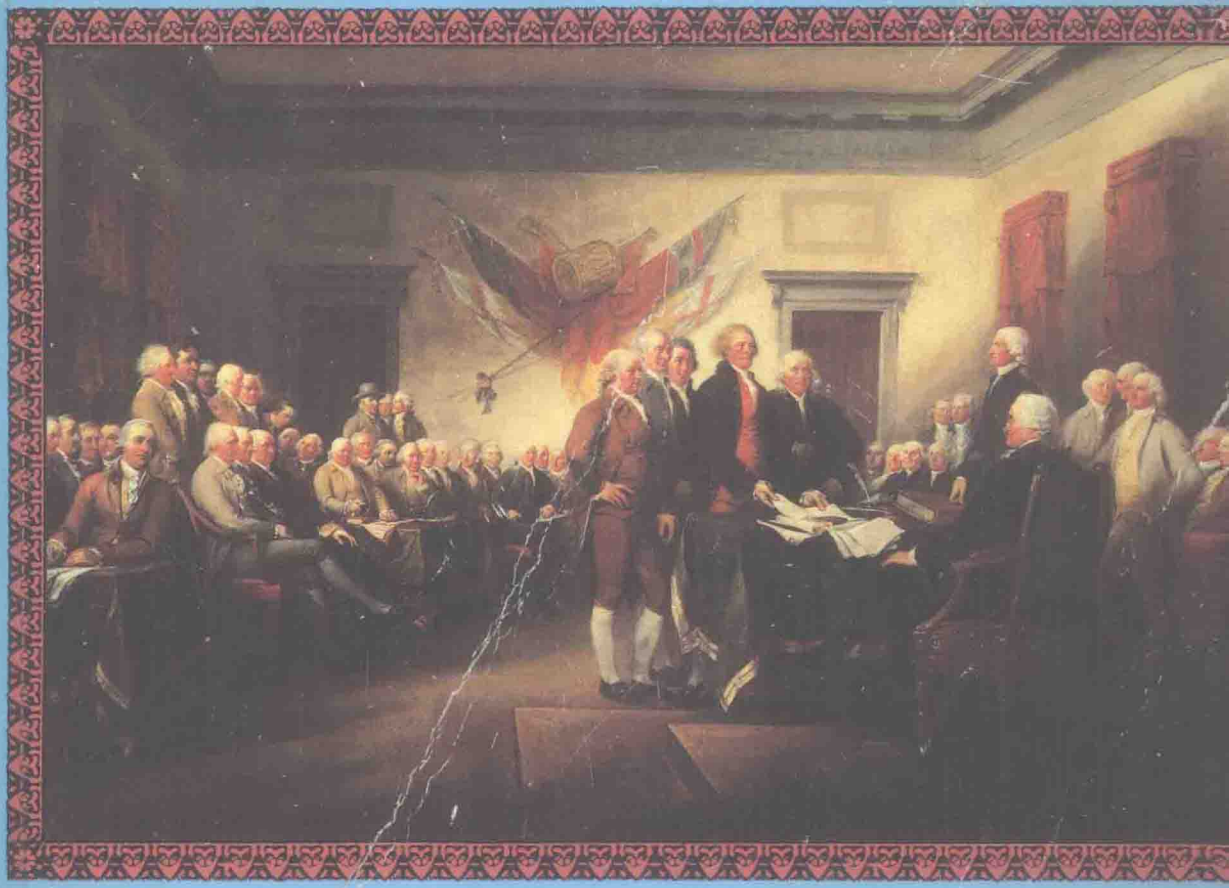
Fifth Edition

AMERICAN HERITAGE

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Frank W. Fox • Clayne L. Pope



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Prologue: The America Question

Shannon O'Rourke pushed back her chair and stood up. The clutter of research notes which had covered the table before her had now been sorted into neat piles ready for permanent filing. The project that had kept her busy throughout her senior year had at last come to an end. It had been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, working as a research assistant for Avriel Taylor—*the* Avriel Taylor—in the completion of his latest book on the U.S. Constitution. Even though the project was finished, it still seemed tinged with wonder.

Although she was planning to start law school in the fall, Shannon had commenced her work here with no deep understanding of the Constitution. She had originally imagined it to be an antiquarian document outlining a system of government she knew by heart, then delving into a lot of fine print that no one much bothered with. In the months of reading documents and essays, writing note cards, discussing this or that concept with Professor Taylor, she had come to a very different view. A constitution, as she could now see, was a blueprint for society. It reflected the spirit and character of the entire people, and touched their lives in countless ways. Indeed, the more she had learned about the American Constitution, the more elusive and mysterious the document had seemed to become. Now, she confessed, she had more questions about it than ever.

Avriel Taylor walked into the room and surveyed the new orderliness approvingly. "I hope you don't start summer vacation early, Shannon," he said to her, "we still have galleys to check and the index to write. I assure you it takes forever." Then there was some small talk about her plans for the summer and her prospects in law school. After a pause, he picked up a note card from one of the piles and studied it thoughtfully. "Do you think we really figured it out, Shannon?" he asked.

"*I* haven't figured it out," she replied candidly. "Oh, the various bits and pieces make sense, at least some of them do. But the big picture is still fuzzy. It's hard for me to see the Founders' central idea. If you could roll it all into one big ball—the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the market system—what would you call it? Freedom? Order? Justice? What?"

"Ah, what indeed?" he repeated. "It's always hard to know what is in the mind of a group of individuals. They were thinking different things. Some of them were just responding to a situation, and their responses developed as the situation did. Others were looking backward, to their own colonial past (which they idealized), or to their broader English past (which they idealized even more), or even to ancient Greece, trying to recover something they feared they were losing. Still others were thinking about the Enlightenment and all that talk about applying reason and reflection to human institutions."

"Yes," she replied, with a touch of Irish in her voice. "But if *I* said that on an exam, you would write 'cop out' in the margin—right?"

"I guess you're right. OK, I'll make a bold generalization. I think the Founders were hoping to establish a new society, a new *kind* of society. We would use the word *modern* to describe their intention today, and maybe that catches the jist of it. They really did believe that reason and reflection could change the way things worked, and that's the essence of modernism."

"Well," said the girl, "that doesn't seem very distinctive to me. The world is full of 'modern' societies today. Sooner or later, every society has to catch up with the times whether it wants to or not. Even Iran. So, what was so unique about the United States?"

"Your mention of Iran highlights a central difficulty with the idea of modernization. The Shah of Iran wanted to modernize a society steeped in ancient custom and tradition. He went about it the wrong way, and the result was a nightmare. That's not unusual. You see, you suddenly bring in all of this cold, dispassionate science and start applying it to people's lives, and something very important gets shoved aside. Nazi Germany was a 'modern' society: those were *scientists* who were examining the kids to determine which ones went to the gas chambers. Soviet Russia is a modern society. So is China. And Vietnam. Pol Pot brought modernism to Cambodia with a fanfare of trumpets—and wound up slaughtering millions. There's nothing magic about the word *modern*—by itself."

"That's why you said modern only catches the jist of it. There is something more."

"Well, you wanted a bold statement. Yes, there is something more. But the other thing is harder to define. You see, the Founders wanted the new society to be modern but they also wanted it to be good. There was no looking to science for a conception of what good was. Science can't do that. They had to look somewhere else. To the past. To philosophy. To religion. Even to common sense. That's why even the most forward looking of the Founders were reading Aristotle and the English Whigs. What they really wanted was to bring forth, once and for all, the Good Society."

"But why?" the girl asked. "What suddenly got into them to do that? They seemed reasonably happy before the Revolution. Their homes were beautiful. Their towns were picturesque. They were well off. And England's was the most liberal government in Europe—in the whole world."

"Well, this may sound a little strange to say in so many words, but I think you could say that America got into them. Living in this land gave them a new perspective. It made them see the world and its history through new eyes. Looking at their own lives—which, as you say, were rather fortunate—they could see more clearly than ever that the world was full of ignorance and folly. Its history, for the most part, had been one of violence, oppression, and man's inhumanity to man. They had tasted a little of that themselves, in their relations with the British, and they didn't like it. English liberty was on the skids, as far as they were concerned, and their own might soon be on the skids with it. Eventually they came to believe that things didn't have to be that way—at least not here. God had given them, as Americans, a chance for a new beginning. A *major* new beginning. They decided to make the most of it."

"So," she replied, "it was a whole new society they aimed to build. The Constitution was only a part of it."

"Well, it was a very important part. There are lots of broad implications in the design of a government, as you have seen. But you're right. The society the Founders had in mind—at least the one they talked about—would be modern in other ways than political. It would become efficient and productive. It would embrace science and technology. It would create material prosperity for its citizens and facilitate the 'pursuit of happiness.' It would develop new standards of justice. It would set an example for the rest of the world in art, literature, the conduct of diplomacy. Most of all, it would enable its people to be free—as few peoples in the world have ever been—free to run their own lives and make their own decisions. We take a lot of that for granted today, but it seemed wondrous beyond imagining then. Remember that quote from John Adams? 'Our pure, virtuous, public-spirited, federative republic will last forever, govern the globe and introduce the perfection of man.' That's pretty heady stuff."

"I guess that's why we still find it so interesting," she mused. "Why we still talk about it and write about it."

"Undoubtedly. A people's own heritage is always of interest to themselves. But the American heritage was supposed to be interesting to *everyone*. We never speak of the 'Russian Dream,' do we? We never make reference to 'Japanese ideals' or use expressions like 'a red-blooded French boy.' We have an idea that the American heritage is not only *ours*, it is *good*—good for humankind. That it represents nothing less than the turning of a corner in history. Not many of the world's peoples think that way."

"Well," said Shannon, the issue suddenly coming into focus, "did they succeed? Did the American Founders really 'turn a corner in history?' Did they open a new epoch for humankind?"

The professor looked at her thoughtfully before replying. "That's a good question," he finally said. "I suppose it's *the* question—call it the America Question. Did the Founders really turn a corner in human history? Did they actually create something new and enduring and of universal significance? Or will it all turn out to be just another brief chapter in some twenty-third century history book?"

"Well?"

"Well . . . I'll tell you what. Let's let *you* answer the America Question. Why don't you think about it for a few days, while you're preparing for final exams. Look around you. See what your friends are up to. Watch the ten o'clock news. Read the

papers. Take a walk down University Avenue and peer into the stores. Talk to the homeless people living under the viaduct. Think about the concepts we've explored in the book. Then come back next week, after it's had a little time to jell, and tell me what you think. Fair enough?"

It was the sort of challenge that Shannon O'Rourke enjoyed. As she started down the hall, she was already mapping out the first sector of her inquiry when Taylor's voice called her back. "Shannon, didn't you mention that you were writing your family history for Phil Dawson's class? Ah, good. You might think about that, too, before you reach your final conclusion. It may be of some relevance."

"Well, it *may* be," she thought, as she swung off down the hall, but at the moment she couldn't see how. The America Question was the business of demigods like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton—not penniless Irish immigrants.

Contents

Part 1

Government

We begin our exploration of the America Question with the study of government. Possibly excepting religion, government is the oldest human institution, and we can trace evidence of it back to the dawn of history. Beginning with the government of families, clans, and tribes, political forms were elaborated and adapted to the use of cities, kingdoms, and empires. People lived with good or bad government, it seemed, but never without government of some kind.

This was because government seemed to address a fundamental human need. Without some way to control the selfish, or hostile, or exploitative actions of individuals, society itself would not be possible. Indeed, so obvious was the need for government that some supposed it to be of divine origin. The ruler, be he king, emperor, sachem, pharaoh, czar, rajah, sultan, mogul (or any of the feminine equivalents), was frequently understood to be God's vicar on earth.

Accordingly, government became bathed in an ineffable mystique. To many, the king was not just a powerful politician or ruler of the realm, he was a demigod, and as such he evoked awe in his subjects. In the France of Louis XIV there was a magnificent ritual attending the king's daily act of rising from bed. And if you think the mystique of monarchy is entirely dead, consider the fuss always made over a royal visit to the United States—where there have been no kings since the Revolution. The clothing and coiffure of Princess Di are the only things that can top Hollywood for popular interest.

The founding and development of the American colonies happened to coincide with significant changes in European political thought. On the one hand, national states, whose growth dated from the Renaissance and whose grasp for power lengthened with the discovery of the New World, grew ever more energetic and expansive. England's King James I, who hounded thousands of Puritans out of his kingdom and across the Atlantic, resurrected the notion that kings ruled by "divine right" and used it to enhance his own authority. On the other hand, many Europeans began questioning the old assumptions. Was government really divine, they asked, or was it merely a human institution? And

if the latter, could it not be altered to suit changing needs? While the American colonies were coming into maturity, there was a hot debate about every aspect of political society.

The American colonies played a crucial role in that debate. Unlike the nations of Europe, colonial governments were not the result of established, centuries-old tradition, but rather were recent and practical inventions. In the Old World the discussion of what government was and what it should do was largely academic since the existing governments had little inclination to change. In the New World, by contrast, the discussion of how government, not yet fully formed, should ultimately be shaped, had both relevance and immediacy. The very notion of *creating* government (as opposed to receiving it from God) was full of revolutionary implications.

What came out of the interaction between European ideas and American practice was both a new theory of government and a startling application of it. Americans learned for themselves that while bad government made for human misery, good government made for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and they began altering their own governments accordingly. This development was the first of America's striking departures from the Old World and its ways.

1
The Human Predicament

The Face of Tyranny

Before its work was done, the Nuremberg Court, set up to try Nazi war criminals at the end of World War II, was to review some ghastly evidence. But even this group fell into a hush of horror the day the chief British prosecutor, Sir Hartley Shawcross, read aloud the sworn affidavit of one Hermann Graebe, a German living in the town of Dubno in the Ukraine, who on October 5, 1942, had witnessed the SS's liquidation of Dubno's five thousand Jews.

> My foreman and I went directly to the pits. I heard rifle shots in quick succession from behind one of the earth mounds. The people who had got off the trucks—men, women and children of all ages—had to undress upon the order of an S.S. man, who carried a riding or dog whip. They had to put down their clothes in fixed places, sorted according to shoes, top clothing and under-clothing. I saw a heap of shoes of about 800 to 1,000 pairs, great piles of under-linen and clothing.
>
> Without screaming or weeping these people undressed, stood around in family groups, kissed each other, said farewells and waited for a sign from another S.S. man, who stood near the pit, also with a whip in his hand. During the fifteen minutes that I stood near the pit I heard no complaint or plea for mercy. . . .
>
> An old woman with snow-white hair was holding a one-year-old child in her arms and singing to it and tickling it. The child was cooing with delight. The parents were looking on with tears in their eyes. The father was holding the hand of a boy about 10 years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head and seemed to explain something to him.
>
> At that moment the S.S. man at the pit shouted something to his comrade. The latter counted off about twenty persons and instructed them to go behind the earth mound. . . . I well remember a girl, slim and with black hair, who, as she passed close to me, pointed to herself and said: "twenty-three years old."
>
> I walked around the mound and found myself confronted by a tremendous grave. People were closely wedged together and lying on top of each other so that only their heads were visible. Nearly all had blood running over their shoulders from their heads. Some of the people were still moving. Some were lifting their arms and turning their heads to show that they were still alive. The pit was already two-thirds full. I estimated that it contained about a thousand people. I looked for the man who did the shooting. He was an S.S. man, who sat at the edge of the narrow end of the pit, his feet dangling into the pit. He had a tommy gun on his knees and was smoking a cigarette.
>
> The people, completely naked, went down some steps and clambered over the heads of the people lying there to the place to which the S.S. man directed them. They lay down in front of the dead or wounded people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I

heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching or the heads lying already motionless on top of the bodies that lay beneath them. Blood was running from their necks.

The next batch was approaching already. They went down into the pit, lined themselves up against the previous victims and were shot.

It is not pleasant reading, is it? But free people must summon themselves from time to time to think about the unthinkable. For what Mr. Graebe beheld in the execution pits of Dubno was nothing less than the face of tyranny. When we speak of being free, this is what we are really, by indirection, speaking about. We mean free from tyranny—free from this. Tyranny knows no bounds, no limits. Once it is unleashed, there is nothing to stop it from going straight to Hitler's genocide.

Yet, almost as detestable is tyranny's partner, anarchy. Stories could be told of it, too. There was the anarchy of the French Revolution, where serial violence claimed the lives of thousands. There was the anarchy in Mexico a century later—great armies of peasants criss-crossing the landscape with swaths of destruction. There was the mad, senseless anarchy of the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese, and the Iranian. And, yes, there was the anarchy of the German Revolution as well. Germans still recall it with a shudder. Throughout the 1920s, the Weimar Republic groaned under the Allied war debt, its economy plummeted, its currency sank into oblivion, while gangs roamed the streets of Berlin, fighting pitched battles with one another, and politicians hawked simple cures.

Adolf Hitler had been one of those. His cure for what ailed Germany was to get the Jews, and in the end he got them. At the same time, he put Germans back to work, brought order to the cities, built the *autobahns*, brought forth the Volkswagen. And, when he stood in the Nuremberg *Sportpalast* and spewed forth his venom, Germans by the millions cheered him wildly. Perhaps tyranny was not ideal, they conceded to one another, but it certainly beat anarchy. Such, apparently, were the only choices they thought life offered.

Nazi executioners: The things free people must think about. (Library of Congress)

It is often said that we live in a troubled world. Looking around us, reading the newspapers, watching the ten o'clock news, we can readily see that the observation is true. In the world of the 1990s, to pick out only a few offhand examples, serial violence convulses the Middle East, Central American difficulties simmer on unresolved, unrest stirs almost weekly in South Korea. In the Philippines a guerrilla war is in progress, and the government fights to keep its grip on the loyalty of former Marcos supporters. Life in Northern Ireland is punctuated by bombings and shootings. In the streets of Beirut car bombs explode with horrifying regularity, each of them killing and maiming scores of innocent victims. Buses are ambushed by Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. Terrorists commandeer commercial aircraft or blow them out of the skies. Nor is the devastation only political. Solid democracies have been knocked off their feet by inflation. Trade imbalances threaten to upset international friendships. Much of sub-Saharan Africa faces starvation. The list, alas, goes on and on.

Unfortunately, the human condition was ever thus. Take a world history book from the shelf and scan through the illustrations for a grisly confirmation. Here are the Christian martyrs being fed to the lions. Here are the torture devices of the Inquisition. Here is the massacre of Flemish children during the Thirty Years War. And here are the mass executions of Peter the Great's enemies outside the walls of the Kremlin. With a shudder we place the book back on its shelf. The human experience, we say to ourselves, should have been better than this.

Tyranny and Anarchy

A closer examination of the situation we have been pondering reveals that the trouble often falls into one of two general categories: tyranny and anarchy.

Tyranny may be defined simply as the rule of will. The tyrannical rule in question may be that of a single individual, a small group, or in some cases a larger group with a specific racial, ethnic, or national identity. It may be well or ill disposed. (Louis XIV of France, for one, claimed to be a "benevolent despot," who truly cared for the welfare of his subjects.) But it is usually the latter. It seems that those who gain power over others almost always wind up grossly misusing it.

The logic of the tyrant is as simple as it is unanswerable. His victims must do (or refrain from doing) a certain thing merely because the tyrant so desires. He doesn't have to give elaborate rationales or involved explanations; he just gives orders. If he is a true tyrant, he has the effective means at his disposal to force compliance.

The victims of tyranny have attempted various means of dealing with their situation. They have tried reasoning with the tyrant or appealing to his humanity. They have resorted to strikes,boycotts, or demonstrations to force his hand. Once in a while they have plotted successfully to eliminate him physically, or to violently overthrow his rule. But most of these tactics have proven to be as costly as they are ineffective. Well entrenched tyrants are extremely difficult to budge.

Anarchy may be defined as the rule of chaos. For in the situation of anarchy no one has control, and the wills of all clash or combine haphazardly. Where tyranny is