

AN EXPERIMENT IN LIBERTY

America's Path to Independence

George Grant

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*To my students and colleagues at Franklin Classical School,
and to my yokefellows at the King's Meadow Study Center*

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INTRODUCTION

“Whatever makes a man a good Christian also makes him a good citizen.”

DANIEL WEBSTER

G.K. Chesterton once quipped, “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed.” Other nations find their identity and cohesion in ethnicity, or geography, or partisan ideology, or cultural tradition, he argued. But America was founded on certain ideas—ideas about freedom, about human dignity, and about social responsibility.

It was this profound peculiarity that most struck Alexis de Tocqueville during his famous visit to this land at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He called it “American exceptionalism.” At about the same time de Tocqueville penned his sage observations in *Democracy in America*, a number of educators in the fledgling republic began to realize that if their great experiment in liberty, their extraordinary American exceptionalism, were to be maintained over the course of succeeding generations, then an

informed patriotism would have to be instilled in the hearts and minds of the young. Indeed, John Quincy Adams wrote, “Posterity: you will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it.”

Thus, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, rising citizens were presented with small handbooks—brief guides to the essential elements of the American creed. Pastors, statesmen, educators, and parents wanted to somehow pass on to posterity the moral and constitutional tools necessary to make good use of their freedom. A decade ago, after collecting a representative sample of such handbooks from dusty antiquarian bookshops, I put together *The Patriot’s Handbook* as an updated summary of that vaunted tradition. It contained a concise introduction to the foundational ideas, documents, events, and personalities of American freedom. It is a citizenship primer for a whole new generation of American patriots.

But I always felt that I should provide a moral philosophy thread to tie those artifacts together into a coherent narrative; thus, this book.

Separating fact from fiction, exactitude from nostalgia, and actuality from myth in early American history is often more than a little difficult. Though it is perhaps unwise to have anything like an idealized perception of that great epoch, it is difficult to dismiss the breadth and depth of the fledgling colonial culture and the substantive character of the people who populated it. Living in a day when genuine heroes are few and far between—at best—those pioneers and the times they vivified provide a startling contrast.

The fact is, colonial America produced an extraordinary number of prodigiously gifted men. From William Byrd and George Wythe to Peyton Randolph and Patrick Henry, from Samuel Adams and John Hancock to Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, the legacy of the seventeenth-century's native-born geniuses remains unmatched. Their accomplishments—literary, scientific, economic, political, and cultural—are staggering to consider. According to historian Paul Johnson, “Never before has one place and one time given rise to so many great men.”

There are very few things that modern historians can agree on. But when it comes to God and His heroes, there is sudden consensus. The long-held notion that history is His story is fiercely resisted in our day. The once dominant view that history is not merely the record of what happened in the past but that it is a kind of moral philosophy worked out by great men and women of vision has been replaced by the odd assertions and assumptions of a handful of experts. It is too easy for us to forget—or to try to ignore—the fact that the doings of man are on the knees of an inscrutable and sovereign God. It is too easy for us to forget that the record of the ages is actually philosophy teaching by example.

Because the past is ever present, giving shape and focus to all our lives, it is not what was, but whatever seems to have been, simply because the past, like the future, is part and parcel of the faith. In this volume, we try to remind ourselves of these important facts.

Alexis de Tocqueville has oft been quoted—perhaps apocryphally—saying:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and

boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

This narrative survey is offered in the hope that the ideas that made America both great and good may once again become the common currency of our national life. It is offered in the hope that the secret of our genius and power might be broadcast far and wide—and essentially cease to be a secret.

CHAPTER 1: THE DIVERSE COLONIES

“Statesmen may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles upon which Freedom can securely stand.”

JOHN ADAMS

America has often been described as the world’s great “melting pot.” People from the four corners of the earth came together on these shores in a common pursuit of freedom and opportunity, despite the wild diversity of their social, economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Eventually they would come from every nation, tongue, and tribe on earth, but even in the earliest days of the colonial settlements, very different peoples with very different perspectives and very different aspirations combined their strengths to create a new national character altogether unique in the annals of history. It was a character that would ultimately unite those very different peoples politically

and culturally and usher in one of the greatest cultural flowerings the world has ever known.

GREAT DIVIDES

At first, deep divisions marked the character of the emerging colonies, reflecting divergent beliefs and practices. Many of the settlers had left their countries due to the religious conflicts that were then raging throughout Europe—particularly in Britain—during the 16th and 17th Centuries. The Protestant Reformation, which attempted to restore the old ideals of Christendom according to the pattern of the Bible, provoked a dramatic Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. The resulting clash of kingdoms, institutions, and ambitions increased tensions across the Continent and unleashed terrible persecutions, purges, and pogroms. The social, cultural, and political tumult convinced many devout believers to flee to the New World where they hoped to find the peace and freedom necessary to realize their vision of a Holy Commonwealth.

Many others came to the New World for financial opportunities and social advancement. The rigid aristocracies that dominated virtually every country in Europe made social mobility for ordinary merchant and peasant classes very difficult, if not impossible. Even the old craft guilds and trade societies which had once paved the way for a Medieval middle class now made it difficult for young, energetic workers to enter into new businesses. The New World's vast, untapped resources and absence of a hierarchical social structure made it attractive to these hopeful entrepreneurs, who wanted to venture out, take risks, and enjoy the fruits of their labors on their own terms. Of course, not all

of these opportunists came to the colonies with pure motives. A few, who had little or no grounding in Biblical standards of stewardship, were motivated only by their unquenchable desire for riches and status. As a result, conflicts and difficulties would arise in the colonies even in the earliest, halcyon days.

The shifting political tides of Europe also forced many settlers to the New World. Escalating political conflicts—caused by war, succession crises, economic pressure, and civil unrest—created waves of refugees. The English Civil War, fought between Parliament and King Charles I, divided Britain into factions: the Puritans, the Levelers, the Cavaliers, the Covenanters, and the Roundheads. Ultimately, Parliament won the war, executed Charles, and sent his supporters fleeing. But the return of the king's son, Charles II, to the English throne in 1660 soon sent waves of Parliamentary supporters to the shores of America. The conflict between Crown and Parliament would be replayed a few decades later during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, sending still more settlers across the Atlantic.

However, the political turmoil was not confined to Britain. In France, Roman Catholic monarchs squared off against the French Protestants, the Huguenots, and regularly put them to flight to havens throughout Europe, England, Ireland, and America. In the various German kingdoms, Protestant and Catholic fortunes teetered back and forth, unsettling families in search of peace and security. Likewise, the struggle for the ascendancy in the Hapsburg Dutch and Spanish realms displaced thousands and added to the stream of immigrants to the New World.

Some people came because of spiritual concerns. Some came because of economic or social ambitions. Others came to avoid

the political disarray, heed the lure of adventure, or run from their sordid pasts. Still others simply followed friends and neighbors. Clearly, the people of the developing colonies came from a number of different cultures for a variety of reasons—some good, some bad. But they came. They arrived on the shores of the New World in droves. As the populations swelled, the individual qualities of each colony became more pronounced, and soon, the differences between the colonies were obvious to even the most casual observers. As communities spread up and down the eastern American seaboard, groups of colonies began to take on a distinctive regional flavor and further developed the cultural diversity that has marked the American existence ever since.

DIFFERENT HOPES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

Of course, the circumstances leading to the establishment of the various colonies were as varied as the character they assumed while they continued to grow further into the American wilderness. Whether religion, profit, or politics served as the motive, immigrants moved and transplanted their cultures when they came. Colonies that started as small communities quickly became vast and diverse.

Virginia

Virginia, the first English colony to be established, was intended to create an economically viable and profitable market for investors back in London. Thus, while the Virginia Charter, granted by James I, expressed the intent to propagate the Christian religion, and while the first settlement, Jamestown, had many

Christian settlers, the primary motive for the colony was commercial, making it an essentially secular venture.

Because the settlement was a profit-driven venture, owned by businessmen back in England who were prominent members of the aristocracy, the leaders of the colony maintained firm political support for the Crown and the interests of the nobility. Accordingly, they fully embraced the established Church of England, maintained their allegiance to Charles I during the English Civil War, and resisted attempts to be governed by Parliament after the Puritan victory.

But the troubles back home distracted Parliamentary officials from the affairs across the ocean, and thus, the colony was able to operate with a fair degree of autonomy. The House of Burgesses, the first representative body in North America, became an active voice in the governance of the colony. Once Charles II returned to England and assumed his father's throne, the young king rewarded the Colonists' loyalty by attempting to limit their home rule, which set the stage for many confrontations between crown administrators and the House of Burgesses in the years to come.

The restoration of the Stewart dynasty also prompted many religious dissenters, particularly Baptists from England and Wales and Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland, to eventually settle in the colony. Moreover, it was in Virginia that chattel slavery, the bane of American life for centuries afterward, was introduced—adding yet another dimension to the diversity of the settlement.

Massachusetts

The colonial settlements in New England were very different from that of Virginia. The colonization efforts there were primarily

religious, with settlers coming to the New World to escape religious persecution in England. In what is known as the Great Migration, nearly 24,000 Puritans, many of them men of means, took to the seas, bound for New England from 1632-1640 in the largest departure from the Old World to any destination ever.

Whereas in Virginia the authorities had to ship in prospective wives in 1619 to add some stability to the venture, the settlement of Massachusetts was a family affair from the beginning. But while the Puritans that settled there were religious dissenters, they too were loyal to the crown. The leaders of the new colony formed the Massachusetts Bay Company and eventually secured a charter from King Charles on March 4, 1629. The charter spelled out that, unlike Virginia, this was to be a religious settlement, set apart for the purpose of preserving the religious liberties of those in opposition to the established Church of England. But since they landed in Cape Cod outside the boundaries of their original charter, they had to establish their own government. Initially, they elected their governors, as opposed to having them appointed by the king. The fact that the inhabitants were not part of the English aristocracy gave the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth colonies an independent streak that would continue to play out as the colonies struggled for independence.

Rhode Island

The colonies in Massachusetts, founded for religious dissenters from the Church of England, soon had a new class of religious dissenters of its own. In January 1636, Roger Williams set out from Massachusetts with 20 supporters to found a new colony. Williams had run afoul of the Puritan leaders with his

uncompromising, incendiary rhetoric, his radical demands for complete separation from all those he considered worldly, and his rejection of covenant theology and the corresponding contract theory which formed the basis for the Puritan community, its legal code, and its cultural impetus. This small group would found Rhode Island, with colonial settlements being established in Providence, Warwick, Portsmouth, and Newport.

The government system in Rhode Island was dedicated to drawing sharp distinctions between the spheres of the church and state, which eventually drew a large number of religious dissenters, radicals, and sects to the colony. The Baptists founded their first church in America at Rhode Island in 1639. The Quakers, who eventually became a political problem for Williams, came shortly afterward. Interestingly, despite the colony's extreme stance on religious tolerance, Rhode Island would become one of the primary chattel slave trading centers in New England, with slaves needed to farm the plantations and raise the livestock of the colony. Due to this burgeoning slave trade and the increasingly profitable trans-Atlantic commerce with England, shipbuilding became one of the leading industries in the small colony.

Connecticut

Connecticut was also established in 1636 when Thomas Hooker, a Puritan, left Massachusetts Bay with 100 supporters to settle the Connecticut River Valley. There they hoped to expand and extend the idea of the "holy commonweal," which they had come to believe was being compromised back in the bustling commercial center of Boston. Later, John Davenport arrived in Connecticut to found the New Haven colony, which he dedicated