

The Unionist Paradigm and the American Civil Religion: Two Heuristics on American Nationhood in Historical Imagination

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Abstract: Contemporary arguments on the nature of American national identity tend either to consider America to be a nation in a classical cultural sense, or in a primarily ideational sense. These, however, are inadequate framings of American nationhood, which is rooted more in process than in identity. To better understand the processes by which American national identity has been constructed historically, and thus the dynamics of ongoing American life, heuristics offered up by David C. Hendrickson and Walter McDougall—“the Unionist Paradigm” and “the American Civil Religion”—can help one imagine America as an international system built on compromise, and then as a fractious universalist church in constant theological dispute. Looking at the span of American history through the lens of these heuristics, the fundamental contingency and shifting nature of American identity becomes clearer, as does the centrality of collaborative and compromising habits to the American political character, and thus of flexibility to American historical memory. America as living tradition, political experiment, and historical memory are all thus emergent, collaborative processes, which do form something worth designating as “nationhood” but this requires an explicit stepping-back-to-observe process. Cultural history and political practice can thus support each other in helping both actors and thinkers understand the ongoing process of America.

PART 1: THE INSUFFICIENCIES OF PRESENT APPROACHES TO CONSIDERING AMERICAN NATIONHOOD

Power when wielded by abnormal energy is the most serious of facts... Roosevelt, more than any other man living within the range of notoriety, showed the singular primitive quality that belongs to ultimate matter—the quality that mediaeval theology assigned to God—he was pure act... The effect of unlimited power on limited mind is worth noting in Presidents because it must represent the same process in society...
— Henry Adams on Theodore Roosevelt (Adams 1918).

For if historians aim to explain change over time, then the United States is the most swiftly moving target of all, because nowhere else has more change occurred in so short a span. America was not just born of a revolution, it is one.—Walter McDougall on writing American history (McDougall 2004).

American Heritage and American Ideals as Insufficient

Most conceptions of American nationhood common these days, conceive of America to be a nation in far too simplistic a sense. On the one hand, they take the standard definitions of nationhood and nationalism—shared language, culture, essential values, homeland, political principles, etc., and a common historical experience commonly agreed upon—and apply it to the American historical experience clunkily. They exclude and contort realities given us by the evidence, to the degree that the actual words and experiences of the historical figures chronicled soon bear little resemblance to the figures our patriotic historians draw; or, they throw out the standard definitions of nationhood as too physical and too experiential, and argue that the unique character of American nationhood is its being specifically and exclusively an idea, an “American creed” based on fundamental principles of government and human nature glorious in their scope and, in the end, only aspirational in their reality.

Within these two approaches to American nationhood—we could call them the “hearth and home” approach, and the “America is an idea” approach—we find most contemporary polemical and popular, and even some scholarly, perspectives on the character of the United States of America. A representative pure form of the “hearth and home” approach is to be found in the writings of Wilfred McClay, whose textbook “Land of Hope” (McClay 2019) drew up a nostalgic and appreciative read on America as a homeland and a culture. A representative pure form of the “America is an idea” approach is to be found in the writings of Jill Lepore, whose “These Truths” (Lepore 2018) and other writings look at America as a nebulously abstract ideal, occasionally flashing to light in movements towards justice or freedom at particular points, and only unfolding deeply over the fullness of time.

These categories extend to historical polemic, as well, the most famous examples of such in the modern context being the *New York Times Magazine’s* 1619 Project and the Trump Administration’s 1776 Commission; the vast majority of these take an approach looking at America as having some essential characteristics of a hearth culture, and requiring some essential characteristics of an ideal for it to be redeemed. The 1619 Project famously argues the essence of America lies in white supremacy and the legacies of slavery and segregation, and compares that sordid reality to the high and grandiose ideals Americans have held for themselves, while concluding that those ideals may well be real, but that America is unworthy of them. The 1776 Commission Report has a far more positive and optimistic historiography of the American cultural and historical experience, but attributes the best of the American identity’s potential to fundamentally spiritual and ideological ideals and principles. There is also a negative and reverse version of this, seen in critical reactionary and radical arguments about America; folks associated with the “postliberal” side of conservatism, most famously Patrick Deneen (Deneen 2018), have argued that America is a very specific idea, an enlightenment rationalist version of liberalism gone mad, and that inasmuch as America is an idea, it is pernicious and dehumanizing. A quick overview of other “American identity” projects—the Claremont Institute’s programs and the writings of some of their leading lights, and the American Academy of Arts

and Science's Our Common Purpose report from 2017, demonstrate in their own ways this dynamic—a view of America as an essentially cultural, experiential nation, *and* as an idealistic ideological creed, but harmonizing these in a way that gives credence to either one or the other, usually to “American ideals.”

All of this is useful enough as heuristic, particularly for its pedagogical benefits for those who are incapable of seeing there being *any* national community at all in the United States of America. But the more one spends time with the heart-and-hearthstone paradigm and with the America-is-an-idea paradigm, the more problems one finds in each, and the less either makes any coherent sense in the context either of the historical evidence, or our contemporary lived experiences.

For one thing, one is struck by the sheer diversity of America, and not just the fashionable diversity hawked in polite company nowadays, but the actual, deep, sometimes problematic and oftentimes impenetrable levels of divergences—across class, geographic, ethnic, sectarian, ideological, professional, racial, and so many other lines—not just in the present day, but at every moment in the nation's history. These do not quite make cultural nationhood impossible, but they do pose huge problems for simplistic renderings of it. This diversity might make identity-in-ideals nationhood more plausible; but the epistemic divergences and deep counter-interpretations of fundamental meaning it implies, render that sort of shared ideological identity clunky at best. Furthermore, just as many American institutions over the centuries have promoted and deepened aspects of national unity, many have also worked against and opposed it.

For another thing, there appears to be an intrinsically political and active component to American national identity, as the centrality of Tocqueville's (Tocqueville, Mansfield & Winthrop 2002) and Publius's (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, Cooke 1961) works to much American self-conception implies. American identity is thus in some sense emergent from the political process. If America were a cultural hearth and coherent nation alone, this self-creative and self-regulatory aspect would either make no sense, or would actively destroy and degrade the existing nationhood; but clearly it does not. If America were a clear and consistent set of ideals, political contestation—which of course has always involved different interpretations of ideals and sometimes different ideals, rather than the much-vaunted “shared ideals” we are told of—would only matter inasmuch as such contestation brought the nation closer to those ideals. Not being a Whig Historian myself, I simply cannot read the historical evidence as supporting this interpretation consistently.

These do not begin to exhaust the inconsistencies, revealed both by the historical record and by best practices of sociology, political science, and cultural development studies, between the heart-and-hearthstone approach to nationhood and the America-is-an-idea approach, and the realities of American nationhood itself.

Nor can the problems with these two approaches be resolved by combining them with each other in some balance or other; as demonstrated above, most approaches to American national identity are essentially an attempt to resolve the apparent dialectic of ideal vs. real, heritage vs. principles, and most of those cram the two heuristics into a system deeply favoring the “principles” sides of things in one sense or another. (The few versions that favor the heritage side, such as McClay's, tend towards antiquarianism, and there is little that is uniquely American about most of them).

In previous investigations, I labored under the assumption that a creative approach to the real-vs.-ideal dialectic in American ideological framings and historiography would be the missing link and key to developing an accurate reappraisal of American identity studies. I no longer subscribe to this assumption, because I believe that in their basic forms and common manifestations, the heart-and-hearthstone framework and the America-is-an-idea framework are simply too simplistic to be useful building blocks for rendering an accurate portrait of America. They obviously are quite usable and useful for public education and political-legitimacy purposes, but they are not strictly true in themselves. The fact that they are useful while incomplete, offers a hint to the nature of American identity in itself; its process-based and discursive character.

So mere cultural nationhood is out, and mere ideological creedal nationalism is out as well. What's left?

What is a Nation?

A deeper look at the origins of most nationhoods is in order, and fortunately we have the excellent work of Liah Greenfield (1992) Ernest Gellner (1983) and Ernst Renan (1882) to guide us. In a nutshell, nations are not *really* the holistic, romantic, nonrational splurges of social life and cultural existence, impermeably subjective to the point of being undefinable by the outside, which the 19th Century originators of nationalist political thought can somewhat accurately be accused of purveying.

Instead, the “nation” as typically defined, is insufficient to describe the actual historical experiences of most extant nations. Rather than being coherent and self-defined wholes, definable monoliths, nations instead are constructed from smaller components, and linked by abstract communities of imagination; and even as they become coherent and attain coherent Weberian states, their internal definitions and dynamics do not escape these pluralist and civil-religious dynamics of negotiations. That is, nationhood is neither a monolith, nor a given, nor a solution of any particular sort. The entities we think of as nations are always political processes with historical memory, and in our own American situation, this is very much the case, as much as any other.

As Greenfield and Gellner demonstrate, nationalism and the construction of nationhood is a historical process which happens in very specific historical context, sometimes but not always a post-imperial context, and is different in every case. The relation of elites and masses, of regions to regions, of locals to foreigners, of traditional society to advancing technological and economic modernity, and every other thing is neither mechanically determined nor foreordained by some kind of onward-unveiled spirit of things, but is in some senses *a negotiated and improvised compromise over time*, the tentative and evolving result of which is *some political, social, and cultural entity which thinks of itself, and is thought of by others, as a nation*. Yoram Hazony’s work in *The Virtue of Nationalism* (2018) distorts much more than it clarifies, but his framing of the Twelve Tribes of Israel becoming the Nation of Israel, and his assertion that this is a natural heuristic in most national developments, also helps sophisticate what exactly it is we are talking about when we talk of these things.

That question of self-conception is central, not peripheral, to the development of nationhood as well. Benedict Anderson famously suggested that nations are “imagined communities,” (Anderson 1983) and it is regrettable that turn of phrase has often been used in subsequent decades to imply a sort of illegitimacy to nationalism, a fakeness to nationhood. Quite the opposite—nations are literally socially constructed in historical time, and as such are among the most real and lasting and deeply, broadly participatory political and cultural units in world history. And so as Ernst Renan demonstrates, “a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.” Every nation is essentially in some sense a faith, not a faith merely in the sense of rational tenets assented to or dissented from, but in the relation of such tenets to broader narratives and theologies and understandings, the relation of those to particular symbols and codes, and then to customs and traditions and hierarchies and institutions, and the meanings, problems, and understandings all of these together imply for a particular way of life, for the peoples linked under it. Once such a self-conception has been constructed, and if it is accepted and gives identity to the lives of enough people, you could say a nation exists.

Obviously these two frameworks of nationhood—that of complex historical context and development of a whole from lesser parts, and that of creedal development based on a thick conception of human experience and subjectivity rather than a mere tenet-based faith of principles—are at odds with the simpler framings much American historical polemic utilizes these days. But they are related to the “heart-and-hearthstone” and “America-is-an-idea” framings, albeit more deeply contextualized and sophisticated.

In the right corners of American historiography, there are deeper framings of the American identity question that, while focusing exclusively on the American national experience, strikingly parallel the frameworks Greenfield, Renan, and others offer up on the question of national identity.

American Nationhood as Political Process, and Two Guides to It

The first of these framings is what we will call the Unionist Paradigm, following the work of David C. Hendrickson (2003) who has argued that for much of United States history, America has functionally been a sort of international system upon the North American continent; I go further than him in arguing that, while this was an accurate framework for understanding American domestic politics all the way up until the end of Reconstruction in 1877, it is still an accurate framework for understanding the undercurrents of American domestic politics up to the present day. The unionist paradigm essentially follows Federalist No. 10 in assuming there is a very large (and, theoretically, it is possible for it to be infinite) diversity of essentially self-acknowledging communities and polities within the American union, and that the task of American politics is keeping them together in this union. Madison writes “extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their strength, and to act in unison with each other” (Hamilton et al., 1961, pg. 64.)

The basic approach of the unionist paradigm, is to look at America as something like an international system with multiple sovereign actors whose interests must be balanced, if anything resembling union is to be made real, and the internal harmony of all preserved.

The second of these framings is what we will call the American Civil Religion paradigm, following the work of Walter A. McDougall (1997) who has argued that much of American political turmoil can be best understood as a secularized reforming Protestantism that unites American self-interest and American moral fervor in all public causes. I go further than him in arguing that this civil-religious dispensation is far more pervasive than merely questions at the national level, and is not solely confined to explicitly religious and ultimate questions alone, but permeates all the way down the American political ladder, in all things social and cultural; it explains much of the feverish character of much of American politics. As religious sociologists like Peter Berger (2014) and others have suggested, often the most important social attributes of faiths are the subconscious ones which manifest culturally, and thus this paradigm more or less ignores the more positive, national-unity versions of “civil religion” bandied about every few years, and uses the heuristic as a framing to explain behavior instead.

The basic approach of the American Civil Religion paradigm, is to imagine America as something like a civilization in the midst of religious revival and holy war, and to consider how some relative secularity might be maintained without letting any of the warring faiths destroy each other or the entire polity.

It should be noted that *these are both essentially descriptive rather than prescriptive approaches* to American national identity questions; neither is particularly aspirational or appreciative, and to the degree that there’s a kind of didacticism inherent in either, it is more a cautious warning of the excesses of small-minded factionalism and sectarianism on the one hand, and messianic hustling on the other, than it is any sort of positive and forward-looking program of national construction, reform, or appreciation. They are not “objective” per se, but they do look with the eye of an analyst more than a poet, and are calculated to make the proud patriot consider the excesses of his countrymen as much as their virtues.

The remainder of this paper will introduce and elaborate the Unionist Paradigm and the American Civil Religion Paradigm, and demonstrate their usefulness for considering American national history. Then it will consider what their practice—in political action, and in historical interpretation—might look like, and consider the degree to which America as union and faith might still justifiably be considered a “nation.”

The broader purpose of this paper is to articulate a framing of American national identity studies that places its key focus on the active processes of conflict and compromise in creedal and factional disputes, and the institutions in which those are conducted and the virtues conducive to them, rather than on given qualities of any sort, abstract or concrete. This in turn will be a framing of American nationhood that is not only more honest to the historical record and respectful of the generations of patriots and dissidents before us, but also more useful for the working historical interpreter, policy wonk, and political entrepreneur ac-

tive in American public life today. It will give them a lens to see the past as having been a stage of action just as their present is such a stage, and perhaps a vantage point to see the bigger pictures in the currents of history in their own time.

PART TWO: AMERICA AS INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: THE FEDERAL UNION, PLURALISM, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONSENSUS

America is Not a Nation

Pause a moment and consider that there *is* no American nation. It isn't hard to do; almost any definition of nationhood relying upon a certain homogeneity or internal agreement, is an impossible definition to apply strictly to the United States of America.

If you define nationhood in cultural terms, you need only consult the long history of regionalism, immigrant amalgamation and endurance, the linguistic variations and the political habits of heart that differ from North to South, East to West, river valley to river valley and port to port; you don't need to be a deconstructive multiculturalist to note the deep impact of French and Spanish and African culture upon certain pockets of America (Meinig 1986) or the contradictory impacts of different English cultures, best depicted by David Hackett Fischer in his always-cited, rarely-annotated opus, *Albion's Seed* (1989): "Even as the ethnic composition of [the various regions of the United States] has changed profoundly, regional cultures themselves have persisted, and are still very powerful even in our own time. All of them derive from folkways that were planted in the American colonies more than two centuries ago..." (pg. 10.)

If you define nationhood in political terms, the placement of sovereignty and the correct adjustment of loyalties, you obviously are confronted with the political realities of America's federal system, of divided sovereignty between the federal government and the state governments, and the very real, complex, and enduring divisions of loyalty and responsibility across that complex system. "...Congress had sovereignty, the supreme lawmaking power, in regard to the matters entrusted to it; the states had sovereignty in regard to matters entrusted to them; and the people reserved sovereignty in still other matters, refusing to entrust it to government at any level" (McDonald 2000, pg. 4.) The whole of American constitutional thought assesses these sorts of questions. Additionally, you are confronted by the reality of multiple political parties with national breadths and constituencies, yet opposing and contradictory ideological understandings of American nationhood and politics.

If you define nationhood in economic terms, you are confronted with multiple systems of political economy extant in the American national economy, some of which are more regionally bounded and others of which are more nationally or internationally open, some of which focus on abstract financial and creative flows, others of which focus on concrete resource extraction and development and logistical flows, and all of which operate on their own logics while still being essentially interdependent with others. Some of these political economies are more bound to the international commercial world, while others are far more self-sufficient on the American continent. All of them employ and are managed by Americans who, in their professional orientations, begin to take on different sorts of values and virtues based on the superstructure of their means of production.

If you define nationhood on social terms, you are confronted with the enduring existence of class distinction in America, of the many forms it takes in built environments and cultural habits (Baltzell 1964.) You also, of course, witness the sheer mobility and individuality and agency that has, at many times, characterized American life, in migration and entrepreneurialism and protest and other things, and the creative instability that wrecks. "From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance... that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom..." (Turner 1893, pg. 37.)

You do not, however, discover anything resembling a general equality of condition, beyond the absence of aristocracy Tocqueville noted (and even that real phenomenon is counterbalanced by the informal aristocracies of familial notoriety and wealth, and credentialed expertise, which seem always to be emerging in American life, exist a couple decades, and are in due time replaced by others.)

Moreover, on all four of these measures on which American unitary nationhood is far more tenuous than one would expect in a united nation, a look both at the historical record back to earliest times, and a look around the conditions of our present and recent times, demonstrates that American life has generally been this divided, this plural, this *non-national*, for the entirety of American history. Pluralism, heterogeneity, division, and all the confusion of public order, the rage of faction, and the creative potential of such tensions, are the *starting point* of American public life; we have never had anything resembling “national unity” or “general consensus” in anything other than a semantic or sentimental sense, and to the degree any ever existed in embryo, it was consciously aided and constructed by the conscious action of American nationalist elites at various times in our history. The very term “era of good feelings,” applied as it sometimes is to the 1810s and the 1990s alike, after the fact, suggests the emotive and cherrypicked nature of such interpretations of unity. Both decades, of course, had their tumults.

Many historians of American national identity start with the assumptions 1) that America *is* a nation and 2) that the American system of government created a nation-state. Even if these two suppositions are true—and I believe they are—they encourage habits of mind that look for unities, not for harmonies and, importantly, not for dissonances, and they thus are often less confident in the ability of the American system’s ability to channel and contain foundational dissent, and see treason behind many more corners than is warranted. At a political level that is bad enough; at the level of historical interpretation, that is malpractice, and dishonest to the historical reality of American life.

Consider instead, that 1) America is not a nation, but a veritable international system and international order, with cultural, political, economic, and social sovereignties all in conflict together within it just as Europe and the Middle East and Asia have had their international orders under various imperiums and agreements; and 2) that the American system of government created a *peace pact*, to use David C. Hendrickson’s fantastic term—an international system, and a means for mediating and resolving disputes between overlapping and competing sovereignties. Hendrickson, a sort of diplomatic historian of American domestic order, suggests we “view the making of the union as an experiment in international cooperation, as a working out, under the novel conditions and circumstances of North America, of the peace plan tradition in European thought” (2003, pg. 24.) Consider as well that this is not merely something that happened in history—say, between 1754 and 1877 or so—but in fact is the general and ongoing nature of American social and public life, even up to our present discontents.

Aside from being useful in diplomatic and constitutional thought, this thesis can inform historiographic thought on American politics and American national identity through the 19th and 20th centuries, and can be applied to institutions such as the party system (Hofstadter 1969, Rossiter 1960, DiStefano 2019) and the development of countervailing power in American economic life (Galbraith 1952, Lind 2020) among other things.

Reading History through Hendrickson’s Unionist Paradigm

“Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding”, and “Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate Over International Relations, 1789-1941” (Hendrickson 2009) together offer up a useful revisionist account of American political history that takes seriously the notion of American federalism not only in constitutionalism, but in diplomacy. They contend that for most of early American political history, and in key ways for much of American political history since Appomattox, unitary nationhood has been a very thin veneer, and the American reality has been a *system of states* resembling an *international system* as much as a national unit. (This is not intrinsically a “state’s rights” analysis, but it does put that tradition in broader context, as it does the unionist tradition and other understandings of American politics). (McDonald 2000).

Hendrickson offers up what he calls “The Unionist Paradigm” as a fundamental tradition of early and subsequent American political thought, at least as coherent and influential as the “Republican” tradition tracked by Gordon Wood (1991) and Bernard Bailyn (1967) and the “Liberal” tradition tracked by others. Where the Liberal tradition in American political thought looks to essential fundamental rights of citizens and restraints on governments as central, and the Republican tradition looks to popular sovereignty and civic virtue as the ordering principles of a free regime, the Unionist tradition or paradigm assumes the multiplicity of sovereignties in geographic space, and sees their cooperation together for certain broader ends, and the systems and rules by which they govern their collective action, and the new and larger identities and attitudes formed by this federative process, as being integral to the American political tradition in ways not always well-enough appreciated. Hendrickson explains “Americans... belonged to multiple communities and had multiple identities and loyalties, and it was the relationship among these communities, and loyalties that constituted the essence of their political problem...” (Hendrickson 2003, pg. 17.)

The United States of America, Hendrickson argues, has been formed by a series of unions. He explicitly suggests the First and Second Continental Congresses’ governing processes, the Articles of Confederation, and then finally the U.S. Constitution itself were, in their own ways and with different orientations towards national sovereignty and the nature of the component parts, successive experiments in national union arising both from the functional consent of the factions and institutions composing the union to its rules, and the said unions’ maintenance and adaptation through various upheavals and challenges. Rather than a compact theory, this is a complex and functionally internationalist argument. In terms of international relations theory, it falls in line with the “Grotian” or “Liberal” school rather than the “Realist” or “Idealist” schools. The American states, and the people and institutions in them, had self-interested and sometimes vicious reasons for their actions, but they also had fundamental collective interests and reciprocal obligations to each other. They also had obligations to other states and peoples, from the British and French and Spanish empires to the Native American tribes on the American frontier, and were generally guided by the *Lex Mercatoria* and the Law of Nations (McDonald 1979) as much as by their own self-interest. The formation of the national union was as much an exercise in managing these obligations and channeling the various local interests into a cohesive national interest and process; there was not a unitary top-down nation-state formed at any one point, either in 1789 or onward. Instead there was a whole system of politics that more closely resembled international politics across a continental sphere.

The analogy he makes is to a “peace pact” or international system, like the famed Westphalian Peace of 1648 or the European international system established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Those were international orders and systems formed in the aftermath of catastrophic continental wars, established by mutually consenting sovereignties with broader goals of peace and harmony in mind. The American Constitution of 1787 similarly was established by mutually consenting sovereignties—drafted by delegations from the states, ratified by conventions of the people—with peace and harmony in mind, with two important caveats: the process of ratification, through ratifying conventions rather than by the states forming the Union, muddied the waters of the fundamental source of sovereignty and power, and so the states were bound up in the Constitution not by their own sovereignty, but by the sovereignty of “the People,” and, the American Constitution as peace pact was formed in anticipation of and for the preclusion of disunion and prospective civil war, rather than in a civil war’s aftermath.

Dynamics of Union through the Paradigm- Sectional, Ideological, Partisan

The implication of all this is not merely the trite “the federal government and the states are both sovereign” framing on domestic policy and constitutional law all American schoolchildren are taught and which often mediates most public discourse on the nature of American government. The implication is far more profound: the United States of America has domestically exhibited the characteristics of a competitive and collaborative international system within the broader international system of the Americas and the Atlantic world, and the dynamics of American national life have had as much functionally geopolitical competi-

tion as classically political competition. The national institutions of American government, resting on public opinion as much as anything else, cannot assume a cohesive national public opinion and merely work aligned with it, but must prudentially balance various regional, institutional, and other geographically-dispersed bodies of opinion and legitimacy, and practice a coalition-and-compromise statecraft to preserve and advance it, not only for the intrinsic Jeffersonian goods of representation and accountability and democracy, but for the existential Hamiltonian goods of national survival and domestic peace themselves (Lind 1997). The alternative we forget, but which the framers could not free their minds from, was anarchic international politics and dissolution into civil war. We must imagine the horrors of civil war if we are to appreciate the sheer boldness of the sometimes-mundane-seeming American system.

American politics, per Hendrickson, is the most successful attempt at an international system of peace and unity ever devised. The fact that it seems like a national unit is testimony to its success. Read in this light, the life-work of Henry Clay and John J. Crittenden later in the 19th Century, and perhaps the work of Franklin D. Roosevelt and William F. Buckley Jr. in the 20th Century, assumes a more grand-strategic cast than the petty logrolling politics they are often remembered for.

It seems to me that to Hendrickson's succession of unions, we ought add a few before, and a long train afterwards. The first significant inter-colonial cooperation among the colonies that would become the American states, happened in the early 1750s, as continental and global war between Britain and France loomed; the Albany Congress, summoned by Benjamin Franklin to coordinate colonial relations with the frontier Indians, proposed the famous Albany Plan of Union on the part of most of the Northern and Middle Colonies; while a young George Washington marched a force comprised of Virginian militia and South Carolinian regulars into the Ohio Country, accidentally touching off the Seven Years' War. These, both happening in July 1754, partly under British imperial and partly under cooperative colonial auspices, might be thought of as the first collective action by the colonists, a proto-union. Such collaborations increased throughout the war years, and in the aftermath of that war, when the British government imposed the Stamp Act and various other legislation upon the colonies, the Stamp Act Congress of 1765 and the successive activities it inspired among various coalitions of colonists up until the calling of the Continental Congress in 1774, gradually brought such plans of union further into the forefront.

After the experience of the Continental Congresses, the Articles of Confederation, and the writing and ratification of the U.S. Constitution, which together forged the essential logic of American union and our Unionist paradigm, the progress and process of American government took on increasingly *sectional*, *ideological*, and *partisan* characteristics, characteristics which have defined every era since 1789, in different proportions age by age, and which still essentially define our present politics. This is not and never was an aberration from the unionist politics of the Colonial and Revolutionary Eras—it has been instead merely their consummation and application under conditions of independence. So American politics since 1789 has been an expansion of the logic of confederated and collaborative national union in different ways, as that union has developed through successive economic and social revolutions and political upheavals and strategic expansions.

Whereas the “peace pact” of the American union was at first between colonies and states, it gradually became a peace pact between the increasingly fractious and divergent geographical sections of the country, laced together by law and economy but divided in culture and economy in different ways century by century; in time a peace pact between the major ideological dispensations, both popular and elite, which have long had their roots in various religious and cultural dynamics from before the Founding, but have twisted and evolved and reformed over time; and most successfully a peace pact and working system between great national parties with mass memberships and sophisticated political operations, capable of mobilizing millions of Americans and organizing government at continental levels. The fact that this unionist system—balancing and managing such conflicts as East and West, North and South, Free State and Slave State, Industrialist and Labor, Conservative and Liberal, Progressive and Populist, Republican and Democrat, Woke and MAGA, and all the rest in our grand historical succession—has generally kept all factions on the

American scene committed enough to its processes to squabble inside the system rather than outside it, and has only fallen into catastrophic total war once, and never again after, is a good sign of its promise.

Sectional

One of the main and most famous axes over which the union has been preserved, has been geographic space, and in particular the distinct regional cultures, regional economies, and regional political units—sometimes machines and patronage networks, sometimes nascent semi-nations like Texas or “The South” or “New England,” and sometimes mere cultural habits distinct to one area but with political implications, like the strange libertarian-progressive history of the Mountain West—which mediate much of American political conflict. The most famous, of course, is the long domestic cold war between northern free states and southern slave states in the antebellum, rumbling in 1819, 1831, and 1850, and exploding apocalyptically in 1861, with a full resolution not secured, by some measures, until 1877. The distinct political culture of the West, as Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) has argued helped mediate and transform that conflict, but by the later 19th Century, one of the major pressing divisions in American politics had become the conflict between the industrial northeast’s financial and industrial elites and the agrarian Midwest’s, resource-extracting West’s, and post-slavery South’s elites (Lind 2004). By the 1950s, much of the former regionalism had lost its independent power—the Second World War’s nationalizing tendencies, in economy and communications and even in-built environments, had opened a truly national scene where conflicts looked more similar in any two parts of the country than they ever had—but even under these conditions, regional identities and their political implications still linger as much as state identities and their political implications. In any case, an America where the two most populous urban forms—dense metropolitan areas and their suburbs, and sprawling exurban areas branching into small towns and the countryside—have become regional cultures with political implications themselves, is an America still beset by regionalist dynamics, for which the unionist paradigm remains a useful balm.

Fischer’s and McDougall’s works usefully trace American “hearth cultures” across time and in their emergent complexities. As McDougall notes, it matters that the central ring of North America was settled by Anglo-Protestant hustlers rather than Catholic Spanish or French conquerors; similarly, it matters to subsequent American domestic politics that the descendants of Yankee Puritans laid down the cultures of the upper Midwest, while those of Pennsylvanian Quakers and Germans peopled the Midwest and Great Plains, and a mix of Southern aristocracy and Scots-Irish mountainfolk were at the forefront of conquest and expansion across most of the American South, West, and Southwest. These have not been independently determinative on the subsequent developments of the rings of the country where they have gone, but they have been an important factor in broader context. Centuries later, the folkways of the original Anglo settlers have continued to echo in various regions’ political dispensations and even built environments; the reactions of different Anglo hearth cultures to successive waves of American modernity, too, has been integral in the formation of subsequent political identities (Fischer 1989). Most importantly, these are the cultures which subsequent generations of American immigrants and domestic migrants have assimilated or integrated into, sometimes consciously and fully, but far more often partially and subconsciously. It is through and against these regional cultures, too, that distinct minority cultures—African-Americans, Native Americans, religious dissenters like Mormons and Amish, and all distinct and lingering immigrant cultures from the Jews and Italians and Irish once upon a time to the Asian-Americans and Latino-Americans of today—have defined themselves (Lind 1995). The amalgamative mix of American social life, broadly speaking, has taken place on these cultural-regional terms, *not* primarily on explicitly racial or ideological terms, and their echoes still abound in culture and politics today. One of the reasons there is no central and easily definable “American identity”, is precisely this; and to best manage it, we have a unionist paradigm to consider.

Ideological

Another of the main axes over which the union has been preserved, and one which has always been relevant but which has become increasingly relevant over the past hundred-fifty years or so, is the ideological axis. Political ideologies and political spectrums do not objectively exist in principle, but rather are the product of the historical imaginations and political creativities of those thinking about their own times. They may make reference to principles and ideas more or less timeless and universal, whether pulled from thin air by madmen in authority or coolly discerned by mature deliberations and reflection and choice; but functionally, they are the heuristics and tools of political actors first, and the nation's motive forces only second (DiStefano 2020). In the American context, however, the heavy ideological focus of many interpretations of our national life, the democratic accessibility of our general public discourse, and the Anglo-Protestant and Liberal-Republican roots of the American public mind, intensify their sway.

Particularly with the containment and channeling of regionalist power between the 1860s and the 1930s, ideological force has gradually become a more and more potent organizing factor in American politics, with the same trends towards disunion requiring sagacious unionist statecraft for their containment and productive channeling for union. Part of this has been due to the successive revolutions in media technology, from mass-printed newspapers to the telegraph and radio to television and the internet (Gurri 2018) which turned the divisions and vagaries of public opinion into a far more professionally institutional force than they had been in the days of the *American Aurora* and *Porcupine's Gazette*. Part of this has been due to the successive "Great Awakenings" occasionally roiling American social and political life with a secularized spirituality equal in fervor to those of George Whitfield or Charles Grandison Finney. Additionally, the parties themselves, and American civil society in general, were long mass-membership organizations of national scope, as Theda Skocpol (2003) has demonstrated. This sort of organization has proven as capable of disciplined ideological politics as the vanguard cliques of more elitist political ages, such as that of the Founders, and our own.

Whatever the case, most casual reference to national division or divorce, political dysfunction, and fears of disunion or civil war, has specifically referred to ideological divides, even if mediated by partisan or sectional, or class or cultural, vessels. This has been the case, certainly, during the politics of the modern political parties, whether one considers them to have been formed in the 1930s or in the 1970s (DiStefano 2020, Lind 2020). It has very real predecessors and echoes in the decades before the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, albeit mixed with more traditional factionalism and partisanship. Despite the ethereal, abstract, and in principle unresolvable nature of ideological disputes, however, experience—both in the formation of parties and coalitions comprising multiple ideologies, and in practical statecraft and policymaking—the unionist paradigm, of the essential legitimacy of each interested component parts of the whole recognized by all such parts, provides the basis of navigation for ideological politics at all times and in our own time.

Partisan

The last axis over which the union has been continually preserved, and arguably the one most integral to its preservation and continuation, is the partisan axis, that of political parties as major national institutions, comprising the "party system" in any age. The single most important thing the Founding Fathers of this country got wrong, regarding political theory (and there were several) was their distrust in and opposition to political parties, and their stated belief—clung to throughout the 1790s and beyond—that political parties were threatening to American constitutionalism, liberty, and union (Hofstadter 1969). Quite to the contrary, the parties they reluctantly built, and the parties that subsequently evolved to replace those parties, and their successors, have been the crucial organs of representative government, through which the living blood of democracy has flowed and without which the skeleton of the constitutional system could have no life. Other civil society and advocacy organizations have played similar roles, but none have been anywhere

near as lasting, as broad-based, and at times as stately as the political parties have been. They have been a source of division, often fiercely so; but they have also helped manage that division and turbulence very well. More than the sectional and ideological divides, the partisan divide has closely resembled a unionist sort of diplomacy, when managed well. As Rossiter (1960, pg. 1) neatly sums it up: “No America without democracy; no democracy without politics; no politics without parties; no parties without compromise and moderation.”

Political historians and political theorists have noted America’s lasting and resilient two-party system, its tendency to realign and readjust every several decades, and the interlocking dynamics of intraparty elite factionalism, grassroots mass-movement activism, and charismatic individual party leadership, at these points. I contend that the two-party system—including, as it does, both the complex coalitions of each party, *and* dissident third-party and nonaligned political movements, organized in ways both promoting some cooperation and conciliation, but allowing the cutthroat power-jostling competition central to politics—is, in every epoch in American history, the most salient mechanism of the ongoing unionist paradigm. When the party system is well-balanced, competitive, representative, and otherwise responsible and healthy, the national union is typically stable. When the party system is imbalanced, unrepresentative, and uncompetitive, the union is far less stable. When the party system broke down in the 1850s, with the splintering of the Democratic Party, the demise of the Whig Party, and the rise of the Republican Party without a fully organized counterparty, formal secession quickly ensued after a few years of combined stagnation and intensification. After the Civil War, when the party system was reconstructed, channels of dissent and conflict were better managed, and they have been pressured and renewed every few decades since.

There have been, in my reading, at least six party systems. In order, these are: The First Party System, of Federalists and Jeffersonians, 1789-1824; The Second Party System, of Whigs and Jacksonian Democrats, 1824-1854; The Third Party System, of Lincoln Republicans and Bourbon Democrats, 1854-1896; The Fourth Party System, of Progressive Republicans and Bryan Democrats, 1896-1932; The Fifth Party System, of New Deal Democrats and Rockefeller Republicans, 1932-1976; The Sixth Party System, of Liberal Democrats and Conservative Republicans, 1976-2020s. It is not the place of this paper to theorize whether we are presently in a party realignment, or what our political parties after such another realignment might look like (DiStefano 2020). It is sufficient to note the existence of the dynamic.

Because, more so than in the case of institutions managing regional and ideological divisions, individual leaders in the party system actively and visibly can exert power, make compromises, and push for new realities, this is the axis of American divides most conducive to unionist statecraft and understandings. Mass-membership political parties are by nature national units, and are essentially agnostic ideologically; their function is to get members of their parties elected to offices at all levels of American government, which requires building coalition and when possible consensus across both geographic, sectional lines, and very often across ideological lines. In several of the earlier party systems mentioned, this also required consensus or cooperation across class lines. Hofstadter (1969) reminds us, in “The Idea of a Party System,” that various thinkers in the 19th century—Frederick Grimke, Jabez Hammond, Francis Lieber, and George Bancroft, among others—were quite aware of both the conciliatory effects of such parties, and their capacity to better represent all American factions, including new ones that would come into being with ongoing developments and social and technological change.

That very capacity has made most American “national” political identity, to be essentially a partisan and ideological political identity—for example the national vision of the Whigs and the national vision of the Democrats in antebellum times synthesizing diverse regional and cultural and ideological coalitions, and the 20th century conservative movement’s and liberal mainstream’s pretensions to speak for all “real” Americans. On the one hand, this can be quite dangerous, in creating national identities based on the heresy and exclusion of half the country. On the other hand, it increases the size and reach of the factions with which unionist statesmen and activists can work, and makes for a somewhat stable, if sometimes tense, bipolar system. When these interests are harnessed in the name of union, there is nothing that can stop them.

All of this is to say, the American nation, to the degree it exists and has existed, has never been particularly coherent as an ideal-type; it has always been constructed from smaller parts, most of which have some intrinsic relationship to each other, but which have also been fundamentally at odds, incompatible. But our very national life has been created by institutions that help mediate that incompatibility, and create new realities as the union glides from age to age. Once the division was between the literal sovereignties of the states; it has transferred in spirit and practice to the functional sovereignties of American regions, ideologies, and parties, exactly as raucous and borderline-violent as the states were once upon a time. But the political logic of union still remains the best way to keep them all, as President Lyndon Baines Johnson is said to have said, “inside the tent pissing out.”

Hendrickson’s unionist paradigm heuristic is a helpful way to check the nationalist bias Americans in the 20th and 21st Centuries have typically brought to assessing American history. There are some ways it is literally true, and other ways it is an exaggeration, but in all of these ways it is an important counterpart to the assumption that there *is* a certain unity and homogeneity requisite for American civil politics. Thinking of America as an international order composed of multiple related sovereignties, thinking of those subcomponents of America—the parties, the regions, the ideological movements—as fundamentally constitutionally legitimate, whose balance and order must be preserved lest the union dissolve into catastrophic international war amidst itself, puts the questions at stake helpfully.

But there is another tendency in American historical interpretation that is equally unhelpful and distortive, and equally requires conscious antidote; this is the notion that America is an “idea” unfolding in time, or a set of emergent truths. To counter this unhelpful habit of historical memory, rather than counterpose its opposite (as with theorizing America as an international system rather than a nation,) I shall take this idea seriously on its own terms, and extend it to its logical implications. To aide in that, we shall turn for help to McDougall, critical theologian of the American Civil Religion.

PART THREE: AMERICA AS CRUSADING FAITH: CIVIL RELIGION, POLITICAL THEOLOGY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL MYTHOS

What if America *is* an Idea?

Pause a moment and consider that America is, in fact, *an idea*. It’s not hard. It comes almost naturally. In recent decades especially, but going all the way back to before the Founding itself, there’s been a longstanding tendency to interpret America not only as an experiment or a process, but as a set of truths, or an unfolding reality, a dream and an ideal more than anything else. G. K. Chesterton is often quoted as having called America “a nation with the soul of a church” and given the almost scriptural propensity by which Americans think on their “ideals,” this is fitting enough. There are others who have seen America as a church unto itself; and that framing we ought to take seriously.

America certainly has a civil religion, and it has certainly behaved as though it believed it were on a holy mission to redeem mankind for the entirety of its history (McDougall 2004). But as a civil religion, it has never been particularly unified; across the American body politic there have always been dozens, even hundreds of sects, both in terms of literal religious denominations, and in terms of spiritually-charged political movements preaching and acting on the public stage as though they were revivalist movements or missionary causes, working to redeem mankind or to damn the heretics and infidels (McDougall 2008). Moreover, even the most self-avowedly secular and anti-religious and post-religious figures and movements in American political history, have functionally wound up sounding like they were delivering jeremiads or recasting the Sermon on the Mount. More interestingly, much of the most memorable and powerful American political rhetoric has been infused with a gospel-preacher sort of style and even language (Bellah 1967, Gorski 2017). At best, this has inspired a sort of original-sin-aware humility, per Abraham Lincoln, while at worst it has fired or cloaked grand hubristic pretensions to righteousness, per Woodrow Wilson. But it has certainly always been present, and not always conscious.

Most assessments of “American Civil Religion” stumble when they look at the concept as something potentially unificatory, that can help bring meaning to American patriotism (Gorski 2017). It is potentially unificatory, in a way, but the concept is in practice something political, a tool to be assessed, not a god-head to be admired. Various historians and thinkers—Walter McDougall and Richard M. Gamble most importantly, but others as well—see it descriptively rather than prescriptively. All notions that America is an “idea” or a set of truths, or a process unfolding, or a promise or a dream or a hope, implicitly and necessarily follow one branch or another of the American civil religion. There are two frameworks one must grasp, if one is to understand the American relationship to religiosity, secularity, political order, spiritual redemption, and world destiny inasmuch as it might be thought of as a general national characteristic requiring explanation. The first is historical, sociological, somewhat theological, and well-documented in a number of cases by various helpful and disciplined historians. The second is an aphorism delightful in its simplicity and foreboding in its implications.

Reading History through Walter McDougall’s Civil Religion Paradigm

First, America is—in its roots at its early findings, in its social hearth as it has developed historically, and in a couple of sociological senses that should be looked at descriptively rather than as having any specific moral valence—America is a Protestant nation. The three most important American hearth colonies, in terms of their influence on subsequent American national culture generally, were Puritan Massachusetts Bay, Quaker Pennsylvania, and vaguely-Anglican Virginia (McDougall 2004). The contrasting approaches to religious life in those colonies set the pattern for most of the other colonies, while the deep impact on political understandings of justice and freedom and order, and the social shaping these understandings exerted in centuries past and still exert today, are recognizably Protestant in their origins. The vast majority of Americans for much of early American history were Protestants, and that led to very particular traits being stamped in the American social soul, even after Protestantism ceased to be the de facto personal religion of most Americans (Kurth 1998). All this is to say, Americans think like Protestants in recognizably the same way English privateers sailing under the Tudor banner in 1603 thought like Protestants (McDougall 2004).

David Hackett Fischer, as usual, is one of the best guides to this dynamic. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, and the other dissenting sects that settled the New England area, practiced a strict, stringent, personally and socially radical form of dissenting Christianity. The social effect of it was a far more proudly self-governing church, demanding not only outward piety, but also inward grace and redemption, of all its members; it was simultaneously intolerant and redemptive, crusading and egalitarian (Fischer 1989). The fiery piety of the first generations of Puritan settlers ebbed and cooled over time, but it had at least two broader effects: first, everywhere influenced by later New England settlement would be populated by less pious, but still-industrious and self-governing, cultural descendants of this stock. (Most of the America Alexis de Tocqueville gleefully surveys in the 1830s, is such a Yankee America, a New England town meeting writ large). Second, every few generations of Americans, including an 18th-Century generation of post-Puritan heirs, would be gripped by a feverish redemptionism, a “Great Awakening,” a phenomenon fueled in part (though not in full) by the lingering fumes of the Puritan hearth (DiStefano 2020).

The Quakers of Pennsylvania, merchant oligarchs of their time, practiced a far more socially tolerant Christianity that was as egalitarian and as personal as that of the Puritans, but with fewer bulwarks of social order and public spiritual discipline. The Anglican planter-aristocrats of Virginia, by all accounts, seem to have been even more lax in their actual piety, but did keep up an established church and frame most of their ideas of liberty and self-ownership in accordance with its precepts (Fischer 1989). In these two hearths, the American heritage of religious tolerance and pluralism eventually grew into institutional form, as a general practice in Pennsylvania and as an extrapolation of ideas of political liberty in Virginia. New England’s, Pennsylvania’s, and Virginia’s colonial ideas of freedom—*ordered liberty*, *reciprocal liberty*, and *hegemonic liberty* respectively, as articulated by Fischer—have been crucial to the American political culture for four centuries (Fischer 1989, McDougall 2004). But they arose not solely by political practice alone, but in tan-

dem with the religious situation in those colonies, as early generations of Americans navigated church and state, god and mammon, in their new world (Mead 2008).

Even during colonial times, American religious life was far more diverse than this, and would only become more so after the American Revolution and into modernity. But the fact that it was a series of Protestant hearths—each of them a minority on the continental and national stage, working to stay true to their own teachings and practicing a necessary toleration amongst each other—ensured that that hearth would be both comparatively stable and shockingly dynamic. And given the particular cultural habits of American Protestantism—James Kurth lists a spiritual elevation of the individual over the parish community, an elevation of the individual’s conscience over the church hierarchy, and a special reverence for the written word of scripture as the most direct way an individual might attain salvation, as three of the most important factors in what would eventually become “The American Creed”—the transition from American anti-hierarchical, anti-communalist, pro-scriptural Protestant individualism, to American anti-hierarchical, anti-communalist, pro-scriptural civic-republican ideologies of politics, is straightforward (Kurth 1998).

Kurth tracks this in his excellent Orbis essay, “The Protestant Deformation and American Foreign Policy.” He argues that over the course of the centuries, Protestantism as a social force shed more and more of the traditional theology of the original faiths, in the American context eventually attaining a “salvation by works” understanding precipitating the Social Gospel, de-emphasizing the trinitarian God and becoming a unitarian faith, and in due time becoming almost entirely secularized, promoting the American ideology of freedom, equality, opportunity, progress, and democracy as a kind of worldly redemption. All this, a development of American Civil Religion. His understanding of the Protestant roots and influences of American political ideologies is astute, but he stops before going deeply into some of the important divisions within American Protestantism and how they have manifested themselves in American political factions and causes in our history.

The second framework deals with outlooks. The functional way the American civil religion at all times, in all its forms, has manifested itself in American social and political life, is straightforward. McDougall calls us the nation “that prides itself equally on its idealism and pragmatism, and likes to believe they are identical” (McDougall 1997, pg. 9.) The nice way to say this is that Americans are “*practical idealists*.” The less-nice way to say it, is that Americans are *messianic hucksters*. As a slur or a description, neither term is specific to any particular political dispensation, region, era, tradition, or even profession in American life, and none are bereft of or immune to it. They are the admiring and detracting versions of a social type, with a particular ethos and prospect, that America produces in spades, and which in turn forms America further onward. That propensity of ours to be simultaneously technical wizards and self-righteous scolds, rapacious hustlers and genuine philanthropists, and for that unity of moral purpose and practical skill to pervade all our self-conceptions of our institutions and our own worth as a force in human history—is perhaps not uniquely American, but it certainly is our most constant and explicit trait. Give Americans a choice of two good things and we’ll insist on taking both; frame up a tragic dichotomy and we’ll invent a new model circumventing our way to a happy ending. This unity of self-interest and moral purpose—what Walter Russell Mead (2008) has memorably described as a hustle for “God and Gold”—has been key to America’s constant ability to transform itself, and its deep faith in its own ability to transform the world. It has also led us to our cruelest and most ridiculous excesses, and is the single most important factor in making American political discourse and polemic far more apocalyptic and totalizing than, on the basis of the merits of the issues at any given time, one would expect it to be.

This is nothing particularly new. The occasional paroxysms and constant freakouts of American political culture, the save-the-world mentalities of American activist and philanthropic culture, the deep sense of disgust and injustice with which American political sectarians view their trespassing, blaspheming, heretical rivals, the tendency of every single presidential election to appear, to those living through it, as a “stand at Armageddon,” battling for the Lord, per Theodore Roosevelt’s phrase—all of these are as excessive as they are, because they are our ongoing and continuing practice, mentally and emotionally, of a cul-

tural disposition towards bringing forth some sort of improvement towards perfection on Earth, which has long been our quietly instinctual approach to politics. Machiavelli says the statesman must love his country more than his soul, and Thomas More dies the state's good servant, but God's first; but the way of the American Civil Religion, is to see no tension between reason-of-state and civic creed, between the public good and moral righteousness.

Structure and Dynamics of American Civil Religion—Great Awakenings and Great Crusades

The American Civil Religion is practiced subconsciously, in terms of its effects, although it does have some formal and conscious trappings. The great major documents of American public life—the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the famous orations and addresses of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. (Gorski 2017) and some select others—provide much of its formal scripture, while there is a long tradition of folk scripture alongside it. It is straightforwardly republican in its adoration of popular sovereignty, public virtue, the wisdom of the people, and the virtue of rulers who trust in democracy; it is straightforwardly liberal in its deep faith in natural rights, in the necessity of limited government and the centrality of freedom in all things (McDougall 2016). It has other themes as well—equality and justice, a faith in prosperity, and a generally pragmatic can-do approach, and distaste for complexity and tragedy.

While it has evolved continuously since the Founding, a few things have been true throughout. The President of the United States has typically served as a sort of high-priest function, and presidential inaugurations and farewells are something like sacred public rituals (McDougall 2016). The loss of American soldiers has tended to be cast as a sacrifice for principles that redeem all mankind, rather than merely as a defense of country and home; and that attitude has been mimicked in other aspects of public life as well. Most government officials in elected and some appointed offices have held a formal role in this; and the combination of public architecture and the public square, and public ceremony in America's patriotic holidays, far from being mere pageants or displays, have served to demonstrate the "dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability," to use Pat Moynihan's words, of the American system of government. It is a civic faith that draws as much from classical as biblical tropes and sources—note the Roman styling of many of our federal buildings and monuments, the very term "Senate," and the fasces that dot American public architecture. But it is also a faith that weds faith in popular government and ordered liberty, with a faith in the redemptive messianic potential of American destiny.

These are only the formal outward and formally-acknowledged parts, the things which are explicitly said and acknowledged in inaugural addresses and oaths of office, and which polemicists and opinionmakers of all political stripes uncritically endorse as necessary for national unity. The more tumultuous and important aspects of the American Civil Religion, are those internecine sectarian fights amongst its different sects over how it ought evolve, what should be tolerated or endorsed in the public square and what should not, which definitions of equality and freedom and virtue are the proper ones for American life in any age. These struggles more closely resemble somewhat-contained versions of the wars of religion in early modern Europe than modern ideological warfare (McDougall 2020, Vlahos 2009). A quick tour through America's revivals and awakenings should illustrate the point.

The best way to demonstrate this concept, is to showcase moments in American history that, for all their secular and mundane political importance, cannot fully be understood without reference to the moral fervor here being examined. A useful way to think about it might be, that there are moments in American history with a comparatively settled public life and public order, where frustrations with established order curdle around the sidelines and begin to mount, until some great shocks or great decays unleash new possibilities in politics and social life. Controversies reopened by these transitions offer up a new field for the moral and religious imaginations of the public to explore, to consider new possibilities and imperatives, to establish new societies and movements. These societies and movements then grow in size and vehemence and fervor as those shocks further destabilize the system, and they bounce not only off the mainstream but

off of each other; the great moral conflicts and political epics in such moments, and especially the mass movements, with their conversions and their witness and their sermons and their righteous fury, as well as whatever political and institutional and social changes they might fight for, are what we think of as “Great Awakenings.” These Great Awakenings, meanwhile, often so upend older public moralities as to establish the new public moralities of succeeding times. The energies and results of Great Awakenings sometimes coincide with or even worsen and precipitate grave national crises, and when they happen to flow directly into a great national crisis, the energies of various furiously competing sects of the American civil religion only deepen and heighten. Such situations might be thought of as “holy wars” or “Great Crusades,” and while these are not nearly the only examples of civil-religious energy in American life, they certainly are the most sharply and painfully profound (DiStefano 2020).

It is not clear whether or not the First Great Awakening of George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards, which swept up and down the colonies in the 1730s, had deep political effects, given especially that it happened before a deep sense of intercolonial union had taken root, and that it does not appear to have enflamed any of the colonies’ ambitions for expansion or power. The imperial crisis, starting in 1765 with the Stamp Act and running through the American Revolution, did take on aspects of a Great Crusade of sorts, and preachers in the era did energetically preach God’s blessing on the cause of Independence. But the first Great Awakening and the first American “holy war” *do not* seem to have been directly related. The energies of American patriots in the Revolution were ideological and fueled by the rage of the American civil religion, but in a somewhat more subdued sense than would be the case in subsequent cases.

The two subsequent Great Awakenings, by contrast, did flow very directly into Great Crusades, and in the first case probably helped bring it about.

The Second Great Awakening famously had many of its deepest roots in the burned-over district in upstate New York, where Charles Grandison Finney conducted much of his ministry, and from which the dissidents who would become Mormons got their initial start. But rather than remaining confined to Puritan and Yankee-descended areas, this second awakening soon had revivalist fervor sprouting all over the American countryside in the South and West as well, and in the urbanizing areas of the East. Aside from the great camp meetings and the specifically spiritual revivalism of the Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and new denominations like the Mormons and Shakers, the energies of this spiritual awakening flowed into new spiritualities (and the Transcendentalist movement should be seen as a part of it) as well as into new social movements, promoting temperance, abolition, women’s rights, and other moral reforms. Some of these would soon be enflaming American politics more generally.

The rapid ascent of abolitionism and its growing currency as a political force in the antebellum, combined against the corresponding revivalist fervor southern denominations brought forth in defense of the expansion of slavery, were central to the intensification of sectional tensions in the runup to the crisis of the 1850s. Other movements with spiritual fervors fueling populist energies rose in these times as well—the “Anti-Masonic” and “Know-Nothing” and “Free-Soil” parties in the north, various visionary expansionists and advocates of Manifest Destiny in the West, and more—but the image of southern preachers defending slavery on scriptural grounds, and William Lloyd Garrison burning a copy of the U.S. Constitution and condemning it as a “covenant with Hell,” more definitively showcased the power of civil religious energies in American politics than anything prior. Jacksonian Democracy was not known for its piety, but it certainly grew in part due to new fervor and new energy brought out by the revivals. The Civil War itself became something of a holy war (Gamble 2019) in part due to President Lincoln’s decision to make emancipation a war aim halfway through, but far more importantly because of the existing energies of domestic factions, north and south, that saw their causes as transcendent already. Julia Ward Howe’s messianic verses in Battle Hymn of the Republic—“As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!”—capture the fire well. The union was preserved, slavery was abolished, over half-a-million Americans died, and the greatest trauma on the American psyche and the greatest test of the American system of government was endured.

The Third Great Awakening had some of its roots in the advances in science in the 19th Century—Darwin’s theory of natural selection in particular forced crises of confidence and subsequent theological searchings in various denominations—and also in the ongoing developments in industrial society, as new conceptions of human social life and economic justice began spreading. The famous Social Gospel Christianity of much of the American industrialist class and Protestant mainline was one response, as was the Pentecostalism that began with the Asuza Street Revival in 1906. New, ostensibly scientific and mysticist, sects were set up, Christian Science being one of the extant ones from the period. But as with the Second Great Awakening, much of the most potent energy of this spiritual awakening was in spiritually-enflamed social movements and their political analogues.

Many, many social movements emerging from this Third Great Awakening flowed directly into new political dispensations. The granger movement in the American Midwest was the direct predecessor and prologue to the Populist Movement, and William Jennings Bryan was as much a champion of the Midwestern farmer and laborer as he was an early fundamentalist and revivalist. The social reform movements in the American industrial core, aimed at improving conditions for the poor, at encouraging temperance and sometimes at banning alcohol entirely, and of encouraging preparedness and physical fitness as part of a comprehensive spiritual discipline, emerged from the same sources as the Progressive Movement, with its obsessions with political reform, public health, rational management of resources, and the like. Sometimes these distinct and divergent manifestations of American Civil Religions were in conflict, sometimes they cooperated; but they did deepen American political interest, participation, anger, and involvement, and the moralism in their approaches strongly shaped American politics in their time.

When the United States was drawn into the First World War in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson became something no American president, not even Abraham Lincoln, had quite been—a sort of high priest of the American Civil Religion during a major national mobilization (Gamble 2003). He, and a nation teetering at the edge of world power, went all-in on it, having had a dress rehearsal in the moral fervors of Progressive Imperialism (culminating in the colonial project of the Spanish-American War of 1898) just a few decades prior (McDougall 1997). The “war to end all wars,” with a sacred mission to “make the world safe for democracy,” were not typical national war aims, but much of America hopped in behind them. McDougall depicts the broad and excited institutional support for the road to war in his Wilson chapters of “The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy,” while Richard M. Gamble showcases the excitement of American clergy in the same cause in “The War for Righteousness.” Ultimately the Wilson Administration failed to follow the Allied Victory with the promised League of Nations Treaty’s ratification due to domestic opposition (Hendrickson 2009) and the plague year of 1919 was full of panic over subversion ending in duds.

The American Civil Religion’s Third Great Awakening did not quite die with the Treaty, though. In 1919 a longstanding revivalist cause, the prohibition of alcohol, was ratified, and would not be repealed until 1933. This was as much a success of a sect of the American Civil Religion as any, although the active social turbulence of the Third Great Awakening was the decline. So America mobilized itself against the Great Depression in the New Deal, against the Fascist Axis powers in the Second World War, and against world Communism in the early phases of the Cold War, without the sheer moral fervor with which it had mobilized in decades prior; the New Deal was as much an exercise in management politics as it was in movement politics, and the American people were not champing at the bit to engage either the Fascists or the Communists in the 1930s and 1940s, and had to be dragged into world leadership by their Presidents. Much of the romance and color of these times has come only with memory; it seems that the certainties of prior times died in 1919, and what might’ve been a series of holy wars was instead borne by American grit rather than American fervor.

There was not a formal theological “Great Awakening” in the middle of the Cold War, although it seems that some historians have argued that splits in various American denominations over great questions of modernity did produce an awakening-like environment (McDougall 2016.) However, various trends in American social controversy at the time—the Civil Rights Movement and its ecumenical social action, the Counterculture and Antiwar protests during the Vietnam War, and all the social and spiritual experimen-

tation and liberation they brought forth onto the mainstream of national culture, the conservative intellectual movement and its various mass forms, including McCarthyism and the rise of the religious right in the age of Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, and the backdrop of rising mainstream secularization in which all these modern trends took place—were powerful and widespread enough, with enough cultural and spiritual driving forces, and enough social and political effects, that they might accurately be called a Fourth Great Awakening themselves.

But this Great Awakening, though it did take place in historic times, does not seem to have taken place amid much of a cataclysmic holy war the way the prior two did. If anything, the civil-religious revival that gave birth to the New Left and the Conservative Movement, shaped the American domestic order just as the Cold War was ending, stewarded by the very non-revivalist George H. W. Bush Administration, as Francis Fukuyama prophesied a new age (Fukuyama 1989). The children of the Fourth Great Awakening did, it seems, have some impact on American and world affairs in the subsequent era, but it seems to have been more of decadence and incompetence than of messianic zeal; an awakening ended with a whimper and not a bang.

But various writers in our own times—Tara Isabella Burton (2020) most capaciously, and others like Joshua Mitchell (2020) and Wesley Yang—have noted similar functionally-religious revivalist trends in movements in the politics and social movements of our own day. Whether the diverse multitudes Burton profiles in “Strange Rites” and Mitchell polemicizes on in “American Awakening” are rumblings of a Fifth Great Awakening or merely aftershocks of the unresolved Fourth Great Awakening, it is not the place of this paper to assess. It is enough to demonstrate that whatever we think of the discontents of our own time, their present quasi-religious dynamics are nothing particularly novel.

My purpose in framing American history as a contest of rival faiths, or rival sects of an overarching faith, is to demonstrate the implications and consequences of the ideational reading of American identity and history; the limitations of creedalism and the excesses inherent in the ideas-first read on U.S. history; and to deliver a heuristic that can help explain the unique vehemence in American ideological politics across times and orders.

I offer up McDougall’s American Civil Religion heuristic as a helpful check against the sanguine creedalist bias Americans in the 20th and 21st Centuries have typically brought to their assessments of American history. The heuristic is in some ways clarifyingly true, though in most ways a helpful exaggeration, but it makes a useful counterpart to the assumption that American idealism is an unalloyed good and a total blessing. Thinking of America as a conversation, a particularly self-righteous and supremely confident, sometimes uncharitable and unreflective, conversation, between ideas and sects, frames any social or political controversy in American life at any time in a somewhat starker lens.

Having offered up these two heuristics, I will proceed to explain their combined utility for a more reasonable understanding of American nationhood.

PART FOUR: TOWARD A HEURISTICALLY SOUNDER CONCEPTION OF AMERICAN NATIONHOOD

Practical Usage of the Two Heuristics

The fundamental problem in American politics, is that our diverse sovereignties and factions in the “international system” of the federal union must be balanced and maintained through compromise and diplomacy; but the diverse sects of the American civil religion, which inform the sense of identity and purpose of those factions and sovereignties, tend towards messianic and uncompromising civic faiths that want to impose a unified order upon the world. The fundamental problem in American historiography is much the same; all American historiography takes place in this same context, and more often than not, merely picks one civic faith or another as its guide to reading history, absorbs its blinders and biases and prejudices, and writes them into histories. These histories are used and cited by contemporary political actors with one in-

tention or another; and both political use of history, and historical interpretation of American politics itself, wind up being functions of particular factions and sects in the American union, and missing the union itself. This essay is an attempt to articulate heuristics by which we might recognize these factions and sects and their dynamics, and perhaps with such awareness, go forth in our own historical interpretations and political advances with a broader view and a somewhat more impartial judgment, inasmuch as those are possible. And meantime, we can only arrive at a more accurate and impartial understanding of the meaning of America in cultural history, if we take these same steps, and first admit, and then hold in proper place, our own inner barriers to deeper understanding.

Dialectics are useful at the nexus of identity studies and political theory, so long as one uses them for their heuristical utility rather than their literal truth. Willmoore Kendall's (1985) juxtaposition of the Two Majorities in American politics—representative in Congress, plebiscitary in the Executive Branch—and Forrest McDonald's alignments of Republicans vs. Nationalists (1985) and of Madison's distrusting balance and Hamilton's confident energy as central to their constitutional scruples (1979) are examples as useful in their impact as they are limited in their scope.

So the frameworks of America-as-international-system and America-as-fractional-faith might be helpful too, and not only for better understanding the dynamics of division, coalition, compromise, and unity in their surprising complexity across American history, but also for considering different styles of leadership and political action by which American citizens, leaders, factions, coalitions, and parties have at various times tried to push their own aims and ends in the American political system, and shaped that system and the practice of politics itself in the process.

The Virtues of Diplomats for Union

If we take the paradigm of America as international system within a continental union, replete with overlapping sovereignties, fluid but distinct cultural hearths and regional economies, and all the complexities of interest and faction and representation diversity that emerge from sprawling societal diversity and a federal system of geographic representation, we look upon a reality where, as Madison theorized in Federalist No. 10, the multiplication of factions creates a unique prospect for flexibility and stability. The art of compromise, coalition-building, and the gradual formation of consensus becomes the sum of the art of politics; everything that can be argued over, can be compromised over, and every faction represented can have its spot at the trough, giving and taking and helping build support for broader programs and agendas while maintaining its honored spot in the tapestry of society.

The dispensation that encourages all factions—especially geographically-represented ones, but with direct relevance to economic classes and factions, different levels of government, and more broadly all social interests—to view themselves as professional representatives in government with limited and discrete aims, concrete and measurable interests, and a penchant for barter and dealmaking, and a casual seriousness about the realities of power—is most closely associated with the virtues and habits of legislators, on the one hand, and Tocquevillian citizen-representatives, on the other hand. This is *not* a morally unserious dispensation by any means, but it does generally assume a comparative coolth of moral ardor on any set of issues and a preset faith in the power of reason and interest to take the building blocks of national political coalitions and turn them into wholes greater than the sums of their parts, while preserving the interest and integrity of each of their component parts, and in turn making them more capable of coalitional governance with factions outside their coalitions as well.

So American politics, as practiced as an exercise in international diplomacy or business dealmaking, is notoriously and beautifully pragmatic. Its critics call it shallow and transactional, willing to sell all principle at the altar of power; its advocates call it prudent and responsible, imbued with a higher institutional sense, grandly statesmanlike for the preservation of order itself. Functionally, it is notoriously capable of assimilating radical and revolutionary critiques of itself and making them into functional, responsible governing actors; and it is capable, with some work, of being adjusted and balanced sufficiently, that it might

integrate previously unrepresented or underrepresented social orders into its operations, thus providing social balance and pulling the rug out from under broad-based dissent against it. Much of American history has been the story of the ebbing and flowing of the representativeness of America's governing institutions and their non-government analogues in the exercise of social and economic power.

In general, this sort of politics is best practiced and managed by individuals or factions one might think of as “domestic diplomats”—leaders in the Senate and the House and the state legislatures, leaders of the political parties, administrators in the federal bureaucracies whose role involves reconciling contrary interests, leaders in public-facing civil society organizations, newspaper editors, prominent civic leaders, and others whose essential role is the gradual construction of compromise and consensus, and whose basic commitments are to institutional preservation and the fruits thereof, as well as the principles their institutions stand for. Across American history, the kind of secular dealmaking skill associated with this has been attributed to folks as diverse as Henry Clay, Lyndon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, Samuel Gompers, Franklin Roosevelt, and more, many of whom have also often come under attack for being insufficiently principled.

The Virtues of the Prophets for Union

Those who accuse the “domestic diplomats” and their style of politics as being excessively realistic and insufficiently principled, far from being wild-eyed idealists, are as integral a part of the American political tradition as are the prudent compromisers. They merely are playing on another spectrum, another field—the field of American politics as a fundamentally schismatic civil religion. That civil religion, buttressed by the individualistic creativity and instability intrinsic to American faith, and by the messianic and redemptionist ambitions that American faith has long held to redeem the world and unite interest and virtue in the name of any number of American causes and principles, makes American politics both endlessly self-transformative and incredibly ideological, when the civil-religious aspects of any social or political question emerge in American politics. In the past half-century, these have tended to emerge mainly on what contemporary thinkers have called “culture war” issues, but in truth this dynamic has existed in American politics on any number of issues in previous party systems, long predating the emergence of modern “socially conservative” traditionalists and “socially liberal” modernizers.

On all issues affected by American civil-religious impulses, though, the dynamic is much the same. American politics polarizes into at least two and sometimes more camps levied against each other, with primary identification being positions on the said civil-religious issues. These issues either commence as or soon become foundational to the political identities of the factions and coalitions involved, and often are constructed as all-or-nothing propositions in which complete victory, and the moral affirmation of one side of a question and the moral destruction of the other becomes the essential goal, if the public discourse on such subjects is to be believed. Being integral to the identities of those invested—and thus incredibly powerful tools for coalition maintenance and political mobilization—these issues often become quite deeply polarized, and are sometimes mistaken for the stuff of politics itself. The advocate of one side in an issue will see their position as a fundamental right or a fundamental signal of dignity which cannot be denied without a certain denial of right or dignity; the opponent of that same side often sees those same “fundamental rights” or “dignity” as at best an overpuffed interpretation of a minor and revokable privilege, or at worst as a licentious conspiracy against life, liberty, or self-government by sanctimonious hypocrites seeking to dupe the public in bad faith. This pattern—which itself is shaped similarly to the American colonists’ rhetorical logic on ‘taxation without representation’ in the crisis of the 1760s and 1770s (Bailyn 1967)—holds shockingly well for any number of moral issues across American history, from gun control, abortion rights, censorship and free speech, and the nexus of issues touching racial and gender identity in our own day, to the debates that raged over banking and currency from the 1790s to the 1890s, the civil rights debates of the 1870s to the 1960s and the slavery debates before them, and the vast majority of controversial, party-coalition-shaping questions in American life at all times.

Issues that have become so polarized have always become so polarized with very good reason—at the core of American identity and self-perception in the practice of government, has been some version of the self-perception of *a self-governing people protecting its rights and privileges and managing its own destiny through the art of representative government* (Kendall 1970). There is thus a mixed republican and liberal ethos in American political philosophy and civil religion, which tends to erase the distinction between rights and self-government and insist on their unity, and looks with scorn or horror on what it sees as attempts to restrict either rights or self-government, as the tyrannical revocation of both. Given that American ideologies are constantly reinventing themselves and developing further, it is only natural that they tend to see each other as heretical usurpers striving to attain absolute power and destroy dissent. Sometimes they are correct.

This dispensation encourages all creeds and sub-creeds within the American civil religion to view themselves as moral witnesses to righteousness and redemption in a sordid and irredeemable order, and both encourages a noble moral clarity—a moral clarity that makes inspired mass movement politics possible, and often provides the energy for comprehensive reformations of various social problems and systems—while putting up barriers and artificial divisions against practical collaboration, indeed often setting whole classes and regions of Americans against each other over abstract principles. At best it can promote social transformation and new moral consensuses, and ground future public opinion in stabler sets of norms and understandings; at worst it can put people at each other's throats, divide those who might otherwise have more interests in common than not, and drive politics to an inconsequential pettiness that precludes meaningful participation beyond cultural signaling. Much of American history has been the steady train of civil-religious issues coming forth across the American stage, occasionally resolving social controversies, other times deepening extant divisions to no avail.

In general, this sort of politics is best managed and directed by individuals one might think of as “domestic prophets”—party leaders, charismatic presidents or other executive figures, great preachers or celebrity-poets and artists, leaders of social movements and powerful activists, whose primary field of understanding is in the moral and cultural controversies and issues of any given time, whose basic commitment is to some broad form of moral uplift or preservation, and the power and dignity of moral causes rather than particular institutions. These charismatic figures, high priests of a sort, practice a different sort of statecraft than the transactional coalition-balancing and compromising of the domestic diplomats; they work, through powers of rhetoric on one hand and of the management of perceptions of moral discourse on the other, to balance and reconcile and occasionally transform civil-religious causes and coalitions in American life. They are the crafters, sometimes, of ideologies for parties or movements, and sometimes of not-explicitly-political social dispensations; and in their work they navigate the moral dramas not so much through practical compromise as through coexistence and a shifting of the moral grounds. This is a very different politics than that of transactional haggling, and sometimes has higher stakes. Some notable practitioners of it have included Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, William F. Buckley, William Jennings Bryan, John C. Calhoun, and Thomas Jefferson.

These two styles and types of politics are of course not incompatible, and in fact they are always occurring simultaneously on the American public stage, with some periods marked by comparative consensus and creative haggling, others marked by strong dissensions and stagnant compromises. Moreover, it is certainly possible for individual leaders, ideological and political factions, social and intellectual movements, public or public-private institutions, and other self-aware actors in American politics and public life, to practice both sorts of politics comparatively well, as the malleability of various factions in our political parties and the genius of various past American statesmen demonstrates. It is simply very difficult, for it requires some deep level of understanding of the politics of one's own time in multiple dimensions, dimensions which do not necessarily mirror or parallel each other easily. It is certainly possible for pragmatic compromisers to make great cultural leaders, or great transformative high-priests of the American civil religion to be coalitional wizards; the greatness of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt can, in some senses, be traced to their simultaneous coalitional pragmatisms and transformative moral grammars. But

far more common are those who, like Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, might be consummate political managers and terrible high-priests, or like Woodrow Wilson, might be charismatic and transformative high-priests incapable of disciplined coalitional management.

But moreover, these frameworks have a deep promise for those striving better to understand the workings of American political and cultural dynamics—divides over cultural and political issues, the construction of working consensuses, the operations of individual and institutional actors in political time working to achieve the possible in tumultuous times, etc. And they open a mode of analysis that can help us understand the construction of nationhood in the past by understanding our divisions in the present, and vice-versa.

America as Faith, Union, and Ultimately Still a Nation

The two heuristics explored at length above—the notion that America might be thought of as something resembling an international system with its own domestic geopolitics, and that America might be thought of as a field of warring messianic faiths—are advanced not to tear down the notion of American nationhood, but to strengthen it, by showcasing the fundamental fact of *process* of negotiation, collaboration, and construction of higher national purpose from diverse regional, factional, and sectarian parts, as more important than some given, unchosen *essence* of identity or principle, in thinking about the American historical experience, and what it implies for American historical memory and identity studies. In lived practice, both in historical times and in our present time, America is *each of these things*—a union across geography, and a crusading civil religion—simultaneously, *and also* a nation. The dynamics of continental union and fractious church characterize American nationhood in all its forms, be they past historical memory, present lived experience, or political experiment ongoing towards the future. American pretensions to being a noble set of truths and ideas or a pleasant hearthstone are spurious at best.

No nation and no historical entity can be understood outside the context of its self-conception of its own historical experience, and human nature being as it is, there are always multiple dimensions by which that historical experience can and should be understood. America has always featured multitudes of civil-religious understandings and geocultural polities, struggling against each other and cooperating with each other to secure their ends and forging recombinant coalitions and new institutions that have framed the destinies of American life. American institutions and American culture have both been shaped by, and have themselves shaped, this essential and fundamental coalitional pluralism; and it has been across the many dimensions of this pluralism, that what we think of as “The American Creed,” “The American Constitutional System,” and “The American Nation” have been forged and negotiated and renegotiated over time. It is a system which has had no final solutions, no ultimate truths, no prerequisites for participation. It is probably too much to say that *political action* in these domains is the ultimate motive power of American national identity; it is not too much to say that one can only begin to understand American national identity, if one has a healthy respect for American political action in the construction of civil religion and pluralistic union, and the ways and purposes to which it has been used.

I hope to help preserve the conceptual integrity of American “cultural nationhood” by emphasizing culture as an emergent process, negotiated constantly and involving constant choice, reflection, and tolerance of the unfinished, and by de-emphasizing culture as a given state, a passive inheritance, or a solid and nonnegotiable substance. I believe this is both more faithful to a sober interpretation of the historical evidence and the moral arcs of American life, and more practical as a general maxim for approaching problems in American public life. The essence and essential substance of American national identity, seems to me to be somewhere out there in the restless motion, tension, and balance American culture is constantly cycling through.

America *is* a nation, in the important senses of that word, but not in all the strict senses of that word. America demonstrates— with its founding deeds and crimes and all its growing pains not shrouded by the hazy past, but written bright and clear in the blaze of modern history—the fact of the construction of or-

der and mythos as a fundamentally political act, and thus as something of a grand improvisation, an ongoing series of seriously-stumbled-into accidents. It is not within the limits of this paper for me to attempt to assess whether such constructions, across geographic space and ideational division, are the forge of *all* nations, or *all* political orders. But the process of building a living nationhood through processes of geopolitical diplomacy and sectarian compromise, does present an interesting argument for the essential contingency of all order and all human life. History thus is not an unfolding of necessary truths from extant hearths, nor is history the progressive construction of rational order discernible by the mind; it instead is a great holding-pattern, one as defined by frailty and hustle as by grandeur and nobility. It is this half-conscious great experiment of the construction of order over time, and posterity's remembrance of it—more than our great experiments in self-government and liberty and egalitarianism, perhaps even more than our great experiment in union—which may in due time prove the greatest gift America delivered to mankind, at the dawn of the modern age. For every society, whatever its values and its ordering principles and no matter how far removed they are from ours, must consider itself. Our own forgetfulness has cloaked the great lessons our nationhood might teach.

Other writers have advanced similar pluralist, non-idealist understandings of American nationhood in their works on nationalism. Samuel P. Goldman (2021), the most thoughtful critic of new nationalism and Michael Lind (2020), the most thoughtful advocate of new nationalism, both functionally integrate it into their thought and writing. Their integrated commentaries (best expressed by Goldman in “After Nationalism,” and best expressed by Lind in several of his books, including “The Next American Nation,” “What Lincoln Believed,” and “Land of Promise”) are sober and balanced, and in my opinion are as close to decent comprehensive assessments on the nationhood question as it is possible to get nowadays, especially given the lingering prevalence of ideational understandings of American nationhood and the increasingly common simplistic framings of cultural nationhood now returning to vogue.

But whereas Lind's and Goldman's understandings emerge from long study and reflection, I think it is imperative for rising and oncoming generations of historical thinkers, as well as policy thinkers, political and social activists, and all who aspire to leadership in American public life and public discourse, to rather quickly internalize something resembling the basic frameworks Lind and Goldman have set forth. McDougall's and Hendrickson's contrary heuristics, by the shock value of their suggestions, may help train imaginations toward serious assessments of what disunity under union has meant, both at the founding of our institutions of government itself, and at the various pressure points throughout subsequent American history when union and pluralism have been tested, up to and including the present. This active cultivation of historical imagination, which at best can engender what Baltasar Gracian calls “sympathy with the great” in a statecraft sense, is a tool that deserves broader appreciation, and deeper articulation, in our own times.

A well-cultivated historical imagination, one which avoids or amends the blinders typical to one's own time and country without reverting to maladjusted excesses in the opposite directions, is crucial for seeing the dynamics and patterns of any hazy past flowing into the present. Such an imagination in the American case, informed by good cultural history, can illuminate the constructive, collaborative, compromise-making and consensus-building dynamics beneath all American national life. It demonstrates these dynamics, moreover, regardless of whether one looks at the historical memory of the past, and the multiplicity of its interpretations, or at the lived experience of the present, in all its divisions and harmonies, or at the ongoing experiment of political participation. That is to say, by deconstructing the monolithic forms of nationhood so common in our discourse, and replacing them with non-national heuristics based on irresolvable conflict, pluralism, and coexistence, one can discern a process-based model which simultaneously very well explains American historical development, American political conduct and habits, and American lived experience; that is to say, a model of American nationhood, of American national identity.

It is not the purpose of this paper to theorize whether this process of American nationhood is a model of how all human political organizations are constructed, nor to formulate an ethical program for American public life based on its precepts and divisions. It is merely to theorize an imaginative model of plurality amid union, and national life as a process in itself. And it is the opinion of this author, that the early selec-

tion of the American national motto, *E pluribus, unum*, From many, one, was more prophetic than anyone could have known.

NOTES

- 1 It is notable how convinced many of the Framers were that civil war would be the inevitable result of ratification's failure. Hamilton in an unpublished essay in late September 1787: "...it is probable the discussion of the question will beget such struggles animosities and heats in the community that this circumstance conspiring with the *real necessity* of an essential change in our present situation will produce civil war..."
- 2 Colin Woodard's books on "nations" in American life have been decent enough as popularizers of the notion of American domestic regional-cultural diversity, but they have been distortive and sometimes approach monocausality. *Albion's Seed* by Fischer remains the superior work on regionalism in America.
- 3 In this author's estimation, the Populist/Progressive Era was a third such Great Awakening, and the Counterculture, Civil Rights Movement, and Conservative movement of the 1960s and 70s was a fourth.
- 4 Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, faced with this formulation, might add, "no compromise and moderation without honest graft."
- 5 The author, a Catholic himself, confesses to having no opinions about this.
- 6 The Spanish Flu epidemic, the collapse of the League of Nations treaty ratification contest, the wave of anarchist and socialist bombings that led to the First Red Scare, the resurgence of white supremacist violence across the South, and various other dynamics all conspire to make 1919 a still-underappreciated year in the resilience of American society amid centrifugal forces.

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