"The Constitution of the People"

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INTRODUCTION

WILSON CAREY MCWILLIAMS

The Greeks thought of the polis as an active, formative thing, training the minds and characters of the citizens; we think of it as a piece of machinery for the production of safety and convenience. The training in virtue, which the medieval state left to the Church, and the polis made its own concern, the modern state leaves to God knows what.

—H. D. F. Kitto

This book is an examination of American political life and culture by six distinguished scholars, an inquiry into our political soul that is urgently contemporary and mirrored in headlines. At the same time, it speaks to the perennialities and, especially, to the political riddle of the many and the one.

All political societies are “many,” complex unions of individuals and families, skills and interests, so that Aristotle regarded it as a decisive criticism of Plato’s Republic that it seemed to reduce citizenship to a mere unison rather than a harmony. Yet, just as harmony requires some ordering or ruling principle, every political society is also “one,” identifiably different from all others, unique. The unity of a political society is thus tied to its identity, an understanding shared by its members of what collectively they are about, extended over time. It is not visible or material: Boundaries are drawn by convention or allegiance; and just as a nation like Poland can persist without “natural” frontiers, so geographic boundaries may enclose different and even hostile polities, as in Timor, Ireland, or Santo Domingo. The members of a public do not necessarily look very much alike, beyond the humanity that unites all peoples, nor are their material interests evidently common. Looking at any human group, the eye sees separate bodies; it may observe a physical similarity between members of families and clans; in villages and simple
societies it may even perceive common work, with a division of labor resting on age and gender, hinting at broadly similar interests. This is ordinary vision's outer limit. A political society, however, includes complexly related interests that often conflict; in these multinational days, moreover, citizens may very well have some interests that are closer to those of foreigners than to those of their fellows. For both reasons unity can be hard to discern. A political society can be symbolized, but it cannot be seen: It is defined by thought, reflected in speech and especially in law, so that “the one” is ultimately an idea, a quality of spirit that serves as the rule or measure for the quantities that we see in political life. Thus American patriotism, in Adlai Stevenson's noble evocation: "When an American says that he loves his country, he means not only that he loves the New England hills, the prairies glistening in the sun, the wide and rising plains, the great mountains and the sea. He means that he loves an inner air, an inner light in which freedom lives and in which a man can draw the breath of self-respect." These essays are explorations in political interiority, an attempt to answer Kitto's question, united by the effort to understand the identity of the United States in a way that does justice to the paradoxes and pluralities of American politics.

The book opens with J. David Greenstone's description of American political culture as a continuing debate between two contending versions of liberal democracy; Robert N. Bellah and Jean Bethke Elshtain then offer diagnoses of the condition of civil society in America, based on their understandings of the relation between individuality and community; Michael Novak and Michael Walzer present two very different views of the Constitution and its impact on American life; finally, Robert E. Calvert ties his analysis of the Progressive tradition to a challenging delineation of the language and conduct of modern American politics. Each essay has its own special sound, and there is more than a little discord: Michael Novak is less critical of American life than the other contributors and more inclined to see economics as a cornerstone of republican government; in a more muted way, Jean Bethke Elshtain worries about the implications of some of her colleagues' appreciation of community. But for all their jangling, these essays have an assonance and, perhaps, a melody.

As Robert Bellah observes, *e pluribus unum*, the republic's motto, originally referred to the states and the federal government, political societies within a larger union, but that relationship is otherwise all but invisible in this book. In our America, national institutions and
allegiances have overwhelmed the states, and the contributors to this volume seem content to have it so, although several express regret at the decline of the local and participant politics that Tocqueville admired. In these essays, “the many" ordinarily refers to individuals or to the families, churches, and associations of “civil society," distinguished from the State. With varying emphasis, all the contributors warn against the abuse and overextension of State power. An even stronger theme, however, is set by Tocqueville’s fear that individualism, having undermined political life, eventually would weaken all relationships, leaving human beings only so many isolated selves, creatures of the moment, desperate but trivial. And all these essays seek some tertium, some middle term between a State grown too intrusive and citizens become too distant from public life, a balance between particular freedom and common purpose.

To speak of purpose is to recall Aristotle’s argument that every regime, every “constitution,” rests on an implicit answer to the question, “What is the good life?” As Robert Calvert suggests in the concluding essay, Americans from the beginning have assumed a close relationship between their own prospects for a good life and the Constitution bestowed by the founders and ordained by their predecessors. And this is the fundamental basis of paradox and ambiguity in our own time.

Augustine’s grand simplification of Aristotle’s question, and our own, reduced the answers to two: “self-love reaching the point of contempt for God” contrasted with “the love of God carried as far as contempt for self.” Recognizing that, in secular practice, no person and no regime is wholly devoted to one or the other of these warring principles in the human soul, Augustinian doctrine regards all politics as a struggle for preeminence between the two loves and their two cities.

In the American tradition, this is a familiar dialectic, the basis of a “people of paradox,” wonderfully captured by David Greenstone’s contrast of the “two liberalisms” of Jefferson and Adams and the “civic ambivalence” they entail. Their modern teachers—primarily Locke and his epigones—taught and teach Americans to see human beings as by nature separate individuals, so many bodies, each with its desires and private experiences, engrossed with the pursuit of gratification and self-preservation. Political society, in these terms, is an instrument for affording a more effective individual liberty through civil peace and the mastery of nature. The “first object of government,” Madison urged, is to preserve and enable a fuller development of our diverse faculties. Consequently, the common good
is only an aggregate in which, at any point, some will be losers; a
more inclusive version of the public interest requires that govern-
ment be so contrived that the “silent operation of the laws” guaran-
tees, in the long term, a measure of equality and community (an un-
likely result, Greenstone observes, when some of the losers were
slaves).9

By contrast, dominant religions in the United States have taught
that originally, individuals are not free. The body, left to itself, is
slavish, the prisoner of desire, while the soul’s self-centered, inward
rejection of its finitude, dependence, and mortality is a denial of its
very humanity, not liberty but illusion. Redemption in the highest
sense may be the work of Grace. Nevertheless, biblical religion in
America has generally assigned a role to human societies and poli-
ties in drawing the self out of its sullen privacies.10 Shrewdly used,
delight, punishment, and the regulation of ambition can attach in-
dividuals to family, property, friends, country, and even, more tenu-
ously, to humanity itself, nurturing the human capacity for love. In
this view, “self-determining power” (John Adams’s phrase) is devel-
oped only through communities which help us to govern impulse
and overcome illusion. Even the highest liberty, beyond the reach of
convention and law, belongs to citizens of God’s city, who see the
partiality of all human polities and things. Individuality is antitheti-
cal to individualism, and loving sacrifice for the common good is the
expression of a free spirit.

Greenstone argues persuasively that a healthy politics in America
requires a balanced dialogue between these historic voices, a skepti-
cal individualism to guard against rigidity and dogma, and a re-
formed, transcendent doctrine to regulate individual and group
selfishness. But maintaining such a balance is a difficult task calling
for great statecraft and good fortune. The ordinary rule when first
principles conflict, as Lincoln observed in relation to slavery, is that
a house divided cannot stand; a riven regime must dissolve or move
toward coherence, a new unity based on the victory of one side or the
triumph of a higher standard capable of subordinating the older an-
tagonisms.11 In any viable political society, the one must enfold and
govern the many.12

In their different ways, all the contributors to this book worry that
the religious, communitarian voice in America’s cultural debate is
growing dangerously reedy, increasingly inaudible against a strident
individualism. Robert Bellah and Jean Elshtain make explicit ap-
peals to Catholic social teaching and to Protestant thinkers like
Reinhold Niebuhr and Glenn Tinder; Walzer, Calvert, and Green-
stone invoke republican values informed by religion. Even Michael Novak, who celebrates the Framers' interest in commercial enterprise, urges us to see commerce as the foundation of their republicanism, part of a political design devoted to the inventive and creative spirit, not merely the private pursuit of material gain—a grand adventure rather than a sordid scrabbling.

These concerns are at least as old as the Constitution, the echo of Anti-Federalist warnings against the neglect of public spirit and moral virtue. As Novak reminds us, the American Framers, devoted to individual liberty, rejected the prevailing aristocratic ideal of a virtuous republic, abandoning the effort to overcome the "causes" of a factious private spirit—impossible without intolerable repression, or so Madison claimed in Federalist 10—in favor of controlling its "effects." In that familiar argument, the danger of majority faction, the chief problem of republican government, is minimized by a large republic in which majorities will necessarily be shifting coalitions, full of conflict and based on compromise, morally mediocre at best. For the Framers, it counted as an advantage that such a politics teaches citizens to limit their political commitments and enthusiasms: In the school of The Federalist, detachment substitutes for civic virtue.

In the Framers' doctrine, attachment is to be distrusted because the ties of love and community bind individuals to particular places and persons, institutions, and ideas without regard to their utility. It makes matters worse that the strongest attachments, the results of early education and long familiarity, chain us to the past. Even reason is dangerous when reinforced by attachment. Like human beings themselves, Madison argues, human reason is "timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated." In association, human beings are apt to reason and act boldly, and at moments like the American Revolution, when private passions are restrained by common danger and shared outrage, an empowered citizenry may become a fraternal public, capable of great things. The Framers, however, had little more fondness than Jean Elshtain for such "armed virtue," especially since they thought it certain to be short lived. Under ordinary circumstances, they held that individuals are likely to be more rational in isolation. Leaders who are subject to scrutiny and hopeful of honor may be able to discipline private desires; for most citizens, the combination of personal invisibility with strength of numbers is an invitation to faction and partisanship. Even if every Athenian citizen had been a Socrates,
Madison contended, the Athenian assembly would have been a mob.\textsuperscript{15}

The Framers hoped that the large republic and the Constitution's design would leave individuals free but psychologically detached, experiencing within civil society a gentle version of the vulnerability of the state of nature, with its impetus for order. Human beings who are "left alone" reason timidly, their very fearfulness a check on passion. They are apt to be circumspect, and to that extent, public-regarding, watching and keeping up the appearances and inclined to be decently law-abiding.

As Novak's account suggests, commerce is a centerpiece in this plan for public peace through detachment, since the national market frees and tames, stimulating ambition but broadening and disciplining avarice, and forcing at least a consideration of other interests. Moreover, since values vary with supply and demand, commercial life promotes flexibility, an emotional detachment from any particular products or relationships, and especially, a responsiveness to public opinion. Subtly, these economic lessons also assail prejudice and hint that all virtues and faiths are only so many relativities, commodities for exchange.\textsuperscript{16}

Certainly, commerce was one of the tempters intended to wean Americans away from attachment to the states. To the Framers, surely to Hamilton, if less clearly to Madison, the states, like all political societies, were only artifacts created to advance the interests of individuals and had become essentially outdated, parochial obstacles to opportunity supported by habit and affection. Consequently, the Constitution allows the federal government to exert its powers directly on individuals, so that it may make a claim on "those passions which have the strongest influence upon the human heart."\textsuperscript{17} In the Framers' view, it is natural for interest to prevail unless confused and opposed by overwhelming attachment; by breaking into "those channels and currents in which the passions of mankind naturally flow," federal power allows interest to make itself felt. Better administered—or so the Framers trusted—and able to hold out the lures of wealth and power, the central government and national life could be expected to detach affections from the states.\textsuperscript{18} It did not trouble the Framers greatly that the national regime would attract only diffuse affections and relatively weak attachments: Lukewarm patriotism, like timid reason, suits a government intended to be the servant of individual liberty.

This is not the only way the work of the American founders can be understood. Hannah Arendt claimed that the basis of the Constitu-
tion was a new and distinctively American understanding of power, power that both Madison and Hamilton sought to harness and control, if for different purposes. The political machinery they created was both "meant to be powerful," as Walzer notes, and also grounded in the people, with their "passions" not diminished but properly channeled through relatively virtuous representatives. And Bellah elsewhere argues that Madison himself had not wholly given up on popular republican virtue.

The Founders surely recognized the need for some sort of moral and civic virtue as the foundation for the republic's laws and liberties. Just as self-preservation does not inspire citizens to risk their lives in defense of their country, the interests of individuals do not necessarily incline them to fulfill their contracts or obey the law, especially if they are poor, obscure, or oppressed, combining desperation with some hope of going unnoticed. And in general, the founding generation regarded religion, broadly defined, as an indispensable element of moral education. Even the enlightened Jefferson preferred the social teaching of Jesus over the privatism of Epicurus, whom he otherwise admired. Thinkers like Adams excepted, however, the leading spirits among the Founders tended to see moral indoctrination as a benign deception, practiced on behalf of the community's "aggregate interests" on individuals whose reason was unreliable, or on those—most evidently, slaves, as Bellah indicates—whose very rights and interests were violated by the law. In these terms, moral and religious education teaches a combination of useful untruths or half-truths—that one should never tell a lie, for example, or that promises should always be kept—and propositions that are far from certain, like the doctrine that a Supreme Judge will detect and punish all crimes and reward all virtues that are neglected here below.

Politically necessary, moral education is at least questionable in the Framers' theory, a kind of sharp practice too dangerous to be trusted to government and also demeaning for a regime devoted to individual freedom and reasoned consent. Consequently, most of the founding generation were content to leave the shaping of character to families and churches, to civil society, and in some cases, to the states; and Walzer is right to note that the founders relied on groups strong and stable enough to nurture conscientious souls. "Our constitution," John Adams declared, "was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." At the same time, however, the Framers gave these groups no constitutional status or notice: The Constitution ac-
knowledges no subjects other than persons and states. While left largely at liberty, civil society and local community were subordinated to a constitution—and through it, to a national market—whose ruling principle is individual freedom, advanced by the strategy of detachment. From the beginning, the laws have worked to undermine the “habits of the heart.”

Nevertheless, in contemporary America, this long-term tendency has taken on a magnitude so great as to resemble a change of kind, like pebbles become an avalanche: Perceptively, Walzer speaks of a second Constitution, a virtually new regime, Calvert of Progressivism's politically denatured citizen. Tocqueville's Americans, for all their “taste for well-being,” were at least familiar with the biblical and republican languages of the common good. Today, as Robert Bellah has indicated, even public-spirited Americans—a more significant group than we sometimes imagine—are more and more inclined to justify their lives and deeds in terms of calculating self-interest (“utilitarian individualism”) or personal authenticity (“expressive individualism”). To a surprisingly wide public, it is now axiomatic that moral and political norms are relative to one's times or culture, the reflection of the unique experience of individuals or groups, and perhaps the strongest intellectual current of the day regards speech itself as only a construction for private purposes, an instrument for domination. The revived “discussion concerning political philosophy,” to which Bellah invites Americans, requires us to recover or learn the power of public speech.

However, curing political aphonia is not easy, and Robert Calvert's shrewd diagnosis indicates some of the difficulties and the dangers. He argues that in their effort to develop a new public philosophy and a language of politics suited to modern America, Progressive theorists found it necessary to challenge the authority of the Framers and that of the “steel chain” of nineteenth-century orthodoxy. Following Beard's “debunking” of the high claims of the founding, Progressivism developed an “anti-myth” to take the place of the traditional American democrat, describing politics not as an affair of citizens but as nothing more than a conflict of interests, a parallelogram of forces. Paradoxically, however, the upshot of this Progressive critique has been to strengthen but vulgarize the Framers' emphasis on self-interest. Retaining the belief that political society is a contrivance manufactured to serve private aims, Progressive doctrine denied the Framers' claim that a political minority may act from broader and more elevated ideas of self, identifying with the polities it creates or governs, or even with humankind. But if Pro-
gressive teaching acted a democratic part in “unmasking” the pretensions of the elite, it also stripped away the moral claim of the many: Justice, Progressive analysis implied, is the interest of the stronger, and any appeal to a public or common good is only the rationalization of subjective interests and values. Deemphasizing speech, Progressivism imitated and extended the Framers’ reliance on political technology, hoping to make good the deficiencies of the Constitution’s “mechanistic” politics through a more “organic” social science and a more scientific administration.

Yet whatever their faults, the Progressives were wrestling with problems that still shadow our politics, most notably the republic’s setbacks in its struggles with power. As Novak indicates, the American Founders accepted a considerable measure of inequality as the natural expression of individual differences, the social and economic face of personality. On the other hand, the Founders also recognized that unequal wealth and power can be used to restrict the development of the faculties of the disadvantaged. For a solution, they relied on the “silent operation of the laws,” hoping that the advantage they saw in a large republic—the competition between many interests, denying more than short-term ascendancy to any—would be an effective check on inequality in social and economic life as well as in politics. It didn’t work: Large-scale private organizations largely elude those controls, and many have come to constitute private governments on which citizens depend and to which, for practical purposes, they can create no alternative. Private power called for public government in its own image, and that necessity—reinforced by international politics and by technology—has created a politics dominated by mass associations and great bureaucracies, aggregations of money, technique, and support adequate to the scale and intricacy of modern life.

Necessarily, this sort of politics grows away from most citizens, losing its connection to their daily lives and competences. It is now almost axiomatic that organizations large enough to be politically effective will dwarf their individual members. Public politics, the sphere of speech and deliberation, has come to seem less and less relevant or worthy of attention. In the mass media, the coverage of what candidates say, never very extensive, is losing ground to an analysis of their advertisements, now treated as news events, while the content of either kind of statement is given less attention than the strategy it reflects. The “real world” of politics increasingly is presented and understood as outside the public’s view, a place of bureaucrats and hidden persuaders, penetrable only by experts. For

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too many Americans, the political is a place of indignity, where they are not heard and do not matter—except as parts of some abstract, statistical category—and in which they are subject to manipulation and deception. Small wonder that private life engrosses Americans, or that the republic suffers from a chronic shortage of public confidence and commitment.\textsuperscript{53}

However, the private order—civil society—is itself in disarray. Limited liability, the great capitalist principle, seems to permeate social life. Divorce, as a normal and even expected hazard, teaches Americans to be at least guarded in their commitments. Even stable families, none too numerous, are likely to be short-term associations for limited purposes, composed of only two generations and pressed to find “quality time.”\textsuperscript{54} Local communities, vulnerable to change, are also weakened by mobility, and the loss of old homes and friends counsels us to be content with superficial roots and relationships. Associational life grows more peripheral, displaced by private recreations and a politics in which the donation of money, solicited by mail or phone, is replacing membership in face-to-face groups as the reigning mode of civic participation.\textsuperscript{55} It is an “unconstituted” society the citizen must vainly try to face.

The extent of this privatization is debatable, and Elshtain warns against exaggerating it; but the problem is serious and the tendency alarming. All the contributors to this book are broadly Aristotelian in regarding civil society, though formally separate from the state, as playing an indispensable role in the regime, particularly as the first course in civic edification, the traditional school and stronghold of communitarian teaching. Thus their evident conviction, Aristotelian through and through, that the American Constitution must ultimately be judged by the “way of life” it reflects and encourages. At the same time, they recognize that civil society cannot be self-ruling. Households and other social groups, Aristotle argued, nurture and provide for individuals, aiming at the safeguarding of “mere life.” Beyond the securing of physical existence, however, families and associations require some other rule and principle: Even the enrichment of material life depends on the division of labor and the exchange of products, and hence, on political institutions like money.\textsuperscript{56} An association like the market or the church, the community theater or the professional society, enhances our lives in some respect, but a fully human environment depends on access to all these associations and hence on political principles and institutions which assign to each its place and its limits. As Bellah indicates, without a common rule, pluralism degenerates into communalism—Leb-
anon's agony—or into the less stark, but more radical, fragmentations of individualism.

Of course, there is not much doubt as to which is the greater danger in the United States: The Constitution and the laws accentuate or promote the weakening of civil society. As Walzer observes, the Constitution affords Americans any number of ways to exit from relationships, localities, and social institutions, but the voice it gives them to work for the improvement of groups and communities is rarely as loud as a whisper in the din of modern politics and economics. Public life and spirit suffer, since it is easier to leave a city than combat its decay, and in contemporary constitutional law, Walzer points out, rights to exit or separate have become “a virtual substitute for social change.” Even decency is hard-pressed: “The scale and dynamism of American democracy,” Lewis Lapham writes, “grants the ceaselessly renewable option of moving one's conscience into a more congenial street.” By contrast, both Walzer and Elshtain ask for what amounts to a civil revolution, a public policy which cherishes the solidarities of civil society, lending the support of law to the internal life and cohesion of associations, hoping—as Elshtain puts it—to strengthen moral obligations rather than substitute for them.

Of course, none of the authors in this book needs to be reminded that communities and social groups can be repressive, or that they can tear up, as well as lay down, the foundations of human excellence. They expect government to protect civil rights and to regulate groups by the standard of public purpose; the doctrine of subsidiarity, which Elshtain derives from Catholic thought, subordinates civil society and yet respects its sphere. However, Walzer speaks for the contributors—Novak excepted, at least in part—when he urges Americans and American law to see rights as the basis of politics rather than private immunities, less as barriers against government than as claims to government of a certain kind. The soul needs the city: Human beings are certainly political animals, if they are also something more, and citizenship is the middle term between individuals and individuality. In this view, American democracy should be understood as a form of “associated living,” in John Dewey's phrase, a way of life entitled to rule private liberties and gratifications.

There is in these essays, then, at least the outline of an answer to Kitto's vital question. For Novak it is commerce (but not only commerce) that must train us in the virtue enabling us to be unified as well as diverse and industrious. The remaining authors are more or
less Tocquevillian, preferring to believe that the “political associations” of civil society may yet serve to some degree as “large free schools” in which we may learn the arts of association in general. There is no nostalgia in these essays for the glory that was the ancient city-state nor even for a fabled and simpler American past; the necessity, in Bellah’s precise formulation, is for a “critical reappropriation” of our political and religious traditions. Rather, the essays aim at the recovery—or the reappreciation—of republican politics, a prescription less for a polity conceived as an engine of virtue militant than for one no longer able to aspire to unchecked dominion.

This is a contemporary version of the ancient argument that a republic must prefer political freedom to affluence, treating its liberties as beyond price, so that in principle it must always suspect wealth and subject it to limits. Through much of its history, America has felt able to evade that choice and necessity, favored as the country has been by nature, culture and situation. Today, however, the embattled economy of the United States needs the disciplines of self-denial, the ethics of craft and saving no longer adequately supported by “worldly asceticism.” Even economic well-being, in our time, calls for some sacrifice of personal comfort and immediate desire on the altar of common purpose.

For all their diversity, these essays share a regard for America’s political institutions—the common ground, as Greenstone notes, for the very different liberalisms of Jefferson and Adams. And at least a majority of the contributors are convinced that America faces a time of great decisions, calling for great politics. Like the hope of rearticulating the second, communitarian voice of the American tradition, the plea for reinvigorated public discussion—Elshtain’s “ fractious” politics—runs through the book like a leitmotif.

There is a connection between Royce’s Philosophy of Loyalty, invoked by Bellah, and the special role of political parties in democratic deliberation, as competitive subcommunities which are also self-consciously parts of a political whole. The arguments in this book give support to the effort to renew political parties, particularly local party organizations as opposed to national bureaucracies. Yet each of the essayists has his or her own preferred schools of political speech and allegiance. Walzer suggests that “state action” in the service of democracy, public policy aimed at encouraging the solidarities necessary to republican politics (he cites the Wagner Act), is hardly unprecedented. We should be willing to listen to all such suggestions. Animating political debate is almost desperately difficult,
but events are pressing Americans to discover to what extent they still speak a common language.

For more than fifty years, foreign policy has substituted for public philosophy, establishing the United States as the champion of freedom in its contest with totalitarianism. That stark confrontation justified departures from democratic practice and the imperial expansion of executive prerogative. It also seemed to justify the regime as a whole, since America's faults, even serious ones, were less severe than those of her rivals: To a great many Americans, any fault-finding was morally obtuse, not to say unpatriotic, while others, more tolerant, treated criticism as "idealism," mere word-spinning, irrelevant to the real struggles of the real world. Of course, foreign policy sometimes moved America in the direction of reform: The need to blunt the appeals of communism, here and abroad, was an important argument in favor of greater racial and economic equality. Nevertheless, Americans have been encouraged and accustomed to see domestic political life in the scenes and costumes of the international megadrama.

With the waning of the cold war, anticommunism is losing its force as a negative public purpose, and the United States has an opportunity to look inward, to mend or reweave the fabric of law and society. A half-century of habits, however, is not easily put aside, especially since it is tempting to fix on the fear of enemies when the sources of civic trust and affection run thin. Elshtain's critique of "armed virtue," consequently, is an invaluable and pointed lesson (one paralleled, in domestic life, by Bellah's dissection of "communitarian pluralism"). A country—or a soul—defined by negation is not autonomous: It is the mirror of its antagonist, ruled by the contest it hopes to win. Hatred of enemies asks too little of friends.

Historically, American xenophobia has always been at least troubled by the universalism of religion and natural right. In Sam Adams's vision of the virtuous city, Boston, like Winthrop's city on a hill, was to be a Christian Sparta, austere but humble, patriotic but aware of the duty to love peace and show compassion. ¹

Less certain in faith, contemporary Americans still profess a belief in the proposition that all human beings are created equal; that bedrock of our nationality is a starting point for reconstruction. An antidote to individualism, equality links us to others: We can be free alone, but it is only in relationships that we can be equal or have rights. Equality also opposes relativism, since it argues that our common humanity is decisive, a quality that overrides all others, a likeness that makes one of many. By implication, all cultures and
polities are not incommensurable, but variations on a theme, answers, more or less adequate, to the human dilemma. Equality, G. K. Chesterton observed, sets limits and duties, so that America turns on "the pure classic conception that no man must aspire to be anything more than a citizen, and that no man shall endure to be anything less." For all their different accents, these essays speak the language of the universal, seeking to recall America to its best and ancient creed.

NOTES

2. Aristotle Politics 1261a17-1261b33. In fact, excepting some indivisible monad, all things are "many," comprising various parts and qualities (Plato Republic 476a).
11. The rise of the secular state, elevating civil peace over religious unity, is the obvious example of the successful assertion of a new principle of rule. In the slavery controversy, Judge Douglas attempted to make "popular sovereignty" into a superordinate law, following the logic of Locke's description of the state of nature (Second Treatise of Government, ed. Thomas P. Reardon [New York: Macmillan, 1986], par. 96.) We are fortunate that, in this case, the appeal of pragmatic accommodation was a failure. See Harry V. Jaffa, Crisis of the House Divided (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973).
12. Contemporary "nonfoundationalists" often argue that, in the absence of any ground for preferring one view to another, tolerance ought to
prevail. But this view, of course, actually asserts toleration as a grundnorm. As Michael Sandel writes, liberal values “can hardly be defended by the claim that no values can be defended” (“Morality and the Liberal Ideal,” New Republic 190 [7 May 1984], 15).

13. Madison maintained that ancient “examples,” most obviously religion, double the strength of opinion (Federalist 49). Americans are admirable because they have not allowed “a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom or for names” to outweigh their good sense and experience (Federalist 14). But all customary attachment tends to be blind: When Madison refers to the veneration “which time bestows on everything,” his observation indicates how indiscriminate such reverence is. Such authority may “perhaps” be necessary to the stability of a free government, and the support of prejudice will not be “superfluous,” but Madison will not go beyond these very limited, grudging concessions (Federalist 49).

14. Federalist 49.
15. Federalist 55.

17. Federalist 16.
18. Federalist 27; see also Federalist 17 and 24.
23. Democracy in America, 2: bk. 1, chap. 5, and bk. 2, chap. 15 (although see also bk. 2, chap. 9).
24. Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart.
25. Most critics appear to have conceded Allan Bloom’s observation re-
guarding relativism’s reigning status among students (The Closing of the American Mind [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987], p. 25), contenting themselves with the response that relativism is either unthreatening or a correct attitude.


27. In the same way, as Eric Goldman observed, in the effort to overcome Social Darwinism, Progressives developed a “reform Darwinism” that insisted on the relativity of all institutions, undermining their opponents but cutting the moral ground from under their own feet (Rendezvous with Destiny [New York: Knopf, 1953]). On “debunking” as an intellectual mode, see Karl Mannheim, Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 295–97.


29. Writings of James Madison, 6:86.


35. The recognition of this fact is the one sound element in the Court’s opinion in Buckley v. Valeo, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).


38. Hence the Anti-Federalists, though far from ascetic, declaimed against “luxury,” and Thomas Jefferson worried that the people would “forget themselves, but in the sole faculty of making money,” losing the ability to act politically to achieve a “due respect for their rights” (Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. A. Koch and W. Peden [New York: Modern Library, 1944], p. 277).
