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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE GENESIS OF THE U.S.: A REPORT OF FPRI'S HISTORY INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

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*In conjunction with the publication of Walter McDougall's critically acclaimed book *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History, 1585—1828*, FPRI held its 11th History Institute for Teachers on June 5-6, 2004. Chaired by McDougall and David Eisenhower, the conference brought together forty-five teachers from fifteen states for a weekend of lectures and seminars featuring leading international scholars. Papers from the conference will be published in the Winter 2005 issue of *Orbis* (due out in December 2004) or on FPRI's website (www.fpri.org). FPRI thanks the Annenberg Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation for their support of FPRI's History Institutes. Upcoming History Institutes on the Middle East and the Koreas are also supported by Mason Crest Publishers (masoncrest.com), the James and Agnes Kim Foundation, and Mr. & Mrs. Robert A. Fox.*

COLONIAL ORIGINS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

Walter McDougall, co-chair of FPRI's History Institute and professor of international relations and history at the University of Pennsylvania, began by noting that devotionals to "divine right republicanism" pervade America's national hymns, texts, and oratory to such a degree that most of us do not even notice them. But in addition to fashioning a new Promised Land -- the last, best hope of mankind -- Americans also can suffer messianic delusions, cloaking the self-centered pursuit of happiness in self-righteous piety. We run the full gamut from charity and sacrifice to cruelty and hypocrisy precisely because we've been uniquely free to be fully human. Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke understood this when he observed in 1775 that "Even if the colonists were less numerous, less loving of liberty, less steeped in religion, less proud, they would still be irrepressible for the simple fact Americans are full of chicanery and take whatever they want."

English drifter Thomas Paine, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1775, defined the colonists' identity for them fourteen months later, in *Common Sense*. Drawing on both radical Whig ideology and evangelical Protestant millenarianism, he wrote that anyone who wasn't a Patriot wasn't an American. His conflation of Biblical and secular principles made America a

kind of religion. He repeatedly warned that "We the people" will "get" anyone who failed to embrace the cause.

Yet only a minority of colonists displayed sacrifice for the cause. The earliest colonial promoters were bold operators who hustled to attract labor and capital. As early as 1651, when Parliament passed the first Navigation Act, New England and Virginia actually forbade compliance with English law. The "unanimous" passage of the Declaration of Independence required arm-twisting, logrolling, and possibly threats and bribes. Benjamin Franklin engaged in diplomatic duplicity, and Federalists such as Madison and Hamilton employed brilliant deceptions to convoke the Constitutional Congress.

The Declaration's framers hoped to harness private ambitions to the public good, devising checks and balances to corruption. But Americans quickly adapted themselves to a free market in goods, services, law, and spirituality. The stories of westward expansion, the admission of new states, and the development of the railroads and canals all have their free-wheeling side. But Paine's vision did come true: liberty under the law freed a people already trained to be hustlers in the positive sense of doers, dreamers, builders as well as in the sense of speculators, manipulators, profiteers and scrofflaws. This, along with bountiful resources, permitted the U.S. to build the most dynamic nation in history.

Far from rejecting the spirits of English expansion, the colonies embraced them and may even have rebelled to defend these spirits of capitalism, reformation, the geopolitical idea that settlement confers ownership, and the right of eminent domain. Yes, they wanted religious and civil liberty, but as Oscar Handlin put it, "Liberty was a continent Americans found while searching for something else."

Why did the American Revolution occur? Many colonists displayed contempt for distant authority the moment they hit the New World, and yet those proto-Americans remained loyal to the crown for 156 years after landing in Jamestown in 1607 and fought with the British in many wars. It took the English victory in the Seven Years French-Indian War,

which the colonists had helped achieve, to separate them. After the conquest of Canada, the king violated all four of the above spirits. Parliament imposed new taxes and legalized the Catholic Church, Britain ceded the Mississippi Basin to Spain, and George III forbade white settlement west of the Appalachians, to protect his new subjects, the Indians. These statesman-like responses looked to America like heresy.

Prof. McDougall concluded that America is a priesthood of believers in a civil religion, master builders, revolutionaries devoted to creative destruction, a jealous people whose pursuit of happiness will not be interfered with, and hustling self-reinventors. But as Rev. John Wiswall observed in 1776, "the American people are altogether too free [ever] to be content with their happiness."

MIGRATION AND COLONIZATION

Daniel Richter of the University of Pennsylvania's McNeil Center for Early American Studies deconstructed some of the popular perceptions of the peopling of the continent through 1763 and presented ways teachers might give their students a sense of the depth of time and diversity involved.

Having arrived in America at least 10,000 and possibly as long as 35,000 years ago, it is inaccurate to depict Native Americans as simply the nation's first immigrants: "since the Ice Age" is as good as forever for these purposes. Nor were the millennia until the Europeans' arrival years of "nothing happening." The tribes dispersed and came to have as different cultures as Europeans did among themselves, with similarly shifting and reconfiguring trade, political, and religious centers.

Nor did they see the colonists as representing one homogenous "European" empire along some fixed east-west frontier. The imperial landscape was crowded, with the West Indies the center of the new world and North America a distant frontier for many colonists. Settlements like New France, New Netherlands, New Sweden did eventually emerge along rivers to exploit trade with Native Americans. Indeed, the seeds of ethnic diversity may be represented in settlements such as Albany.

For their part, the colonists saw themselves not so much as American but as part of the larger British-Atlantic world, which grew, as the Native Americans' settlements had, along trade routes. Colonists like the Dutch or French had come not as settlers, but to man trading posts. Only in 1763, with the French-Indian war, did a more east-west border, relentlessly pushing west, emerge.

Prof. Richter also reviewed the push-pulls of the 17th-century English migration and the wider 18th-century Atlantic migration. He noted that some European cultures showed a greater affinity for moving, both within and out of their country, than others. And America was but one of many places Europeans could go to seek economic and other opportunities. English emigrants could equally elect Ireland, for instance.

LIBERTY AND RELIGION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

J. C. D. Clark of the University of Kansas considered how reinterpretation of the American Revolution can illuminate our understanding of U.S. culture in the present. The Revolution was about liberty, but over-familiarity with the term can lead us to miss what people meant by "liberty" in the late eighteenth century and how Americans came to conceive of liberty as a sacred cause.

The evolution of the language of rights is analogous. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the nature of "rights" was keenly debated. Over the centuries, more and more claims of "rights" came to be made until after the Second World War, the "rights of man" had metamorphosed into "human rights."

Something similar happened in the 18th century to the idea of "liberty." Previously, "liberties" were predominantly understood as specific privileges or entitlements, and "liberty" as a summation of them. This usage changed, especially in the American colonies. The American Declaration of Independence did not assert that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" were self-evident; what was self-evident was that "their Creator" had endowed men with these things. This made the Declaration a claim about God's actions and intentions. It went on to list a series of grievances—"liberties" that had been violated. But "liberty" was no mere summing up of these specific liberties. It was a different, more elevated, idea.

Prof. Clark located the American image of "liberty" within the positive and negative liberty categorization propounded by Isaiah Berlin: liberty can be freedom from or freedom to do something. "Liberties" echo an attachment to "freedom from"; "liberty" looks to "freedom to." In the American Revolution, "freedom from" gets collapsed into "freedom to."

David Hackett Fischer has traced four different "folkways" of the concept in America: "ordered liberty" in Puritan New England, "hegemonic liberty" in Virginia, reciprocal liberty in the Quaker Delaware region; and "natural liberty" in the backcountry, peopled by Scots and Irish. Of course, these ways changed over time, but "liberty" retains to this day in America religious connotations. Thus President Bush could explain in a 2002 interview that his values were "God-given values. These aren't U.S.-created values." The common feature of many aspects of contemporary U.S. culture has been to remake the world in its own image, an evangelical project that contrasts with understandings of "liberty" elsewhere in the world. This raises the question whether other societies have been more successful in safeguarding "freedom from," and whether the U.S.'s self-image as a defender of freedom and its frequent assertion of the "freedom to" rest on an important misinterpretation of its origins.

STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY IN NORTH AMERICA

Jeremy Black of the University of Exeter recalled that the struggle for mastery of America didn't end with the colonies' attaining independence. If anything, they became less protected, and it was far from clear how many times the

empire would strike back. This would play a major role not just in American foreign policy, but also in its domestic history.

Britain, France, and Spain were all present in North America in the 1780s, and America was peculiarly vulnerable as a nation on the oceanic periphery—most of its population lived within 75 miles of the coast. The Continental Navy would, excepting the Civil War, not be able to project power until the late 19th century. Coastal defense was a much larger concern than defending against American Indians. And the peace settlement had left many unanswered questions that would lead ultimately to the Civil War.

How would the nation formed in 1776 deal with its fragility? Its westward expansion was far less inevitable and more syncretic than used to be emphasized. There have been few cases (America, Siberia, Australia) where it was relatively easy for a Western nation to overpower the natives. Western colonies of the 19th-20th centuries lasted only an astonishingly short fifty years in much of the world. But colonization was not what Britain had been trying to do in America: it had only sought maritime hegemony and trade. France, too, in the 1730s-50s was seeking not settlements but trade in Quebec, Havana, and Manila. And operating and supplying a gunboat navy to protect these was very difficult. Prof. Black also noted that the British had had no formal colonial policy. It delegated a great deal of authority to entities such as the East India Co. and the Hudson Bay Co., which were self governed by the local elite. And the elderly George II had been more concerned with the implications of European conflicts than with events in, say, the Ohio Valley: it had no master plan to gain control there. The same can be said of France, which gained Quebec almost by chance.

After the war of independence, only these nations' preoccupations elsewhere permitted America's expansion, creating a power vacuum America could fill without even needing to fund and field a large military. But its frontiers took shape in a protean fashion, with no obvious northern or southern boundary, and the nation only became imperial late in the 19th century. Initially, a great deal of debate surrounded the issue how to mobilize strength when your nation has and wants a different state structure and ideology. With the 20th century Cold War and America's new foreign policy of interventionism, the question is how far the existing judicial, taxation, and other state structures can support this new orientation.

THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

Gordon Wood of Brown University gave the keynote speech, co-sponsored by the Brown Club of Philadelphia. He began by discussing the many ways America's constitution was unusual, if not unique, at the time -- federalism, separation of powers, separation of church and state, independent judiciaries and presidents, judicial review -- that are now typical. Similarly, Americans used to be thought unique in their obsession with rights, but that obsession now is shared throughout the developed world.

However, the American constitution remains unique in light of its specific origins. Unlike many European countries that

existed as nations before they were states, America was a state before it was a nation. At its founding, America was imagined as something resembling England, but lacking the corruption Americans believed plagued the English constitution.

The American revolutionaries conceived of a constitution as a written document, a fundamental law circumscribing the government. The English constitution, in contrast, was an unwritten mixture of laws, customs, principles, and institutions, referring both to the way the government was constituted and to the rights it was to protect. The American constitution was to be a document distinct from and superior to all the operations of government -- "antecedent to" a government, as Thomas Paine put it; a Bible for every family to possess and cite. Its framers knew that to make sense of their envisioned system, sovereignty had to remain with the people. One may agree or disagree with the wisdom of the outcomes this has produced, but Prof. Wood emphasized that the American constitution does truly rest with the people.

FOUNDATIONS, FOUNDATIONALISMS, FUNDAMENTALISMS: THINKING ABOUT AMERICAN HISTORY

To contextualize the ways he thinks about American history, J. G. A. Pocock of Johns Hopkins University began by explaining ancient vs. modern ideas of republics.

The creation of the American republic occurred at a hinge moment when the understanding of republics in ancient and neoclassical terms was increasingly in competition with a new, modern, commercial, and individualist understanding. In the ancient understanding, the reason for having a republic was to enhance citizens' opportunity to develop their political capacity; in the modern understanding, the function of the political was to liberate and protect personal and social endeavors. Where some scholars stress the speed and completeness with which the American republic moved from the ancient understanding towards the modern, Prof. Pocock emphasizes the extent to which ancient values survived and complicated Americans' understanding of themselves.

Ancients insisted that a republic could not survive if its magistrates and citizens became corrupt or dependent on one another, which would lead to their degeneration as moral beings. Prof. Pocock noted that all modern republics have a problem with corruption, but none equals the U.S. in the degree to which it constantly worries about it and fears that it is becoming corrupt. This stems from the ancient idea that republican virtue and corruption are both incompatible and intimately linked.

In the ancient model, citizens met in assemblies to govern themselves. As the republics grew into empires, it became harder for these assemblies to meet; and as they became civil societies, it also became less desirable: as Adam Smith remarked, people in civil society have better things to do than to be governing themselves all the time. Thus arose the idea of electing representatives to govern for them. America's modernity is seen in James Madison's writing in the Federalist Papers—distorting the history of political language—that a polity the citizens rule themselves is a

democracy, but one they rule through representatives is a republic.

At least a hundred years before Madison wrote this it had been a commonplace of English political rhetoric that representatives easily become corrupt. In our own time, it is hard to believe that those we elect in any sense represent us. If we identify ourselves with them, we are giving ourselves to them; if we don't, we are allowing them to rule us. The political class begins to look like an oligarchy of professional politicians.

With the American Revolution, Americans who had thought they were English began to think of themselves as no longer British. The English kingdom had expanded to become a complex monarchy including Ireland, Scotland, and the colonies of Caribbean. The debate about republics, ancient and modern, was part of a larger debate surrounding the ways the monarchy had expanded, what Edmund Burke termed "the present discontents." The language of this debate became the language of a civil war in the American colonies and what the Romans called a social war (between associated states) in the empire.

The Declaration of Independence is not republican -- it goes no further than to declare the government of a king dissolved. One notes the use it makes of John Locke's account of how a government may be dissolved. Locke imagined the dissolution of the government of a single state, whose people then reverted to the state of nature. The stated purpose of the Declaration was to dissolve the ties that had connected one people with another -- it is not terminating a civil government so much as an empire.

The Declaration had to invent concepts of "American" and "British," neither of which yet existed—the English and Scottish did not think of themselves as "British," as the Declaration treats them. But the Declaration does not declare George III deposed, solicit support from within Britain, or incite the "disaffected patriots" of England to dissolve their government. To the British people it spoke only of rejection and defiance.

In America's civil religion, the Declaration is the moment of the Covenant and the Constitution the moment of the Law. Few other nations begin their history with such a conscious act of foundation, which proclaims principles said to be applicable to the rest of mankind. While it took Abraham Lincoln to mythologize America's founding as the world's last, best hope, the American founders assuredly thought they were founders. Prof. Pocock recalled Michael Oakeshott, who saw history as an unending stream of contingency, in which one takes from time to time such actions as seem necessary and justifiable -- "when in the course of human events" they appear necessary and justifiable. On an Oakeshottian reading, 1776 was a moment when Americans found it necessary to found a polity on the basis of certain enduring principles.

America's foundational culture makes it easy to fall into a cycle of self-condemnation and denial. American historiography, Prof. Pocock noted, can alternate between a

liturgical mode in which the principles are celebrated and a Jeremiad mode in which the people are condemned for falling away from them. Prof. Pocock dismissed the idea of American messianism, but noted that the American universalism of the moment may arise from the Enlightenment belief that all good things come from having a commercial civil society and a free market, regardless of whether preconditions have been met.

WHIGS VS. DEMOCRATS: COMPETING VISIONS OF AMERICAN POLITICS

Allen Guelzo of Eastern University discussed the emergence of political parties in the new Republic over the years 1750-1865. The Founders had not anticipated political parties: Thomas Jefferson declared that allegiance to a party was "the last degradation of a free and moral agent," while Alexander Hamilton vowed "to abolish factions and to unite all parties for the general welfare." Nevertheless, in less than a decade the ideological division between the two men had split American politics between the Hamiltonian (or Federalist) and the Jeffersonian (or Democratic-Republican, or simply Republican), with each blaming the other for making their own party necessary.

Hamilton's and Jefferson's conflict over economic policy touched Americans on almost every rung of the economic ladder and invited side-taking, to elect representatives who would avert the evil posed by the other side. This required expenditures of commitment that had to be rewarded with more than just electoral success. Beyond the patronage this engendered, political parties came to serve the larger purpose of establishing what Daniel Walker Howe called "political culture."

Thomas Jefferson's 1801 inaugural speech ("we are all Republicans; we are all Federalists") sought to quiet party politics, but differences over economic policy led Jefferson's own party to schismatize by 1820 into the more federalist National-Republicans and the agrarian Democratic-Republicans. By 1832, displeased with Andrew Jackson's war on the Second National Bank, National-Republicans had officially divorced to become the Whig Party, a name Henry Clay selected for its historic connotation of resistance to tyranny. The Whigs sought to differentiate themselves from Jacksonians by standing for economic opportunity, a national Christian social morality, and the preservation of the Union.

The Whigs saw a blending of public and private ethics; Jackson's Democrats (the old Democratic-Republicans) compartmentalized the public and the private, wanting laissez faire over the latter sphere. The Democrats made political virtue almost synonymous with the popular will, where Whiggism was suspicious of popular democracy. After the Panic of 1837, the Whigs had their first presidential victory in 1840, sending William Henry Harrison to the White House.

By 1856, slavery in the western states had become a dividing issue, sending deep South Whigs into the ranks of the Democrats and anti-slavery Northern Whigs into the newly-formed Republican Party. The spirit of the Whigs, however,

remained in the policies of former Whig-turned-Republican Abraham Lincoln, who embodied Whig self-improvement, reason over passion, and striving for national unity. The Civil War became the crucible in which these Whig elements hardened into national culture. Lincoln's Whiggism ebbed in the 20th century in the face of a rejuvenated Jeffersonianism. Whether this culture of hedonistic individualism and subsidy rather than aspiration will be challenged by a new national crisis is the burden the present generation will bear.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING U.S. HISTORY

Paul Dickler, AP U.S. History Teacher at Neshaminy High School and Senior Fellow of FPRI's Marvin Wachman Fund, summarized some key lessons for teachers. Students should

be urged to guard against envisioning early America as just like modern America; a foreign land would be the better model. Through the early 19th century, it was more maritime than students may realize. The founding fathers are important, but it's the generations thereafter who make America what it is. He would also remind that more than ten thousand years residency is a long time, so Native Americans should be given their due. Our Whig heritage may be underappreciated, as is our idea that liberty is sacred -- the corollary to the idea that religion should be free. He presented various sample teaching aids, and also led discussion on how to help high school students develop both a factual knowledge base and critical thinking skills, without putting one before the other.

FPRI's History Institutes for Teachers are specially designed for secondary school teachers and curriculum supervisors. Each weekend-long program features an intellectual feast, not to mention free room and board for the teachers! Previous weekends have covered Teaching Geography and Geopolitics; Teaching World Religions; Teaching the Vietnam War; Multiculturalism in World History; The Cold War Revisited; 200 Years of American Foreign Policy; Teaching History -- How and Why; and America and the Idea of the West. Keynote speakers have included William McNeill, Emeritus Professor of History, University of Chicago; John Lewis Gaddis, Professor of History, Yale University; and Jeremy Black, Professor of History, University of Exeter (United Kingdom). For materials from these weekends, visit our website at www.fpri.org.

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