

# THE UNFINISHED REPUBLIC

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American Government in the Twenty-First Century



KENNETH R. MLADENKA

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**For: Linda, Brooke, Lauren, Friend, and Happy.  
My favorite citizens of the Republic.**

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## *About the Author*

Kenneth R. Mladenka received a Ph.D. from Rice University in 1975 and taught for 20 years as a professor of political science at the University of Virginia, Northwestern University, and Texas A&M University. His research on American politics has been published in the *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Wilson Quarterly*, and *Urban Affairs Quarterly*. Shortly after graduating from college, he served in Vietnam (1967–1968) as a platoon leader with the Fourth Infantry Division.

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# *Preface*

## CONTRADICTION, CHANGE, CONSTANCY

### Contradiction

The American Republic was fraught with powerful contradictions and enduring ironies from the very beginning. Abraham Lincoln would proclaim at Gettysburg in 1863 that “four score and seven years ago the founders had brought forth on the continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” But there was not a single mention of the words equal or equality in the Constitution, and it required Lincoln’s own powerful legacy to graft the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution after both Lincoln and the Civil War had passed. The nation may have been conceived in liberty, but no less a member of the revolutionary elite than Richard Henry Lee of Virginia could look at the just completed Constitution and find it “really astonishing that the same people who have just emerged from a long and cruel war in defense of liberty, should now agree to fix an elective despotism upon themselves and their posterity.”<sup>1</sup>

A powerful contradiction existed between elitism and egalitarianism. The decade of the Constitution was a period of deep disillusionment for many of the revolutionary leaders. These “first generation gentlemen” had envisioned a republic founded on the willingness of its citizens to place the public interest above narrow self-interest. Leadership for this virtuous republic would be drawn from the ranks of an “aristocracy of talent.” Membership would be determined not by blood, kinship, or social standing, but by genius and merit. Promising young men would receive a liberal education, acquire an “enlightened” character, and thereby properly equip themselves for admittance to the

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

ranks of the elite. But just as the Revolution had challenged and transformed existing patterns of political and social authority, so the Revolution unleashed other powerful forces as well. As we will see in Chapter 2, one of these powerful forces was egalitarianism. Ordinary Americans came to think that they were as good as everyone else. More importantly, they came to act that way. They came to believe that they were capable of self-government, and that government existed to help them obtain their private ends.

According to this perspective, the people were the ultimate source of political authority. Several developments during this period—the radicalization of state legislatures; citizen participation through the mechanisms of conventions, committees, and associations; the enactment of legislation in several states providing for debtor relief and the issuance of paper currency; and Shays' Rebellion—were interpreted by the elite as assaults on liberty and property.<sup>2</sup> The people apparently were as capable of despotism as any prince. James Madison came to see that the few had much more to fear from the many, than the many had to fear from the few. This growing alarm over the tyranny of the majority was aggravated by the low regard in which the elite held the masses. George Washington referred to them as “the grazing multitude,” John Adams described them as the “Common Herd of Mankind,” and Governor Morris characterized them as “Poor reptiles! They bask in the sun, and ere noon they will bite, depend upon it.” Poor prospects indeed upon which to pin posterity's hopes for republican government. The framers' solution to the problem of a lack of political virtue among the people was an ingenious one. Entrust the future of republican government to the new institutions created by the Constitution rather than to the virtue of the people.

Only some of the powerful contradictions that had plagued the American Republic from its origins would be resolved by the Civil War. The issue of the contingent nature of the Union was settled with a striking finality. No longer would individual states (South Carolina during the nullification crisis), or groups of states (New England during the War of 1812), threaten secession. Before the Civil War, the nation was referred to as “The United States are . . .” Afterwards, it became, “The United States is . . .” The bane of slavery had also been eradicated, its deadly poison leached by violence from the political fabric of the Republic.

But other issues defied resolution. Conflicts over the power of the states versus that of the national government would dominate the post-war evolution of the federal system. State resistance to the imposition of a national policy agenda—in conjunction with the lingering effects of the Reconstruction Era—would produce a pattern of highly uneven political and social development among the states. Within this context, the continuing struggle and halting

<sup>2</sup> Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*.



progress of various minorities would come to represent one of the great ironies of American self-government. The tortuous path followed by African Americans, Native Americans, women, ethnic minorities, and Hispanics in their quest for a measure of the political, social, and economic equality promised them by the American dream would prove to be an enduring contradiction throughout the nation's history.

A connecting tissue among the chapters is provided by the importance of often contradictory beliefs and ideas in the development of the American political system. It was the belief in classical republican values that served as one of the most basic foundations for the emerging nation. In turn, the growing power and appeal of egalitarianism—in combination with the increasing likelihood of ordinary citizens to participate directly in political affairs—clashed with elitist notions of a virtuous republic led by gentlemen drawn from an “aristocracy of talent.” It was the conflict generated by competing beliefs regarding the issues of sovereignty, direct democracy, representation, interests, leadership, and the appropriate nature and ends of public power, that defined the constitutional era.

Another idea that powerfully shaped American politics was the belief in divine inspiration and guidance. The Puritans believed that just as God had driven out the tribes of Canaan for the benefit of the Israelites, so God would drive out the Indians. John Winthrop knew that the “God of Israel is among us.” When an epidemic decimated the Indian population in 1633 he observed, “If God were not pleased with our inheriting these parts, why did he drive the natives before us?” Three hundred and fifty years later, Ronald Reagan would proclaim, “I have always believed that this anointed land was set apart in an uncommon way, that a divine plan placed this great continent here between the oceans.” President Woodrow Wilson, son of a Presbyterian minister, professor of government, and president of Princeton University, wrote that “America was born a Christian nation; America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelation of Holy Scripture.”

Racism was another powerful doctrine that spawned its own set of contradictions. President Andrew Jackson asked in 1830, “What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic . . . occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people and filled with the blessing of liberty, civilization, and religion?” Alexis de Tocqueville observed that white Americans “scarcely acknowledge the common features of humanity in this stranger whom slavery has brought among them.” He predicted that “the abolition of slavery will increase the repugnance of the white population for the blacks.”<sup>3</sup> *The Cincinnati Enquirer* editorialized

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Mentor Books, 1956).

at the end of the Civil War that “slavery is dead, the negro is not, there is the misfortune.” Intellectuals labored to lend a patina of scientific respectability to racist beliefs. Some, such as Louis Agassiz of Harvard University, maintained that whites were genetically superior. The doctrine of Social Darwinism, created by the Englishman Herbert Spencer and propagated in America by William Graham Sumner of Yale University, argued for the legitimacy of the strong dominating the weak by virtue of the inevitability of survival of the fittest.

When the concept of Americans as a “chosen people” merged with a belief in racial superiority, a powerful hybrid was born. In 1874, Samuel Harris, professor of Theology at Yale University, proclaimed that it was to the Anglo-Saxon race “more than any other that the world is now indebted for the propagation of Christian Civilization.” James King, a Protestant clergyman, observed that God had chosen the Anglo-Saxons “to conquer the world for Christ by dispossessing feeble races, and assimilating and molding others.” Josiah Strong, another influential clergyman, thought that eventually all of mankind would be “Anglo-Saxonized.”

It would not take long for this new nation, where the people saw themselves as “chosen” by God, to come to believe themselves invincible in battle. John Winthrop proclaimed that with the “God of Israel among us . . . ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies.” Oliver Wendell Holmes believed that the message of war was “divine.”<sup>4</sup> President Woodrow Wilson acknowledged no contradiction between political violence and Christian principles. It was clear to him that “When men take up arms to set other men free, there is something sacred and holy in warfare. I will not cry ‘peace’ as long as there is sin and wrong in the world.” Increasingly, America’s wars became religious crusades. Religion’s warriors marched to the song, “Onward Christian Soldiers.” According to the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the nation’s soldiers had a mission even more important than Christ’s. While Jesus died “to make men holy,” Americans died “to make men free.” When President Wilson returned from the peace conference in France at the end of World War I, he proclaimed, “At last the world knows America as the savior of the world.” America had become Godlike.

Several powerful and often contradictory beliefs shaped the nation’s behavior both at home and abroad throughout much of its history: Republicanism, egalitarianism, divine guidance, racial superiority, and invincibility on the field of battle. Together, they provided the basis for a potent national ideology. Perhaps no one ever more clearly expressed that ideology than Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana who, in a speech supporting the American war against the

<sup>4</sup> Richard Severo and Lewis Millford, *The Wages of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

Philippines—a war in which 16,000 guerrillas and 100,000 civilians died—observed that,

We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race but will move forward to our work . . . with gratitude for a task worthy of our strength and thanksgiving to Almighty God that He has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation. . . . This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world's progress, guardians of its righteous peace.<sup>5</sup>

But mixed in with these powerful beliefs in the superiority and invincibility of the American nation was also a genuine sense of idealism (what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature”). The God who smiled upon the Puritans in their violent subjugation of the Indians would also inspire and sustain the Abolitionists in their unrelenting attacks on the evils of slavery. Enormously proud of her political, social, and economic institutions, America would be moved by that same sense of idealism to bestow the blessings conferred by God's Grace and Divine Providence upon others. America's growing involvement in the international arena during the twentieth century would profoundly alter the course of human history.

Another contradiction exists between what the American Republic promises and what it delivers. Our political tradition abounds with eloquent, powerful, and stirring appeals to the dispossessed and downtrodden: “All men are created equal,” “conceived in liberty,” “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” However, resistance to demands for a larger measure of political and economic justice for minorities has been given up only grudgingly.

Powerful and contradictory beliefs have shaped America's political destiny. These contradictions are as much a part of the Republic's political life today as they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a people, we are still confronted with the contradictions between egalitarianism and elitism, between the search for social justice and the demands of economic efficiency, between Christian brotherhood and racial superiority, between secularism and the belief in divine guidance, between tolerance and bigotry, between fairness and survival of the fittest, between individualism and the longing for community, between the myth of the melting pot and the reality of isolated racial and class enclaves.

It is this theme of contradiction that will be emphasized in the pages that follow. These contradictions have structured and shaped the nature of political

<sup>5</sup> Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

conflict in America, and our political institutions and processes have evolved in an effort to resolve them. Some of the nation's most powerful contradictions have been ignored. Others have been confronted with considerably less than satisfactory results. The enduring promise of the Republic is that each generation will try anew.

## **Change**

Change is a major focus of this book. The country is undergoing enormous change, and the consequences of those transformations will permanently alter the American political system. For example, demographic shifts will exert profound effects on the distribution of power in society. The time is approaching when a majority of Americans will be nonwhite. The extraordinary political consequences of these population changes will be examined in an effort to help understand the political future of the country. The "browning" of America is already evident. In New York state, 40 percent of the children enrolled in the public schools are nonwhite. In California, the figure is 51 percent. In San Jose, the Nguyens outnumber the Jones in the phone directory—fourteen columns to eight. A multiracial and multicultural society will produce enormous political strains and tensions. This country has had past experience with demographic change, but the great waves of ethnic migration in the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century were different in one fundamental respect: The new arrivals were white.

We already see indications of the heightened tension these demographic transformations are likely to produce. One ominous sign is a rise in the incidence of racial discrimination and instances of racially motivated violence and brutality. In the classroom, there are conflicts over bilingual education and multicultural curriculum. Grievances and discontent may increase if African Americans perceive that the increased political and economic power enjoyed by Hispanics and Asians has been obtained at their expense. Potential inter-racial conflict may incorporate an element of intergenerational tension as well. As the white population ages, an increasing number of retirees will be supported by a heavily nonwhite working population. The opportunities for enhanced political tension in such an environment are enormous.

Some predictions hold that by the middle of the next century, America will already be a majority nonwhite society. For the first time in a history spanning 400 years, the nation will be forced to accept the reality of a society no longer dominated by white beliefs, biases, and myths. Already, the Republic is beginning to engage in the agonizing reappraisal of what it will mean to be a citizen of the Republic when African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans will wield the political, cultural, and social influence that defines a society's most basic institutions, values, and beliefs.

The fundamental economic changes that are sweeping the country and the world will also exert profound effects upon the nation's political future. The

globalization of the economy, the shift from an industrial to an information processing and high-tech economy, and the growing challenges to America's economic position in the international arena, will combine to substantially alter the domestic political fabric. For example, if the pattern of redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor continues, we can anticipate the eventual likelihood of heightened class conflict. A high-tech economy may also entail significant political consequences. Some believe that such an economy will produce a small group of highly paid professionals and managers and a very large group of marginally rewarded clerks, secretaries, fast-food workers, and janitors. The former group will reap enormous rewards from the system; the latter group will suffer underemployment, low wages, and little opportunity for advancement. A high-tech economy may cause a shrinking of the middle class and the further erosion of labor union membership. One possible outcome is a redistribution of political power as well as increased class polarization.

Economic change in the United States has always caused profound political change. The transformation of the economy from an agricultural to an industrial base in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries radically altered social and political relationships. Great cities developed as people moved from rural to urban areas. The ethnic and religious composition of the country changed as a result of a massive influx of immigrants from abroad. Political power was redistributed as labor unions began to organize, the middle class grew, and blacks migrated from the South to Midwestern and Northeastern cities. This economic transformation also caused broad movements of political protest, beginning with the Populists and Progressives. The size and scope of government dramatically expanded as more programs and services were required by an increasingly complex society. The power and role of the bureaucracy grew as government assumed responsibility for regulating a wide array of social and economic activities.

The enormous and enduring success of the American political experiment could not have been accomplished and sustained without the limitless energy and vast resources created by a powerful economic engine. The prodigious industrial capacity and awesome technological prowess of the Republic helped propel the American people to the very center of the world stage. Politics and economics are so powerfully intertwined that careful attention will be given the role of the latter in the political origins, evolution, and maturity of the American political system.

### **Constancy**

The history of the nation is rich, colorful, and exciting—full of rogues and idealists, scoundrels and saints. Each generation produced statesmen, visionaries, religious fanatics, profiteers, corrupt politicians, warlords and warmongers, pacifists, crusaders, martyrs, and great writers, explorers, and inventors.

America's political history is written in successive waves of fervor and passion and violence. The history of the country is an exciting adventure. The extraordinary energy, determination, and endurance of the early Americans allowed them to settle the wilderness and conquer the Indians. They fought a war for independence, invented a Republic, and established and defended the legitimacy of the nation. They created a flourishing society in one great region of the country based on slave labor, fought a bitter and horrendous war to destroy that slave economy, and in the process redefined American democracy. They reacted to the profound changes wrought by industrialization and immigration by forming vast waves of political protest—Populism and Progressivism. The country grew prosperous and powerful, flexed its muscles in the international arena, pursued imperialistic interests abroad, and fought a great war in Europe. The Depression dealt a glancing blow to unbridled capitalism and gravely challenged national self-confidence. The country restored both its prosperity and self-esteem in World War II and emerged from that conflict as the world's dominant military and economic power—as well as its policeman. The next half century would witness a superpower confrontation with the Soviets during the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the communist witch hunts and paranoia of the McCarthy era, the Civil Rights movement, the Kennedy assassination, the agony and despair of Vietnam, the shame of Watergate, the deterioration of America's economy, the Reagan years, and the patriotic rejuvenation of the Gulf War.

An understanding of the historical development of the country also provides a sound basis for an understanding of America's political present and future. American politics is characterized by historical cycles. During certain periods in the country's history, the national public agenda is dominated by a concern with economic productivity and efficiency. At other times, this emphasis is displaced by a focus on social equity and justice issues which, in turn, eventually gives away to a preoccupation with a law-and-order agenda. Each new cycle of public priorities produces a different set of political policies, outcomes, and impact. An emphasis upon political history, therefore, not only enhances readability but provides the student with the basis for evaluating America's political present and future.

The significance of individual Americans will also be emphasized. What if, by the mere accident of birth, the revolutionary generation had been absent the following six men: Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and John Marshall? What if Nat Turner had never heard the voice of God commanding him to lead his bloody slave rebellion in 1831, or if John Brown had not heard the same voice at Harper's Ferry 28 years later? What if Harriet Beecher Stowe had not grown dissatisfied with being a wife and mother to her seven children and had never written *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, if Abraham Lincoln had not been elected to the presidency where

he would preserve the Union and redefine American democracy, or if John Wilkes Booth had not heeded the counsel of his own personal demons to murder Lincoln? What if “Tailgunner” Joe McCarthy had never lived to invent the political movement of hysteria that bears his name?

American society offers a high standard of living; immense opportunity and reward for many; vast personal freedom; relatively honest, open, and efficient government; substantial progress in civil rights; and an opportunity to share in the national largess and reap the rewards of full citizenship. The opportunities and rewards that are so eagerly offered to some are summarily denied to others. America at its best sets standards that are exceedingly high. The Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech eloquently affirmed the national political ideal and purpose for their respective centuries. With ends that are so noble, the nature of the nation’s means as well as the reality of her accomplishments frequently suffers by comparison. One thing is certain: Every significant political development advances the dreams of some Americans; every significant political development defers the dreams of others. As the Republic enters its next century, whose dreams will be realized? Whose dreams will be deferred?

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

The related themes of contradiction, constancy, and change guide this book. The powerful and enduring contradictions of the American political experience (republicanism, egalitarianism, elitism, racism, divine guidance) provide a connecting thread between the chapters. In Chapter 2 (Political Origins of the American Republic) and Chapter 3 (Constitution), we will trace the decisive conflicts over control of the Republic’s political future between the elites (“propertied gentlemen of virtue”) and those ordinary citizens who had become imbued with the spirit of egalitarianism unleashed during the Revolutionary era (“reptiles basking in the sun,” according to their elitist opponents).

In Chapter 6 (Political Minorities), we will witness the bitter political conflicts generated by the clash between the quest for equality on the one hand, and the powerful forces of racism on the other. These forces—deeply ingrained in the political fabric of the American experience—are illustrated by the horrible and chilling words of Roger B. Taney, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, who proclaimed that black Americans were “so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro [therefore] might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.” The powerful national contradiction between egalitarianism and racism is further illustrated by the same Chief Justice who, as an advocate of Jacksonian Democracy, wrote that “every man is equally entitled to protection by law.”

The frequently contradictory nature of the nation's political beliefs will be emphasized throughout the book. In Chapter 8 on the presidency, for example, we will see that several of the nation's presidents often reflected the larger society's ambivalence and contradictions regarding racial superiority, Christian principles of brotherhood and pacifism, and sense of military invincibility. No president better illustrated these contradictions than Woodrow Wilson—one of the best educated and most scholarly of all the nation's Chief Executives. He could sincerely profess the universal equality and Christian brotherhood of all men. He could also practice discrimination against black federal employees, treat women as intellectually inferior, and resist efforts to enfranchise women despite the repeated entreaties of his daughters. He could dedicate his life and that of the nation to Christian principles, and yet advocate war and violence to achieve his goals. He could believe in the dignity of all mankind, while also insisting that God had selected Americans as His "Chosen People" to deliver salvation and democracy to inferior races throughout the world.

The second theme is change. In Chapter 1, we examine several significant changes that will exert an impact upon the American political system. These include the aging of the population, demographic change, economic upheaval, suburbanization, the cultural conflict over values, race and violence, and the decline of national power. The chapters on Political Economy, the Presidency, Congress, Judiciary, and Interest Groups and Political Parties consider how these changes are likely to influence political institutions and processes. The intent is to get students to think critically about American government and politics in dynamic rather than static terms.

The third theme is constancy, what Abraham Lincoln in his First Inaugural Address called "the mystic chords of memory." A shared historical experience holds the nation together, just as the forces of change tend to pull it apart. These "mystic chords of memory"—the Revolutionary period, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Progressive era, immigration, the World Wars, the Depression, the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam—will be examined from the perspective of how the nation's political history illuminates the present and perhaps even suggests the contours of the future. For example, conflicts between the elites and ordinary American citizens during the Revolutionary era—as illustrated in our portraits of Alexander Hamilton and Daniel Shays—are clearly relevant to understanding the political conflicts between elites and masses today. Similarly, portraits of various presidents are used to demonstrate the enormous pressures, frustrations, and opportunities historically associated with the position.

These three themes—constancy, contradiction, and change—connect the chapters. An understanding of the political past helps in our effort to grasp the



meaning and purpose of the present. A recognition of the powerful contradictions embedded in the political and social fabric of the nation—egalitarianism and elitism, the yearning for social justice and fairness on the one hand and the incessant striving for economic success and survival of the fittest on the other, Christian principles and racial superiority, secularism and divine guidance, “rugged” individualism and the longing for community and purpose—helps us understand why public officials find it so exceedingly difficult to discover and serve the “public interest.” And finally, an examination of change permits us to glimpse—if only dimly—the emerging shape of the nation’s political future.

Kenneth R. Mladenka