Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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Conclusion

This conclusion is going to be work. For it’s no mere cheerful summary of points already made. It’s intended as an opportunity to reach conclusions—to conclude the diagnosis envisioned in the title. There are three major distinctions that need to be worked through to do this.

The first distinction is a distinction between Enlightenment thinking and the Puritan project. These two are interwoven and conflated in rhetoric and policy throughout the whole of American history, yet they are clearly in opposition to each other. It’s not just a matter of two things co-existing in tension, but of two things that are polar opposites. If we’ve been moving toward one, we’ve been moving away from the other.

The second distinction is between society and the state. Around the time of the First World War, Randolph Bourne wrote that “war is the health of the state.” He did not say it is the health of society. Throughout our history, there has always been a residual wholesomeness in our society; yet, for all Bourne’s effort to make a strong distinction here, our society cannot be regarded as simply innocent in the manner it’s been recruited by the state for purposes of war. We’ve been complicit in the process of our seduction. So Bourne’s distinction needs further attention.

The third distinction concerns our present condition. On the one hand, there’s statistical probability; on the other there’s opportunity. It’s incumbent on us to consider the difference between these. Statistically, it’s likely we’ll continue along the destructive path we’ve been on, endorsing and engaging in activities we refuse to acknowledge as detrimental to our character even as they heighten tensions and disrupt human relations and
do irreparable damage to habitat. If our sense of statistical probability is so strong that we believe, as many of us seem to, in a kind of destiny and fate, then it would seem the handwriting’s on the wall. One should despair of the common good and seek what enclave of personal happiness or pleasure seems still available. (An opium den comes to mind.)

The statistically improbable but urgently needed alternative is to find in the past an opportunity for self-instruction. Rather than regard that past as the template for our future and let inertial momentum carry us into the future, there’s a discomforting (no typo here!) opportunity to believe we are free—and then go on to validate that belief by acting on it. It’s of freedom’s essence not to let the past weigh on one as a doom. Our freedom is not held in thrall by the laws of physics. We know this, not by a speculative analysis, but by acting freely.

To elaborate on these distinctions, and find guidance in them, is the work of this conclusion.

1) The Enlightenment is not the source of the Puritan project; the Puritan project rejects the Enlightenment.

To separate these two is a fundamental task for any historian of America. It’s not an easy task. This is due to some simultaneity of the two and to a sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious conflation of the two from the very start of our history by leading Americans.

When we say “all men are created equal” and when we dedicate ourselves to promoting “the general welfare” and securing “the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity,” we are endorsing the Enlightenment. When we honor our nation in song by calling it “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” the Enlightenment resonates in these moving lines. Again, when we pledge our allegiance to “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all,” we are pledging to live in the halo of the Enlightenment.

If it’s difficult to pinpoint the essence of this movement of the human spirit, it’s partly because the Enlightenment was different things to those who were its champions. To Hume it was, surprisingly, a matter of liberating mankind from the tyranny of
reason. To Hume’s lifelong friend, Adam Smith, it was a matter of bringing rationality and clarity to the conduct of economic affairs. To Thomas Paine, it was the very Age of Reason made flesh. Further, while Voltaire, in company with Hume, saw the Enlightenment as freeing humans from the dictates of religion, Kant saw it as a matter of setting limits to reason so as to make room for faith.

Even though the Enlightenment was in general a kind of morning-after resolution in favor of sobriety following a night-long binge of religious intoxication and mayhem, it’s not by accident that so many of its leading lights stopped short of atheism. When in his last years Thomas Paine was rejected by the same American people whose banner-carrier he’d been, it was on a charge of atheism. But this was a misreading. Paine’s unrelenting theme from *Common Sense* to *The Age of Reason* was human rights. In pleading his case for them, Paine drew on the long tradition—at least as old as Aristotle—that rooted human rights in natural law. To Paine, as to the majority in that tradition, it seemed an implausibility to have natural law without a lawgiver. Therefore, Paine, the son of a Quaker father, stopped short of atheism and was a deist.

But Paine’s explicit deism (God stands back and leaves it to us to run the world properly) was enough to do the trick—that is, it provided Puritan America sufficient cause to turn its back on him. Puritanism insists we are on a mission of purgation under the generalship of Divine Providence. Puritans seemingly are sure God wants us His instruments to take the world by the neck and shake it till its teeth rattle. Enlightenment deism shudders at the thought of such a mission.

In his advocacy of rights, Paine was of necessity a critic of privilege. Central to Puritanism however is a claim to privilege. The problem Voltaire, Hume, and so many other leaders of the Enlightenment, including Paine, had with religion is that it seemed of its nature, by a kind of inbuilt reflex, to turn from worshipping God to instituting claims of privilege on behalf of the worshippers. Belonging to God’s party, one was superior to everyone else. Worse yet, in the case of the Puritans, the act of worship tended to be identified with a mission to subjugate the ungodly—if necessary, purge them from the earth. (One can see why puritanical Christians have so much trouble with jihadist
Muslims; the programs of the two are near mirror images, and like a man's two hands, neither can reshape itself to occupy smoothly the space of the other. “Success” in either camp stirs outrage in the other.) The elitist mission of the Puritans was then incompatible with the Enlightenment's affirmation of the equality and dignity of all humans.

To be honest, it's hard to dwell in the Enlightenment. We've seen already how the illuminating reflections of Adam Smith were perverted into mere defenses of greed by those preparing a space for Ayn Rand and the Friedmanesque business schools and lawyerly operations of America today. To catch something earlier on of this same mechanism by which Enlightenment principles are let slide into dilution and contradiction, we can note in the life of Thomas Paine that before he was rejected by American society, he was rejected by the French whose revolution he had come to France to celebrate. As in human history everywhere, the issue was privilege. While Paine went to France to participate in a triumph of human rights, the leaders there who came actually came to power there preferred to celebrate their extraordinary ascendancy over others; and their revolution degenerated into chaos and terror, with Paine imprisoned and spared only by happenstance from execution.

We find a dialectic at work by which things become their opposites. This leads to disappointment and confusion. If amid this murky flow of human affairs, one wishes to locate the core principle of the Enlightenment, I'd hazard one can hardly do better than Kant's aforementioned second formulation of the Categorical Imperative: “So treat humanity, whether in yourself or another, as never to regard it as a mere means.” Simple as the wording is, one has only to attempt to abide by this imperative to find how totally it sets one in opposition to the current flow of American affairs. To echo what Chesterton says of Christianity, one can say of the Enlightenment: “We have not tried it and found it wanting; rather we've found it difficult and left it untried.”

Taking Kant's Categorical Imperative as the litmus test of Enlightenment thinking, one defines the Enlightenment as an unyielding champion of human dignity. On the other hand, to understand the Puritan project one must realize Puritans had no allegiance whatever to this imperative. In the Puritan view,
the majority of humankind are damned, ours not to reason why. What we must do to certify ourselves as among the non-damned is put ourselves in opposition to the great unwashed majority with every fiber of our being. The more thoroughgoing our effort to cleanse the earth of them, the more secure in God’s blessing can we feel.

In place of the tolerant garden of the Enlightenment, what we encounter here is the inhumane root of American exceptionalism. It’s interesting that today, when we congratulate ourselves on racial progress in America, we’re usually speaking of a kind of accommodation of white society to the descendants of people we brought here from Africa. This accommodation—and it’s of course both more than that, and still remains tragically incomplete—is really not so surprising. Blacks were always valued. Why else the labor of kidnapping them and transporting them across the Atlantic? (Eventually, even Thomas Jefferson came to realize that the most valuable harvest of Monticello was each fresh harvest of black children.) The blacks planted the cotton and picked it. They built the houses of the whites. They cooked their meals and raised their children. They taught them music. What was there not to like?

To recapitulate lessons from an earlier chapter, we are almost never speaking of an accommodation to Indians when we speak of racial progress. This is because we whites never had any intention to accommodate. Ralph Ellison’s truly “invisible man” was the Indian. The Indian was beyond the pale. The Indians were an anomaly of nature (signs indeed of nature’s “fall”). Once the Indians showed they would not be tamed by us, they became certifiable agents of Satan—to be cast into outer darkness.

(If you can’t take this in, read the documents—the diaries, accounts, letters, and speeches of the whites, and read too those reports which have been handed down to us of the astonished, outraged reactions of indigenous Americans. This whole bundle of material is given limited space in our curricula. If one asks a college class whether Frederick Douglass was a great American, the more alert and articulate among the students will say there’s no doubt he was. If then one follows by asking if Chief Joseph was a great American, the same students will go mute. Some may try after a pause to recover, and say “Well, he really isn’t a part of the story of America.” And of course, in a sense, that answer
is perfect. Genuine documents and preserved data about Indian/white relations do nothing to sweeten The American Story. They’re demoralizing, and, like the torture activities of the CIA, they’re best kept from the young and impressionable.)

Amid the many squabbles and rivalries present in Massachusetts Bay Colony from the start, one point there was that was universally agreed: Indians had no rights. Those who couldn’t subscribe to this self-evident truth were exiled from the colony. Practice followed readily on the heels of preachment, and the bonds of fellowship within Massachusetts Bay Colony were soon quickened and sealed with Indian blood. As recounted earlier, this occurred within the first six years when at Mystic Fort the whites carried out a just-at-dawn massacre of Indian men, women, and children. We seem to have conducted no reassessment in the aftermath of this event; rather the event was allowed to become a paradigm, a community-affirming ritual act, which we repeated again and again through two and a half centuries, till there was no more Indian opposition we need worry about.

There are people alive today whose grandparents lived through the culmination of this enterprise. Further, as I mentioned, when I was a kid, the Westerns I imbibed at the corner theater ended typically when the federal cavalry would arrive at the last possible moment and shoot every Indian in sight—while we, the juvenile audience, cheered furiously. It happened in a way similar to the way Americans, still juvenile, assembled recently in Times Square to chant “U.S.A.!” at news that Osama bin Laden had just been assassinated in his bedroom in front of his wife.¹

Perry Miller, our foremost scholar of the mentality of Puritans, says tentatively in his Errand in the Wilderness that the Puritans seem to have provided a thread which persists throughout the rest of American history; but Miller—ever provocative—avoids specificity here, leaving it to the reader to take things further. One of Miller’s students, Bernard Bailyn, says in his study of the

¹ I guess one has to grant—for it seems almost a requisite for being considered a genuine American—that this recent evening was a great moment in American life. Perhaps it would have been even better if bin Laden had been subjected to Abu Ghrab type torture before death instead of being rendered a bloody dishrag by streams of machine gun bullets from all directions. As it was, the people in Times Square got a lot out of it. And President Obama did too.
ideological origins of our American Revolution that even before the crystallization of our thinking in the second half of the 1770s, there was a consensus throughout the colonies, passed down to the present, regarding the nature of American life, and that Puritanism was a part of this.

They need not have been so tentative and cautious. There was, by reason of the Puritan settlement process—with its decision not to seek any lasting accommodation to Indians—a strong bond forged from the start between “civilians” and “military.” In the early days, in fact, the two groups were often one. René Girard hypothesizes it’s frequently part of the pathology of human societies that they have been formed “against”—and that actual bloodletting is frequently what seals the bond that holds them together. This has been the case with the United States. While we think of the United States as conceived in a bloody revolution against England, this bloodletting is prominent from the first Puritan settlements. At all subsequent moments in “the Winning of the West” the settlers, hand in glove with the military, have reconfirmed their sense of themselves in Indian blood. When the West was won and we ran out of domestic candidates for our rituals of solidarity, we sought new candidates abroad. We’ve never been at a loss for how to commemorate our shared citizenship and re-consecrate our original bonds.

It was only in the nineteenth century, with writers like Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Mark Twain, and in time since, with writers and orators like Will James, Randolph Bourne, Eugene Debs, William Appleman Williams, Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Chris Hedges, Naomi Klein (of Canada), John Perkins, and Norman Solomon, does it seem a concerted effort has been made to study the constantly refreshed bond in American life between our civilians and our military. 

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2. Barton Bernstein of Stanford has attempted to extend Eisenhower’s notion of threat from a military-industrial complex by directing attention to ever tighter bonds between the military and our allegedly civilian institutions of higher learning. The alumni magazine of the allegedly civilian institution of higher learning called Stanford has not let this critique pass without printing a commentary on Bernstein that charges him with being an agent of violence.
These authors sometimes try to soften their depictions of us Americans on the home front by indicating the manipulations to which we’ve been subjected by industrialists and military leaders and bad media and bad schooling. The point I suggest here is that such manipulations would not have been working so predictably all these years without some predisposition of the public to go along.

Puritanism in America begins with a mission to tame the wilderness and plant a New Eden. Taming the wilderness meant eliminating or immobilizing its savagery—its savages. Stretch though it may seem, that same zeal, with father-to-son biological continuity, is alive and active in the Monroe Doctrine, in our acceptance of a Manifest Destiny, in the Winning of the West, in the annexation of the Philippines, in the announcement of an Open Door (a door open to us) in China, in Wilson’s grand crusade to make the world safe for democracy (and American commerce), in our effort through manipulation of the United Nations to establish a Pax Americana throughout the world since the end of the Second World War, in our efforts to contain the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and in our present open-ended and apparently un-endable War on Terrorism.

There will be more on this when we try to reflect on the distinction and relations between American society and the American state.

What we’ve been elaborating here is the non-identity, and in fact deep opposition, between Enlightenment ideals and this Puritan project that has such a hold on our dedication. It was John Winthrop who first attempted a conflation of the two. Speaking of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as “a city on a hill,” Winthrop suggests that Puritans will light up the world by their example. We echo this ambition when we speak of America as “the last best hope of humankind,” or when we refer to the president of the United States—as media newscasters still casually sometimes do—as “the leader of the free world.”

For all the sweetness of our rhetoric, we noted the Puritans soon swooped down from the sacred hill to wreak mayhem on everything that moved on two legs. The example thereby given was something less than the tolerant and beautiful thing one might have hoped. It proved more a matter of “making an example of” than a matter of “setting an example for.” Convenience
and dishonesty were facilitated by Winthrop’s use of Enlightenment rhetoric.

Let’s review, and incorporate in our conclusion some of the data from earlier in the book.

The pattern for action we proclaim is routinely humanitarian, but the practice is routinely Puritan. As noted, Polk (sometimes listed a Presbyterian, sometimes a Methodist—but a good Puritan either way) provides a clear instance. As Polk enters the White House, Texas is already ours; but Polk wants to add California (and why not all the land that lies between California and Texas as well?). He sends John Slidell to Mexico City to negotiate a purchase of California for $25,000,000. No one will talk to Slidell for, in the turmoil of Mexican politics, after the U.S. had annexed Texas, it would be political suicide for a Mexican politician to be found negotiating some further loss of land. In the ordinary uses of diplomacy, that would end the matter—at least for the time being. That doesn’t happen. Frustrated, Polk decides to present Mexico’s refusal to negotiate as itself a casus belli—such a breach of international law that he’s entitled to go to Congress and request a declaration of war on the ground that a right of the United States has been grievously violated. It’s no longer a mere piece of land he’s seeking; he seeks rather to uphold the very fabric of international law. An effort at a landgrab has been elevated to an act to maintain the sanctity of international law.

Eventually, Polk was rescued from needing to stoop to quite such silliness, but the incident is worthy of our attention because its structure reveals a sad pattern in our way of doing foreign policy. No sane person (and Americans are mostly sane) really believes a nation has an obligation under international law to enter into negotiations for a sale of its land whenever a neighboring nation wishes to buy it. Yet the benefits of expanding westward were so manifest to Polk that he figured he could get by with such an argument if it was the best he could invent. He may have been right since the ploy he did use to get his declaration of war wasn’t much better. The essence of the matter was to present America as the victim—the innocent but brave defender of justice. The Enlightenment was on our side. Our rival was the violator of rights and law—the God-rejected savage, if you will.

Sometimes we think the Puritan project was an offspring of the Enlightenment because we regard the Puritans as well read
and remarkably articulate in the exposition of their views. They were. Perry Miller demonstrates this with a dazzling exploration of Puritan intellectual life in his *Errand into the Wilderness*. But we should avoid making a muddle of things. In an effort at disentanglement, let’s consider twentieth-century President Woodrow Wilson. Here, certainly, one might think, is a child of the Enlightenment—wide in his grasp of history, a university professor, eloquent, proficient in scholarly works, and eventually a president of Princeton University. Yet if we look to his performance as president of the United States, we find the Enlightenment is employed to fulfill its traditional role in our foreign policy: it’s there to legitimize the Puritan project.

In *The American Political Tradition*, Richard Hofstadter introduces his chapter on Wilson:

Woodrow Wilson’s father was a Presbyterian minister, his mother a Presbyterian minister’s daughter, and the Calvinist spirit burned in them with a bright and imperishable flame. Their son learned to look upon life as the progressive fulfillment of God’s will and to see man as “a distinct moral agent” in a universe of moral imperatives.... Deadly in earnest, rigid, self-exacting, Wilson suffered acutely from his Presbyterian training.... Capable himself of intense feelings of guilt, he projected his demand for unmitigated righteousness into public affairs, draining his intellectual capacity for tolerance. In an early essay on Burke he commented feelingly that “we should not expect a man to be easy and affable when he finds himself in a death-grapple with the enemies of his country.”³

“Draining his intellectual capacity for tolerance” is a telling phrase. For Wilson had intellectual capacity second perhaps among American presidents only to Lincoln. By that I mean he could view a situation from five or ten angles when others in the room could see it only from one or maybe two. That he wished to act within the sphere of the Enlightenment seems evident from

the recurring originality with which his speeches echoed it. At the outbreak of the First World War, he spoke of being “impartial in spirit as well as in action.” He spoke of a “peace without victory,” expressing his hope the war could end with neither side feeling vanquished and aggrieved. Later, when he felt the need to promote the war, he spoke of “a war to end all war,” and “a war to make the world safe for democracy.” After the war, he went to Versailles and lectured the victorious Allies at length on the need to allow all countries the right of “self-determination.”

It fell apart. It was a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense where the downfall is the consequence of a flaw in the heroic protagonist. For Wilson could never free himself from the grip of the Puritan project. While he envisioned a postwar world in which natural law prevailed, one where justice and the rights and freedom of all were respected, he could never rid himself of the notion that the natural order was one in which white Anglo-Saxon Protestants—especially such as were bred in the United States—guided, tamed, and controlled everybody else.

His neutrality during the war was never genuine. With justified cynicism, we may say he believed in neutrality right up to the point where it might endanger the prosperity America could reap during the war from sales to Britain and France; beyond that point, he did not observe it. Or, taking a larger measure of the man, let us say he believed in neutrality right up to the point where it might endanger a British/French victory; at that point, he no longer believed in it—and never had. Believing an Allied victory would be conducive to leadership of the world by the United States after the war, he could not, in the days before our entry, genuinely commit to any neutrality that would leave an Allied victory in jeopardy.

Eventually he sounded as ridiculous as Polk. In 1915, he claimed, as Hofstadter tells us, a kind of unalienable right of Americans to travel on belligerent British merchant ships in a war zone. Such travel of course rendered probable a loss of American lives amid the hostilities. When that happened, Wilson would thereby be in a position to reproach the Germans with illegally killing “neutral” American citizens. He seemed to imply to the Germans that so long as a “neutral” American was on a ship, the Germans had to regard it as free from attack even though it might carry a cargo of food and munitions in support of the Allied cause. To suggest
such a claim in the name of international law was to make a mockery of international law, and the Germans of course understood this. When the battle in Europe reached such a crisis that Germany felt it could no longer afford any deference to Wilson’s hoax, it began sinking all ships supporting the Allied cause, and America discarded the pretense of neutrality and became a direct and honest participant. The honesty was new, for as Hofstadter makes clear, the United States was a participant from the start.

In the matter of Wilson’s advocacy of self-determination for nations everywhere, there was again an undermining duplicity. On the eve of the First World War, Wilson had said, “I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men.” When a certifiably bad man muscled his way to the presidency of Mexico, and when this man added to his other disqualifications a lack of respect for the United States, Wilson saw him as setting a bad example, and sent troops to invade Mexico at Veracruz. Our troops remained until, in the ferment of the Mexican revolution, a new Mexican president came to the fore. While Wilson may have felt he had done the Mexican people a favor, it should surprise no one that there was widespread Mexican resentment of the American intrusion. Again, some four years later, in the aftermath of the First World War, Wilson sent a military force to Russia to protect the Russians from making mistakes similar to those to which Mexicans were prone. It’s difficult to get a coherent account of just what Wilson thought he was doing. It’s been charged against him that the main effect of our intervention in Russia was to prolong a chaotic state of affairs there at the cost of many Russian lives. George Kennan (a champion of a proactive policy toward Russia at the end of the Second World War) attempts a sympathetic account of how Wilson arrived at his policy, but ends by saying Wilson acted in complete ignorance of facts on the ground.

What these bookend events at the start and the end of the First World War suggest is that Wilson was prone to quixotic bungling in the exercise of diplomacy. While he believed in the right of people everywhere to self-determination, he was tolerant of the results only so long as what the foreigners strove for met his approval. Where their aspirations fell short, it was the office of the U.S. president to correct them. The president should do so with lethal military force if necessary.
During the war itself, Wilson (who’d often denounced the war as inhumane and as a war being fought for unworthy purposes) was routinely inhumane in persecuting and prosecuting dissenters who continued to say things Wilson no longer thought convenient. Pursuit and persecution of dissenters continued until Wilson’s administration ended in 1921—more than two years after the war itself ended.

William Appleman Williams cites a onetime admirer of Wilson, Raymond Robins, as follows:

Wilson was a great man but he had one basic fault. He was willing to do anything for people except get off their backs and let them live their own lives. He would never let go until they forced him to and then it was too late. He never seemed to understand there’s a big difference between trying to save people and trying to help them. With luck you can help ’em—but they always save themselves.\(^4\)

That Wilson envisioned himself and the United States as savior of others calls to mind how Massachusetts Bay Colony dealt with Quakers. Winthrop’s successor as Governor, John Endecott, was willing to accommodate to Quakers if they’d give up their heretical notion of an Inner Light and would convert to Christianity—by which Endecott meant Calvinism as interpreted by Puritans. Short of that, he was willing to allow them to depart from the Puritan community. When both these generous alternatives were rejected, Endecott did what any godly person would do in such circumstances: he had them hanged.

Similar to the manner in which much that Wilson did in foreign policy violated the spirit of the Enlightenment, so, more explicitly, much that he did on the home front violated our Bill of Rights (our great effort to install Enlightenment principles at the core of our Constitution). This needs saying, not to heap coals on his head. Life itself did that. In the course of a couple years, Wilson lost the respect first of the leadership of the Senate, then that of the surrendering Germans, then that of the victorious

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Allies, and finally the respect of the generation of Americans who had twice elected him president. We need to note that the Wilson administration was not an outstanding moment of idealism but a stark example of how the Puritan project, alive and at the center of things in the twentieth century, trumped the spirit of the Enlightenment at just the moment it was most emphatically invoking it.

The maneuver has become such a staple of our foreign policy it seems almost trite to speak of it. In a generation some forty years after Wilson, our deep objection to the Castro revolution in Cuba was that it was not carried forward under American auspices and was not directed by American leaders. It violated our Monroe Doctrine and the hegemony we thought we had achieved over Cuba. We packaged our opposition however as an enlightened effort to resist a godless communism of Soviets who were intervening illegally in the western hemisphere and were out to destroy freedom everywhere. We insisted our opposition was simply a necessary response by the nation charged with leading the free world.

To bring this matter up to the time of writing: recently, having warned the Palestinians of Gaza not to elect the Hamas Party as its leadership, we now leave them with two options: having defied us, they can vacate Gaza and go God knows where; or they can stay in Gaza and die. The deaths are under way, and they proceed with our funding and with our approval and guidance. John Winthrop and John Endecott were never more clear than we. While baptized in the waters of the Enlightenment, the rivers in which we do our daily swimming are those of the Puritan project.

2) American society then is not the state; yet while our state often pursues projects very harmful to our society (thereby manifesting the two are not identical), the state wouldn’t be able to do this with such regular and predictable ease were there not some predisposition in our society to go along.

The second-to-last paragraph of Randolph Bourne’s remarkable indictment “War Is the Health of the State” is as follows (slightly shortened, and with the addition of a bracketed word):
Nothing is more obvious… than that every one of us comes into society as into something in whose creation we had not the slightest hand…. By the time we find ourselves here we are caught in a network of customs and attitudes, the major directions of our desires and interests have been stamped on our minds, and by the time we have emerged from tutelage and reached the years of discretion when we might conceivably throw [direct] our influence to the reshaping of social institutions, most of us have been so molded into the society and class we live in that we are scarcely aware of any distinction between ourselves as judging, desiring individuals and our social environment. We have been kneaded so successfully that we approve of what our society approves, desire what our society desires, and add to the group our own passionate inertia against change, against the effort of reason, and the adventure of beauty.5

It would be difficult to over praise this paragraph. Each word-choice registers. Bourne combines insight with careful articulation. Trouble is, the gist of his paragraph here complicates the direction in which he's been arguing. He's labored eloquently to make a distinction between a generally wholesome and innocent populace (one believing presumably in the platitudes of the Enlightenment) and a duplicitous and manipulative state. Good society, bad state. Now he finds he must acknowledge a kind of original-sin arrangement built into the very structure of human existence. We are what our social forebears have chosen us to be. In a sense, it doesn’t matter whether we are “society” or whether we are “state.” What W.A. Williams calls “the dead inertia of the past” weighs equally on all. We are all equally innocent and all equally guilty.

Bourne’s essay stops about here—ended either by the “Spanish flu” which ends his life, or perhaps stopped simply by the quandary into which his thought had carried him.

While Bourne formats the problem in universal terms, it’s really in its exceptional and highly dramatic form in American history that Bourne is struggling with it. What he has come up against is the Puritan project. The long hand of Winthrop and company has been discovered in our heart of hearts, setting the values and paradigms by which we judge and live—and by which we decide whom to let live. And Bourne’s acknowledgement carries with it the ring of truth. Surely the past is irref ormable. There is absolutely nothing we can do to turn it into a different past.

Yet defending the innocence of us Americans becomes problematic as one reflects on the ease with which we have lent ourselves to cruel and violent enterprise. Bourne’s poignant phrase “our own passionate inertia” points to the complicated reality here. We are victims of a cruel tradition—and this is a point Bourne very much wants to make. But we are willing victims—we have ingested the things that wound our souls. What does emerge clear in this sociological reflection is that it undermines one of the favorite tropes of would-be reformers; it cuts the ground out from under those who say: “let’s return to the good ole days.”

At the center of Barry Goldwater’s conservatism was his conviction we must return to some Eden-like and forthright innocence of ours. The same conviction inspires the Tea Party movement today. My hunch is that this conviction is currently held with deliberate and conscious dedication by the much-denounced Koch brothers. We must strengthen the strong. That is what we did in the past and should do now. Handicapped parking spaces are a mistake. Human progress depends on enhancing the strong without regard to the price paid by the weak. Nietzsche has said exploitation is the law of life; he invites the strong to engage in it without remorse. He does this in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Ayn Rand echoes Nietzsche. What makes us Americans peculiarly open to this teaching is that we believe “strength” is the sign that God has befriended us and predestined us to grace. We white Americans come into the world not into the hands of an angry God, but into the hands of some very aggressive Puritans who immediately begin molding us into replicas of themselves.

For this reason, a genuine opposition to the class which includes the Koch brothers is almost impossible to mount among us; beyond our outbursts of rhetorical denunciation, there’s a longstanding emotional flirtation with what they hold dear. Even
that is too weak. There’s a longstanding dedication. A people whose elected representatives recently voted one hundred percent for violence against the ill-fed, ill-washed, near defenseless people of Gaza can have no real argument with the Koch brothers.

What about the “good ole days”? When were they? Were they at the beginning when we were slaughtering Indians and hanging Quakers? Were they in the long years thereafter when, Northerner together with Southerner, we were accepting Africans kidnapped from their farming communities in Africa, and insisting we were the rightful owners of their labor? Think of the use of black women as “bed wenches” and of the disregard for their family relations by Christian whites who commodified them, treating them and theirs as disposable income. Think what such commercialization meant as members of black families were sold severally to the highest bidder or were separated to be handed over to the most insistent debt collector. (Do some black women have “attitude” today? How could they not?) Perhaps the golden days were when Thomas Jefferson would leave off overseeing the whipping of a slave boy at his nail factory so he could retire to his study and write eloquently on the equality of man. Perhaps the golden days were those of Andrew Jackson, slave-master and heroic hater of Indians. Here was a man, admired greatly in his own day, and admired still—a man on horseback who, in the midst of setting up pet banks or managing the spoils system, could turn at the blink of an eye and promote sending thousands of Cherokee on a trail of tears from their ancestral lands. Then there were the days of his protégé, James Polk. He too was respected and prosperous by reason of the slaves he acquired; he didn’t exhaust himself with the undoing of Indians but rather with the taking of land from Mexicans. To this day there are historians who complain he’s never gotten the full measure of credit he deserves.

Not to make too long a list, there was Teddy Roosevelt, as genuine a believer that might makes right as one could ask for. As noted, he cites among the chief benefactors of humankind those who purged the West of savages to make way for civilization. He was a legitimate offspring of the ancestors he praised. He helped purge Cuba of savage Spaniards in order to replace these arrogant Spaniards with ourselves. Later as president, he cheered on his good friend Leonard Wood as Wood purged the Philippines
of savage Filipinos. He was and remains what most Americans regard as an exemplary president.

Putting sarcasm to one side, the truth of the matter is there were no good old days. When one hears the claim there were, one should ready oneself for fresh calls to violence.

From the age of nine, I’ve been fascinated by seeing in newsreels the faces and gestures of young men in landing barges, many of whom were less than thirty minutes from death on a foreign shore. While I’ve been moved beyond speech at the courage and grace of these Americans who fought the Second World War, nonetheless I fear the feelings of those who celebrate and remember with me. I fear lest in their nostalgia, they will keep those days going on forever. In many ways we remain in the midst of such days, guaranteeing our children and grandchildren will know them too, and know them first hand.

But as Bourne acknowledges, taking up a critical stance toward our past is very inconvenient. Where, if not to the past, is one to look for inspiration and direction?

Bourne speaks at the end of the paragraph cited above of “the effort of reason, and the adventure of beauty.” It is, I think, not in celebration of our wars, but by rational reflection on the paramount accommodation in America’s history that we can find something of the beauty and sense of direction we need—if we have the deeper courage to go there.

Our history does have something to say about accommodations. The fundamental accommodation of American history is the one between blacks and whites. I don’t say it is achieved. Rather it’s a work in progress. We whites often think of it I fear as a gradual process wherein whites have brought blacks to accommodate to the exigencies of living in white society. In actual fact, the accommodation is much more interesting than that, for—as is the general nature of accommodations—the process has been mutual and reciprocal. If whites have been the teacher, they have also been the student; if blacks have been the student, they have also been the teacher.

This accommodation is so imperfect, by reason of many kinds of fear and countless eruptions of hatred and bloodshed, that we may hesitate. Indeed, the reader may be incredulous. If however we want a future better than our past, it’s especially here we can hope to learn something. When I speak of this accommodation
of whites and blacks, more precisely what I have in mind is the still halting, deeply conflicted and imperfect accommodation of whites to blacks. In the face of all that’s still lacking to whites in their capacity for this accommodation, it impresses me as the foremost success in American history. (More important even than the electric light bulb of Edison; more important than the Model T of Ford.)

After the Civil War, American blacks had no real choice but to stay pretty much where they were, and to achieve there what they could in the uncharted waters of emancipation. It turned out that the accommodation the mainstream was willing to make to them—in the North as well as in the South—was very limited. With the stoicim by which they’d survived more than two centuries of bondage, black Americans tested their new opportunities as best they could.

Amid Jefferson’s stupefying list of black limitations set forth in his Notes on Virginia (read the list; the man was no sage), Jefferson conceded that blacks seemed good at music. They were. And they combined this gift with a Christian hope and with patience towards others’ shortcomings that was altogether beyond Jefferson’s reach. (This patience could of course bother Marx, and did bother Richard Wright and Malcolm X, and many others.)

When blacks were first introduced to the Bible, they knew where Egypt was. It was the plantation on which they lived. They recognized who the Egyptians were. The Egyptians were these light-skinned people of stunted affectivity who held them in bondage. As for Jesus, they understood—as their white handlers did not—that the sympathies of Jesus were with the orphan and the widow, the hungry, the unjustly treated, the despised. While for the whites, a sign of their election to grace was their success as oppressors, the blacks understood intuitively what a failed reading of the Bible that was. (The whites’ special reading of the Bible was the bedrock of The American Story, and I suspect no black has ever been taken in by it.)

Blacks exercised their talent for music particularly along two lines. One was music that registered with equal force their sense of distress and their hope for deliverance. These “spirituals” initiated the gospel tradition which became the foundation for so much of the world’s music from then till now. The other was music dealing with their deep dependence on personal relations,
particularly the dependence of black men on the caring love and respect received from black women in a time of near utter humiliation.6

We call such music “soul.” (It’s well named, for this music emerges in response to an attempt to annihilate the souls of blacks.)

The themes of the gospel music and the soul music have never been in opposition to each other. The longing for salvation is common to both, and the passion voiced in each blends into the other. Whites have long been surprised by the easy conjunction here of religious sensibility and human sensuality—and find the result exotic and arresting. One can surmise that the African communities from which American blacks were taken were innocent of Calvin’s withering touch on human sensibility.

Nowhere is the tutelage exercised by blacks more evident than in this matter of music. (This is matter greatly encumbered today by ill-directed efforts at political correctness; many in our universities get it wrong; musicians on the other hand understand the matter intuitively.) As just suggested, even in the days of slavery, the inhabitants of the Big House would hear the musical laments and musical celebrations (often in the same song) of those whose freedom they had done what they could to cancel. The inhabitants of the Big House were “captivated”—as well they should have been—and would invite the blacks “up” for the edification of themselves and their guests.

Antebellum accounts clearly attest that whites were impressed by this music. What can get lost in the mists of political correctness is how this white interest came to effect change in white

6. James Baldwin sets the mood for such music tellingly in Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York: Dell, 1980):

They had been very happy together, in the beginning, and until the end he had been very good to her, had not ceased to love her, and tried always to make her know it. No more than she had been able to accuse her father had she been able to accuse him. His weakness she understood, and his terror, and even his bloody end. What life had made him bear, her lover, this wild, unhappy boy, many another stronger and more virtuous man might not have borne so well. (193)
aesthetic capacity. The beginnings of American minstrelsy can be given a too-complicated treatment as a result.

Minstrelsy probably began with blacks publically satirizing themselves in music for the amusement of themselves and of whites. If one wishes to pour out outrage at such a terrible self-violation of human dignity, well, be my guest. It seems to me a failure of human imagination to do so. From birth, American blacks enjoy privileged insight into human hypocrisy; conditions of their birth gift them with this. In the centuries of slavery, though, they could hardly make public sport of whites. Whites were, they knew, mysteriously challenged when it came to humor. So the original “Jim Crow” (perhaps the first minstrel) and others did what they could to clown and make mirth, but with circumspection. Satire on blacks could be performed publicly before both races; satire on whites had better be reserved for discreet performance in the slave quarters.

What’s really quite wonderful about this—less sinister I’d say than subsequent critics, black and white, realize—is that, sooner than one might expect, whites who were looking on at black minstrelsy were saying: “Hey, let me try that!” Not much reflection has been expended on what that meant. The easy, politically correct, judgment is that whites were piling on. “If blacks are getting positive approval, and being rewarded by whites for demeaning blacks, I want a piece of the action. I can mock blacks better than they can.” What this neat judgment leaves out is attention to the underlying humane context and intent of the music and the humor. For that, we do well to look back to the motivations for plantation music mentioned above.

When whites put on blackface, what they were often working toward was a more intimate entry into black music. If you want to say, “Well, then, they were attempting to kidnap black music just as they had kidnapped blacks,” again, be my guest. But music doesn’t work that way. The original white “covers” of black music had a singular honesty; whites put on blackface to do these covers, saying in effect, “If you want to know the sources of this music, I’m showing them to you.”

What was being conducted, more perhaps than consciously realized, was an experiment in empathy. The white performer wanted to get into the shoes and skin of the black. Or, if you find that metaphor cloying and repugnant, you can reverse it:
the black Americans’ music had gotten “under the skin” of the whites.7

Even in antebellum days, a process of tutelage and nurturing had been under way. The parched souls of aesthetically challenged Puritans were being washed in the redeeming waters of black sensibility. (Do you think that’s over the top? To take a prominent instance from a later moment in the process, think of the millions of white Americans who responded to the ominous message of the First World War by entering the Jazz Age. The Jazz Age had roots other than the discredited worship of Progress that had been the white man’s faith. This black music became balm and comfort food for the wounded hopes of whites.)

As I speak of a gradual accommodation of whites and blacks in America’s history up to now, notice I’m not repeating a bromide about white Americans teaching blacks how to fit into white society. It should be clear by now I’m saying something quite different. True, there’s always a reciprocal dimension to accommodations (and I do think along with Booker T. Washington—as updated by the Warren Court—that it’s important for the skills necessary for economic success in America to be shared across the races). But a fundamental countermovement was in play: slowly, in the face of great resistance, and with many awkward starts and cruel rejections, blacks have been educating white Americans toward a more sensitive and humane understanding of others and—more basically and haltingly—to a more realistic sense of the shortcomings of the whites’ own religiously impoverished souls. (To the extent that Martin Luther King Day serves any authentic purpose currently, it is to celebrate this.)

Blacks began bringing whites around through their music—a music now very nearly the idiom for music everywhere. (They’ve also done it through athletic skills—performances of grace under

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7. In its later phases, in the first half of the twentieth century, the role of young Jewish musicians can’t be exaggerated as a catalyst in accelerating the crossover of this music. Out of their own legacy of hardship and persecution, these brash young men, whose families were fresh from the ghettos of Eastern Europe, “got” black music in advance of mainstream white America. Jolson said he’d never felt at home on stage till he put on blackface.
pressure. Think Jackie Robinson. Think Muhammad Ali. Think Bill Russell and Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, and Steph Curry.) And, as just suggested, they’ve done it too through a far more accurate and down-to-earth understanding of Christianity than their old-time plantation handlers (the Jefferson crowd) intended.

The sermons at typical black churches evidently owe less to Calvin and more to Jesus than has been the norm at white churches in America. So when Martin Luther King tried to bring the religious experience of blacks in America to bear upon American foreign policy, white America wouldn’t let him. He was ridiculed in our mainstream press and by our president as being “intrusive” and “out of his league”—dismissed in President Johnson’s revealing phrase as “just a nigger preacher after all.” Then he was assassinated. Today, unfortunately, his eloquent teaching that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere is largely ignored on the day dedicated to his memory; in the eyes of King, in contrast to the good Puritan, the obligation to respect the rights and freedom of foreign peoples was quite real—and violence toward others in order to impose our will was violation and sin. (Were King alive today, one can be confident he would greet our veterans, returned from Iraq, with compassion and love; no doubt he would credit them with sincerity. But one familiar with the speeches of his final twelve months cannot imagine him congratulating them by saying: “Thank you for your service to our country.” For this reason, those speeches are now seldom featured on the day dedicated to his memory.)

Our strong resistance to a black understanding of Christianity shows there’s still a way to go; our Puritan heritage stands in the way. Black literature provides a kind of bridge. Through the works of David Walker and Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, to name a few, there has been an opportunity for whites to take in the texture of black lives and black aspirations more accurately than in earlier days. Not irrelevantly, in the two hundred and more years since the beginnings of black minstrelsy, black stand-up comics have in the last four or five decades been able to take on white audiences and get them laughing to the point of tears at
the contradictions and hypocrisy of our white-dominated society. Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Chris Rock are prominent examples. More recently, reviving a style from the earliest days, there’s the raunchy, minstrel-like honesty and down-to-earth humor of Steve Harvey—judging from the laughter of audiences, as liberating to whites as to blacks.

This is mentioned, not to congratulate blacks but to locate where there remains hope for some change of direction in our American mainstream. True, some blacks, particularly in politics and law, have sold out—just like so many others—to the worst aspects of American ambition and American opportunism; and the system has rewarded them. But there’s reason to believe the majority of blacks know too much and feel too strongly for that. If whites are becoming aware of the inconsistencies of our traditional story, and are looking around for a new and more realistic commentary on who we are, blacks have been and are now becoming increasingly a source and catalyst for white self-understanding. As I say, it’s unlikely any black has ever taken seriously The American Story.

It’s not then to some golden moment of our past we should look for remedies. The most positive thing in our history has been the gradual, halting—sometimes furiously resisted—steps of accommodation that sons and daughters of Puritan forefathers have made toward comprehending the struggles and riches of black culture in the face of white oppression and white resistance. An understanding of these struggles sweetens our temper, shames our arrogance, and redirects our shared society to more wholesome goals. It’s from this, if anywhere, we can hope still to become responsible citizens of global society and conservers of the planet. (There’s even hope we whites may someday forgive ancestral Native Americans for all the bad things we’ve done to them, and that we may begin to be tutored by their unslaughtered descendants who continue to breathe among us. The wisdom we tried to bury under the corpses of our Indian predecessors can, if we have the humility to accept it, yet help us toward redemption. In the meantime, we can look to Indians as a warning. In the nineteenth century, as time was then running out for them by reason of our actions, so time today, by reason of closely related current actions, is running out for the rest of us.)
3) So, while it’s true we’re all products of our past, that doesn’t mean our past is our destiny—doesn’t mean we’re doomed by it.

Some of the most refreshing voices among American historians and commentators, past and current are those of Perry Miller, Richard Hofstadter, William Appleman Williams, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Barton Bernstein, and Chris Hedges. It’s not that these scholars all agree; but they all tend to take ideology seriously. They think the ideas in our minds are of great importance, and that we cannot have much understanding of our past unless we attend to them. This makes these authors interesting to read—the more so because their approach is not familiar.

It’s not that the rest of Americans have no ideology; it’s just that most of us tend not to pay attention to the ideology out of which we act. Hofstadter wrote an entire book on anti-intellectualism in America.

It may be that Hume is the culprit here. (Or it’s more probable he just articulated well what was to become the American mindset.) Reason, says Hume, does not call the shots in our ethical behavior; rather our emotions do. We act in accord with our inclinations and affectivity.

There is, to be sure, at least a half-truth in what Hume says. When I am wondering whether or not I should go to the beach today, it’s probably not by a logical deduction but by an inclination, an appetitive disposition, that I’ll resolve the matter. What Hume and we Americans seem insufficiently attentive to is that the general scheme of my affections—the organic whole of my affectivity—is no doubt deeply saturated with my ideology (something that does involve a network of—at least informal—reasonings and convictions). While Hume would have it that reason typically enters after the decision is made, and that then—when it does arrive—comes in the form of a rationalization, this can seem on reflection a bit glib. A more attentive phenomenology might reveal reasoning has been there from the start, pre-determining what parts of my affectivity I will bring to bear upon the options under consideration. To state the matter in more general terms, Hume seems to disregard that one of the things to which one’s affectivity is most inclined is one’s ideology. That for
Americans, it’s typically an unexamined ideology does not make it any the less dynamic. Here Freud is more useful than Hume.

In fact, a great deal of harm seems to have been occasioned by our American inattention to ideology. First of all, we don’t notice our own; instead we will say that our preferences are simply for the natural order of things. (Some of us are able to say, for instance, it’s quite natural to go to Africa and behead a lion named Cecil there.) Secondly, we’re not alert to ideology in others. It doesn’t occur to us, for instance, that Native Americans had (have!) ideologies of their own. We seem to have been so simple as to think their minds were simply examples of Locke’s blank and chalk less slate—an empty tablet awaiting the slash of our writing instruments. Ditto for the minds of laborers drawn from Africa. Ditto for Mexicans, for Filipinos, for Vietnamese, Central Americans, and all classes of Muslims.

It’s for this reason we’ve been so ready to go along with Wilson’s “I will teach the people of South America to elect good presidents.” It fits a pattern. In Chile, when the people elected Allende, Kissinger and our CIA knew better, and worked effectively to empower those opponents of Allende who drove him to commit suicide. In Iran, when Iranians elected Mossadegh, TR’s grandson Kermit Roosevelt, Jr., of our CIA, pitched in to correct the outcome of their vote. When Ronald Reagan saw that the Nicaraguans had made a mistake in electing Daniel Ortega, he sponsored the Contras. The Contras, working closely with our CIA (and with people funding our clandestine operation by smuggling drugs into America’s ghettos), were—most of us felt—merely attempting to restore things to normal. Earlier, when Cubans made the mistake of choosing Castro, JFK worked hard for Castro’s assassination. Earlier yet, Eisenhower knew that if the Vietnamese were left free to conduct the elections we had promised in the Geneva Accords, the Vietnamese would mistakenly have chosen Ho Chi Minh. In the interest of democracy Eisenhower called off the elections. More recently, less than a decade ago, we gave a clear and unmistakable warning to the Palestinians of Gaza not to vote Hamas into office as their leadership. Once they’d ignored us and done so anyway, in July, 2014, our entire Congress rose as one person and encouraged the Israeli government to punish the misguided civilians of Gaza. The obliging Israelis did so, killing roughly four hundred Gazan children to make the important point that violence never pays. Recently, when Egyptians voted a less-than-moderate
Muslim party into office, we worked successfully with Egyptian dissidents to bring about a coup. More recently still, we acted similarly in the Ukraine, assisting a coup in the Ukraine to reverse the election there and reduce Russian influence. We are now doing all we can to keep Putin from intruding into the stability we so artfully worked to establish. A decade ago, we destroyed the governmental structure of Iraq lest Saddam Hussein develop weapons of mass destruction, and currently we’re naturally disappointed that the government we helped install in Saddam’s place hasn’t done better with the rich opportunity we provided—namely the opportunity to rebuild Iraq from the ground up. For all of this, we have never apologized; for after all, we’ve only been doing what comes naturally to us who bear responsibility for keeping the world free.

(OK, that’s almost the last time I’ll do that.)

We have always wanted to think, as one can observe, that in whatever we do, we’re simply acting in accord with common sense. Yet the premises out of which we’ve operated have been bizarre, peculiar, and inhumane. Throughout all that, we’ve never quite abandoned the principles of the Enlightenment; we’ve reserved them to demand—often with threats and with violent force raining down from the sky—that our rivals and enemies abide by them. In particular, we want to teach them that opposition to us should always be non-violent. In order to teach from a position of power, we’re working night and day—at tremendous cost to the American taxpayer—to refine still further our unrivaled nuclear arsenal.

Why is there today such general malaise (that word again!) among those who aspire to a reform of our actions “before it is too late”? It is not that it’s so hard to decide what we want. The general shape of the desired result of reform is not too obscure. FDR did a good job in formulating it in his vision of the Four Freedoms: (1) freedom of speech, everywhere; (2) freedom of religion, everywhere; (3) freedom from hunger and want (due to lack of healthy habitat, lack of shelter, lack of adequate clothing), everywhere; (4) freedom from war and the threat of war, everywhere.

The source of our malaise is we do not see how to get from A (our present situation) to B (the desired result of reform). Our malaise is well founded. For to get from A to B, we must first become aware of the way our lifestyle, and the ideology that justifies it, hold us back from the result we want. For this reason I started this book with a general discussion of our disinvestment—moral as well as monetary—regarding education. Other chapters on “convenient
skepticisms” and “false hopes” may have seemed extraneous; but really they too touch the heart of the matter. For here lie (in both senses) the strategic defenses for the mindset we hold. We hold these defenses with white knuckles, and we will not easily let them go.

Alternatives are not unimaginable. One can catch glimpses of opportunities for change in our past. Perhaps in the success of our Revolutionary War, we could have recognized that the noble premise we presented as motive for our revolt—all men are created equal—was ground not only for our assertions against England but ground too for Indian and black assertions against us successful ex-colonial whites. We did not do this because it was not convenient. We let our noble profession get ground to dust beneath our feet.

In the years immediately following the furor of the War of 1812, during the administration of J.Q. Adams, we could have followed Adams’ lead toward internal improvements and provision for decent lives of all Americans, while learning to live within the boundaries of that time and by discontinuing our unjust treatment of black Americans. We chose Jackson instead.

Toward the end of the century, came the turbulent 1890s—never given the attention they deserve. Henry Adams reflects on this time in his autobiography, but demonstrates only how feckless he and the other intellectuals of the time had become. The time was the afterglow of the North’s victory. It was the age of the Robber Barons—a time presaging the oligarchy we citizens united now endure. It was the Gilded Age. During this time we would celebrate the final cleansing of the Great Plains from savagery. It was a time in which we welcomed “Redemption” in the South, with Jim Crow laws restoring black Americans to their proper place—an action enjoying the tacit approval of the North. Having done what we could to subdue the people of color within our boundaries, we were now ready for Cubans and Filipinos. And after that, we were ready to extend our protection to the Chinese. Surprisingly, even as we congratulated ourselves amid so many successes, a time had come of frightening economic depression. The flaw in the economy was that the farmer and the industrial laborer often had insufficient funds to buy even ordinary goods amid the immense surpluses spewing from their farms and factories.
In other words, it was a time in which we were making all the
wrong decisions.

Why rehash this? The intent is to emphasize how extensively
we average Americans have been implicated in a disastrous com-
mitment to the Puritan project. Largely, the commitment was
unexamined and unchallenged.

Here the ideological detectives (Perry Miller, Richard Hof-
stadter, and company) are on the right track. Money does not
quite run the show, as Marx might claim it does. (Neither, for
that matter, it would seem, does Freudian libido.) In the final
analysis, ideology has the upper hand. When in the Civil War,
hundreds of young white soldiers of the South hurled their bod-
ies into what was a virtual crematorium at Cemetery Ridge, it
was not for money or economic advantage; neither, surely, was it
for sex. It was pure ideology. Most of them neither owned slaves
nor probably expected to. Rather, Virginia had been invaded!
Georgia, for God’s sake, was threatened! Their culture and cus-
tom had been despised. It was too much to take. And the North
was just as blinded by ideology as was the South. The commit-
ment to profit-taking at any cost was unyielding.

We charge Muslims with eccentricity and barbarism because
they would sooner kill fellow human beings—and themselves into
the bargain—than see their culture despised and changed. We
should know better than to so charge them. We are very much
cut from the same cloth. People will kill and be killed sooner
than change their minds. In fact, this resistance to mind-change
seems especially strong among us children of Puritans.

And so the final question. Can we, in the face of a manifest
need to do so, change our minds? Can we abandon an unexam-
inied and bankrupt ideology?

A concern for our children is perhaps our strongest motive to
do so. If we insist, as we have been insisting, that anyone think-
ing and acting differently from the way we do is a threat to our
national security, and if we continue trying to structure the poli-
tics and economics of the planet to accommodate a Puritan sense
of economic rationality, and if we try to enforce this with the
might of our military technology, we will end by declaring just
about everyone in the world a terrorist. People everywhere will
begin acting in accord with the label we have assigned them. Our
grandchildren’s lives will be bleak beyond present imagination.
I’ve argued that, while a terrible racism continues to corrode our hearts, the best place to look for lessons toward relief is, ironically, to the history of homegrown white racism against blacks. Our attention to this history over the last half-century has already contributed to our liberation in a variety of meaningful ways. The prejudices of parents and grandparents are happily becoming inexplicable to our young. Currently, when our police profile blacks, our very police—longtime emblems of security to white America—are becoming inexplicable to young Americans of all races.

Note that thousands of young blacks and young whites are marrying across the color line, and millions will follow. Even now multitudes of older white and black Americans stand with unstrained smiles to applaud and encourage the brides and grooms. Perhaps more importantly, parents who have absented themselves from attending such weddings are finding their grandchildren irresistible. The children of these unions are cherished and will be cherished by all their relatives—all sides reconciled by the deepest urges of human nature.

In addition to a blending of races, out of the successes of the civil-rights struggle have spun liberations of women, of Latinos, of the handicapped, and of gays and lesbians. (One can almost hear the shudder of American conservatives: “See! We warned you.”)

One must hope that from these successes there will come a mellowing and gradual leavening of our Puritan sensibility. One hopes too that, for the sake of our children, the sensibility that develops will lead to a fresh connection with habitat while habitat is still there. The choice for that must come in the first half of this century, and can happen only if a residual wholesomeness in the people is able to refuse the blandishments—recognize the insanity—of a majority of those now leading our corporations.

History need not be a doom. It can liberate us. It can liberate us if we address it honestly. We have to admit that The American Story is an elaborate myth now in the process of crumbling. The cake of our Puritan custom is falling apart. While the Puritan myth has long been effective in providing some cohesion, it was always in fact a myth embedded in bigotry. The “America” of that myth, as it loses its creditability, is becoming altogether inadequate to hold things together—either for us, or as the pivot of
the world. Whether we will abandon it in time to become an America that deserves our dedication is up to us.