

THE PURSUIT OF LIBERTY

A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



VOLUME TWO

SECOND EDITION

R. Jackson Wilson James Gilbert Stephen Nissenbaum
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AUTHORS' PREFACE

When the oldest of the authors of *The Pursuit of Liberty* was in the eighth grade, he had to take his first course on the history of the United States. His teacher was a legend in the school, a tough, slightly forbidding woman, who was determined that her students were going to learn *something* about the history of their country.

She gave her roomful of fourteen-year-olds a demanding task. They had to memorize any 200 facts about American history, including dates. When the final examination came, they had to write down their list of facts in the correct chronological order. You could choose any facts, as long as there were 200 of them and they were in chronological order. You might start with "1492—Columbus discovers America." Or you could begin with "1607—First English colony in America at Jamestown, Virginia." (In both cases, you would be a bit wrong. But that didn't matter. These "facts" were in the textbook, and the important thing was that you had learned them.)

Nowadays, of course, everything about learning history has changed. The authors' own children come home from history classes in schools and colleges with their heads full of "concepts." They don't think "1607—Jamestown" (or even "1587—Roanoke," which is closer to the truth). Instead, they are taught to talk about large and abstract events, such as "The Confrontation of European and Native-American Cultures." They study grand processes such as "Industrialization," "Immigration," and "Urbanization." They seem to learn history in a more sophisticated and better way than memorizing some list of 200 facts.

But there is a problem. Students who study American history today seem to know something in general, but nothing in particular. They discuss abstractions and generalizations, but these are not connected with any firm grasp of relevant factual information. Have our best and most innovative teachers and professors simply replaced 200 facts with 20 vague concepts? The old problem was that history was a grab bag of names and dates and places. Students learned something in particular and nothing much in general. But the new problem, knowing the general but not the particular, is just as serious. Either way, studying history runs the risk of being a plain waste of time. ¶

This dilemma is partly the result of the nature of history itself. There *are* large and general tendencies and there *are* particular facts. The difficult thing is to see how the two fit together. We tend to look at history the way we look at a painting. We focus on the foreground—the facts. Or we think about the background, about the general way the picture is structured and the kinds of claims it makes on our imagination. But when we study history, it is difficult to put the foreground and the background, the facts and the general concepts, together. We seem to choose between foreground and background, unable to see how each makes sense in terms of the other.

When most history textbooks try to bring specific facts and general concepts together, they do so by simply *telling* readers that this or that fact is an example of this or that general tendency. First comes a heading, something like "The Con-

tact of European and Native-American Cultures" or "Industrialization." Then comes a sentence or two of generalization. A little further on come the facts, such as "1607—Jamestown" or "The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869."

Some important things are lost in this way of writing history. We are not asked to see or understand the relationship between fact and general concept at all. Did something called "industrialization" *cause* the first transcontinental railroad or did a host of facts, such as the building of that railroad, cause industrial development? Concrete facts and general concepts merely coexist in such textbooks, each of them inert and incapable of giving any sort of life to the other.

Perhaps worse, when students study history in textbooks of this sort, they get no sense of the human *experience* involved in either the specific events they find listed there or the generalizations they read and underline to study for next week's test. Most history textbooks contain no narrative, no stories, no accounts of the dramatic, sometimes triumphant, often shameful efforts and struggles of human beings. Human action is squeezed out of history and we are left with dead "events" and equally lifeless generalizations.

We have written *The Pursuit of Liberty* in the belief that we have found ways to solve these kinds of problems. We started with two convictions. First, we had to make it possible for students to see and *understand* the ways that specific sequences of human action were related to the general setting in which they took place. Second, historians ought not to keep a secret of the remarkably exciting and dramatic ways people actually acted in the past.

These two convictions have shaped our book, and they explain its unusual structure. Each chapter has two different parts. In the first, we tell the story of a very specific and concrete episode: a witchcraft hysteria in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, for example; or the massacre of a band of the Native American Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek in the Dakotas in 1890; or the rending struggle for custody of the infant known as "Baby M" in the 1980s. Episodes like these are the human material out of which history is made.

But history is more than stories. It involves coming to understand how the stories could have happened. To do this, we have to know something about the general context within which a specific episode took place. So the second part of each chapter is a discussion of the historical setting of the chapter's episode. The narrative of Salem witchcraft is followed by a discussion of seventeenth-century New England Puritanism; the Wounded Knee massacre by an examination of the westward expansion of European-American society into the territories of the Native Americans; the story of Baby M by a discussion of the tangled relationships between private morality and public politics that characterized American life in the 1980s.

And so we go through *The Pursuit of Liberty*, alternating between the specific and the general, between narrative and explanation. In the end we think our readers will have a much better grasp of the way history works, of the way that all the specific actions of people are shaped by the historical setting in which they take place. And we have faith, too, that some of our readers will learn the most important thing that history has to teach all of us: We all live in history, profoundly shaped by the society around us, by what it has been as well as by what it is now.

If this lesson is learned, then our readers will have learned what we already know, that learning history is a way of discovering our kinship with all those real people who have come before us, who have acted out their struggles, terrors, and occasional exaltations with the same anxiety and effort that go so deeply into all our lives. The past is inescapable, for everyone, whether one knows it or not.

It is better to know it.

R. Jackson Wilson
James Gilbert
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James Gilbert is Professor of History at the University of Maryland and a graduate of Carleton College and the University of Wisconsin. He has also taught at Teachers College, Columbia University; Warwick University in Coventry, England; the University of Paris; and Sydney University in Australia. His books include *Writers and Partisans* (1968), *Designing the Industrial State* (1972), *Work Without Salvation* (1978), *Another Chance: Postwar America* (1981), and *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (1986). He has been a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Woodrow Wilson Center. Currently he is finishing a book on Chicago in the 1890s.

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We believe that everything that is said in *The Pursuit of Liberty* is true. Well, almost everything. But the book contains two unavoidable falsehoods, both of them on the title page. Both are formulas that are imposed by the powerful conventions that govern the publication of books in our society. The first is the suggestion that an abstract corporate entity named Wadsworth Publishing brought the book into existence. The second is that five individuals known as "authors" are responsible for all the words and ideas in the book. We would like to set the record straight on both these points.

The truth of the matter is that Wadsworth Publishing is really a set of very specific people who have generously invested efforts, care, and talent in this book. In particular, no one could have worked more diligently and effectively than Leland Moss, Margaret Adams, James Chadwick, Marta Kongsle, and Roberta Broyer. The book owes much to them.

The truth is, as well, that the writing of history is a collective enterprise. We owe an incalculable debt to generations of men and women who have labored to make the history of the American people comprehensible. We also owe a great deal to the people—many of them now mature men and women—who have been our students. We can-

not repay them for all the history lessons they have given to us; we can only hope that some of *their* children may learn as much from our book as we have from them.

The Pursuit of Liberty is also the product of some fine advice from many extremely intelligent and dedicated people. We are grateful to them all, and particularly to: Katherine Abbott, John K. Alexander, Stephen L. Berk, David Bernstein, Lee R. Boyer, Thomas J. Boyle, John C. Chalberg, Lawrence Foster, Paula Franklin, William Graebner, Pembroke Herbert, James Henretta, Donald W. Hensel, William C. Hine, E. Rusten Hogness, Cornelia Hopkins, Marvin L. Jaegers, George L. Jones, Stephen Kneeshaw, Neil B. Lehman, Gerald McFarland, Frank Nation, Gary Nissenbaum, Gregory Nobles, Thomas C. Parramore, S. Fred Roach, Chris Rogers, Philip R. Royal, Alan Schaffer, Rodney Sievers, John Snetsinger, Dennis Thavenet, Stephen Weisner, Nancy Woloch, and Phyllis Zimmerman. Sometimes their suggestions have posed formidable tasks for us. Although their criticisms have not always been gentle, even their sternest comments have been useful because they were obviously motivated by a genuine concern for history and for teaching.

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C H A P T E R 1 2

"HIS TERRIBLE,
SWIFT SWORD"



THE EPISODE: If the importance of historical figures can be measured by the amount of attention that historians and biographers pay to them, then Abraham Lincoln was surely the most important American. In this chapter, we look in some detail at several crucial moments and themes in his career as president.

The first is the secession crisis, which the new president confronted when he took office in March of 1861. The second is Lincoln's attempt to define the Civil War as the ultimate test of the principles of republican government, an attempt he began soon after the war started and that climaxed at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1863, when he said that the cause of the Union was the cause of "government of the people, by the people, for the people." The third is his halting, tentative effort to confront the question of slavery and the relationship between the preservation of the Union and freedom for African Americans. The fourth is his assassination and the public mourning that followed, which made it clear that he had become the symbol, in the North at least, of both Union and liberty.

We chose these moments and themes not only because they are intrinsically interesting and important, but because they also reveal much about a transformation in the man. When he ran for president in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was a folksy, practical, politically shrewd Illi-

nois politician with a flair for words. If he had died then, nothing he had done would have made him more than a footnote to history. When he did die less than five years later, most Americans would agree that he was the nation's savior, the Great Emancipator, the embodiment of their highest national aspirations.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING: Abraham Lincoln did not cause the Civil War. In a sense, the war caused him—made him into the leader and the monumental memory he became. Understanding what happened to Abraham Lincoln after 1861 means understanding what happened to the nation during the decade and a half of Civil War and Reconstruction.

The momentous questions he confronted during every day of his two terms as president were the same questions that were also confronted by American men and women, North and South, white and African American. Would there be war? If the war came, who would fight and what would be the strategies of battle? Who would prevail, and how? And what would be the political, economic, and social fate of millions of African Americans held in slavery, not only in the states that formed the Confederacy but in several states that remained loyal to the Union? And when the war was over, if the Union did endure, how would the Confederate states be returned to their rightful place in it?

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: FROM POLITICS TO MARTYRDOM

As the winter of 1860–61 ended, the new president came quietly, even somewhat secretly, into Washington to take his oath of office. He was about to face a reality no other American president had had to face: a divided Union. And no one, not even men who had agreed to serve in his cabinet, not even the political friends who had helped engineer his nomination and win his election, knew what his strategies and policies would be. Most people who thought about Abraham Lincoln at all thought of him as a western lawyer, as a pretty good stump speaker, and—above all—as a shrewd politician. And they were, in the main, right. Lincoln had shown a remarkable ability to find moderate positions about slavery, positions he knew were not far from the opinions of the Northern voters who had elected him.

No one could have predicted that four years later, a murdered Abraham Lincoln would leave the capital as the greatest national hero since George Washington. When his body returned westward, back to Illinois, it was no longer the political figure, or even the political leader, that people mourned. It was a dedicated, heroic martyr to what Lincoln had managed to define as a national crusade. He had managed to transform an ugly civil war into a spiritual struggle for principles much higher than the political unity of a nation. His death put the seal on that transformation.

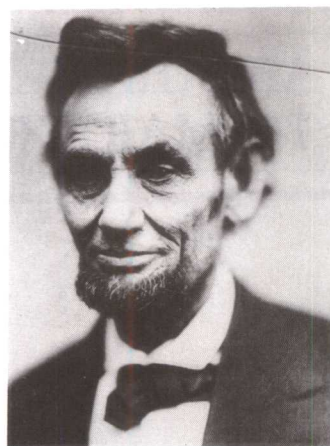
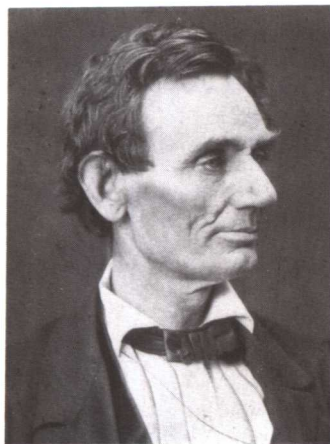
He began his presidency by playing a complicated political “game,” as he sometimes called it. The game became war. And war changed Abraham Lincoln. The change was not complete: The shrewd politician remained always a part of him. But he began to see the war as something more than politics, more even than battle and suffering. Part of him began to think of it as a religious experience, in which a nation that seemed to have been chosen by God for special blessings was now being put through a special trial and punishment. He began to insist more and more that the war was a kind of blood sacrifice demanded by God as a payment for the long sin of slavery. And when, at the war’s end, he paid with his own blood, dramatic proof seemed to be given that his redefinition of the war was correct.



As Lincoln prepared to take office, the political situation was so delicate and so dangerous that even his practical skills had only a slender chance. Seven states in the lower South had already seceded and had established a new federal government for

Abraham Lincoln, 1860 and 1865.

The first portrait shows Lincoln in June 1860, at the opening of his presidential campaign. (Library of Congress) The second, taken just four days before his assassination, reveals the psychological and physical toll the Civil War had extracted from Lincoln. (McLellan Lincoln Collection, Brown University, John Hay Library)



themselves, the Confederate States of America. Several states in the upper South, particularly Virginia, Maryland, and Kentucky, were poised to join the new Confederacy. All the federal officials in the seceded states had either given allegiance to the Confederacy or had been replaced by secessionists. The Confederacy had taken over almost all the federal property within its borders—the post offices, the customs and land offices, even the forts and arsenals. All that remained of visible federal authority were two forts. One was Fort Pickens, far off in Pensacola, Florida; the other was Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, in the heart of secession country.

Then, as inauguration day approached, there was a strange lull. Everyone waited to see what Lincoln would do. He made no public statements. The only prediction anyone could hazard was that his actions would be—characteristically—cautious, secretive, and essentially political. In Lincoln's mind, the best direction things could go was clear: Secession would somehow be stopped without violence; the Union would be restored. And this would be done without compromising the basic Republican position on slavery in the western territories. The problem was, did he have the means and the power to work out such a political solution?

The answer would surely lie with Virginia. If he could manipulate events carefully enough so that Virginia stayed in the Union, then surely Maryland and Kentucky, probably Tennessee and Missouri, would follow Virginia's lead. Time would take its toll on the weak and isolated Confederacy. Good sense might win out, and one by one the seceding states could come back into the Union.

At this point, Lincoln saw the problem in terms that were legal, political, and constitutional. It was illegal for any state to secede. He had no doubt of that. But it was equally unconstitutional for the federal government to interfere at all with slavery in any of the states. The political bargain he wanted was for the upper South to accept this political settlement, remain in the Union, and keep their slave system as long as they could make it last.

But it was a tricky situation. If Lincoln did anything that even seemed hostile, he might provoke the border states and the upper South, especially Virginia, into joining the Confederacy, leaving the Union in a much more vulnerable position if and