

Is America an experiment?

WILFRED M. MCCLAY

SOME of the most valuable work in the field of American history these days is being done by the men and women who restore and preserve historical sites. Though such work is often disdained as antiquarian or subscholarly by academic historians, it in fact serves an immensely important public purpose. It helps us to remember our origins and, thereby, to remember who we are. Whenever one visits a reconstructed colonial American setting—and here I am thinking not only of a relatively elegant town like Williamsburg but also of somewhat more spare or rugged places such as Jamestown or Old Sturbridge Village or Plymouth Plantation or St. Mary's City—one is forcibly reminded of the tentativeness, the contingency, the fragility, the sheer *chanciness* of the entire American undertaking.

This article is based on the keynote address presented at the 1998 Western Civilization Summit sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

That impression follows one even into the more famous venues. Go to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Faneuil Hall or the Old North Church in Boston, the Old Senate Chamber at the State House in Annapolis. All are lovely, well-kept sites. Yet one is struck not by their grandeur but their tinniness, their almost self-effacing modesty. Even the most jaded among us may feel compelled to pause for a moment and ponder the astounding fact that a nation so colossal could have grown from seeds so small. When one thinks about the chaotic and tumultuous social history of Jamestown and early Virginia, or when one contemplates the half-mad audacity of the New England Puritans, who were convinced that their lonely adventure huddled together in a remote and frigid wilderness was a divinely appointed mission of world-historical importance, one does not sense historical inevitability or destiny. Far from it. The longer and more deeply one studies the American past, the easier it is to imagine that matters could have turned out differently.

Yet it would be a mistake to see the American enterprise—and it would be a long time before it had sufficient coherence to be called anything like an enterprise—as a quirky, *sui generis* thing, independent of the great movements of Western history. Lewis Mumford once rightly observed that “the settlement of America had its origins in the unsettlement of Europe,” an insight that neatly compresses a great deal of history into a single phrase. Nevertheless, there has always been a strong tendency, perhaps never stronger than in the present day, to detach our discussions of the American past from discussions of what we call Western civilization, thereby neglecting the specifically American slant upon, and contribution to, that larger subject. It is almost as if we presume that the relationship between the great traditions of European thought and the realities of modern American life is so clear-cut—or so hopelessly severed—as to need no comment.

Palefaces and redskins

Here I speak from some experience, though one could hardly call it typical. I did my own undergraduate work at St. John's College in Annapolis, a wonderful institution dedicated to the ideal of education as a sustained engagement with the Great

Books of the Western World. We read, with varying degrees of care, almost all of the principal works of the European philosophical tradition, from Plato to Nietzsche. We learned a smattering of ancient Greek, enough to struggle through a lexicon-aided translation of Aristotle's *Physics* and St. John's Gospel. We studied the unfolding of Western scientific and mathematical thought, from Euclid and Democritus to Einstein and Lobachevski. But what we did not do, to any significant extent, was study the works of American authors and thinkers.

Not until I spent a post-collegiate year teaching high-school history and literature, including American literature, did I rediscover the classic works of American literature. And it was literally a life-changing experience. When I again read the important American authors of the past two centuries—Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Emerson, Stowe, Whitman, Poe, Twain, Henry Adams, William James, Henry James, Dickinson, Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Cather, Mencken, O'Neill, O'Connor, Frost, and so on—I felt as if I had come home to something and been reunited with a long-lost band of brothers and sisters. I revered the books I had read at St. John's. But the American authors spoke more directly to my condition. Their questions were my questions, their anxieties mine, their strengths mine—and perhaps also their weaknesses.

Without knowing it, I had stumbled onto one of the central themes of American history. For no question has bemused and bedeviled American writers from the nation's beginnings more persistently than the question of how America was related, intellectually and culturally, to Europe. In declaring political independence, had it declared something approaching cultural independence? Or was it still mired down in a kind of colonial mentality, even as its political and social institutions, and its galloping commercial and industrial economy, were vaulting ahead into previously unimagined territory? One sees this dichotomy all the time, an opposition between what Philip Rahv called *palefaces* and *redskins*—*palefaces* being writers who attempted to produce a high-toned American literature, worthy of comparison in both form and content with the great literatures of Europe; and *redskins* being those who believed that it was the destiny of American

culture to produce something dramatically different, something indigenous, something as bold and distinctive as the facts of American social and political democracy.

The core conviction of the redskin author was well captured by Ralph Waldo Emerson when he complained that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." These were "courtly" muses, a modifier meant to remind his listeners of the fiercely anti-monarchical and anti-aristocratic premises undergirding American political life. But the thrust of his remarks was to urge would-be American writers to find their own way, to treat their European heritage not as a sacred legacy but as an exploitable (and dispensable) resource. And, in a different but complementary way, the influential American historian Frederick Jackson Turner propounded a theory of American origins that discounted the "germs" of European culture and, instead, found the genius of American democracy arising out of the life of the American frontier.

In the spirit of "why not?"

Such reflections bring to mind the concept of America as an "experiment." One does not have to look very hard to find contemporary examples of the use of this concept. Marjorie Heins, director of the Arts Censorship Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, casually invoked it during the course of a March C-SPAN appearance, in connection with the suit brought against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) by controversial performance artist Karen Finley and several others who had been denied NEA grants on the grounds that they offended general standards of decency. Of course, Heins thought the NEA's denial of funding to the likes of Finley was deplorable, and she marshaled all the familiar arguments as to why this was the case. But the clinching argument, in her mind, was contained in her declaration that "we are as a nation collectively involved in a great experiment," and that our national commitment to free experimentation demands that we be "mature" enough to "contribute" some portion of our tax dollars to the subsidizing of forms of expression that we do not like. (That it might be more logical to demand such "maturity" first from those who receive and distribute such Federal moneys, rather than from the taxpayers who pony

them up, was an unexplored alternative, though one that the Supreme Court now appears to have endorsed.)

Another, rather more chilling example of the language of experiment appeared in a December 1997 op-ed piece in the *New York Times* by Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe, dealing with the possibility of human cloning. Tribe argued that it was premature, and perhaps unwise, for us to prohibit such cloning, and he adduced a variety of grounds for this assertion. At the head of the list was the need to preserve the central importance of experimentation in American culture. A society that privileges certain behaviors as "natural" and stigmatizes others as "unnatural" runs the risk of "cutting itself off from vital experimentation," including experimentation with alternative lifestyles. The prohibition of cloning, he continued, might serve to open a Pandora's box of reactionary sentiment, ultimately serving to cast a pall of doubt over all those who are experimenting with "unconventional ways of linking erotic attachment, romantic commitment, genetic replication, gestational mothering, and the joys and responsibilities of child rearing." The great experiment that is America must be permitted to go on, no matter what.

In both cases, then, we have the idea of America-as-experiment offered as a last refuge of the otherwise unthinkable or indefensible. One often sees the partisans of the most extreme forms of multiculturalism, or advocates of a transformation in the standards of American citizenship, or other opponents of the very idea of a common American culture, making a similar flourish: America is not, in their view, a set of fixed beliefs or standards or customs or laws or codes or institutions. *America is an experiment*. And who could find fault with that? Is not experimentation a wonderful thing, a trademark of individual liberty, the sign of a curious and questioning mind, a quality more inclusive than motherhood and certainly much healthier than apple pie?

Well, maybe. But such statements beg the question of what an experiment is and of what it might mean to live in a country that embodies an experimental spirit. Is the spirit of experiment the same thing as an endless process of asking "why not?" Is it a sort of endless project of deconstructing the stable, reconfiguring the given, overturning the traditional,

and driving our carriages over the bones of the dead, in William Blake's grisly phrase? Is America the land of antitraditional tradition—what Irving Howe called “American newness”? Is America the world's beacon of modernity, its Oval Office of perpetual experimentation? Is America the non-nation nation in which all that is solid melts into air, as regularly as the eruptions of Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park? Is that what we mean by liberty, the liberty to experiment, to declare independence from everything that has come before us, to discard the tried and embrace the untried—exercising our creativity even if it means reinventing the wheel?

Who are we?

Clearly this imprecise and sentimental idea of America-as-experiment needs to be examined. But before we do, it's important to point out that there is something about the American experience that makes us want to pose the questions, “What is the *meaning* of America? And what does it mean to be an *American*?” These are questions that Americans, and non-Americans, have posed again and again, and they have lost none of their fascination. To be sure, in educated circles such questions are now often considered out of date. In the multicultural dispensation, the American nation is to be regarded as little more than a functional container for other identities. According to that view, the experimental quality of America is found precisely in this: that America can be made a “denatured” nation, from which the “bad” qualities of nationalism are removed. Such an America would bear the same relationship to a real nation that the Ford Foundation does to the Ford Motor Company.

Nevertheless, the need to search for the “meaning” of America seems incorrigible, and that need is in itself an immensely significant datum about America. No modern nation has been more prone to bouts of self-scrutiny and attempts at self-characterization than the United States. For all that Americans have been satirized as a nation of glad-handing extroverts and shallow materialists, they have also proved to be a remarkably introspective people. There are all sorts of ideas about the core meaning of America in circulation, and no one is predominant. There are debates about such

matters, and these debates are themselves part of what America is. Long may these debates continue. But their existence does not mean that we don't agree on anything, since even disagreement is not possible unless agreement is also present.

There are a number of contenders put forward over the years as "keys" to American national identity. Let me name a few. First, there is the Puritan idea of America as a probationary "errand into the wilderness" and Americans as a people called to a mission of redemption and a life of the most rigorous self-examination. There are the universalistic accents of the Enlightenment, thought to have resonated especially widely and deeply in the American context. There is the tendency, whether republican, Enlightened, or romantic, to see American life as a liberation from the corrupt and arbitrary constraints of custom and tradition, and as a recovery of the innocence and authenticity of Nature. There is the unusual degree of self-conscious deliberation with which America, as "the first new nation," was brought into being and its principal institutions founded. There is the broadly inclusive creedal or ideological (rather than narrowly cultural or racial) basis of American national identity—the sort of thing that made Chesterton call the United States "a nation with the soul of a church." There is the libertarian, Live Free or Die conception of America as the one place on earth where you ought to be able to do exactly as you please. And finally, as I have already mentioned, there is the identification of America as the prototype and exemplar of modernity. All these conceptions have contributed to, and perpetuated, deep-seated ideas of national distinctiveness.

The cross-cutting diversity, even incompatibility, of these conceptions can seem bewildering at first glance. Think of some of the names, used as labels and slogans, that pepper our history of national self-reflection. America is: the New Israel, the City Upon a Hill, the Empire of Reason, the New Eden, Nature's Nation, the Nation Dedicated to a Proposition, the Great Refuge or Asylum, the Melting Pot, the Land of Opportunity, the transnational "Nation of Nations," the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the Redeemer Nation, the Almost-Chosen People, the Last Best Hope of Mankind, and, most recently, the Indispensable Nation. One of the more significant slogans on offer today is contained in the title of one of the best-

selling American history textbooks, Alan Brinkley's *The Unfinished Nation*. We will return to that idea in a moment. Suffice it to say, for now, that it's clear that Americans are haunted by the idea that their nation is distinctive, that it *means* something, and that that meaning is something that has to be consciously appropriated anew, rather than being passed along effortlessly like genetic information.

The original experiment

Does the idea of America-as-experiment belong in this group? To answer that, we have to take a closer look at the idea of experiment. The dictionary defines experiment in three ways: first, as a test made to demonstrate a known truth; second, as a test to examine the validity of a hypothesis; and third, as a test to determine the efficacy of something previously untried. The Latin roots of the word strongly suggest the guiding idea of *trying* or *testing*. But what should be obvious, in all three definitions, is that experiment is always related to some specific end, some well-defined goal, some truth, hypothesis, pattern, or principle to be confirmed or disconfirmed. This is the case even with the last definition, trying the efficacy of something untried, which, at first glance, might seem to include the radical "why not?" school of experimentation. It doesn't, though, because the concept of "efficacy" is necessarily related to some very particular and carefully circumscribed end. (When Roman Catholics speak of the "efficacy" of the sacraments, they do not mean that the wine makes you drunk.) The key to an effective scientific experiment lies in the careful definition of the problem, a definition that does not change in midstream and that always seeks to identify, understand, and harness the laws of nature, not transform or obliterate those laws.

In that sense, the American nation most definitely *was* an experiment at the outset. In particular, it is clear that the Framers of the Constitution, and the early generations of American national political leaders, thought of their handiwork in precisely this way. Alexander Hamilton began the first paper of the *Federalist* with the famous speculation that it "seemed to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether

societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." The word "experiment" is not used here, but the concept certainly is; and the word itself occurs in 24 of the papers in the *Federalist*—always used in a very matter-of-fact, practical, unmythical way. The implication is that experiments succeed and experiments fail, which describes how knowledge progresses.

In contrast, it's revealing to ask ourselves whether the ACLU's project director Heins would ever be willing to concede that the "experiment" of subsidizing offensive art had "failed." Is there any conceivable evidence that she and others like her would find persuasive? Or, in Tribe's case, can one identify a purpose or end for all this experimentation—or, for that matter, any conceivable set of values that could take precedence over the sovereign right of self-determining individuals to live experimentally? In that case, what do they *really* mean by "experiment"?

In any event, the word "experiment" was used quite precisely by George Washington, in his First Inaugural Address, where he echoed Hamilton's view almost exactly, remarking that "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the *experiment* intrusted to the hands of the American people." What he meant was best understood as a careful practical experiment, not an open-ended utopian experiment in human engineering or consciousness transformation. And the ends of the experiment are made clear in Washington's statement. They are the preservation of liberty and the republican model of government. The Framers, by and large, saw this new constitutional order as an informed and realistic effort to use the knowledge of history and human nature in order to defy the known effects of history and human nature, both of which seemed to teach the doleful lesson that the fate of even the best free republics was the fate of Rome, America's exemplar *and* its warning.

Because the Framers believed that human nature was perverse and incorrigible, and that the republican form of gov-

ernment was exceptionally unstable and corruptible, the example of Rome, in both positive and negative ways, hung over the early nation like a gigantic unanswered question. Everywhere one looked, the adulation of Roman models was evident—in the neoclassical architecture, in the public statuary, and even in the classical *noms de plume* (Publius, Brutus, Cato) chosen by both proponents and opponents of the Constitution. But since even Rome had succumbed, in the end, to the corruptions and ambitions of human nature, that adulation was inevitably double-edged.

New deals

So there was plenty to be nervous about in the American experiment. Yet, by the time Abraham Lincoln gave his speech on "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions," before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, in 1838, the results of the experiment were in. "America had been felt to be an undecided experiment," said Lincoln; "now, it is understood to be a successful one," having conclusively proved "the capability of a people to govern themselves." But success, he continued, brought its own perils. As the "patriots of Seventy-Six" who had created the new nation passed away, and a postrevolutionary generation came of age, there was the danger that the commitment to the republic would flag. Now that the success of the experiment was no longer at issue, the younger generation was left without a proper field of activity for its own heroic aspirations. Lincoln worried that "the temple must fall" unless "other pillars" be provided to take the place of the Founding generation, pillars "hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason" rather than the powerful, but unsustainable, passions that had motivated the revolutionary generation. In a sense, then, Lincoln saw a perpetuation of the spirit of experimentalism, and of experimental urgency, as a part of any effort to perpetuate our political institutions. Perhaps this was why, 25 years later at Gettysburg, he recurred to the idea that the Civil War itself was a "testing" of whether the product of such a republican experiment "can long endure."

Lincoln was right. Part of the value of the idea of "experiment" is the sense of alertness and responsibility for our own

lives that it awakens in us. If we do not hold up the walls, who will? But, whatever one thinks of his formulation, it seems hard to escape the fact that the scope and character of the experiment were also being slightly redefined by Lincoln, and perhaps expanded beyond what Washington had in mind—most notably in the Gettysburg Address's invocation of the war's call for a "new birth of freedom." His words are inspiring, and yet also hauntingly ambiguous.

Yet such language seems mild compared to the distended language of Franklin D. Roosevelt's First Inaugural, often praised as an example of the pragmatist spirit in American politics. The economic conditions of the day, he declared, demanded "bold, persistent experimentation." One should not get too fancy about it; instead, "take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something." We are a long way here from the notion that the aim of the experiment is the cultivation of a regime built around ordered liberty. And yet, to give him his due, Roosevelt still clearly linked the process of experimentation with results. Like a good pragmatist, he recognized that an experiment can produce negative results, or even fail altogether.

Rorty's dream country

But these examples illustrate how pliable are the uses of the idea of experiment. It is an ambiguous word, and sometimes a dangerous one. Roosevelt's language was pointing toward the sense of experiment that we increasingly hear expressed today, one that is more than willing to entertain the transformation of the American people and nation into something radically different from what they are and have been. In this view, the American project, to the extent we can even talk about such a thing, is unfinished and nothing to take any great pride in—yet. Fortunately, however, nothing is static or fixed. We are continually remaking, reinventing, and recreating ourselves as a people. Democratic ideals are being recast; civic identity is in flux. Anything is possible.

Of course, all these things are true to some extent. We are indeed always changing and adapting. And to call America an "unfinished nation" can be viewed as a form of honest affirmation, a way of endorsing an enterprise that has repeatedly

fallen far short of its professed ideals, perhaps most notably and shamefully in its treatment, over several centuries, of African slaves and their descendants. But the question is whether everything is therefore to be open to transformation. A proper experiment requires stability in the object, in the means by which the experiment is conducted, and in the ends the experiment is designed to achieve. It is one thing to argue that the experiment needs to be conducted more faithfully and quite another to say that it needs to be redefined or junked altogether. In the historian John Fonte's telling words, we need to be on our guard about "the concept of America as an 'unfinished nation,'" since this can be employed as "a blank check to argue for the reinvention of the American nation-state from its origins as an experiment in self-government tempered by constitutional liberty, to a permanent cultural revolution." Thus would the concept of America-as-experiment be transformed into Experimental America.

A salient expression of this theme appears in the philosopher Richard Rorty's new book, *Achieving Our Country*, an attempt to revive the fortunes of leftist thought in American political life, by urging American academic intellectuals to stop theorizing so much and to get back to the business of social transformation. Had the words not already been used by Nike and Jerry Rubin, the book's title ought to have been "Just Do It." That we all "know" what needs to be done, and that the past three decades of debates over economic and social policy are not even worth noticing, is only one of the book's staggering assumptions. But let that pass. I want instead to focus on a passage from near the end of the book which illuminates the landscape like a lightning bolt. This book has been warmly received by those who want to see in it an affirmation of America and an effort, in accents recalling the glory days of the Popular Front, to recover the mantle of patriotism for the Left. Yet this hope simply does not bear up under scrutiny. Rorty has the considerable virtue of being a clear writer, a virtue that makes it hard to hide the real thrust of what he is saying.

Nobody has yet suggested a viable leftist alternative to the civic religion of which Whitman and Dewey were prophets. That civic religion centered around taking advantage of traditional pride in

American citizenship by substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's principal goal. We were supposed to love our country because it showed promise of being kinder and more generous than other countries.... This was a counsel of perfection rather than description of fact. But you cannot urge national political renewal on the basis of descriptions of fact.... You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.

The last two sentences are especially startling. What makes them so is that they come from a leading advocate of pragmatism, a philosophy that, whatever else it means, is committed to an emphasis upon the actual, the immediate, the concrete, the particular, as opposed to the ideal or fantastical. One would have thought that a pragmatist would be less of an idealist, would have more respect for the way things are. But Rorty's statement serves to make the point that there are some ways in which America is not an experiment, and it is pernicious to talk as if it is. There is a big difference between saying, as Lincoln did, that the great achievements of our fathers are fragile, and ever in need of support and bolstering, and saying that our country does not exist yet, because it does not yet correspond with the dreams of enlightened intellectuals. This is the language of "unfinished nation" taken to its extreme. "Achieving" our country is the sort of ungrammatical phrase that always should be a tip-off that an intellectual heist is taking place. We do not use the word "achieve" in the way Rorty has tried to use it. One accomplishes a task, one does not "accomplish" a country. One lives in it—unless, that is, one is a pragmatist who urges us to live in a dream country, rather than the one that actually sustains us.

A more serious way of making this point is to say that we cannot live in the world provisionally. Otherwise, we will reach the end of our lives without ever having begun them. A far better pragmatist, William James, understood this fully. We *must* make choices, ultimate choices, merely to live. We are not born into a vacuum or on probation from reality. We have specific fathers, mothers, contexts in which our duties and obligations are shaped. Our duties are to them, not to the fathers, mothers, and others that we would have preferred to

have, had we been able to create the universe in a manner more after our own hearts. We cannot say, with Herman Melville's haunted character Bartleby the Scrivener, "I would prefer not to." We cannot withhold ourselves from our country until it meets USDA standards of purity. We do not have it in our power to reinvent the world first and then, and only then, to live in it. The past has a reality, has inescapable sway, has authority over us. And we cannot be nurtured by that past until we acknowledge its reality.

Withholding ourselves

This brings me to a very great American poem, "The Gift Outright," by Robert Frost, which, it seems to me, captures some of the ambivalence present in the idea of America-as-experiment. Like most of the greatest works of American literature, it is flawed; but even its flaws have a meaning that enriches the whole incalculably.

The Gift Outright

The land was ours before we were the land's.
 She was our land more than a hundred years
 Before we were her people. She was ours
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
 But we were England's, still colonials,
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
 Something we were withholding made us weak
 Until we found out that it was ourselves
 We were withholding from our land of living,
 And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
 Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,
 But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
 Such as she was, such as she would become.†

The idea of American civilization as "colonial" and the image of the "land vaguely realizing westward" are powerfully evocative of Emerson and Turner, of the idea that American civilization needs to find its own distinctive voice, rather than live off the inheritance of its European patrimony. This is, as

† From *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1942 by Robert Frost, ©1969 by Henry Holt and Co., c 1970 by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

I have said, an immensely strong element—the redskin element—in American intellectual history. But the phrase “something we were withholding made us weak” seems to me a phrase that Rorty might want to take to heart. Maybe the thing that makes Rorty’s Left weak, aside from its ideas, is what it is withholding. It is the very withholding that Frost warns against, and that Rorty, notwithstanding his praise of isolated figures like Dewey and Whitman, urges us to persist in. In fact, many of us who have spent our lives moving away from the Left were first nudged in that direction by a sense that its ideas and withholding were part of one and the same problem. A reading of *Achieving Our Country* will not change anyone’s mind about that.

A primal love of one’s country, like the primal and inexplicable love of Being itself, constitutes an enormous emotional and spiritual resource, to be drawn upon in all the endeavors of one’s life by those fortunate enough to have it. Such love is not synonymous with complacency. Nor is it synonymous with any particular ideological commitment or political identification. But it is incompatible with the idea of America as an open-ended social experiment, an entity yet to be achieved, in which all options are open, all traditions subject to dissolution, and all claims revocable. And it is incompatible with the idea that our Constitution is a *living* document, the content of which is determined by what our robed masters and law professors tell us it means today.

If everything is open to change, then nothing finally matters but the narcissistic self, the one still point left in a turning world. Or perhaps even that narcissism will give way to Robert Jay Lifton’s “protean man,” which unapologetically celebrates the postmodern conception of the self as an ensemble of endlessly changing roles. But this is a recipe for disaster. It produces lives stunted by the false excitement of a provisionality that is, at best, nothing more than an extended adolescence. Experimentation cannot be an end in itself; the very concept disintegrates at the first analytical touch. The experiment of America, like all experiments, means nothing unless it is undertaken for the sake of what is not experimental, and for the sake of those convictions, beliefs, and fundamental commitments embodied in the term “ordered liberty.”

Two experiments

There is one more insight to be gleaned from Frost: his notion of the Gift Outright. "Such as we were, we gave ourselves outright," he says. An "outright" gift is one given wholly, without reserve or qualification. Well, what are we to make of this? Do we ever really have that power of self-endowment, the power to make ourselves? Certainly not, and perhaps Frost is guilty of an overstatement here, guilty of succumbing to his own redskin and Turnerian prejudices. But, at the same time, Frost has captured a struggle that is intrinsic to American history and to the relationship between what we are as Americans and what we are as part of Western Civilization. The same ambivalence is at the heart of the idea of experiment in American history. On the one hand, experiment is a controlled and rational truth-seeking process that takes seriously and earnestly the conditions in which one has been placed. It also takes seriously our natural or God-given power to act and, thereby, to influence our world. The recognition of the power of the past should not be a counsel of passivity; on the contrary, it should be a goad to action. It is *that* sense of experiment that Washington and Hamilton and Lincoln, and even Rorty's hero John Dewey, invoked.

But there is also the sense of experiment that Rorty's other hero, Walt Whitman, invoked: experiment as the search for a condition of boundlessness and unconstraint, of Promethean rebellion against the dead-hand authority of God and nature—the song of the open road and of "the land vaguely realizing westward." There is quite a lot of that in the American intellectual tradition, going back at least to Jefferson, with his conceit that America was to be "nature's nation," free from the confining artifices and corrupting hierarchies that disfigured all other nations, a nation in which the individual is set free from all ascriptions of birth and heritage, free to make himself. And there is even more of that in our modern and postmodern fantasies of self-construction, in which individual persons are to be regarded as (in John Rawls's words) "self-originating sources of valid claims." Let me admit, too, that I cherish the sense of fluidity, the sense of sheer possibility, in American life. But it is a foolish and ungrateful illusion to pretend that one has no

antecedents and that one's present existence is a gift outright from one's self.

To put this same point in a rather different way, the redskin strain in our intellectual history suffers from a prickly defensiveness, even immature defiance. One sees this tendency in, for example, Mark Twain—a tendency to try just a little too hard, to counterpunch too much against “courtly muses,” whether real or imaginary, and thereby to show too little confidence in the possibility of an Americanness that is comfortable with its European heritage. Sometimes a redskin can even sound like a redneck. To be sure, there are worse things than being a redneck. But these are not our only choices, and we should never imagine that they are. We have a more goodly and various heritage than that. The American versus European conflict is an important historical element in that heritage. But we ought to be mature enough to understand that the grounds for that conflict are now largely past. America will continue to have, as it has since at least 1945, an essential role to play in the protection and perpetuation of that European heritage. At the same time, America will also need to attend, more closely and carefully than it has in the past, to parts of that heritage it has increasingly neglected or marginalized, if it is to play the role effectively.

From old west to post-west

That brings us to the final point. In 1994, the political scientist James Kurth wrote an article in the *National Interest*, in which he argued that future conflicts would not be between the West and other civilizations but, instead, “between the West and the Post-West, within the West itself.” This clash, he argued, “has already taken place within the brain of Western civilization, the American intellectual class.” The term “Post-West” is a felicitous one for our purposes, since it implies a combination of dependency and departure. What we mean by the Post-West is a massive intensification of certain very Western ideas, to the exclusion of others. The hypertrophy of the idea of “rights,” detached from notions of individual limitations or accountability, is a vivid example of the sort of thing I mean.

But at the very center of the Post-Western idea is a redefinition of the meaning of the nation. We have come from

being Nature's Nation to contemplating the Denatured Nation. America is no longer to be thought of as an entity whose cohesion is based on a shared set of values, shared social and institutional arrangements, a shared legal structure, a shared history, a shared culture, and a shared standard of citizenship. Or, to the extent that it is so conceived, and a modernist rather than postmodernist ideal prevails, all such desiderata are considered subordinate to certain international and universalistic values: humanitarianism, egalitarianism, democracy, international equity. Either way, the nation-state is understood to be inadequate, and the idea of national sovereignty obsolete. There is a strong overriding sense of experiment in the Post-West (though a sense one cannot find in Frost and can only rarely find in the great American tradition). It is a sense of "experiment" as the promise of total and open-ended human transformation, a sense that amounts (as Richard Rorty makes explicit) to an unrelenting war against the limiting conceptions of God and nature.

That project is, of course, also Western, based as it is on Western notions of the systematic relief of man's estate through the exercise of instrumental reason. Arguably, Karl Marx was the modern Western philosopher, *par excellence*. He certainly wasn't anything else but Western. That fact should give us pause when we think about Western civilization as a benign or inert body of knowledge in any simple sense, rather than as a peculiarly charged, dynamic, and self-questioning activity, one that can go badly astray. The West is no one thing, and the roots of American order are astonishingly various. Only to think about the fundamental incompatibility of Athens and Jerusalem, and about the equally indispensable role that each plays in the sustenance of this civilization, is to realize how complicated a task it is to describe the West.

But, at the risk of oversimplification, I think we can say one thing. These days, when we think of the West, we tend to think of such ideals as individual liberty, private property, democratic polity, economic growth, and the transforming power of applied science. And all these things are indeed characteristics of the modern West. But they have been successful only because they arose in a larger and longer context. The historian David Gress calls that context the Old West, by which he

means the premodern synthesis deriving from the classical civilizations, medieval Christianity, and Germanic culture. The pathologies of the world we now live in, with its hard and inhuman techno-rationality, its growing disregard for the intrinsic value of human life, its fanatical desire to conquer and manipulate nature, its shameless compulsion to make public what should be private (and make private what should be public), its willingness to put a price tag on anything for which there is a potential buyer, and its inability to conceive a higher calling in life than the pursuit of individual pleasure—each of these pathologies represents a grotesque intensification of values that were originally benign, so long as they were embedded in a deeper set of metaphysical convictions. Virtues become vices when they are disconnected from their proper points of reference. This is precisely why experimentation cannot be a sufficient end in itself.

Retrieving our country

Yet I do not want to conclude in a way that appears to disparage the idea of experiment, especially since there is still one great experiment ahead of us now, and its outlines are becoming clearer and clearer as time goes by. There has been a growing division in the Western soul between the Old West and New West—between those who embrace either the *imago Dei* or a normative conception of nature, with the inherent limits upon the human will and human condition that such conceptions impose, and those who disdain such limits in the name of boundless revolutionary or technological transformation. It seems increasingly likely that this division, as it grows and deepens, will correspond less and less to the usual divisions of liberal and conservative. Which is to say that both ends of the ideological spectrum will need to take stock of themselves and of how they stand with respect to these matters.

The stakes are high, as high as they were in 1787, if not far more so. If the West is to survive and thrive, and if it is not to devolve into a doomed pseudo-civilization of soulless hedonists and consumers, a dystopia less like Orwell's than Huxley's, a way of life that will earn, and deserve, the world's contempt, it must recover the lost Old West. For it is only within that framework of meaning that the achievements find their

proper measure. The moral revulsion that most—though not all—of us feel at the now-looming prospect of human cloning, taken along with the inability of many of us, from President Clinton on down, to provide a persuasive justification for this revulsion, should be a warning to us that Western man cannot live for long by the values of the New West alone.

So we, too, are embarked upon an experiment—a great experiment in cultural recovery. No one knows whether it can succeed. There is no real precedent for it, at least not on the scale required now. One sees precisely the same aspiration weaving in and out of the highly interesting, if abstract and tentative, reflections of a European figure like Vaclav Havel. But America will have to be the proving ground for this experiment in cultural recovery, and the task will be especially difficult here. When Nathaniel Hawthorne used to complain that America had no ruins and castles, he was pointing not only to the nation's youthfulness but to its weak relationship to premodern institutions. And so we will not be able to stumble into this transformation. We will not find it by rummaging around in our basements and attics. We will not be able to find it, as Turner said the frontiersmen found democratic freedom, by exchanging our leather shoes for moccasins and our automobiles for birch canoes. We are going to have to engage in an arduous process of consciously reappropriating the past, a past that has nearly slipped out of our reach. And we must do so not out of antiquarianism but in a fresh and unprecedented way, knowing that our lives depend on it.

It is a formidable experiment. It will be the great task of the rising generations. As in any experiment, the possibility of failure is very real. But we can take inspiration from the fact that the original experiment of Hamilton and Washington and Lincoln has succeeded. And there are other aspects of our past we can build on. One of the enduringly suggestive features of Turner's view of American history, notwithstanding all its faults, is its energizing idea of a *frontier*. John Kennedy called his program the New Frontier, hoping to borrow some of that word's resonance and to mark the coming of a new generation. Well then, here is a new frontier, for us, now: our very own experiment, every bit as exciting and challenging as the one our forebears embraced, if very different in kind. May we fare as well as they did.