarily left behind after the
derailment or destroyed in it. Elements of the prior tradition remain, and these elements
do not necessarily need to fit together in the same way as before in order to be reclaimed
or reused. When speaking of a tradition or ideas, their chronological spot on the clock is
not the sole determinant for whether they may be lived out.

The Constitution and Declaration of Independence, even if their meaning has been
distorted, remain important and prominent parts of the American political tradition.
Arguments about their real meaning are among the most contentious in politics because
there seems to be broad agreement that their meaning matters. And if there is broad
agreement here, it is necessarily possible for there to be broad agreement. And if it is
possible for there to be broad agreement about the American political tradition in this
small way, perhaps that agreement can be widened. If this agreement is widened, then
perhaps efforts toward consensus—and the advent of a new robust tradition—are not
impossibly out of reach.

As was said above in a different connection, part of the contribution of this
dissertation has been implicitly to show that agents are the main force in the changing of
political traditions. Different balances of extant elements and the addition of new ones to
old are constantly ventured in a vital tradition. But a tradition cannot remain what it is if a
radically new balance becomes ascendant overnight. Such a precipitous change would
amount to a derailment or unraveling of the tradition, and would nearly exclude the
possibility of consensus; it tends toward an unraveling of a given society’s traditional
political order, even if elements of that tradition remain. It seems safe to say that this is
somewhat descriptive of America, where many divergent interpretations of the founders, and even rejection of their thinking, is held up as the operative account of what America is. All can agree that the Declaration is important, in other words, but for reasons that differ widely from one another. Yet this need not be the final word; consensus may be ventured.

Since political traditions are constantly being modified, added to, and subtracted from by the agents who are its bearers, and since these moves sometimes amount to a derailment or unraveling of that tradition, particular agents are capable also of preventing such derailing or unraveling. By helping preserve—in political operation and in political thought—the integrity of the extant order, an agent can in principle help avert the unraveling that characterizes contemporary American politics. A further question is raised here: what if the unraveling has already occurred? What can be done with the disparate strands of an unraveled thread? What is called for is not merely the preservation of the status quo, but the re-establishment of consensus. This consensus need not be identical to the former one, but may be. It will require the re-appropriation of many of the old strands of the tradition because the traditional status of a tradition means that it is most likely to be effective in rendering a people politically unified. But other strands may be introduced into the thread, so long as none of them is wholly antithetical to the tradition. To further pursue the analogy, the thread must be re-spun. But how may this be done?
Can we forge ahead into a new balance of our political order? Can we return to the balance that preceded its unraveling? Can we be politically one in a way that does not lend itself to imperialism, a result antithetical to the tradition prior to the turn of the twentieth century? Can we re-spin the thread of our tradition without also including the elements that led to its unraveling? The answer to these questions is necessarily yes, because the re-appropriation of the tradition, the reaching of consensus, is always a possibility when an agent takes this task upon himself. The resources are present in society and in history. And the elements found there can be balanced in ways that comport with one another and with the prior the American political tradition. Though there can be no formula for the accomplishment of the task, we know its broad outlines.

Americans can once again, and with caution, consider themselves the world’s exemplar, so long as an inward focus remains the priority and so long as the good of the world is put in its rightful place behind the good of individual citizens, their communities, and their country. The balance of the spheres of religion and politics can be reasserted with the good of each sphere—and ultimately the good of the country as a whole—is held in constant view. The American political tradition can once again be seen as a lived tradition, rather than merely a set of abstract ideas or beliefs. Citizens, scholars, and politicians alike can work to build a consensus about who we are as a people and to articulate and live out what this self-conception means for practical politics. But, it can be seen, this is not a political program or campaign platform. It is a task for each citizen and scholar in his own life and work. Each must take what is best about the tradition and
reject what is aberrational. And each must discover which elements fit into the tradition, and which do not, by himself appropriating the tradition as it was and as it has developed. The elements required for this task still exist in America, and the tools of persuasion and active operation have always been at Americans’ disposal. All that is required now is its performance. The present project, while it has shown the problem at hand and the path ahead, can only be the start.
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