

POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Michael Dawson Stephens
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Chapter 1

TRADITIONS AND ATTITUDES

Part One: The Image of America - Roots and Borrowings

... an instance of an officer who had actually lived for some time in the wilds of America, of whom, when in that state, he quoted this reflection with an air of admiration, as if it had been deeply philosophical; 'Here am I, free and unrestrained, amidst the rude magnificence of Nature, with this Indian woman by my side and this gun, with which I can procure Food when I want it; what more can be desired for human happiness?' Johnson, 'Do not allow yourself, sir, to be imposed upon by such gross absurdity. It is sad stuff, it is brutish. If a bull could speak he might as well exclaim, "Here am I with this cow and this grass; what being can enjoy greater felicity?"'

From James Boswell's Life of Dr Samuel Johnson.

Until well into the 1960s America has been sustained by an idea of itself which, although often bearing only modest relation to reality, gained the unquestioning commitment of most of the population. It was, and is, an image of great seduction, both to Americans and those of other nations. Much of it was summed up by the outsider Alex de Tocqueville in his disseminating volume Democracy in America:

The great advantage of the American is that he has arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution; and that he is born free without having to become so.

The part-truth of America as the 'most free' and 'most egalitarian' of the world's countries was particularly plausible in the nineteenth century.

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By the twentieth century it became clear that America's political institutions, so much admired in the previous century, were no longer exceptional. Other countries had even moved further along the road of achieving greater freedom of the individual. For example, it surprised many, weaned on the superb publicity surrounding the great achievement of the Constitution, that it was only with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that 50% of the adult population was entitled to vote:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Others pondered the conservative nature of much of the 'Bill of Rights' of the Constitution's first nine amendments such as the Second Amendment:

A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

America was singularly fortunate in its roots, although what it made of these foundations was a compliment to the quality of its early political leadership. America was born of an England in the intellectual ferment of the late Tudor and early Stuart period. By the time the 'Thirteen Colonies' were moving towards independence they were locked into the raging debates of eighteenth century Western Europe. During the eighteenth century England was seen as the most open of the world's countries, much envied by the French and a model for a number of German initiatives like the University at Göttingen (1734). America's unique contribution in the Constitution signed on September 17th, 1787 (and ratified on June 21st, 1788) is that she began to implement those political ideas so familiar to the English and eloquently advocated by such as John Locke, Emerich de Vattel and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

It was virtually inevitable that the thirteen colonies would push for some form of independence during the later stages of the eighteenth century. The education of their opinion leaders made rule from London intolerable. Their English roots, with such examples as the revolt of the Commons against the King in the first half of the seventeenth century, regicide, or the Glorious Revolution of 1688, made defiance of the royal government a dangerous, but not

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awesome, matter. The largely English ideas of the eighteenth century permitted the men of ambition to carry many Americans with them in their striving for independence.

The European Tradition of Instability.

The groundwork for the English culture which gave birth to the American image preceded the settling of America. By the time Virginia and Massachusetts were being opened up the culture imported and disseminated by education was moulded into the vehicle used by the revolutionary leadership some one hundred and fifty years later. An often overlooked and important element in the English inheritance of this period might be termed 'creative instability'. From the decline of the Roman Empire Western Europe in particular had been unstable. As is always the case in human affairs there is a seeking after constancy and those cultures which achieved some sort of stability, such as China prior to the nineteenth century, tended to be much admired and not a little envied. However, for Western Europe instability was of importance for it endlessly produced a more open society than the men of power would otherwise have permitted. Europe was turbulent and men of initiative could implement change, even in feudal times, in a way usually not available elsewhere. Events like the Black Death of the fourteenth century broke open societies and undermined such conservative institutions as the Church. Every time it looked as if Europe might have the status quo imposed it was shattered. It was impossible to control anything for much of the time and so such instability ensured remarkable freedom to large sections of the population of, say, England for great periods. The contemporary population might think the price too high, for example, many English communities were wiped out by the Black Death, but it created a society where those who ruled assumed their power would never be absolute and those who were ruled would move quickly to curb the power of those who were over-ambitious in their offices. Under such circumstances it is not necessarily surprising that the greatest of changes in human affairs since the Neolithic period, the Industrial Revolution, should have begun in England and have been so quickly taken up by America.

Capitalism.

The English gave to America an assumption of considerable freedom of action and the framework of

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capitalism. The efforts of feudal Europe to control the economy were, as with most other areas of life, a failure. The Stuart English settlements of eastern America were frequently the result of economic expansion more than religious flight. English rulers, ever short of cash because of their limited power, were reluctant to stand in the way of those likely to generate more income. Of course, this would lead to yet more conflict between an English government which saw colonies as tax producing, and the colonists who saw themselves in the English merchant or farmer tradition as largely free agents likely to be taxed periodically. The furore in Massachusetts over the Stamp Duty was the protest of capitalists, not of American patriots.

A great strength of the American leadership after the Revolution was its recognition, during most periods, of the usefulness of its European roots. The European contacts continued to be exploited, although the nineteenth century superiority of much of the knowledge across the Atlantic could be irritating for the new nationalists. In a letter dated August 13th, 1817 (Boston Public Library collection) Benjamin Vaughan (1751-1835) complained to his friend Nathaniel Bowditch (1773-1838):

Permit me now to revert to the subjects of our last conversation, namely the necessity of giving a stimulus to science in Massachusetts, and the propriety of establishing a reputation in Foreign countries for attachment to science on the part of the United States. Massachusetts ought to be the headquarters of science in the United States, on account of the numbers of its citizens are well educated ... yet, excepting as regards the progress of Harvard College, Massachusetts makes little or no effort. Its American Academy¹ is asleep, perhaps in the sleep of death; and while it sleeps, other petty rivals take (as it were) from between its teeth, the materials which ought to go for its support. Instead of being the organ of New England's learning, its own journals and its own petty societies carry away what ought to belong to it; and Connecticut² has instituted a rival society - so far from our dividing the force of Massachusetts, we ought to combine the whole of New England in favour of Knowledge' ... It is with this view then, that I wish you to exhibit some of the errors and deficiencies of our friends in Europe on mathematical subjects

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which have occurred to you; that the persons may at least be made more modest in their carriage towards us.

Nationalism.

Amongst the most powerful inheritances from England and Europe was that of a sense of nationalism. Nationalism is a state of mind which may be aided by such factors as a common language and reinforced by the education system. In its virulent modern form it is the creation of Western Europe. The idea of nationalism would have been very familiar to the leadership of the thirteen colonies. American nationalism may have been latent prior to 1776, but its rapid development was ensured by the politically astute revolutionary leadership.

Nationalism is tribal, the sense of belonging to a unique group. Shakespeare had it, but George Washington feared that only the separate states of the so-called United States would. Much of his Farewell Address of September 17th, 1796, when he decided to relinquish the Presidency, warns of the need for an American, as against a state, nationalism.

The unity of government, which constitutes you one people, is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence - the support of your tranquility at home, your place abroad, of your safety, of your prosperity, of that very liberty which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee that, from different cause and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed - it is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as the palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its presentation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can, in any event, be abandoned; and indignantly frowning

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upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts. The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.

Washington, as astute a politician as ever led a nation, recognised the powerful potential of nationalism as taught to Americans by Europe, and saw the rival of state commitment which led to the crisis of 1861.

The image of being 'American' like that of 'America', resulted from European thought and developments. If the reality was different the image was for most of America's history the more important. To be an American, and thereby 'born free' (Tocqueville) and equal, in America, the uniquely favoured country, was enough. During the nineteenth century such a powerful nationalism could infect immigrants from any part of the world. As Katz³ has written of Massachusetts in that period, 'Under a swelling Celtic wave the homogeneous land of Yankees disappeared forever' (Of Massachusetts' population of 1,231,066 in 1860, 15.06% had been born in Ireland).

The Illusion of America.

Americans' nationalism and their belief in the uniqueness of the country the eighteenth century 'aristocracy' and upper middle classes created, gained in vigour from the early decades of the nineteenth century. 'America the illusion' was nurtured. The writings of the period are rich in examples. In 1831⁴ it was reported:

Who does not see daily evidence that we need greatly to advance both in intelligence and in purity to resist the constant temptations arising from the increase in luxury and the love of ease, the insidious progress of exterior refinement, and the constantly fresh demands for honor and office and riches which these causes produce? Who will dare rely on these deceptive appearances of prosperity, this delusive glare of weather and glory? ... If our country is to be maintained in its blessings and privileges, it is by combining sound instruction with the training which will form the character, and founding both upon the

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instruction of the Bible.

In the same decade, J T Irving⁵ stated:

In any country, perhaps, can education be a matter of more vital importance than in ours. Where power is deposited with the people, and every intellect may be considered as the throne of government, how essential is it that such intellect should be thoroughly enlightened! Possessed of a heritage embracing within itself the blessings of every clime, self-poised and independent, it beholds us to instil into our extensive population those principles of virtue, and that sound information, which alone can preserve and perpetuate our privileges.

Interestingly enough it was the Scot, educated at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, James Wilson, signer of the Declaration of Independence, who got incorporated into the Constitution the idea of sovereignty residing in the people. From New York⁶ came the claim:

The United States remain almost single handed, the champions of free principles and of free government ... But the very existence of our government depends on the continuance of our union and the general diffusion of knowledge.

In an address to the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association in 1812, John Fairbanks⁷ proclaimed:

But where shall we end the interesting account, or how relate the advantages derived from the mechanic arts? Chemistry and philosophy have united to improve and systematize, while commerce with a liberal hand has patronized them as the surest means of securing wealth and happiness to an intelligent and enterprising people ... What then may not be expected, when the vigor of manhood arrives, and the objects of mechanical ingenuity and enterprise are multiplied with the population of the country ... as citizens of the only free republic on earth, whose independence ought not to suffer a dependence on foreign manufacturers for the necessary articles of life.

Social Mobility.

Another important element in the creation of the image

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of America was also inherited from England, and that was social mobility. Class, as in all societies, was very apparent in early America. Despite a continuing belief that the country was classless it had as clear a class system as most other countries. Part of the extraordinary success of the early leadership was to make believe that caste did not exist. This belief could only continue whilst those likely to challenge the system, the able from the lower classes, were socially mobile. There had always been such mobility in England so that, for example, an Ipswich butcher's son could become Henry VIII's chief minister (Wolsey). With increasing national prosperity the socially mobile became more numerous during the later Tudor period and of considerable numbers in eighteenth century England, as Boswell noted in his Life of Dr Samuel Johnson:

Foreigners are not a little amazed when they hear of brewers, distillers, and men in similar departments of trade, held forth as persons of considerable consequence;

and remarks on 'The hopes of rising in society by personal merit'.

An unequal society, as all societies are, needs a social safety-valve. America improved on the English tradition of social mobility for those 'dangerous elements' in the population who might, because of their energy or talents, feel otherwise frustrated by incorporating formally what was happening as part of the package of the image.

That social mobility was part of both eighteenth century England and America is illustrated by the life of Benjamin Franklin (1706-90). He was born in Boston, the son of a tallow chandler and soapmaker. He left school at ten years and was largely self-educated. He was in London from 1724 to 1726. Because of his remarkable abilities he moved easily in the upper class circles of both his native America and England. From 1753 to 1774 he was Deputy Postmaster General of the Colonies. Such was his acclaim in England that he thought seriously of settling there permanently. His exceptional talents as writer, scientist, printer and statesman-politician made him an obvious candidate to be welcomed into the élites of either country. It is almost chance which sees him as a key member of the Revolution. His illegitimate son was to be found on the other side and did settle in England. It was an important borrowing from England to give men of ability an easy movement up the social

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scale. Without such easy movement the bluff of the stirring and utterly remarkable opening words of the Declaration of Independence would have been called:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they shall declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

The Revolutionaries had to carry a divided American population on a risky act of defiance of the lawful government of George III. Much of the Declaration of 1776 is a listing of the abuses of the London Government. The truth is often lost in the process, for example, there was considerable British support for the American cause⁸ despite the claim, 'Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren ... They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity'. What emerged was a beautifully written, astutely political document. It had been largely drafted by Thomas Jefferson (1746-1813), the College of William and Mary educated lawyer from slave-owning Virginia. Whilst successive generations of Americans have seen the rousing words of the Declaration as meaning them Jefferson could

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not have had in mind women, or such sizable minorities as slaves and Indians. Above all he was writing for his peer group a document which would have appealed to similar people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Rising Expectations.

A further English invention of the period of the Industrial Revolution very quickly reinforced the image of America and that was the notion of 'rising expectations'. Prior to the Industrial Revolution the mass of the people had assumed, at best, a stable standard of living. With the commercial and industrial expansion of the Industrial Revolution there grew up a belief that life would improve materially. An America of abundance could reinforce the allegiance of its population by a rising standard of living for most men. It was not so much the arrival of the Age of the Common Man, but the increasing ability of America, with its industrial and commercial borrowings from England, to feed, clothe and shelter almost everyone more effectively and in increasing comfort.

The English were quick to note the possibilities of the Industrial Revolution. The President⁹ of the Preston Literary and Philosophical Society, for example, stated in 1811:

Not only are we indebted to the discoveries and elucidations of science for our more ordinary conveniences and comforts, but for every ornament and elegance with which we please our pride, or gratify our taste. The principles of chemistry, and the mechanical powers, are employed to pamper our luxury and indulge our sloth; nor are any of the sciences neglected, in the entertainment and amusement of our senses.

Significantly, sixteen of the Society's forty-six Honorary Members were American, and included the Presidents of Harvard College and of William and Mary College.

Americans, with their close contact with England, were not slow either in acknowledging the potential of what was happening in Britain. The evidence was to be found throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1825 S Miller¹⁰ of New Jersey pointed out:

I have repeatedly adverted, in the foregoing remarks, to the great advantages resulting to nations from their progress in the (industrial) arts and sciences.

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In its Constitution the Lexington Mechanics' Institute in 1829¹¹ stated:

The objects of the Institute shall be the improvement of its members and of junior mechanics, and the promotion and encouragement of manufacturers and the mechanic and useful arts by the establishment of popular lectures on the sciences connected with them; by the formation of a cabinet of models and minerals and a library; by an annual exhibition of manufacture, workmanship, etc and by such other means as they or the board of management may deem expedient.

The appendix to the Constitution included the words:

The object of these institutions is to give to persons, whose time is chiefly occupied with business or labor, knowledge of a kind to be directly useful to them in their daily pursuits. Of this kind is the Theory of Mechanics, showing the principles of which mechanical power of all kinds is gained, and all machines are constructed; Natural Philosophy, which explains the general nature of the great powers and bodies that exist in the universe, of air and water, for example, and the manner in which the works of man affect or are to be affected by them; and Chemistry, which makes known the particular nature and properties of all the substances, about which the art or science of man is occupied ... The principles of science have hitherto been accessible to those only who were pursuing a course of study preparatory to what are called the liberal professions. The poor and the occupied, if destined to the active pursuits of life, have been almost necessarily debarred from them. By Mechanics' Institutions they are offered to all.

America was particularly fortunate in the timing of its drive for independence. The ripeness of the thirteen colonies to go their own way by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the coming together of an astute and exceptionally talented political leadership in America, the ineptitude of the British government, the sympathy of much of the British population for the American cause, the creation of vehicles to exploit and nurture emerging American nationalism, the critical English inheritance which made everything

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possible and, then, if all else failed to convince the American population, there was the increasing affluence linked to the Industrial Revolution and the incomparable resources of the country. As G P Morris¹² was to complain in 1839:

A moderate independence, quietly and honestly procured, is certainly every way preferable even to immense possessions achieved by the wear and tear of mind and body so necessary to procure them. Yet there are very few individuals, let them be doing ever so well in the world, who are not always straining every nerve to do better ... The present generation seem unwilling to 'realize' by slow and sure degrees; but choose rather to set their whole hopes upon a single cast, which either makes or mars them for ever.

The creation of Samuel Slater's cotton mill at Pawtucket in Rhode Island in 1790 heralded the arrival of another English borrowing to reinforce the persuasive American image.

The Religious Contribution.

The final contribution to the support of the American image was Christianity. Its importance had been a major factor in the settling of parts of America, but the seventeenth century religious intolerance of both the Established Church in England or groups like the Puritans in Massachusetts, had been greatly modified by 1776. Dr Johnson, a conservative in religious and other matters, could say to Boswell:

For my part, Sir, I think all Christians, whether Papists or Protestants, agree in the essential articles, and that their differences are trivial, and rather political than religious.

The Founding Fathers recognised the importance of a tolerant Christianity in binding together the nation. As the Virginian gentleman George Washington stated in his Farewell Address:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?

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Earlier Washington had noted, 'With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits and political principles'. Although the diverse and massive immigration of the next century no longer supported such a view America remained a country largely within the Christian category and using Christianity as a unifying factor. An acknowledgement of being part of a Christian country was to be found in all areas of American initiative:¹³

We the undersigned, Instructors of Youth, aware, that by the combined exercise of our talents and industry, and by the interchange of friendly sentiments and services, we may be enabled to extend our knowledge, promote our usefulness, and enlarge the circle of our social and intellectual pleasures, have united ourselves into a fraternity entitled 'The Associated Instructors of Youth in the Town of Boston and its Vicinity', for literary and charitable purposes; hoping that by free enquiry and candid investigation, by temperate discussion, and by Christian compromise of our paternal and local prejudices in education, by soliciting and cultivating a friendly correspondence with other similar societies, and respectable individuals, engaged in the same arduous and useful employment with ourselves; to promote the interests of education generally, especially of the Youth under our care, and what is particularly desirable, a more uniform system and mode of instruction in our school and academies.

Whilst the creators of America would have thought an Established Church quite unacceptable, religion did have much attraction as a vehicle of the state to aid in persuading citizens to conform with the Founding Fathers' image of America. Without doubt the American leadership was, in its majority, genuinely Christian in its beliefs, but they were practical men and used all available tools in their creation of America. Christianity was a very steam engine of a tool in producing conformity.

The Revolutionary leadership succeeded in giving Americans the feeling that they were a Chosen People. Such a concept is a Judaic or Christian one. Some of that feeling of being a 'people apart' was captured by Abraham Lincoln in the Address dedicating the national cemetery of the Civil War Battlefield of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania on November 19th, 1863 (the Revised version):