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# The Skeptic's Guide to American History

Course Guidebook

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Professor Stoler has previously taught *America and the World: A Diplomatic History* for The Great Courses. ■

# Table of Contents

---

## INTRODUCTION

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Professor Biography ..... | i |
| Course Scope .....        | 1 |

## LECTURE GUIDES

### LECTURE 1

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Religious Toleration in Colonial America? ..... | 4 |
|---|---|

### LECTURE 2

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Neither American nor Revolutionary? ..... | 11 |
|---|----|

### LECTURE 3

|   |    |
|---|----|
| The Constitution Did Not Create a Democracy ..... | 19 |
|---|----|

### LECTURE 4

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Washington—Failures and Real Accomplishments ..... | 27 |
|--|----|

### LECTURE 5

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Confusions about Jefferson and Hamilton ..... | 34 |
|---|----|

### LECTURE 6

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Andrew Jackson—An Odd Symbol of Democracy ..... | 41 |
|---|----|

### LECTURE 7

|   |    |
|---|----|
| The Second Great Awakening—Enduring Impacts ..... | 48 |
|---|----|

### LECTURE 8

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Did Slavery Really Cause the Civil War? ..... | 55 |
|---|----|

### LECTURE 9

|   |    |
|---|----|
| The Civil War's Actual Turning Points ..... | 62 |
|---|----|

# Table of Contents

---

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>LECTURE 10</b>                                 |     |
| The Myth of Laissez-Faire .....                   | 68  |
| <b>LECTURE 11</b>                                 |     |
| Misconceptions about the Original Populists ..... | 74  |
| <b>LECTURE 12</b>                                 |     |
| Labor in America—A Strange History .....          | 81  |
| <b>LECTURE 13</b>                                 |     |
| Myths about American Isolation and Empire .....   | 88  |
| <b>LECTURE 14</b>                                 |     |
| Early Progressives Were Not Liberals .....        | 95  |
| <b>LECTURE 15</b>                                 |     |
| Woodrow Wilson and the Rating of Presidents ..... | 102 |
| <b>LECTURE 16</b>                                 |     |
| The Roaring Twenties Reconsidered .....           | 109 |
| <b>LECTURE 17</b>                                 |     |
| Hoover and the Great Depression Revisited .....   | 116 |
| <b>LECTURE 18</b>                                 |     |
| What Did Roosevelt’s New Deal Really Do? .....    | 123 |
| <b>LECTURE 19</b>                                 |     |
| World War II Misconceptions and Myths .....       | 130 |
| <b>LECTURE 20</b>                                 |     |
| Was the Cold War Inevitable? .....                | 137 |
| <b>LECTURE 21</b>                                 |     |
| The Real Blunders of the Vietnam War .....        | 144 |
| <b>LECTURE 22</b>                                 |     |
| Myths about American Wars .....                   | 151 |

## Table of Contents

---

### **LECTURE 23**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Who Matters in American History? ..... | 158 |
|--|-----|

### **LECTURE 24**

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| History Did Not Begin with Us ..... | 165 |
|-------------------------------------|-----|

### **SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL**

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Bibliography..... | 172 |
|-------------------|-----|



# The Skeptic's Guide to American History

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## Scope:

Everyone recognizes as myths the idea that Columbus was the first to discover America or the story that George Washington admitted cutting down a cherry tree. But very few people realize how much of what we think we know about American history is also mythical and mistaken. As historians often emphasize, many popular beliefs about history in general—and about U.S. history in particular—are myths, either totally false or, at best, only half true.

In this course, we will examine some of these myths, such as those concerning the origins of religious tolerance in America, the American Revolution, George Washington, the causes of the Civil War, the causes and conduct of World War II and the Cold War, and America's supposed history of isolationism and anti-imperialism, as well as our government's laissez-faire policies regarding business. But the course is far from limited to challenging these and other myths. It will also examine how and why these myths arose and what historians now say about what really happened—as opposed to what most Americans believe happened.

In the process, we will also explore the complexities of history and just what historians do. In that exploration, we will again challenge popular misconceptions—this time about the study of history itself. For example, it is often said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, but the idea that history repeats itself is a myth. It does not. World War II was not a replay of World War I in this regard, and the Cold War was not a replay of World War II; the belief that they were led to disastrous consequences.

Beyond challenging such misconceptions, we will explore some of the important but little known realities of historical study, most notably the law of unintended consequences and the need to separate results of actions from their causes and the motivations of those who acted. We will also examine the pitfalls of projecting contemporary values onto the past and other forms

of anachronistic thinking, the changing meaning of key words over time, how and why people and events in history are lost and then rediscovered, and the differences between history and memory.

Below are just a few examples of the questions this course will consequently raise and attempt to answer:

- Did religious toleration truly begin in America's colonial history? And if not, when did it arise?
- Was the American Revolution less revolutionary (and less American) than we commonly believe?
- What were George Washington's numerous failures and most important contributions to American history, and why are they commonly overlooked?
- What is the difference between separation of church and state and separation of religion and politics?
- Why is empire-building a surprisingly constant feature of U.S. history?
- Was slavery truly the major cause of the Civil War? And if so, how?
- Has the United States ever had a truly laissez-faire approach to economics?
- When and why did states' rights become a rallying cry not only in the South but also in New England?
- Is Woodrow Wilson overrated? Is Herbert Hoover underrated?
- Who have been America's greatest presidents and according to what standards?

- How have such important concepts as “progressive” and “populism” changed drastically from what they originally meant?
- Just what did Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal do and not do?
- How does our collective memory and commemoration of World War II differ from the actual history of that conflict?
- Was the Cold War inevitable, and why did it occur and last so long?
- What were America’s true blunders during the Vietnam War?
- Who are some of the most notable but often forgotten figures in American history, and why have they been forgotten in comparison to their contemporaries?
- How dramatic and consequential are contemporary changes in American life compared to previous changes in U.S. history?

In this skeptical journey through American history, we will consider anew key people, events, periods, and legacies and gain a much deeper understanding of the extraordinary history of the United States. ■

# Religious Toleration in Colonial America?

## Lecture 1

**T**wo well-known historical myths about Christopher Columbus are that he discovered America and that he proved the earth was round rather than flat. Of course, in reality, educated people had for centuries believed the world was round. A great deal of what we think we know and believe about American history is just as wrong as these myths about Columbus. In this course, we will identify some of those myths and examine how and why they arose.

### Myths and Realities of Historical Study

- These lectures are devoted to identifying myths of American history and learning what historians now say about the true course of events in our past. In the process of this exploration, we will also challenge popular misconceptions about the study of history itself.
- As we will see throughout these lectures, history does not consist of rote memorization of facts about the past, and those facts do not “speak for themselves.” Further, history does not repeat itself, nor can we draw lessons from these supposed repetitions. It’s also not true that history and memory are synonymous; they are, in fact, separate and often antithetical to each other.
- Among the important realities of historical study is what historians sometimes call the law of unintended consequences—the fact that consequences of human actions often differ sharply from the motivations of those who acted. Columbus, for example, wanted to find a western water route to the Indies, not “discover” America.
- Further, we often select facts to study in history on the basis of those unintended consequences. For example, even though Columbus was not the first European to “discover” the Americas, his explorations are far more important historically than those of Leif Eriksson because of their enormous consequences.

## The Myth of Religious Toleration in America

- Many people believe that toleration arrived in North America with English colonists who were seeking religious freedom, beginning with the Pilgrims in 1620 and proceeding through the establishment of all 13 colonies. That is not the case.
- Many colonies, including Virginia and New York, were founded for non-religious reasons, and even in colonies that were religiously founded, many colonists came for non-religious reasons.
- Moreover, religious toleration was not considered a virtue at the time. Even a desire to escape from religious persecution in Europe usually did not lead to a belief in tolerance for others. As a result, colonial history is filled with religious conflict and persecution. Puritans, for example, persecuted and banned virtually anyone who disagreed with them.



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**Much of what we believe about American history is as untrue as the myth that Columbus discovered America.**

- Toleration did begin to develop during the colonial era but only gradually—and largely accidentally.
  - For those who came to North America seeking religious freedom and an end to their persecution, religion was central to their entire belief system and worldview. Almost by definition, then, they could not conceive of another belief system as valid.
  - Indeed, the Pilgrims who arrived in Plymouth in 1620 were not escaping religious persecution in England but toleration in the Netherlands, where they had moved and where they feared their youth would be led astray.
  - The Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts Bay a decade later banished dissenters in their own Congregationalist denomination, such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, as well as those from other denominations or religions, and executed those who violated such banishment.
  - Furthermore, religious warfare broke out in colonies that did allow other denominations and religions. Maryland, for example, was founded by George Calvert (Lord Baltimore) as a haven for persecuted Catholics but soon had a Protestant majority—and a virtual civil war between the two.

### **The Development of Toleration**

- Religious toleration was partially established by Puritan dissenters, most notably Roger Williams. After he was banished from Massachusetts Bay, Williams founded Rhode Island and is known to us for his insistence on the separation of church and state, as well as his opposition to forced worship.
  - Not well known is the fact that Williams wanted separation of church and state in hopes of maintaining the purity of the Puritan church against a corrupt state, not vice versa! Unlike the Puritans, who sought to reform the corrupt Anglican Church, Williams also wanted total separation from the Church of England.

- Equally unknown is the fact that in his continuing efforts to create a pure church and retain his own purity, Williams's separatism accelerated in Rhode Island until "he could not conscientiously have communion with anyone but his wife." At that point, he realized the error of his ways and admitted sinners into his church and all denominations to his colony.
- Williams, in short, was a religious absolutist and purist who came to toleration only gradually and only by a series of what we would consider backdoors.
- Toleration also resulted from settlers more interested in profits than religion, particularly the Dutch in New Amsterdam. In the mid-1650s, these settlers even allowed the first Jewish community in what would eventually become New York.
- Another partial explanation for the development of toleration can be found in the negative example of the English Civil Wars during the 1640s, followed by the execution of the English king and the establishment of a Puritan dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell. This experience illustrated where both religious and political conflict could lead. Greater tolerance arose in England after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.
- It's also true that no one Christian denomination was dominant in all 13 colonies, which led many groups who feared persecution by others to support toleration as a means of protecting themselves. Maryland's famous 1649 Act of Religious Toleration, for example, was approved by Calvert's son, Cecilus, to protect Catholics against a Protestant majority, but it was passed by a Protestant legislature to protect them against Calvert's Catholics!
- Finally, toleration was partially the result of the founding of a new colony in the 1640s, Pennsylvania, by a new and more tolerant denomination, William Penn's Quakers.

### Why Do We Believe the Myth?

- Our belief in the myth of toleration may be the result of a tendency to confuse colonial practice with the First Amendment to the Constitution, which banned any state-established religion and established legal toleration of all religions. But that amendment passed in 1791 and should not be confused with events that occurred more than a century and a half earlier.
  - Furthermore, the First Amendment banned only Congress from establishing a state religion (i.e., the federal government), not the individual states.
  - Only with the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Supreme Court rulings was state-established religion completely prohibited.
- Even more anachronistic and incorrect than this projection of events from 1791–1833 onto the 1600s is a tendency to project our contemporary values onto the past in the process of attempting to discover the roots of those values. The praise of Roger Williams serves as a classic example in this regard. He did indeed call for tolerance and the separation of church and state but in the interests of protecting what he considered his true church from the corruption of the state.
- Further, the passage of the First Amendment and the later disestablishment of Congregationalism in New England by no means resulted in religious tolerance as we understand the term today. Toleration did not translate into social acceptance, and plenty of religious prejudice existed in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. history, as well as in 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century colonial history.
  - Anti-Catholicism, a deep prejudice in much of U.S. history, reached a peak of sorts with the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party of the 1850s, which fused religious and racial intolerance and almost eclipsed the newly founded Republican Party as the successor to the Whigs and the second major political party.

- Anti-Catholicism reemerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and played a role in the defeat of the Catholic Al Smith in the presidential election of 1928. The 1920s also witnessed a major wave of anti-Semitism.

### **The Real Emergence of Religious Toleration**

- Religious tolerance has historical roots in early colonial history, but it didn't emerge in its modern form until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily as a result of World War II.
- Hitler's racist ideas came from more than a century of European and American thinking and practice. However, in witnessing the hideous consequences of the literal implementation of those ideas, Americans finally began to question their religious and racial prejudices.
- Simultaneously, defeating Hitler required placing more than 15 million Americans in uniform—many of whom saw and interacted with other Americans of different religions and races for the first time.
- The impact of this awakening on many Americans was profound and nearly immediate. In just a few years after the war, Major League Baseball was integrated, a film about anti-Semitism in America won the Oscar for Best Picture, Truman ordered the integration of the armed forces and supported recognition of the state of Israel, and the Supreme Court ordered integration of the public schools.

### **A Skeptical Approach**

- What we've said in this lecture exemplifies the broader approach that we will take throughout this course. Specifically, our skeptical approach will involve paying attention to the law of unintended consequences—the fact that the consequences of human actions often differ quite sharply from the motivations of those who acted.
- We must also be wary of anachronistic thinking, that is, distorting the past by dealing with events and ideas out of their proper

chronological order and context. As we saw in this lecture, such thinking often takes the form of projecting contemporary values onto the past.

- We will further see how key words change meaning and significance over time. Religious toleration once meant not killing one another and accepting that others might live in the same colony. Today, toleration tends to have a much broader meaning than it did in previous centuries.
- Finally, we see that history and memory are not the same. Our memory and ensuing commemoration of the origins of events and ideas often differ quite dramatically from historical reality.

### Suggested Reading

Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why do we tend to equate the desire to escape religious persecution with a desire for religious freedom and tolerance?
2. Why do we assume that 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europeans thought the same way about religion that we do today?

# Neither American nor Revolutionary?

## Lecture 2

**T**he American Revolution is generally portrayed in terms of a unified “American people” rising up to defeat a great empire and establishing a democratic republic. As with all myths in history, this one contains an element of truth, but it also ignores some inconvenient facts: The colonists didn’t view themselves as Americans or as undertaking a revolution, and they could never have defeated the British alone. Indeed, it was almost despite themselves that the colonists created a revolution and a unique American ideology.

### American Perceptions in 1763

- A key to understanding the very nonrevolutionary origins of the American Revolution lies in the perceptions Americans held in 1763.
- The colonists saw themselves not as Americans but as proud members of the British Empire, which had just achieved a stunning victory in the Seven Years’ War—one that eliminated the French from the North American continent.
- Unlike the French or Spanish empires, the British Empire was not a monarchical tyranny. Parliament had asserted its supremacy over the monarchy in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688.
- This action was justified by John Locke and others with the “social contract” theory of government, whereby government exists through the consent of the governed to protect certain “natural rights,” and a government that did not protect them should be overthrown.

### Changing Perceptions

- Colonists were proud to be part of this liberty-loving British Empire, but that perception would change dramatically over the next decade in response to acts by Parliament.

- To put an end to continued warfare with Indians in the west—and the rising costs associated with it—Parliament declared the Proclamation line in 1763, prohibiting colonists from crossing the Appalachian Mountains into Indian territories, with troops to enforce the prohibition.
- Parliament also levied taxes on the colonies to pay off some of the debt incurred during the Seven Years' War, from which the colonists had benefited most.
- This taxation would take place through three measures: (1) the enforcement of existing navigation acts to raise revenue, (2) the requirement of partial payment for troops needed to enforce the navigation acts and the Proclamation line, and (3) new taxes, most notably the Stamp Act of 1765.
- The colonists saw the Proclamation line as denying them the fruits of their military victory and the land they needed to survive economically. They also realized that enforcement of the navigation acts would interfere with smuggling, without which the colonial economies could not survive.
- The colonists further complained that the enforcement mechanisms for these new taxes violated their “rights as Englishmen” by allowing for the issuance of search warrants without evidence and trial by Admiralty courts without juries.
- The new direct taxes from Parliament were seen as invalidating the powers of the colonial assemblies to tax—thus the cry of “no taxation without representation.”

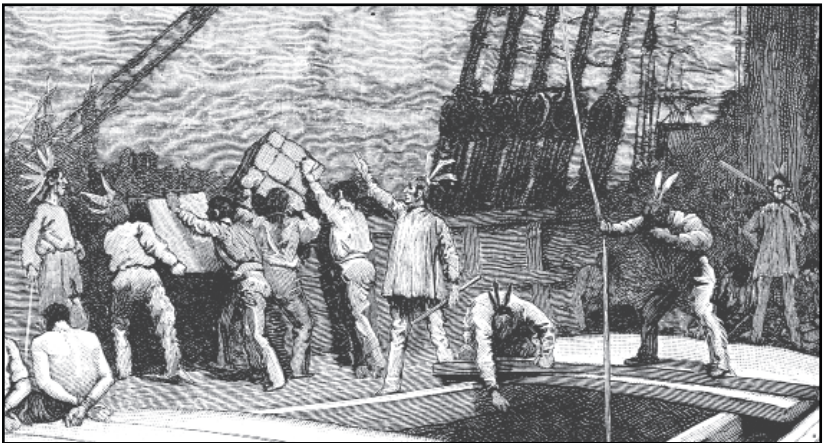
### Revolutionary Ironies

- These economic problems and political differences between the colonies and the mother country had existed for nearly 100 years but had never been raised because they were meaningless in practice.

- What made them meaningful were the new British policies resulting from the victory in the Seven Years' War and the ensuing need to reorganize the empire and pay off the war debt. Britain's problems thus stemmed from its military successes.
- The colonial response would eventually create an American identity that had never existed before. The idea that citizens of the colonies and the mother country were all English was beginning to unravel.

### Colonial Resentment

- Colonial resentment built from 1761 to 1765, then exploded over the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act Congress was formed, at which representatives from nine colonies agreed to boycott British goods until the law was repealed.
- Parliament agreed to repeal the Stamp Act, but in the Declaratory Act, it asserted its power to make laws "in all cases whatsoever." Parliament then passed the Townshend Acts in 1767 to tax colonial imports from England, with a new Board of Customs Commissioners established to enforce these acts.



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The Tea Act of 1773 created a monopoly for the British East India Company and imposed "taxation without representation" on the American colonists, sparking the Boston Tea Party.

- The colonists responded with more nonimportation agreements and mob violence against customs officials. Troops were called in, leading to the Boston Massacre and the intensification of the so-called “country ideology,” with its attendant fears of parliamentary corruption and a royal plot to establish despotism.
- In 1773, the Tea Act allowed the bankrupt British East India Company to sell tea in the colonies, paying a tea tax of only one penny. The colonists, already sensitive because of the events of the 1760s, exploded, demonstrating their indignation with the Boston Tea Party.
- Parliament retaliated with the Coercive or Intolerable Acts of 1774, closing the port of Boston, revoking the Massachusetts charter, appointing General Thomas Gage as governor, and sending troops to be quartered in the colony. Simultaneously, the Quebec Act extended Quebec into the Ohio valley, making the Proclamation line permanent.

### **The First Continental Congress**

- These actions fed colonial conspiracy theories and prompted more intercolonial cooperation. The First Continental Congress was convened in September of 1774.
- Radicals at the Congress argued that Parliament had no rights in the colonies, but moderates disagreed. By now, four distinct groups had emerged in each colony: loyalists, neutrals, moderates, and radicals. This last group wanted a break with England; some members, angered by the undemocratic nature of colonial assemblies, even sought a revolution at home.
- The moderates controlled the Continental Congress and most colonial assemblies, but their position could hold only if the king and Parliament agreed with it, which they did not. Instead, London ordered General Gage to arrest John Adams and John Hancock and to seize guns and ammunition being collected at Concord.

## **The Second Continental Congress**

- Moderates remained in charge of the Second Continental Congress, yet the opening of hostilities at Lexington and Concord forced them to agree to fight. The Continental Army was established under George Washington to maintain the siege of the British in Boston.
- The king rejected the moderates' Olive Branch Petition, and Parliament ordered all colonial ports closed; arrangements were made to send Hessian mercenaries to the colonies.
- As the fighting continued, colonial assemblies seized power from royal governors and became de facto revolutionary (and illegal) governments. Loyalists objected, and civil wars broke out in many colonies.
- In early 1776, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was published, offering a radical position on the logic of independence phrased in simple and inflammatory rhetoric.
- Gradually, the moderates in the Second Continental Congress were forced—against their will—into independence. The decision for independence was finally announced in July 1776.

## **The Declaration of Independence**

- The reason the Declaration of Independence was directed against the king, despite the fact that the colonies' struggle had been against Parliament, was twofold: (1) The Continental Congress had already declared its independence from Parliament via previous acts, and (2) the colonists believed that Parliament was being manipulated by the despotic king.
- The famous Preamble is based on John Locke's social contract, and three-quarters of the document is a bill of indictment against the king to justify the revolt on the grounds that he had broken the social contract.

- In effect, Jefferson used British theories regarding liberty from Locke and the Glorious Revolution to declare American independence. In that sense, the Revolution and the Declaration were not very revolutionary at all. The entire movement was an attempt to maintain traditional British rights against new and tyrannical British policies.

### **Redefining Liberty**

- In revolting, the colonists implicitly and explicitly expanded and changed the definition of liberty—and of themselves.
- With the perceived failure of the British constitutional monarchy to protect liberty, the colonists turned to an alternative form of representative government, personified in elected legislatures: republicanism. This was a new and radical ideology.
- With the overthrow of the authority of the king and his governors, as well as Parliament, the traditional “rights of Englishmen” came to exist only in the former colonies. They thus became, in Paine’s words, “the rights of man.” This new nation was to be the haven of liberty and the source from which it would eventually spread throughout the world.
- In the process of reaching this conclusion, the people in what had been 13 separate British colonies came to see themselves for the first time as Americans.
- The revolt had begun with the questioning of parliamentary and royal authority. But once one begins to question authority as antithetical to liberty instead of defensive of it, where does the process end? The question of home rule leads logically to the question of who should rule at home, and the answer will inexorably lead to government that is more representative and more democratic.

## **The True Course of the Revolution**

- The colonists quickly learned that declaring independence and achieving it are two very different things. They would be fighting against the largest and most powerful empire in the world and against fellow colonists who remained loyal to the king.
- Washington was able to stave off total defeat with successful raids at Trenton and Princeton, but the only way to force the British to accept American independence was to obtain foreign aid, most notably from the despotic French monarchy. Indeed, American victory over the British would have been impossible without French money, equipment, and forces.
- The American revolutionaries thus wound up creating a new nation and “cradle of liberty” only with the help of tyrannical European powers and against the wishes of their neighbors who remained loyal to England.
- It’s safe to say that the American Revolution was far less American and far less revolutionary than we might think. A variety of reasons explains the emergence—and persistence—of myths to the contrary: the tendency of nations to overemphasize their own role versus that of their allies in war; the admiration of the French general Lafayette for the American ideology, perhaps leading to a larger myth of aid from the “liberty-loving French”; the migration of many loyalists to Canada; and the tendency to look at the end result of a series of events rather than its origins.
- What remains true is that the Americans rose up against a tyrannical British Parliament and king, in a coalition that ultimately involved all the other major powers of Europe—uniting against the greatest empire in the world and making it possible for a group of rebellious colonies to form a new nation.

## Suggested Reading

Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*.

Chernow, *Washington: A Life*.

Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*.

Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do we tend to look at results of events rather than their origins and causes?
2. What other events in U.S. history have results that differ from their causes and origins?

# The Constitution Did Not Create a Democracy

## Lecture 3

**W**e often hear talk about the “original intent” of the writers of the Constitution, but the Founding Fathers did not plan to create the political system we have today: a democratic republic based on two national and permanent political parties. Indeed, “democracy” and “political parties” were dirty words to them. They did realize, however, that the world was likely to change, which is one reason they included an amendment process in the Constitution that has allowed this document to survive as our frame of government for so long.

### Historical Views of the Constitution

- The Constitution was not the original frame of government of the newly independent United States. The states were originally governed by the Second Continental Congress and then, from 1781–1789, by the Articles of Confederation.
- Late-19<sup>th</sup>-century historians saw these Articles as a disastrous failure, engendering the “critical period” concept, in which the infant and endangered United States was saved by the godlike Founding Fathers.
- That interpretation was questioned by early-20<sup>th</sup>-century historians, who argued that the Constitution was the response of moderates protecting their own economic and class interests. In this view, the Constitution was an antidemocratic, counterrevolutionary document.
- In turn, that interpretation came under attack in the mid- and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many historians today view the Constitution as a continuation, not an antithesis, of the Revolution.

## The Articles of Confederation

- The process of creating governments began in the 1770s as the colonial assemblies transformed themselves into state legislatures and governments. This process would involve a rejection of the British concept of “balanced” government in favor of overwhelming legislative power and a move from unwritten to written constitutions.
- At first, the central government was the Second Continental Congress. The Articles of Confederation, meant to serve as a bridge between the Congress and a federal government, were presented to the states in 1777 but not ratified by all until 1781, largely because the states retained their distrust of both centralized power and one another.
- The Articles set up a central government of sorts but a weak one, with no executive or judiciary, no power to tax or enact any important measures without a two-thirds vote, and no power to change the structure without unanimity. Each state had one vote and, thus, a virtual veto power.
- This organization was established very consciously. The states saw themselves as independent republics retaining sovereignty and joining into a loose confederation, something like the United Nations. They feared centralized power and sought to guarantee their liberty through decentralization and state legislatures.

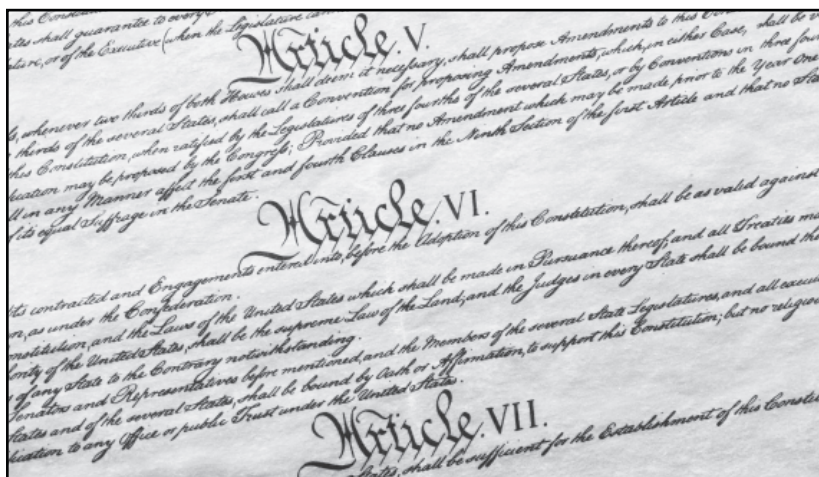
## Successes of the Articles

- Despite the inherent weaknesses of this frame of government, much was accomplished under the Articles, including the winning of independence and a favorable peace treaty in 1783, with a western boundary for the United States all the way to the Mississippi River.
- State governments were also established under the Articles, with many social and political reforms, including the extension of the franchise, frequent elections, and the separation of church and state.

- The pattern for western expansion and settlement was established with the Northwest Ordinances of 1784, 1785, and 1787.
- Internationally, the Articles opened trade with European powers and Asia.

### Problems with the Articles

- By 1787, problems under the Articles appeared to outweigh successes.
- The Confederate Congress had no power to tax and, thus, to pay for a military force or pay its debts. The nation's military power rested, essentially, with untrained and unreliable state militias. This translated into a lack of power in foreign affairs and a lack of respect from European nations.
- A postwar economic depression was also blamed on the Articles. To halt land foreclosures, states began to repudiate debts and print paper money, causing inflation; such measures were easy to enact



The Constitution was written to address the need to create a government strong enough to preserve liberty without giving it enough power to become tyrannical itself.

because there was little or no check on legislative powers in the states. Some states established their own currencies and trading systems, causing a breakdown in interstate relations and presenting the danger that states would turn to European allies for intervention.

- With Shays’s Rebellion—a march of 1,200 men on the Supreme Court in Massachusetts and on an arsenal—fear of anarchy spread. No national army was available to halt the rebellion, and although the state militia did, it could just have easily failed from lack of training or even joined the revolt.
- These problems convinced many that the national government was incapable of defending the liberty won during the Revolution and that a new frame of government was necessary. Note that the definition of “liberty” here was not democracy but individual freedom from tyranny, either from above or below.
  - The Revolution had fought successfully for liberty and against tyranny from above, but the threat now seemed to be tyranny from below—mob rule as in Shays’s Rebellion.
  - With the danger of European intervention and the possible destruction of the republican experiment, tyranny from above had not been eliminated either.

### **The Constitutional Convention**

- In 1787, a special convention was called to revise and strengthen the Articles of Confederation. Revolutionary leaders Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were present, but aside from these two, most of the delegates were quite young. Many were veterans of Washington’s Continental Army or the Continental Congress, which gave them a national, as opposed to a state, outlook.
- The representatives were simultaneously conservative and revolutionary. They were men of property who feared democracy and mob rule as destructive of liberty, but they were also revolutionaries who desired to create something new—a republic with centralized power to preserve rather than destroy liberty.

- Their basic dilemma was this: How to create a government strong enough to preserve liberty from the tyranny of the mob or European monarchs without giving it enough power to be tyrannical itself?
- In the 51<sup>st</sup> Federalist paper, James Madison noted, “A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government.” Thus, the Constitution begins, “We the People.” Sovereignty rests with the people.

### **Checks and Balances**

- The Constitution separates sovereignty from rule via a series of intermediaries and divides power among those intermediaries to avoid tyranny. We know this system as “checks and balances,” and it exists on two levels: separation of powers among the three branches of the national government and division of powers between the national government and the state governments.
- The Founders returned to the concept of “balanced” government because of the perceived excesses and weaknesses of existing legislative governments. They sought to combine elements of a monarchy, an aristocracy, and a democracy within the new national government.
  - The president would be a monarch indirectly elected via the electoral college by elite electors (the aristocracy), with a four-year term and powers limited to those enumerated in Article II.
  - The Senate would be an aristocratic branch indirectly elected by the people through the state legislatures, with a six-year term and the powers listed in Article I. The national judiciary would also be aristocratic.
  - The House of Representatives would be the democratic branch, with short terms, albeit still with property qualifications for voting.
- As we know, each branch has the power to “check” the others. For example, the president is the commander-in-chief of the

armed forces, but Congress appropriates funds for the military and declares war.

- The new national government had enormous powers, but it did not have a monopoly on power. The Tenth Amendment explicitly reaffirmed that all powers not delegated to the new national government or prohibited by it to the states would be reserved to the states, each capable of checking the other.

### **A Large Republic**

- The Constitution set up a large republic, something that, according to political theory of the day, could not survive. In the 10<sup>th</sup> Federalist paper, Madison turned this theory on its head, claiming that a republic in a large area had a better chance of preserving liberty than one in a small area.
- For Madison, factions were the key problem in sustaining a republic. In a democracy, a majority faction—a group willing to ride roughshod over the rights of others to ensure its own interests—could easily gain control and destroy liberty.
- Such factions cannot be abolished without abolishing liberty, but they must be controlled via checks and balances. A large republic can do this better than small ones because the greater population and area resulted in more factions and a reduced chance that one would dominate.

### **Disagreement at the Convention**

- Despite agreement on certain essentials, disagreements among the delegates almost wrecked the Convention. Major disputes pitted large states against small ones over the issue of representation and northern states against southern on some issues related to slavery. Delegates also split over just how much power to give the national government at the expense of the states.

- Some delegates feared that despite the checks and balances, the new national government had too much power. Only 39 of 55 delegates signed the final document.
- The Constitution called for special state ratifying conventions, with ratification by nine states required to put the document into effect. Intense opposition emerged in virtually every state, primarily from established groups who controlled state governments and feared centralized power.
- The pro-Constitution forces won the struggle for a number of reasons. They were better organized, were on the offensive, and had the advantage of defining themselves as Federalists, while their opponents were labeled Anti-Federalists.
  - The ratification process also bypassed state legislatures that had a vested interest in the failure of the new system.
  - Further, the Federalists also agreed to address a key Anti-Federalist objection: the lack of a specific Bill of Rights. Creating one would be the first order of business under the new government.

### **The Truth about the Founders**

- The final version of the Constitution and the Federalist papers show the Founders as Hobbesian realists who distrusted human nature and sought to stop what they considered the excesses of revolution. In that sense, they can be viewed as conservative, even counterrevolutionary.
- Simultaneously, however, they were still Lockean and revolutionaries who wanted to preserve their republican experiment against what they considered clear and present dangers and were willing to try a radical and unprecedented experiment to do so.
- The Founders succeeded in establishing a new frame of government, but in the process, they left a series of unanswered questions that

would cause a split among them within a few years and would be bequeathed to their successors.

### Suggested Reading

Chernow, *Washington: A Life*.

Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*.

Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*.

Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why do we equate liberty with democracy when the writers of the Constitution did not do so?
2. Why do we tend to project our contemporary values onto the past?

# Washington—Failures and Real Accomplishments

## Lecture 4

**W**e know that the cherry tree story about George Washington is a myth, but we still accept as fact what is at least partially mythical about the father of our country: that he was a great military and political leader. He was not perceived that way by some of his peers, and many historians agree with some of their criticisms. This lecture will look at Washington's failings and analyze his accomplishments, including some little-known ones that may be his most important contributions to American history.

### Washington as General

- George Washington was originally selected by the Continental Congress to head the Continental Army not because of his previous military record, but because he was a well-established and respected figure in Virginia and had affirmed that the southern colonies would fight for Massachusetts in the wake of Lexington and Concord.
- Washington admitted that he did not think himself “equal to the command I am honored with,” and he wasn't.
- He succeeded in maintaining a siege of Boston during 1775 and forced a British withdrawal from Boston in March of 1776. But he also ordered Benedict Arnold's ill-advised effort to take Quebec in 1775, which ended disastrously.
- In the summer of 1776, the British invaded New York, defeated Washington at the Battle of Brooklyn Heights, and took over New York City as their headquarters for the rest of the war. They went on to defeat Washington again at White Plains, capture Fort Mifflin, and force the abandonment of Fort Mifflin in New Jersey. Washington was chased all the way through New Jersey and across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.

- All that prevented the pitiful remnants of Washington’s army (now fewer than 3,000) from evaporating at the end of 1776—and the Revolution from ending in failure—was his desperate and successful raid on the Hessian garrison at Trenton on Christmas Day, followed by his successful raid on the British garrison at Princeton.
- In the following year, the British defeated Washington again in the battles of Brandywine Creek and Germantown and took the American capital of Philadelphia. Washington went into winter quarters at Valley Forge.
- At that point, a movement known as Conway Cabal emerged in both the officer corps and the Continental Congress to replace Washington with General Horatio Gates. Conway Cabal was squelched, but the attacks on Washington’s competence continued.
- From 1778–1780, Washington’s forces under subordinate commanders also suffered a series of disastrous defeats in Georgia and the Carolinas. Indeed, with the exception of the 1777 Saratoga victory, in which Washington was not directly involved, the general had only one major victory after Trenton and Princeton in the entire war, at Yorktown.
  - But Washington realized that he did not need a large number of battlefield victories to win the war and achieve independence; he had only to avoid the capture or destruction of the Continental Army to keep the Revolution alive until the British tired of the effort or were distracted by other concerns.
  - And that is exactly what happened. By the time of Yorktown, the British found themselves formally at war with France, Spain, and Holland, as well as unofficially at war with the rest of Europe. The British government also faced major dissent against the war at home. After the defeat at Yorktown, it was thus willing to make peace and recognize American independence.

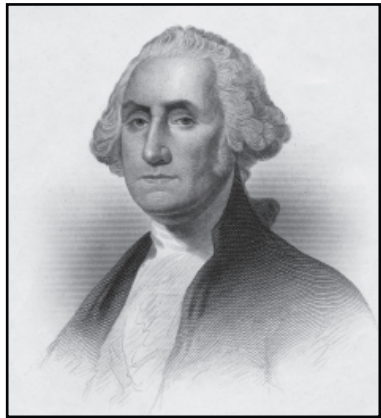
## **The Newburgh Conspiracy**

- At least as important as the Yorktown victory was Washington's recognition of the appropriate strategy, along with what he did after Yorktown but before completion of the formal peace treaty: his squelching of the Newburgh Conspiracy, one of the most dangerous events in U.S. history.
- While the Continental Army was encamped at Newburgh, New York, during the winter of 1782–1783, officers upset over Congress's refusal to fulfill past promises regarding pay circulated documents denouncing Congress, threatening its supremacy over the military, and calling for a meeting to discuss how to proceed.
- These officers had been encouraged by some political figures who wanted to use the threat of a possible coup to force Congress to agree to an import tax that would have strengthened national power and who turned to the anti-Washington group around General Gates to help foment the threat.
- Washington quickly squelched what could have easily become a real attempted coup, denouncing the documents and countering the threat by reminding his officers in a special meeting of what they had fought for and how perilous their behavior was to liberty.
- He followed that up later in the year with his own resignation as commander of the army. This formal renunciation of military power, as well as the refusal to seize power earlier when he easily could have, made him the American Cincinnatus—the ancient hero who had been granted absolute power, had saved the Roman Republic in a military crisis, and had then given up his power voluntarily.
- This move endeared Washington to his countrymen. In effect, he became the embodiment, as well as the defender, of the American concepts of liberty and civic virtue. He was asked to preside at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 and thereby lend his prestige to the document the convention produced to replace the Articles of Confederation.

- Given that prestige, it was also apparent that Washington would be elected as the first president under this new frame of government, and he was, unanimously in the electoral college.

### Washington as President

- As the first president, Washington set critical precedents in just about everything he did, many of which continue to this day. He also had many specific policy accomplishments, including creating a sound currency and fiscal structure to pay off the national debt, crushing the Whiskey Rebellion, and securing the western frontier by various treaties.
- In 1793, Washington managed to avoid war with Britain and maintain American neutrality during the European war that erupted in the wake of France's declaration of a republic and execution of its king.
- In one area, however, Washington failed miserably: avoiding a major split between his key advisers, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, and among the American people over his policies. That split resulted, during his second term, in the formation of two national political parties and, by century's end, almost a civil war.



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**Neither a great general nor a great president, Washington's actions during the Revolution and his two terms in office were nonetheless vital to solidifying the American ideology of republican liberty.**

### The Neutrality Compromise

- Washington had appointed the northerner Hamilton and the southerner Jefferson to the two most important cabinet posts, Treasury and State, to avoid division. But the two quickly came into

sharp disagreement over fiscal policies, foreign policy, and their interpretation of the Constitution.

- In general terms, the key differences between the two were as follows: (1) In fiscal policy, Jefferson opposed Hamilton's idea of a national bank and his entire fiscal program; (2) in foreign policy, Hamilton leaned toward neutrality favoring Britain, while Jefferson advocated neutrality favoring France; and (3) in constitutional interpretation, Hamilton maintained a broad view of the powers of the federal government as opposed to the state governments, while Jefferson held a narrow one. Their followers soon referred to themselves as Federalists (for Hamilton) and Democratic-Republicans (for Jefferson).
- Some have seen Hamilton and Jefferson as Washington's surrogate sons and what followed—the neutrality compromise of 1793—as a desperate and failed attempt by Washington to steer a middle course between the two and avoid a “family” crisis.
- Hamilton recommended an immediate proclamation of neutrality in the conflict between Britain and France and no recognition of the new French government or its minister, Genêt. Jefferson recommended the opposite, and Washington's compromise was to issue a Neutrality Proclamation but also to recognize the new French government and receive Genêt.
- Gradually, Washington came to favor Hamilton's positions, and indeed, Hamilton used Washington's prestige to obtain congressional approval of both his fiscal program and the Jay Treaty guaranteeing continued peace with England. The unpopularity of the Jay Treaty—which smacked of surrender on neutral rights issues to the hated British—led to both public and private denunciations of Washington.

### **The Farewell Address**

- Washington announced his retirement after two terms in a document known as the Farewell Address. Contrary to popular belief, that

document was not a call for isolation from European or world affairs. It was a warning against emotionalism in foreign affairs and against future permanent alliances given the grief the wartime alliance with France had cost Washington.

- But the basis of that warning is Washington's preceding warning against political parties based on geography. For Washington, such parties weakened the United States and invited European powers to exploit the split in order to increase their own power in the New World.
- The importance of Washington's advice in foreign affairs has tended to bury what may be the most important part of the address: his decision to leave the presidency voluntarily and after only two terms. It established a precedent for the two-term limit that lasted for more than 140 years and is now enshrined in a constitutional amendment.
- As he had done in his military career, Washington once again voluntarily gave up power and, in doing so, reinforced the constitutional emphasis on limiting the power of government offices as a way of preserving republicanism and liberty.

### A Negative Legacy

- Washington was far from perfect as either a general or a president, yet his accomplishments were extraordinary in both fields: He virtually created the Continental Army and developed the appropriate strategy for using it to attain victory. He renounced absolute power when it could have been his and voluntarily gave up power at war's end. As president, he made the new frame of government work and established countless precedents, including the two-term limit when he once again voluntarily renounced power.
- Washington's most important contributions were, thus, negative, that is, critical for what did not happen: creation of a dictatorship. But they were nonetheless vital to the success of the nation.

## Suggested Reading

Chernow, *Washington: A Life*.

Clausewitz, *On War*.

Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*.

Wills, *Cincinnatus*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do we tend to ignore negative as opposed to positive accomplishments in history?
2. What personal characteristics and values made Washington so vital to the United States during the War of Independence and his presidency?

# Confusions about Jefferson and Hamilton

## Lecture 5

**D**uring the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton held sharply conflicting views on foreign and domestic policies and on constitutional interpretation. Today, many label Hamilton's views as conservative and Jefferson's as liberal and see their conflict as a harbinger of contemporary battles. Yet the specific issues over which they argued are not relevant to modern Americans, and their views have little to do with current definitions of "conservative" and "liberal." Still, their conflicts are relevant to us, albeit not in the ways we might think.

### The Split over Fiscal Policy

- Washington had selected Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton for his two most important cabinet positions as part of a general effort to maintain sectional balance—not political/ideological balance—within the new national government.
- The split that developed between the two was primarily over two issues: government fiscal policies and definitions of neutrality as a result of the war between England and France.
- As Treasury secretary, Hamilton believed that the most pressing problems of the United States were financial. The country needed to establish credit at home and abroad if the new government was to work.
  - Hamilton thus proposed that the new national government assume all state Revolutionary War debts, combine them with the national debt, and fund both at par value via a new bond issue.
  - He also proposed new taxes on imports and some domestically produced items to pay government debts and the establishment of a combined private and government-controlled national bank to serve as a depository for treasury notes and fiscal agent

for the government, with its own bank notes to be considered legal tender.

- These actions would tie the wealthy merchant and financial class to the success of the new government, while providing a new circulating medium, establishing the credit of the government, and increasing its power and prestige.
- The opposition to Hamilton was at first led by James Madison, not Jefferson. Later, Jefferson opposed the establishment of the national bank on the grounds that the power to do so was not specifically enumerated in Article I of the Constitution. Hamilton argued that the power was constitutional via the “necessary and proper” clause in Article I. Washington sided with Hamilton, but a serious split had emerged.

### **The Split over Foreign Affairs**

- The division over foreign affairs became apparent in 1793, when the French Revolution turned radical with the creation of the French Republic, the execution of the king, and the institution of the Reign of Terror. This resulted in the outbreak of general war in Europe, pitting republican France against Britain and all the other major monarchies of Europe.
- Everyone in the cabinet agreed that the United States should remain neutral, but a treaty of alliance was in effect with France dating back to the Revolutionary War. Further, the question arose of which country U.S. neutrality should favor. Hamilton argued for neutrality favoring Britain, while Jefferson advocated neutrality favoring the “sister republic” of France.
- At first, Washington took a middle-of-the-road position, but by 1794–1795, he sided with Hamilton by agreeing to the Jay Treaty with England. In an effort to avoid war, the treaty acceded to the British definition of “neutral rights” in return for British evacuation of posts on U.S. territory and peace.

- The Jay Treaty led to a public uproar against it and formation of the first two national political parties: the Federalists under Hamilton and the Democratic-Republicans under Jefferson and Madison.

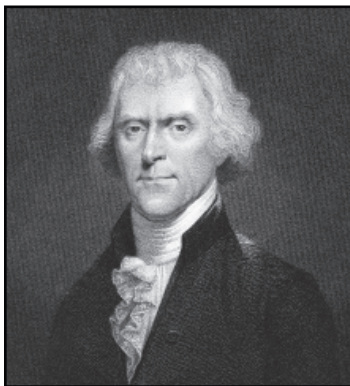
### The Split Widens

- In the presidential election of 1796, Federalist John Adams narrowly defeated Jefferson, who became the vice president.
  - During Adams's presidency, the dispute between the two political parties became white-hot as the United States engaged in an undeclared naval war with France as a result of the Jay Treaty.
  - The Federalists passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, directed against the Democratic-Republicans, while Jefferson and Madison responded with the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, threatening nullification of the acts and other "unconstitutional" laws.
  - The specific issues addressed by these laws and resolutions are of little or no relevance to us today, but many argue that the conflicting beliefs behind the issues are significant, though not in the ways we might think.
- As we've noted, Jefferson argued for a narrow interpretation of the Constitution with regard to national power versus state power, while Hamilton argued for a broad interpretation via the necessary and proper clause.
  - This argument over state versus national power is a constant in U.S. history, right down to this day. It pitted Federalists against Democratic-Republicans throughout this era, then Democrats against Whigs in the 1830s and 1840s, then Democrats against Republicans in the modern era.
  - In this case, however, the positions in the 1790s were reversed from what they would later be and still are today. At the time, the supposedly aristocratic Hamilton argued for more national power and the supposedly democratic Jefferson argued for

less, whereas since the 1930s, Jefferson's liberal disciples have argued for more and their conservative opponents for less!

- Also relevant in this regard was Jefferson's welcoming of the French Revolution while Hamilton and his followers abhorred it and favored the British.

- Hamilton favored the British because British trade was essential to provide revenues for the government via import taxes and because British credit and manufactured goods were necessary for his vision of U.S. development.



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**Although Jefferson argued for less national power in his clash with Hamilton, as president, he actually expanded the power of the federal government.**

- At the same time, Jefferson's opposition was based not so much on his love for republican France but on the fact that he did not support the Hamiltonian domestic program and, thus, did not believe that the United States needed British trade or credit. He also feared dependency on the powerful British and desired to use a French connection as a counterweight.
- It's also true that, in many ways, Hamilton was not really aristocratic and Jefferson was not really democratic. Both men believed strongly in republicanism (meaning representative government) as opposed to monarchy, but the questions here were: Who would be the representatives, and who would they represent?
    - Despite his reputation, Jefferson was not a democrat who believed in majority rule. He was a slaveholder and aristocrat who believed in property qualifications for voting. He also saw a decentralized, agrarian society of self-sufficient yeoman

farmers as the best way to preserve liberty, and he believed in the “politics of deference”—hardly a democratic notion!

- Hamilton, on the other hand, was no aristocrat. He was an illegitimate child from the West Indies, and he believed that centralized power was necessary to preserve liberty from both internal chaos and external threat. He also believed that self-interest rules human nature and should be used to create such centralized power by a linking of the wealthy commercial and financial interests to those of the national government. Jefferson saw self-interest as evil.

### Modern-Day Relevance

- The specific issues facing Jefferson and Hamilton, and their disagreements, have little to do with the issues we as a nation face now, yet their disagreement is still relevant to us on multiple levels.
- First, the disagreement over the interpretation of the Constitution and national versus state power has been a constant throughout U.S. history down to the present day. Here, it is Hamilton’s view that contemporary liberals embrace and Jefferson’s that contemporary conservatives embrace.
- Second, Jefferson’s agrarianism and aristocratic emphasis on property qualifications for voting possessed a strong democratic streak in the agrarian American world of the 1790s. At the time, the United States was overwhelmingly populated by farmers who owned their own land and, thus, possessed sufficient property to vote. Hamilton’s commercial/manufacturing and urban vision possesses an unwitting democratic streak in the opportunities for advancement it would provide in the future.
- The conflicting views of Hamilton and Jefferson on human nature and the role of self-interest in government also have continued relevance.
  - Hamilton had a pessimistic view of human nature, which he saw as motivated by self-interest. He sought to harness

that self-interest by tying the wealthy and powerful to the new government.

- Jefferson saw self-interest and the mutual dependence of government and commercialism as leading to corruption and the destruction of liberty. He also believed strongly in republican virtue and political disinterest (rather than self-interest) as appropriate for politics in a republican society and as the key to preserving liberty.
- Although Jefferson's words still resonate with our democratic beliefs today, it is Hamilton's vision and views regarding a politics based on self-interest that would become our reality. The concept of republican virtue as central to politics would disappear with the deaths of the Founding Fathers and their replacement by a new generation of political leaders with different ideas.

### **The Aftermath of the Split**

- Hamilton's death did not result in the immediate demise of the Federalist Party, but it left the party leaderless and geographically isolated in New England, while westward expansion brought in more supporters of Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans.
- Jefferson and his successor, James Madison, succeeded in wooing moderate Federalists into the Democratic-Republican Party by agreeing to some Federalist ideas, including a protective tariff for American industry and the chartering of a second national bank.
- During the War of 1812, the remaining extreme Federalists further isolated themselves by opposing the war and, at the Hartford Convention, hypocritically calling for states' rights and virtually threatening secession. News of American military victories and the negotiation of a peace treaty ending the war with Britain led to the party's disgrace and collapse.

- In the election of 1820, the Democratic-Republican candidate James Monroe ran unopposed, and the nation entered an era of one-party rule, during which the Democratic-Republican Party encompassed the views of both Hamilton and Jefferson.
- That, of course, could not and would not continue. The Hamilton-Jefferson disagreements would soon reassert themselves in the creation of the so-called second two-party political system during the 1820s and 1830s.

### Suggested Reading

Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*.

Ellis, *American Sphinx*.

———, *Founding Brothers*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How are the conflicts between Hamilton and Jefferson relevant to us today?
2. Where else in U.S. history do we tend to anachronistically project our contemporary values onto the past?

# Andrew Jackson—An Odd Symbol of Democracy

## Lecture 6

The election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1828 ushered in a new era in U.S. history, one in which property qualifications for voting disappeared and the nation truly became democratic. Yet Jackson was an odd symbol of democratic reform: He was not himself a “common man,” and many of the policies he championed would not be considered democratic today. This lecture’s careful examination of the age of Jackson reveals much about the nature of American democracy—both in his time and today.

### Jackson’s Life

- Andrew Jackson was born into poverty on the Carolina frontier in 1767. By the age of 14, he was an orphan. He moved west and prospered, becoming a slaveholding planter and a major political figure in the new state of Tennessee.
- During the War of 1812, Jackson became a national military hero for his victories at the battles of Horseshoe Bend and New Orleans. He also achieved fame for his invasion and conquest of Spanish Florida, which led to the acquisition of Florida.
- Throughout these years, he prospered economically, made a fortune, lost it, and then made another one. In doing so, he became a symbol of the common man, as well as a symbol of his era and its values.
  - He stopped army desertions in the War of 1812 and managed to defeat the British army—the finest in the world—at New Orleans with a ragtag force of farmers, pirates, Indians, and others.
  - He ignored diplomatic protocol and international law by invading Spanish Florida in pursuit of hostile Indians and escaped slaves who had crossed the border. In the process, he took two Spanish forts, executed two British subjects,

deposed the Spanish governor of Pensacola, seized the Spanish archives, and appointed his own governor.

- He defeated a superb marksman in a duel in 1806, pretending he was unharmed—even though a bullet had lodged in his chest—then hitting his opponent with a mortal shot.
- The fact that Jackson’s success was tempered by personal tragedy only enhanced his appeal as a man of the people. His beloved wife, Rachel, died just a few months before his presidential inauguration.

### **Jackson in Politics**

- Jackson emerged as a major political figure with his 1823 election to the Senate and the 1824 presidential election, which took place during the so-called Era of Good Feelings, when the Federalist Party had disappeared and left only one national party, the Democratic-Republicans.
- In 1824, however, this party split over its presidential candidate, and four candidates ultimately emerged for the race: Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Senator Henry Clay (Kentucky), Senator John Calhoun (South Carolina), and Jackson.
  - Adams was the son of the former president and a brilliant diplomat. As secretary of state under Monroe, he was responsible for the acquisition of Florida and the Monroe Doctrine.
  - Clay, known as “Harry of the West,” was a former speaker of the House, a war hawk, a peace negotiator at Ghent, and a popular voice of the new West.
  - Calhoun was another former war hawk and nationalist, but one who would soon move in the opposite direction to defend slavery in the South. He had a reputation for having a sharp mind, but he dropped out of the race early to run for the vice presidential position, which he won.

- Jackson ran as a war hero and an alternative to Clay as the voice of the new West.
- Jackson won a plurality of both the popular and the electoral vote but no majority; thus, the election went to the House of Representatives, where each state casts one vote. The contest came down to Jackson and Adams; Adams won with Clay's support, then appointed Clay secretary of state. Outrage against this "corrupt bargain" poisoned Adams's presidency and ensured Jackson's victory in the 1828 election.

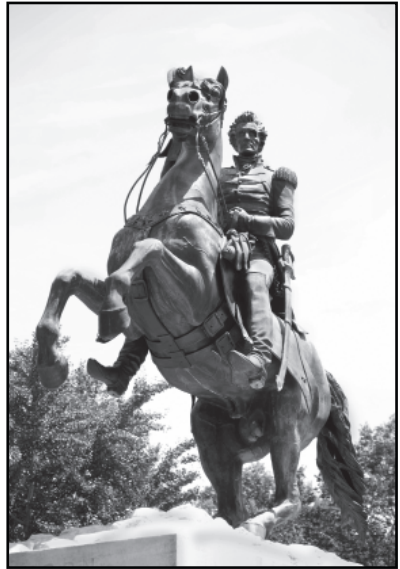
### **Jackson as President**

- Many historians agree that democracy made Jackson rather than vice versa. Indeed, no one really knew what Jackson stood for in 1829, but as president, he would dominate events and help to define the main political characteristics of this new democracy that had elected him.
- Key events of Jackson's presidency included Indian removal, the Maysville Road veto, the nullification crisis, and the destruction of the second national bank.
  - In the 1830s, Jackson refused to enforce the ruling of the Supreme Court that the Cherokee Nation was entitled to federal protection from Georgia state actions to force its removal. Instead, he used federal forces to impel the movement of Cherokees out of Georgia, resulting in the notorious Trail of Tears.
  - In the Maysville Road event, Jackson vetoed a bill that would have authorized federal funds for internal improvements, insisting this was a state issue and that the bill overstepped the powers granted to Congress.
  - Although Jackson supported slavery and, thus, the gag rule against abolitionists, he was an intense nationalist who would not tolerate South Carolina's attempt to nullify a new tariff law.

- Jackson also destroyed the second Bank of the United States through his veto of its new charter and removal of federal funds before the old charter expired, moving those funds into state “pet” banks.

### A Transformation of the Presidency

- During these and other events, Jackson transformed the office of president in the name of “the people.”
- He made massive use of the presidential veto, expanded executive power at the expense of Congress, refused to enforce Supreme Court decisions with which he disagreed, and became known to his enemies as “King Andrew.”
- Jackson justified the expansion of presidential power on the grounds that he was the only government official elected by all the people and that this new power was needed to tear down special privilege that had come to dominate Washington.
- Jackson instituted rotation in office and the spoils system for federal appointees, a move he justified as a democratic attack on the entrenched aristocracy of educated bureaucrats. He also instituted the “kitchen cabinet” of special personal advisers not subject to Senate confirmation,



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**Through his military exploits and business endeavors, Jackson became a symbol of his era: a man able to overcome adversity through an understanding of the natural order and possession of both divine protection and incredible will.**

justifying it as a move away from the elitism of the cabinet and necessary given the presence of political appointees in that body whom he did not trust.

- Jackson justified all these moves in the name of democracy, but today, it's clear that many were not democratic and that they resulted in corruption of the American political system, a dangerous expansion and abuse of executive power, a crippling of the American financial system, and a gross denial of rights for opponents of slavery and for Indians.
- Interestingly, many of Jackson's revolutionary moves were also justified via the old Jeffersonian doctrine of limited government and states' rights. The Jacksonian coalition was made up of many contradictory elements that had little in common other than the desire for change. The lowest common denominator able to hold this coalition together was a strict interpretation of the Constitution.

### **The Bank War**

- The contradictions in Jacksonian democracy are best illustrated through analysis of the so-called Bank War.
- Chartered in 1816 for 20 years, the second Bank of the United States stood as a symbol of the Democratic-Republican Party's move to political center after the Jeffersonian opposition to the first national bank. Control of the bank was divided 20/80 between the government and the private sector.
- The bank served many useful functions, both for the government and for the American financial and economic system, but it also had many enemies. It was distrusted by small farmers and eastern workers and opposed by businessmen, western bankers, Wall Street financiers, southern slaveholders, and Jeffersonian Republicans.
- The lowest common denominator among these opponents, which Jackson used to justify his veto of the bank recharter bill in 1832, was strict interpretation of the Constitution to destroy special

privilege. But this is also an argument against any government control of the economy and a validation of Adam Smith's economic ideology of laissez-faire.

- Jackson followed up on his veto after his 1832 reelection with a personal vendetta to destroy the bank, despite the fact that its charter still had three years to run. To carry out the destruction of the bank, he had to fire two Treasury secretaries—both of whom feared financial and economic disaster if the bank was shut down—before he found a third who was willing to assist him in removing government deposits from the bank.
- Disaster did indeed follow; Jackson placed federal funds in state “pet” banks, which then used the funds to underwrite more paper money, leading to a vicious cycle of overspeculation in land and inflation.
- Jackson tried to stop the speculation with his Specie Circular in 1836, announcing that henceforth the government would accept only gold and silver for land. The land market collapsed, and overextended banks called in their loans, which led to panic and depression in 1837 under Jackson's successor, Martin Van Buren.

### Jackson's Legacy

- Jackson is an apt symbol for a democratic era in which all free white males obtained the right to vote and for an ideological revolution in economics as laissez-faire triumphed over government direction of economic growth. The two were now fused in American ideology by the concept of equality of opportunity and, thus, no special favors from the government for anyone.
- Jackson also helped to re-create a two-party system in the United States. His coalition, now known as Democrats, united around the issues of destruction of special privilege and strict interpretation of the Constitution. His opponents, known as National Republicans, or Whigs, favored continued government control of economic growth and, thus, a broad interpretation of the Constitution.

- Many at the time and still today view Jackson’s laissez-faire economics and his political behavior as democratic. But in reality, his economic policies marked the triumph of those who favored a highly speculative economy with rapid growth and its ensuing risks over the traditionalists who favored government supervision and more modest growth.
- In the political realm, the spoils system and other related political reforms wound up enhancing the “special privileges” for some that Jackson sought to destroy. Further, the expansion of rights for free white males during the age of Jackson was paradoxically accompanied by the rise of the “cult of true womanhood” and “scientific racism,” almost as if expanded rights for some meant that others must be defined as inferior.

### Suggested Reading

Meacham, *American Lion*.

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*.

Wilentz, *Andrew Jackson*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why are many of the political reforms considered democratic in the 1830s now considered undemocratic and corrupt?
2. Why do individuals like Andrew Jackson emerge as symbols of their eras despite the facts about their lives and beliefs that run contrary to the symbolism? What other individuals in U.S. history have emerged in this way?

# The Second Great Awakening—Enduring Impacts

## Lecture 7

The fact that some evangelical groups are politically active has concerned many Americans because we are used to thinking of religion and politics as existing in separate realms. But that is not the case historically. This lecture looks at the Second Great Awakening, focusing on the ways in which it both reflected and affected American politics in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the process, we will see that this 200-year-old religious movement continues to influence us today.

### Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the Second Great Awakening

- The early 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an intellectual and spiritual upheaval in both the United States and Europe. This movement, known as romanticism, emphasized emotion and intuition, replacing the previous Enlightenment emphasis on reason. In New England intellectual circles, this led to the transcendentalist movement, which was translated into political action by such thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.
- The mass emotional movement at this time was the Second Great Awakening, a widespread evangelical religious revival that downplayed theological arguments in favor of heartfelt personal experiences.
- Theologically, the Second Great Awakening ended once and for all in the United States the old Puritan concept of predestination, that is, the belief that salvation was available only to a select few chosen by and known to God before they were even born. In its place grew the belief that salvation was available to anyone who admitted his or her sins, accepted Jesus Christ, and chose to lead a good Christian life. Sin thus became voluntary and alterable, and in rejecting it, one could be “born again.”

## The Impact on Politics

- The Awakening resulted in an explosion of religious commitment, with regular church attendance increasing dramatically. It democratized American religion by making salvation available to all, interestingly, at the same time that American political life was being democratized by the Jacksonian movement. But it also had more specific and direct influences on politics.
  
- Many Americans at the time held a different interpretation of the Book of Revelation than the one popular today.
  - This interpretation included doctrines of perfectionism and immediatism that emphasized the need for saved Christians to save others and to work to perfect the world as a prerequisite to—and a way to hasten—the Second Coming of Christ.
  
  - Some thought the Second Coming would occur in their own lifetimes, but many more thought in terms of a millennium that they believed was to precede the Second Coming, a time in which the world would be perfected and one they claimed had begun with the establishment of the United States.
  
  - Perfectionism led to extraordinary communal experiments as some Americans sought to live on earth as they would in heaven. Extremes ran from the Shakers, who banned sex altogether, to the Oneida Community, in which every male member of the commune was married to every female member.
  
  - Far more lasting than these communes was the birth and growth at this time of the polygamous Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
  
- Many other evangelicals became involved in a series of major reform movements that arose during this time.
  - Such famous revivalist preachers as Lyman Beecher and Charles G. Finney rejected predestination and original sin in favor of free will and the idea that salvation was available to all in the here and now. They also preached that one could aid

Christ's work by acting both to save others and to reform or perfect society.

- One major reform movement was in the field of education, where such figures as Horace Mann emphasized the importance of public education supported by state taxes to strengthen religious and family values and to avoid permanent social classes by providing tools for economic success.
- Another movement took place in prison reform, with Lewis Dwight and others focusing on the rehabilitation rather than merely the incarceration of lawbreakers.
- Other reformers, such as Dorothea Dix, focused on care of the mentally ill, establishing the concept of the asylum as a place where sanity could be restored rather than one where insanity was locked away under atrocious conditions.
- One of the biggest and most important reform movements of the time was temperance. Alcoholism had become a major problem, with consumption per person in 1830 three times what it is today. Calls for temperance soon shifted to those for total abstinence, and by the 1840s–1850s, some states enforced legal prohibition.

### **Abolitionism**

- Although temperance may have been the most popular of the reform movements, the most controversial and consequential was abolitionism—the movement for the immediate and total abolition of slavery.
- Abolitionism differed from previous antislavery movements, with their emphasis on gradual emancipation and resettlement in Africa, in its focus on slaveholding as a mortal sin. Thus, for those who truly wished to be saved, slaveholding must be brought to an immediate and total end.

- Contrary to popular belief, most northerners were not abolitionists. Indeed, many abolitionists were denounced and attacked in the North as fanatics, irresponsible agitators, and self-righteous absolutists. Neither the Free Soil Party nor the later Republican Party adopted abolitionism before the middle of the Civil War.
- Nevertheless, abolitionists played a vital role in awakening northerners to the evils of slavery and the need to do something about it.

### **The Role of Women in Reform**

- Women were key figures in the abolitionist movement, as well as the temperance and other reform movements. Their involvement created an uproar and led to the first women's rights movement in the United States.
- According to the “cult of domesticity” then in vogue, women's proper role was in the private sphere, while men were engaged in



**The Second Great Awakening saw the democratization and expansion of religion in America that remain with us to this day.**

the public sphere. That private sphere focused on the home, where women were responsible for raising children and creating a retreat from the marketplace for their husbands.

- This, in turn, was part of what one historian has termed the “cult of true womanhood” for middle-class women, based on the four interlocking pillars of domesticity, piety, submissiveness, and purity. Men were considered to be more competitive, dominant, rational, and secular than women by nature, while women were more cooperative, emotional, virtuous, and religious.
- At same time, we see the rise of the family as an institution of affection, dominated by love between husband and wife and between parents and children. This coincided with a declining birthrate as children lost their economic importance and parents practiced extensive birth control.
- Given the fact that women were considered to be more virtuous and religious and were responsible for the moral development of their children, it is far from accidental that they became active in their churches. But with the emphasis on reforming society in the Second Great Awakening, religious women ironically found themselves entering the public sphere in their calls for temperance and other reforms.
  - Women’s benevolent associations began to form to promote moral reforms to control men’s “baser instincts,” and women began to speak at public meetings for the first time to promote such reforms. This led to major controversies within the churches and within the abolitionist movement.
  - The reform movements and the strong reactions to their participation also led some women to question the validity of the entire system of domesticity and to launch a reform movement of their own for women’s rights.

## **Disestablishment of Religion**

- Disestablishment of religion in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries ironically appears to have led to an extraordinary democratization and expansion of American religion in the Second Great Awakening, to the point where Americans became and remain today the most religious people in the industrialized world.
- The Second Great Awakening's emphasis on emotion rather than formal theology and on rejecting sin and accepting Christ continued throughout 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. history and continue today with the contemporary evangelical movement.
- The Second Great Awakening also had profound political repercussions. Abolitionism, of course, had the most immediate impact in terms of its role in the coming of Civil War, but not far behind it was the anti-alcohol crusade, leading to nationwide prohibition in the 1920s. Ideologies of many of the other reform movements continue to this day, most notably in the fields of education, prison reform, treatment of mental illness, and women's rights.
- The camp meeting emphasis on renouncing sin publicly that emerged in the Awakening also continues today, a fact illustrated by the call heard on many campuses over the past few decades to "stand up and admit you are a racist." This is incredibly similar to the "stand up and admit you are a sinner" of the evangelical camp meetings.
- Nineteenth-century religious rhetoric has consistently reappeared throughout 20<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. history, particularly during time of war. The Cold War, for example, was seen as a struggle against "Godless communism."
- Alexis de Tocqueville, who was touring the United States in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, said that the religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck him, and he marveled at the number of sects and their apparently inseparable

relationship to American concepts of liberty. Perhaps in this regard, all our politics are—and always have been—evangelical.

### Suggested Reading

Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*.

Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why do we tend to view religion and politics as separate realms despite their historical linkage?
2. In what specific ways is the Second Great Awakening still with us?

# Did Slavery Really Cause the Civil War?

## Lecture 8

Over the last 150 years, historians have cited numerous causes other than slavery to explain the Civil War: conflict over the extension of slavery into the territories or over states' rights, differences in the cultures and economies of the North and South, and perceptions of conspiracy brought on by a particular American belief system. Nevertheless, as we examine these causes, we'll see that slavery was, in a unique way, indeed the primary cause of the war, and we'll learn much about the nature of historical study.

### The Extension of Slavery

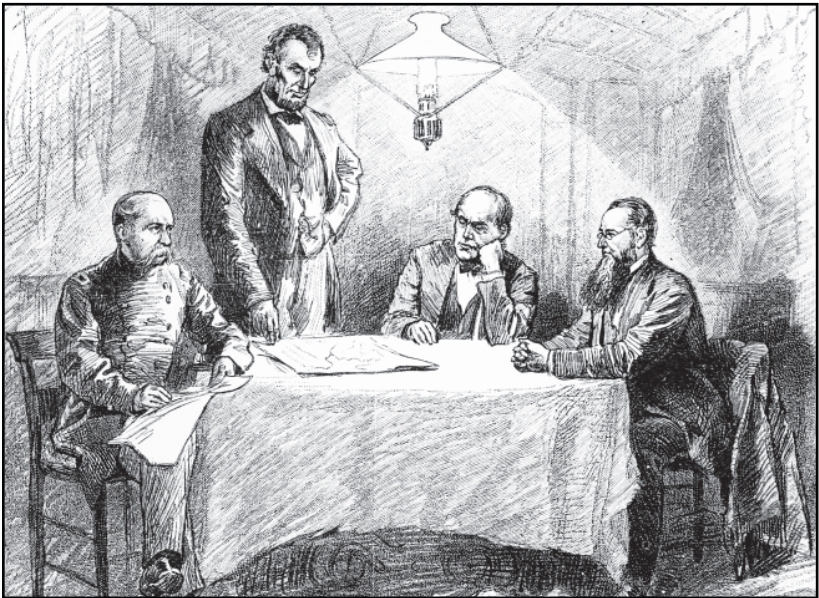
- The key issue of the 1850s was not slavery per se but its extension into the western territories. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed by Congress in 1854, set off a firestorm by opening to slavery territories previously closed to it by the 1820 Missouri Compromise.
- That firestorm led to the event known as Bleeding Kansas, a small-scale civil war in the Kansas territory, and to the replacement of the Whig Party by the new Republican Party, a sectional party committed to reversal of the act and prohibition of slavery in all the territories.
- The Republican Lincoln was elected in 1860 without a majority of the total vote but with victories in every one of the populous Northern states, thereby giving him a majority in the electoral college. With his election, South Carolina and other states of the Deep South seceded, and with the start of hostilities at Fort Sumter, the states of the Upper South followed suit.
- Lincoln's call for troops in April 1861 was to suppress the rebellion in South Carolina and preserve the Union, not to abolish slavery. Indeed, before hostilities began, Lincoln had been willing to

guarantee the preservation of slavery in the states where it existed and had called for barring slavery only in the territories.

- Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was issued as a war measure. It did not apply to border slave states that had remained in the Union or to occupied Confederate territories but affected only those areas still in a state of insurrection.
- In light of these facts, historians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to question the centrality of slavery to the coming of Civil War.

### State versus National Power

- One revisionist interpretation of the cause of the Civil War focused on the old conflict between state and national power. Three years after the war ended, for example, Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens maintained that this was the real issue, with the



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The abolition of slavery was not a Union war aim in 1861 or the first half of 1862; at the time, Lincoln's objective was preservation of the Union.

South seceding and fighting to support the primacy of states' rights over the federal government.

- As we've seen, this conflict had existed since the days of Hamilton and Jefferson. Was the national government of the Constitution a creation of the states and, therefore, subordinate to them and possessing only limited powers? Or was it a union of the people, possessing strong implied powers over the states?
- Contrary to popular belief, the South has not always defended and the North had not always opposed states' rights over national power.
  - New England had supported states' rights and opposed the federal government before and during the War of 1812 and during the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848.
  - Interestingly, the northeast did not control the federal government during those two wars. Indeed, as historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. made clear during the 1930s, states' rights had consistently been used throughout U.S. history by whichever section did not control the national government and felt oppressed by national power.
  - It was thus a device to protect specific sectional interests and, in truth, a rationalization for, rather than a cause of, the Civil War.

### **Economic and Cultural Interests**

- Of course, slavery was among the sectional interests that led the South to defend states' rights at the time, but historians during the 1930s saw slavery as just one part of a much larger Southern economic interest. In this view, the Civil War was the defense of an agrarian economy against a diametrically opposed economic system of industrial and commercial capitalism in the North.
- These two economic systems clashed not only over slave versus free labor but also over taxation, tariffs, railroads, monetary policies, and land policies, issues requiring federal action. Given that the three-fifths slavery clause in the Constitution was the basis of

Southern agrarian power in the federal government, disagreements over economic interests became a struggle between competing economic systems for control of that government.

- But economic differences between the North and South had existed since colonial times and had not led to war. In fact, in many ways, the different economies were complementary rather than competitive.
- Some historians answered that the two economic systems were in themselves part of what had become two unique cultures: a Southern agrarian society and a Northern society with different political, economic, social, and intellectual values. Here, too, though, the idea of an aristocratic, agrarian South versus a bustling capitalist North is largely myth. The similarities between the two regions far outweighed their differences.

### **A Conspiracy against Liberty**

- In the 1930s, a group of historians argued that Americans on both sides of the Civil War saw the other as engaged in a conspiracy against liberty.
- Despite the fact that neither Lincoln nor any other major Republican figure proposed abolishing slavery where it existed, many Southerners believed that the hidden aim of what they labeled the “Black Republicans” was to destroy slavery entirely and institute black rule in the South. Similarly, many Northerners believed that Southern slaveholders were engaged in a conspiracy to spread slavery to the North and, thereby, control the entire Union.
- No such conspiracies ever existed, but many people believed they did, and people act on the basis of their beliefs, even if those beliefs are false. Thus, some historians argued that false perceptions led each side to believe it was threatened by an illusionary plot and to go to war to defend its rights.

- Historians also argued that the blame for belief in these conspiracies should be placed on fanatics, agitators, and blundering politicians on both sides. But this leads us to ask why the American people would believe and follow such irresponsible agitators and political incompetents?

### **The American Belief System**

- In the last three or four decades, many historians have concentrated on examining the general beliefs—that is, the ideology—that led Americans to their perceptions of conspiracy. These historians have concluded that the basic problem lay with the belief system itself.
- Americans had come to believe that there should be no barriers to their individual efforts to achieve their own destiny and perfection, and that of their society, in this nation of equal rights, equal opportunity, and individual liberty.
- The problem was that Northerners and Southerners had, by the 1850s, defined their freedom in diametrically opposed terms: The Southerners' fundamental right to property (including slaves) collided with the Northerners' right to compete in a free market of equals, not slaves or slaveholders.
- The Southern idea of property rights also conflicted with the Northerners' concept of the rights all human beings possessed. As historian Avery Craven put it as early as 1950, "right and rights had become the symbols of all those interests and values" that divided North and South.
- Other historians, such as Allan Nevins, saw the slavery issue as inseparable from the "complementary problem of race adjustment." The root of the conflict, Nevins maintained, was that neither side was willing to "face these conjoined problems squarely." For historian David Donald, the cause of this unwillingness was a society "suffering from an excess of liberty" and, consequently, unable to deal rationally with differences.

- By the 1970s, another group of historians argued that a nation so devoted to individual liberty lacked, almost by definition, the strong social and institutional frameworks required to deal with their differences short of war.
- David Brion Davis put all this together in the 1970s and 1980s when he wrote that there had been, in the four decades before the Civil War, an “overleaping of boundaries of every kind” and a growing belief that the American people as a whole, like the American individual, were “free from the burdens of the past and free to shape their own national character.”

### Multiple Interpretations

- These different interpretations of the causes of the Civil War make abundantly clear that history is a subjective discipline in which disagreements are common. The study of such disagreements is called historiography.
- It’s also true that specific interpretations are usually tied in some way to the era in which they were written.
  - It is far from accidental, for example, that the generation that fought the war would come to view it, in the North, as a moral struggle over slavery and, in the South, as a more defensible support of states’ rights.
  - Similarly, it’s not surprising that an economic interpretation gained popularity during the years of the Great Depression or that the interpretations emphasizing fanatics and incompetent politicians should arise during the ascension of Hitler and Mussolini.
  - Of course, the emphasis on ideology developed during the Cold War, which was both a power conflict and an ideological one.
- It’s important to note that if one accepts this ideological approach, all the previous interpretations retain their validity.
  - Even if there were no conspiracies, no differences in economies or cultures, no basic disagreement over the nature of the Union,

and no chance of slavery establishing itself in the territories, Americans North and South believed otherwise because of their ideology—and they acted on the basis of those beliefs.

- Further, ideology and perceptions are themselves the products of all the general factors previously cited as causes of the war: economics, culture, politics, political theory, and moral values.
- The common denominator linking all of these previously cited causes is slavery, which is, therefore, the basic cause of the war.
- Have we simply come back to the earliest interpretation and wasted our time over the last 150 years in false interpretations linked to the values of specific eras? The answer is no. We are far from seeing slavery as the basic cause in the simplistic way originally proposed. Indeed, we now have a much better understanding of the causes of the war than ever before and of the ways in which our interpretations are shaped by the values of our era.

### Suggested Reading

McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

Perman and Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*.

Stampp, ed., *Causes of the Civil War*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Are past ideas that historians now consider rationalizations nevertheless causes because people believed and acted upon them?
2. In what ways does our present synthesis on slavery as the key cause of the Civil War differ from the one enunciated by historian James Ford Rhodes nearly 100 years ago: “there is a risk of referring any historic event to a single cause... of the American Civil War it may be safely asserted that there was a single cause, slavery”?

# The Civil War's Actual Turning Points

## Lecture 9

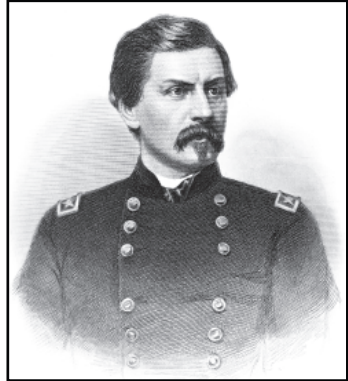
Most Americans would probably point to Gettysburg as the most important battle of the Civil War, the turning point when Confederate victory ceased to be a possibility. In reality, however, Gettysburg was not all that significant for the outcome of the Civil War. Far more consequential, both militarily and politically, were at least three other events: the Battle of Antietam, the Union capture of Vicksburg, and the Union capture of Atlanta.

### The Battle of Antietam

- The Battle of Antietam, fought on September 17, 1862, was not a clear-cut victory for either the North or the South, but in terms of importance, it was one of the most consequential battles of the Civil War.
- Before the battle, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had decided to follow up on his successful summer victories outside Richmond and at the Second Battle of Bull Run with an invasion of the North. If successful, his campaign could result in the capture of Washington and/or British and French intervention on the side of the Confederacy, either of which would mean Confederate victory and independence.
- But Lee's plans were foiled by the accidental Union discovery of his orders. Had the Union commander, General George McClellan, moved quickly, he could have destroyed Lee's army, but his slowness enabled Lee to bring his forces together at Sharpsburg, Maryland, along Antietam Creek. Still, Lee was put on the defensive against a concentrated Union army nearly twice as large as his own.
- Lee was able to counter three uncoordinated Union assaults on his line, but given his heavy casualties and the fact that his location in Maryland was no longer a secret, he was forced to end his

campaign and withdraw back into Virginia, with McClellan unable (or unwilling) to pursue.

- The battle itself was thus inconclusive on a tactical level, but it was a strategic defeat for Lee in that he had to end his invasion of the North. And it had decisive political and diplomatic consequences.
  - At the time, both the British and French governments were considering intervention on the side of the South, but Lee's withdrawal from Maryland convinced them to remain out of the conflict.
  - Further, Lee's withdrawal enabled Lincoln to portray the battle as a Union victory, despite McClellan's failures. Lincoln then used the occasion of this "victory" to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which altered the aim of the war from preserving the Union to ending slavery and made the possibility of British intervention in support of the South even less likely.



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**Despite his failures at Antietam and elsewhere, Union commander George B. McClellan became a viable peace candidate in the North in 1864, threatening Lincoln's reelection.**

### **The Battle of Gettysburg**

- Antietam was followed by major Union defeats against Lee at Fredericksburg in December 1862 and Chancellorsville in May 1863. In this latter battle, Lee almost destroyed a Union army twice the size of his own, but the victory did nothing to improve the chances of Confederate success.
  - It did not relieve the Union blockade that was gradually starving the Confederacy, and it did not relieve pressure on

Confederate forces in the west, where Union General Ulysses Grant had isolated and laid siege to the Confederate fortress of Vicksburg.

- If Vicksburg fell, Union forces would control the entire Mississippi River and effectively cut the Confederacy in half.
- Lee, therefore, decided to go on the offensive for a second time in June 1863 in an effort to achieve decisive results. This second invasion of the North brought him to Gettysburg in southern Pennsylvania.
- The most important day of that three-day battle is the one least studied—the first one. On that day, Lee's arriving army routed Union forces in the area and captured the town but failed to seize the high ground south of the town, which the Union army, now under General George Meade, immediately reinforced.
- Lee's uncoordinated assaults on Meade's right and left flanks on the second day failed, as did his famous assault on the Union center on the third day, Pickett's Charge. In retrospect, Lee should have broken off the battle after his second-day failures rather than launch the doomed frontal assault that so decimated his forces.
- Even if Lee had succeeded in flanking Meade on the second day and forcing his retreat, the Union commander would have retreated to his prepared position at Pipe Creek, Maryland, or to Washington, which was, by this time, the most heavily fortified city in the world. Lee thus probably could not have destroyed Meade's army or taken Washington, and without one of those results, the British would not have intervened.
- Again, even if Lee had succeeded at Gettysburg, it is doubtful that the British would have intervened at this stage given the slavery issue that Lincoln had introduced with the Emancipation Proclamation and a host of additional factors that had emerged in the 10 months since Antietam.

- On the day after Pickett's Charge failed at Gettysburg, Vicksburg surrendered to Grant's forces, thereby effectively cutting the Confederacy in half. Nevertheless, Lee was far from finished in July of 1863.

### **Grant's Campaign against Lee**

- Grant followed up his victory at Vicksburg by relief of a trapped Union army at Chattanooga and major victories at Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge. He was ultimately able to defeat Lee, not by tactical brilliance on the battlefield but by his strategic plan—to bring all Union forces to bear in a simultaneous assault along the entire Confederate periphery—and by his refusal to retreat even when his plan failed miserably.
- Lee defeated Grant at the Battle of the Wilderness on May 5–6, 1864, but instead of retreating, Grant continued to move south in an effort to outflank Lee. Lee was forced to follow him and pin him down so that he could not regain the strategic initiative.
- During the course of the campaign, Lee's casualties were about half of Grant's, but they represented a higher percentage of his total force than Grant's. Grant was draining Lee's army of men while stretching its lines to the limit.
- As a result of military failures and massive Union casualties, peace sentiment in the North grew stronger, threatening Lincoln's reelection. The promise of an end to the war if a peace candidate was elected would mean Union recognition of Confederate independence.
- In July 1864, Confederate General John Bell Hood took command of the defense of Atlanta, but he was forced to abandon the city in September when Sherman threatened to cut his supply lines. That victory, along with Union victories at Mobile Bay and in the Shenandoah Valley, ensured Lincoln's reelection and, with it, a continuation of the war to the bitter end. It also placed Sherman

in position to begin his destructive and decisive march through Georgia and South Carolina, the heart of the Confederacy.

### **Drawing Meaning from Battles**

- As these examples clearly show, battles are truly meaningful in the study of history for their consequences, not their size. As we saw in an earlier lecture, Washington lost most of his battles during the Revolutionary War, but the few he won—Trenton, Saratoga, and Yorktown—were incredibly consequential.
- It's also true that the political consequences of battles are especially meaningful. War is, as the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz famously observed, a political act, and it always has a political goal. Antietam and Atlanta clearly had political consequences for the Union cause far more important than any Gettysburg had or could have had even if Lee had been victorious.
- In terms of military consequences, Grant's simultaneous victory at Vicksburg was more important than what happened at Gettysburg in that it split the Confederacy in half, reopened the Mississippi River to the North, and led to Grant's overall command of all Union armies.
- It's important to note, however, that battles are not the only consequential events in war. Indeed, one could argue that a little-known diplomatic event in late 1861 was at least as consequential, if not more so, than any of these three battles.
  - On November 8, 1861, U.S. Navy Captain Charles Wilkes, in command of the USS *San Jacinto*, intercepted the British mail steamer *Trent* as it left Havana and seized two Confederate emissaries, James Mason and John Slidell, who were on their way to London and Paris to attempt to obtain British and French recognition of the Confederacy.
  - The enraged British government demanded the release of the two emissaries and a formal apology, and Lincoln chose to agree to this humiliation rather than face war with Britain.

## Gettysburg: A Turning Point?

- Why is Gettysburg seen by so many as the decisive battle of the Civil War? The explanation lies partially in its sheer size—it was the largest and deadliest battle of the war—and partially in the tendency to look for a single and specific “turning point” in war.
- Such single turning points seldom exist, but Gettysburg appears to be one because it broke Lee’s invincibility. Still, that is what we know now with the advantage of historical hindsight; it did not appear that way at the time.
- Gettysburg’s fame is probably also a result of what happened there after the battle—specifically, the establishment of a cemetery for the reburial of Union dead, dedicated by Lincoln with his Gettysburg Address.
- In that brief address, Lincoln stated, “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here,” but in commemorating those who had died and imploring his countrymen to “resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain,” Lincoln unknowingly immortalized the battle, as well as himself.

### Suggested Reading

Clausewitz, *On War*.

McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

———, *Tried by War*.

Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What battles in other wars are more or less important than we think?
2. Why do we have a tendency to look for single “turning point” battles in wars when they seldom exist?

# The Myth of Laissez-Faire

## Lecture 10

The years between 1865 and 1900 are known as the age of industrialization, a period in which enormous national and personal wealth were created in the United States and one that also witnessed a huge gap between rich and poor. People have attributed these outcomes—both positive and negative—to a governmental policy of noninterference in the business world. But the truth is that such a policy toward business did not exist then or at any previous time in American history.

### The Age of Industrialization

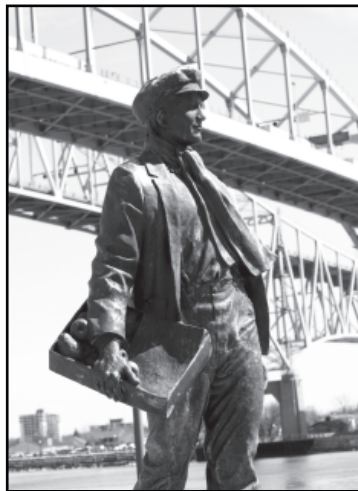
- The era of industrialization brought the United States to a position of leadership among the powers of the world, but it also produced major problems, including significant corruption and an equally significant gap between the rich and poor.
- Both at the time and later, people viewed the positives and negatives of this era to be the result of a governmental policy of noninterference in the business world, a “hands-off” policy that the British economist Adam Smith had most famously proposed in his 1776 classic, *The Wealth of Nations*, and which became known popularly as laissez-faire.
- Smith and other economists had argued against governmental controls over the economy, such as government-chartered monopolies, on the grounds that they hindered economic growth and the accumulation of wealth. If left alone, they argued, the marketplace would produce more wealth and would be self-regulating by the laws of supply and demand. The “invisible hand” of the marketplace would allow for constant competition among individuals and unlimited economic growth and progress.
- This was a revolutionary, liberating thought in 1776, countering the mercantilist idea that wealth is finite and that to get more, one

must take it away from someone else. Laissez-faire ideas gained popularity over the ensuing 100 years and, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, dominated economic thought in the industrialized world. Since then, they have been praised by their supporters for the wealth they helped to create and condemned by their opponents for the corruption and income disparities that accompanied them.

- Despite the rhetoric, a hands-off governmental policy toward business did not exist during this era or any previous era in American history.

### **Government Economic Interventions**

- The age of industrialization was a period of very high protective tariffs (taxes on imports). Early U.S. tariffs were designed to raise revenue to run the government, but protective tariffs were much higher and were designed to protect American industries from foreign competition. Such protective tariffs reached a high point in the 1890s with the passage of the McKinley Tariff Act at the same time that the Supreme Court ruled that any income tax was unconstitutional.
- Another form of government aid involved land grants to railroads as construction incentives, along with loans and financial subsidies. In fact, numerous businesses successfully lobbied the federal government for special favors during this era.
- Government aid also took the form of immigration policy. Congress maintained open



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**Thomas Edison took advantage of the federal government's support of inventions via patents and its encouragement of the growth of large-scale corporations.**

immigration policies, which provided surplus workers for industry and kept salaries low.

- Government also encouraged inventions by issuing patents. Inventing itself became a big business, with Thomas Edison developing and patenting more than 1,000 items at his Menlo Park “invention factory.”
- The growth of large-scale corporations, such as Edison’s General Electric Company, was sanctioned and encouraged by the government, even though such corporations tended to destroy competition. In addition, courts defined corporations as possessing the same constitutionally guaranteed rights as human beings, while labor unions were defined as “combinations in restraint of trade.”
  - Monopolistic corporations were thus ironically protected from state regulations via the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause, while unions would be prosecuted under the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act designed to outlaw monopolies!
  - Court injunctions were issued against numerous labor strikes, and government forces were brought in to break such strikes, including the railroad strike of 1877 and the Pullman strike of 1894.

### **The Myth of Laissez-Faire in America**

- Government in America had always seen its role as promoting business to increase the wealth of the country, an idea with roots in the mercantilist beliefs under which the colonies had originally been founded. Americans broke out of the British mercantilist system as too confining during the Revolution and gradually accepted the laissez-faire ideology, but they certainly did not reject all mercantilist thought.
- Hamilton’s proposal of, and Congress’s agreement to, the first national bank in the 1790s, for example, can be seen as a continuation of the mercantilist concept of government-sanctioned and -controlled monopolies. The same holds true for

the second national bank in 1816 and the first protective tariff, passed in the same year to protect infant American industries from British competition.

- Not all Americans agreed with such government support for business before the Civil War. The Democratic Party—in particular, Andrew Jackson—appeared to oppose government favors to any one group, as well as any federally funded internal improvements. This could be seen in Jackson’s veto of the Maysville Road bill and his destruction of the second national bank. But that destruction was, in effect, government action in support of Wall Street and other banks desiring to escape from the national bank’s control!
- The Whig Party opposed the Democrats on these points. And the rise of the Republican Party in the Northern states during the 1850s created an alliance of classes in the North who favored government action against slavery and economic competition from slave labor and supported free government land for homesteaders and a high protective tariff for Northern industry. The sectional division of the Democratic Party in 1860, the Republican electoral victory, and the secession of Southern states removed the major political barriers to the passage of the entire Republican platform.
- After the Civil War, the reunited Democratic Party claimed to be laissez-faire via its low tariff policy, but in reality, it too favored continued government support of business.
  - As we will see in later lectures, the reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries sought to regulate the perceived excesses of big business but did not halt government promotion of business.
  - Further, some big businesses may have actually wanted this regulation at the time as a way to stifle future competition, by establishing rules that large corporations could easily obey but small newcomers could not.

- Contrary to popular belief, the 1920s did not mark a return to laissez-faire policies. Indeed, the Republican administrations of those years were quite active in promoting business and, in the early 1930s, in promoting major government programs to end the Great Depression.
- Business also has the ability to obtain the types of government actions it desires—and block those it does not desire—via the need of elected government officials to retain business confidence to ensure economic prosperity. As we will see in a future lecture, one reason the New Deal failed to end the Great Depression was the fact that business would not accept its temporary expedient of deficit spending and other measures.

### **Belief in the Laissez-Faire Myth**

- If all this is true, then where, when, and why did the myth of laissez-faire government policy regarding business develop?
- Although the U.S. government has never been completely laissez-faire, different groups throughout U.S. history have favored sharp restrictions on government's role in regulation of the economy. Such restrictions have often been proposed and defended in the name of laissez-faire, even though that was a distortion of what was being proposed and why it was being proposed.
  - In this regard, we're reminded of the use of states' rights arguments by different sections of the country at different times, as discussed in the causes of the Civil War lecture.
  - In a similar fashion, laissez-faire has been used by different groups at different times to lend ideological support to their self-interests.
- Does that make such proponents of laissez-faire hypocrites? Critics say yes, but if so, the same can be said for all the varying advocates of states' rights. Is it hypocrisy to honestly believe in something that is not true?

- Further, if people honestly believed in laissez-faire or states' rights, and if they acted on such beliefs, can we consider the belief to be a real cause of an ensuing historical event, even if it is not true? Many historians would say yes. Human beings create history not on the basis of reality but on their perceptions of reality—perceptions that are often far removed from what actually occurred. And what actually occurred, as we have seen, is often visible only with the hindsight that the study of history provides.

### Suggested Reading

Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How and why did the myth of laissez-faire develop in this country?
2. As with states' rights, is belief in a myth a valid causal factor in history?

# Misconceptions about the Original Populists

## Lecture 11

We often hear the word “Populist” used today either to praise or to attack political movements and leaders. Obviously, there is disagreement and confusion over whether the term denotes praise or contempt—as well as whether it refers to the Left or the Right. Interestingly, that echoes historical disagreement regarding the original Populist Party of the 1890s and its leaders. This lecture will analyze that original movement and explore what links it may have to later movements and leaders described as Populist.

### The Plight of Farmers

- Populism arose in the decades after the Civil War as an agrarian movement of farmers victimized by the industrial revolution then sweeping the United States. Although that revolution created enormous wealth for some, it also impoverished many others, most notably unskilled factory workers and farmers.
- In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, millions of farmers faced the problem of overproduction, primarily brought on by the mechanization of agriculture and the massive expansion of acreage under cultivation. By the laws of supply and demand, the result of this enormous expansion of supply was falling prices with each bumper crop.
- The problem was compounded by overseas competition. The U.S. farmer was now part of the world market, and the agricultural revolution was taking place worldwide.
- Farmers’ economic problems were worsened by a host of additional factors.
  - The general deflation of the time, combined with the fact that farmers were perennially in debt owing to the need to buy land, seed, and equipment, made it more difficult for farmers

to pay off their debts. A 50 percent drop in the prices farmers received for their produce meant that they had to grow twice as much to pay off their debts, but the more they grew, the lower prices dropped.

- In addition, high tariffs raised prices of manufactured goods farmers bought but not prices for their produce. In effect, farmers were forced to sell on a world market of depressed agricultural prices but buy manufactured goods on a protected market of high prices.
- Farmers also faced high property taxes; high interest rates from banks, loan companies, and insurance companies; and high railroad rates to ship their produce to market. Moreover, the railroads controlled land and land sales through government land grants and charged high fees for the use of grain elevators they owned.
- Farmers' problems were also a result of the shift from self-sufficiency to specialized commercial farming, which placed farmers at the mercy of market forces beyond their control.
- Finally, farmers faced social isolation and a loss of social status in the newly industrialized and urbanized America.
- Existing political parties were unable or unwilling to help, essentially for two reasons.
  - What has been labeled the “steel chain of ideas”—a combination of Smith’s laissez-faire ideology and the laws of supply and demand with David Ricardo’s Iron Law of Wages—led to the conclusion that nothing could be done politically to change conditions for American farmers. Andrew Carnegie asserted that economic inequality in the industrial era was inevitable and that it was useless to criticize the inevitable.
  - The fact that the two parties were so evenly matched and elections hinged on a very small number of votes in just six

states led to marginalization of the real issues in favor of an emphasis on political machines in the cities, corporate contributions, and special favors to swing key states.

## Organization

- From the farmers' perspective, both parties were corrupt and there was no real difference between them. As a result, they began to organize, at first on the local level, with the Grange.
- In the 1870s, the Granger laws were passed in the Midwest to regulate rates charged by railroads. The Supreme Court at first upheld such laws but later ruled that they were unconstitutional.
- Those decisions led to the formation of Farmers' Alliances—one in the Midwest and two in the South—to elect both state and national officials. The Alliances were successful in 1890, electing 6 governors, 3 senators, and 50 congressmen.
- In 1892, the Alliances met and created the People's or Populist Party in Omaha, Nebraska. The party attempted to unite farmers, industrial workers, and reformers, but it would be dominated by the three Farmers' Alliances.
- The party platform has been called "one of the most comprehensive reform documents in American history." It called for an end to



**The enormous expansion of farm production brought on by the industrial revolution brought falling prices and poverty to many of the nation's farmers; in response, they created the Populist Party in 1892.**

government subsidies for private corporations, a graduated income tax, political reforms to return power to the people, sympathy for labor unions, and numerous other measures.

- The key plank was one that called for free and unlimited coinage of silver, as well as gold, at a ratio of 16 to 1.
  - Until this time, the government had printed money as it received gold or silver, but in 1873, it agreed to accept only gold. Populists labeled this the “Crime of ’73” and called for the acceptance of silver again, at a higher-than-open-market rate. This would allow the creation of more money and change deflation to inflation, enabling farmers to pay off their debts more easily via the ensuing higher prices for their produce.
  - Opponents protested that such moves represented unsound economics that would lead to disaster via Gresham’s law (“bad money drives out good”). Further, neither England nor the rest of the world would accept the currency.
  - Congress had agreed to limited silver purchases with the 1878 Bland-Allison Act and the 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act, but the Populists wanted free and unlimited coinage at 16 to 1 with more printing of paper money as a result.
- Along with this platform came a revivalist tone of holy war, impending doom, and cataclysmic confrontation—the forces of good versus evil. In the words of Populist orator Mary Lease of Kansas, it was time to raise “less corn and more hell.”

### **The Incredible Election of 1892**

- In the run-up to the elections of 1892, opponents in the Midwest characterized Populists as filthy, illiterate idiots who would wreck the country if put in office. In the South, some Populists attempted to unite whites and blacks in a class war against conservatives. Merchants refused credit to farmers who wouldn’t disavow Populist candidates, and violence, fraud, and intimidation were seen across the country.

- The Democrat Grover Cleveland won the election, but the Populists scored 1 million votes for president and 22 electoral votes and elected numerous senators, congressmen, governors, and state legislators.
- In the wake of Cleveland's election, the U.S. economy suffered its worst depression to date, with 20 percent of the workforce unemployed and no government relief, as well as massive salary cuts for those who still had jobs. The fallout would include 1,400 strikes in 1894 and violence as the government once again sided with business and sent in troops.
- A rush on the U.S. gold reserve led Cleveland to turn to J. P. Morgan to bail out the U.S. Treasury and to have Congress repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which only made the economic situation worse and increased the popularity of free silver.
- Populist Ohio businessman Jacob Coxey organized the first march on Washington (labeled Coxey's Army) to support his idea of a government public works program for the unemployed, to be financed with paper money. But he was arrested when he reached the capital, and his marchers were forced into detention camps.

### The 1896 Nomination

- In 1896, the Democrats repudiated Cleveland as silverites from the South and West gained control of the convention and placed free silver, as well as many other Populist proposals, in the proposed platform, leading to an intense floor fight. The last to speak was William Jennings Bryan, who delivered the extraordinary Cross of Gold speech.
- Bryan's words ensured the passage of the platform and his nomination for the presidency. Gold Democrats bolted, initiating a major party realignment.
- The fact that the Democrats had taken their most popular issue put the Populists in a quandary. Fusion with the Democrats would mean

loss of identity and much of their party platform, but no fusion meant that the anti-silver Republican William McKinley would win. Their solution was to nominate Bryan for president but their own candidate, Tom Watson, for vice president.

### **The 1896 Election**

- The 1896 campaign was one of the most polarized in U.S. history. Bryan was portrayed as a wild-eyed radical. Businesses threatened to close if workers voted for him and contributed massively to McKinley's campaign. His only major resources were his youth and his extraordinary oratorical ability.
- The election was an overwhelming victory for McKinley. Bryan carried only the South, part of the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountain (silver) states. McKinley swept the industrial Northeast and the old Midwest. Bryan failed to gain votes from the Granger states, some wheat states, labor, and urban areas.
  - Labor and urban voters feared inflation and were personally affronted by Bryan's and the Populists' evangelical rhetoric, which was seen as anti-Catholic and anti-urban.
  - Many historians agree with these anti-Bryan voters and have labeled the Populists as reactionaries.

### **Populism Today**

- Although the Populists were defeated in the 1890s, some of the measures they called for in the Omaha Platform were enacted during the Progressive and New Deal eras. Nevertheless, many of the issues that led to the Populist movement lost relevance with the passage of time and with the tremendous decrease in the percentage of the population engaged in farming.
- Still, the word lives on in both our historical and our political controversies, as does the rhetoric of the Populist platform in calls today for action to address the enormous gap between rich and poor and the economic plight of many Americans.

- Historians still debate who and what the Populists were: radical revolutionaries trying to overthrow the existing order, progressive reformers, reactionaries, or just an agrarian interest group out to get its piece of the pie.
- Similarly, the public continues to debate what a Populist is as the term is used today. The word means “for the people,” but which people and in what ways? Is Populism forward- or backward-looking? The answer depends on your own politics and your views of the politicians you are describing.
- Descriptions and disagreements related to contemporary Populists echo descriptions and disagreements regarding Populists of more than a century ago, despite what appears to be the lack of relevance to our lives today of the specific problems they faced and their attempted solutions.

### Suggested Reading

Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*.

Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*.

Woodward, *Tom Watson*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do you reconcile the successful later passage of many Populist proposals in the Omaha Platform with the failure of the movement as a whole in the 1890s?
2. Describe your views of the original Populist movement and its leaders.

# Labor in America—A Strange History

## Lecture 12

**D**uring the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, a movement gained traction to rescind the collective bargaining rights of unionized teachers and other state employees. Whether in favor or opposed to this action, many Americans perceived it as a dramatic reversal of historic governmental policy toward unions. But as we will see, this 21<sup>st</sup>-century effort is a continuation of traditional government hostility to labor unions that dates back to at least the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Origins of Organized Labor in America

- The industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the creation of a new class of largely unskilled industrial workers. In response to low wages and dangerous working conditions, these workers attempted to organize into labor unions, using the strike as their key weapon to force employers to bargain.
- As noted in a previous lecture, U.S. government policy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was pro-business rather than truly laissez-faire. That policy included hostility toward labor unions that tried to form during this era and the use of armed force to suppress union strikes.
- Partially as a result, effective unionization of industrial workers in America would take much longer than it did in Europe and would lead to a very different union ideology.

### Opposition to Organized Labor

- A number of factors contributed to the hostility toward labor unions and failure to organize during this period.
- First, many industrial workers continued to believe in the traditional American dream and ideology of individualism. Unionization meant recognition that they could not “make it” on their own.

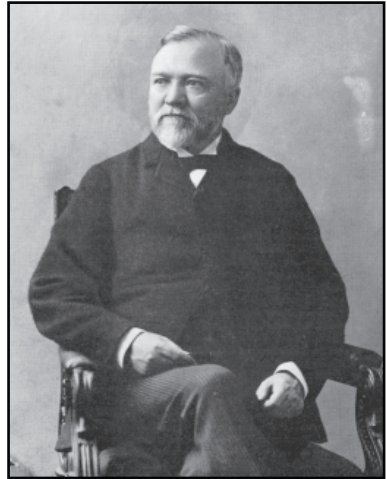
- In addition, this was the era of the so-called “new” immigration from eastern and central Europe and Asia, as opposed to the older immigration wave from western and northern Europe. Linguistic and cultural differences divided American workers, making union solidarity extremely difficult if not impossible. Compounding this problem was the fact that employers often pitted these groups against each other as strikebreakers.
- As previously noted, the courts defined corporations as individuals possessing the same guaranteed rights as citizens. Consequently, they voided state laws attempting to regulate industries as violations of the equal protection clause in the Fourteenth Amendment.
  - Courts also issued injunctions against union strikes on the grounds that they threatened property rights and constituted restraint of trade.
  - Both state and national governments used armed forces to enforce these injunctions and break strikes.

### The 1892 Homestead Strike

- The Carnegie steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, employed 3,000 unskilled workers who were paid 14 cents an hour for a 10-hour day, 6 to 7 days per week. The 800 skilled and unionized workers at the plant did much better, getting paid \$50 to \$70 per week but only when the mill was in full production.
- In 1889, Andrew Carnegie appointed Henry Frick, who already had a reputation as a union buster, to manage the Homestead plant. Carnegie instructed Frick to sign no new union contract when the old one expired in June 1892. Instead, Homestead was to overproduce steel before that date in order to create surplus, then close the plant to break the union.
- The union called on all Homestead workers to strike, which they did, and to take over the company town. Frick responded by hiring strikebreakers and Pinkerton detectives. On July 6, the opponents exchanged gunfire; seven Pinkertons and nine workers died, and

sympathy strikes spread to other Carnegie steel mills.

- The strike and violence continued throughout the summer, but by October, 1,600 workers were on relief rolls, and in November, the union gave up. Only 800 of the original 3,800 workers were rehired. In retrospect, this failure spelled the end of any unionization in the steel industry for 40 years.



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### **The 1894 Pullman Strike**

- The 1894 Pullman Strike took place in the supposedly model company town of Pullman, Illinois. Plant workers there declared a strike after five wage cuts in one year, with no reduction in company rent. Pullman responded by closing the plant.
- The independent American Railway Union, under Eugene Debs, voted to aid the strikers by boycotting Pullman cars nationally. When the railroads began to fire participants in the boycott, Debs called on his 150,000 members to walk off the job, crippling the national rail system.
- U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney sent in 3,400 special deputies, over the protests of the governor of Illinois, on the grounds that the trains must be kept running for the mail and interstate commerce.
- This move led to violence, and Debs was jailed for violating a federal court injunction that had prohibited the strike on the grounds that it violated the Sherman Antitrust Act as a “combination in restraint of trade.”

**The failure of the strike at Andrew Carnegie’s Homestead plant set back the union movement in the steel industry for 40 years.**

## The Socialist Movement

- When Debs emerged from jail, he announced that he was a socialist. He would later run for president as the candidate of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and, in 1912, would poll nearly 1 million votes. But that was as close as socialism ever came to being accepted in the United States.
- The situation was quite different in Europe, where socialist political parties were forming with union members as their backbone. They demanded not only better working conditions and wages but an end to the capitalist system via a government takeover of the factories. Many of these socialist parties would emerge as the largest parties in their countries.
- It's important to note that not all European socialist parties were communist. Both the SPA and the large socialist parties of Europe were democratic and believed in achieving socialism via the ballot box. Communists, in contrast, believed in the violent overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of what Karl Marx had called "the dictatorship of the proletariat."
- In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many Americans were attracted to socialism, although the ideology had far less appeal in the United States than it did in Europe. One major reason that socialism didn't take hold in the United States was that Americans as a whole did not possess the class consciousness that Europeans did.

## The American Federation of Labor

- Only one national labor union succeeded during this period, and it did so by eschewing any anti-capitalist political goals. This was the American Federation of Labor (AF of L).
- Under Samuel Gompers, the AF of L refused to have anything to do with socialist ideas, socialist political parties, or anti-capitalist radicalism. Gompers emphasized that his organization's only aim was to improve the wages, hours, and working conditions of its members within the capitalist system.

- Gompers was willing to use strikes and boycotts and to back specific candidates from existing political parties but only to obtain his limited goals. In effect, he was willing to use what were perceived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as radical means but only for conservative, limited ends.
- Gompers favored mediation and arbitration of labor disputes when he ran into businesses that were willing to deal with his union. And many big businesses were, on the grounds that Gompers was far better than the radicals and that they could afford to offer the higher wages and shorter hours he demanded, whereas most small businesses could not.
- Socialists opposed the AF of L and, in 1905, founded their own radical industrial union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), declaring, “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.”
  - In direct opposition to the AF of L, the IWW sought to organize all workers, both unskilled and skilled, and to amass sufficient members and power to be able to eventually overthrow the entire capitalist system.
  - But the IWW never achieved the popularity, strength, and acceptance of the AF of L, and both before and during World War I, it was decimated by government repression.

### **Unions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Today**

- Gompers and the AF of L have been accurately described as “a new generation’s capitulation to the corporate revolution.” In effect, they constituted a corporation of labor, organized in a corporate manner to obtain profits for their members within a capitalist system.
- Operating in this manner, Gompers was able to obtain, in the 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act, a clear statement that labor was “not a commodity or article of commerce” and that it had a right to organize and use peaceful strikes, picketing, and boycotts. The

act also placed restrictions on the use of court injunctions against organized labor.

- The AF of L would become the model for later successful unions, most notably, the Congress on Industrial Organization (CIO). Although willing to use more radical methods than the AF of L, the CIO similarly accepted the capitalist system and asked simply for its “share of the pie.”
- Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal broke with traditional governmental policy in the 1930s by supporting unionization in general. In effect, the AF of L and the CIO replaced, through the activities of their members and their financial donations, the many corporate businesses that broke with the Democratic Party in the 1930s over the New Deal.
- But the New Deal’s break with past governmental policy should not be overstated. During and after World War II, Roosevelt and Harry Truman proved more than willing to move against union strikes when they were perceived as endangering the national welfare. In our own time, Ronald Reagan would fire striking air traffic controllers who refused to obey his order to return to work.
- Union membership as a percentage of the workforce declined in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the economic base of the United States moved away from heavy industry. Unionization of some white collar professions, such as teachers and government workers, took place, but with uneven success and with numbers and power that did not make up for the losses by industrial unions.
- We tend to view this decline as a break with history, but the real aberration is the pro-union policies of the New Deal during the 1930s. That this aberration has come to be viewed as what has always existed speaks volumes about the way in which an event in the relatively recent past can distort our perceptions about our entire past—and, with it, our perceptions about the present.

## Suggested Reading

Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*.

Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why were Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's actions—proposing the elimination of most collective bargaining rights for state government workers—incorrectly viewed as a dramatic reversal of government policy toward unions?
2. Why has there been so much governmental and public hostility to unions in the United States?

# Myths about American Isolation and Empire

## Lecture 13

Given that the United States was born in an anti-colonial revolt, we have come to believe that our country has opposed imperialism throughout its history and even sought to encourage anti-colonial republican revolts elsewhere. Along with this anti-imperialism, we have evidenced a desire to remain isolated from the rest of the world. But the United States has never been isolated or anti-imperialist; indeed, it has been a highly expansionist power always involved with the rest of the world.

### Early American Expansion

- The 13 original American colonies were founded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as part of an expanding British Empire, and in the next century, they rebelled against that empire. But that does not mean they rebelled against the concept of empire.
- One of the first military acts in the Revolution was the attempted conquest of French Canada in 1775 in an effort to make it the 14<sup>th</sup> state—an effort that ended in failure at Quebec at the end of the year.
- In the 1783 peace treaty with Britain, the United States acquired not only what had been the 13 colonies east of the Appalachian Mountains but also the huge territory between those mountains and the Mississippi River.
- Nor did the Founding Fathers see the Mississippi as the final boundary of the United States. They often referred to the United States as “our rising empire.” The Fathers envisioned an expanding entity, but not one that would acquire formal colonies that might eventually rebel. Instead, acquired land would gradually be incorporated into the Union on an equal political basis, first as organized territories, then as states.

- This pattern was first established in the Northwest Ordinances of the 1780s, and it would serve as the model for American expansion across the entire North American continent over the next 50 years—by both war and treaty.
  - Americans did not consider these activities imperialism because of the political equality granted settlers in the new areas, as opposed to colonial status.
  - Further, they saw the entire continent as theirs by divine right, as evidenced by the expression “Manifest Destiny” in the 1840s. Of course, others—Native Americans, Spanish, Mexicans, Canadians—saw it as aggression, subversion, and imperialism.

### **The Reality of Isolationism**

- The American expansion across the North American continent was hardly isolationism. Neither was the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which asserted that the entire Western Hemisphere was “off limits” to European colonialism but open to continued American expansion. The expansion of American commerce throughout the world in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was not isolationism either.
- American isolation was limited to nonparticipation in Europe’s numerous military alliances and wars, which was made possible by two factors: (1) the geographical separation of America from what Jefferson called “the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe” and (2) the American belief that expanded commerce was a way to avoid war and, indeed, a rational alternative to war.
- In reality, of course, commerce was often a cause of war.
  - A clear example was the American declaration of war against Britain in 1812, prompted by British violations of American commercial “neutral rights” via seizures of American ships and goods on the high seas.
  - Commerce as a cause of conflict was also obvious in the declaration of war against Germany in 1917, again for

violation of commercial neutral rights, but this time, via submarine warfare.

- In retrospect, the major reason we did not go to war with a European or world power in the 105 years between the end of the War of 1812 and our entry into World War I was the fact that British balance-of-power politics maintained overall European peace.

### **Expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

- Sectionalism and the Civil War brought a temporary end to American territorial expansion during the 1850s and 1860s, but throughout the 1850s, numerous adventurers—known as filibusters and supported by the U.S. government—attempted to conquer Cuba and portions of Central America.
- Within two years of the end of the Civil War, the United States purchased the enormous Russian colony of Alaska.
- In 1898 came the war with Spain and the acquisition of the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico, as well as the annexation of Hawaii.

### **Informal Empire in Central America and the Caribbean**

- Much more extensive than any formal colonial empire of the United States was the informal empire it created in Central America and the Caribbean in the aftermath of the war with Spain. That empire included protectorates over five nations: Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.
- Although these countries were nominally independent, the United States controlled their economies, finances, and foreign policies and reserved the right to intervene militarily in each of them.
- In 1901, Cuba was forced to incorporate the Platt Amendment into its constitution. Provisions of this bill included agreement not to incur indebtedness beyond Cuba's means or take

any other actions that might endanger its independence, to grant the United States a naval base on the island (Guantánamo), and to allow U.S. military intervention in the country.

- In 1903, the United States helped to organize and supported a successful revolt in the Colombian province of Panama in order to obtain the right to build and fortify a canal through that now independent country.
- Over the next decade, the United States would foist treaties similar to the Platt Amendment on Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, as well as Panama, and would intervene militarily in each of them.
- Careful examination of the map explains why these nations became part of the American Empire: Panama and Nicaragua held the two key potential routes for an interoceanic canal, while Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, along with Puerto Rico, controlled the Caribbean approaches to such a canal.

### **Commercial Expansion and Domination**

- The American policy of free trade, most clearly enunciated in the 1899 and 1900 Open Door notes regarding China, also promised, and often led to, further commercial expansion and domination of other areas.
- Given the enormous size and power of the American economy by this time, free trade (free of tariff barriers) would almost inevitably mean that U.S. goods were cheaper than those of other powers.
- Continuation of commercial expansion during the years between the two world wars has led many historians to question the supposed “isolation” of the United States during this period.
  - Although the Senate rejected membership in the League of Nations, the United States remained actively involved in the world

during the 1920s, signing numerous treaties and expanding its economy globally.

- Indeed, the American economy undergirded the entire global economy of the 1920s and, with it, the peace structure of that decade.
- The American economy, the global economy, and the peace structure collapsed during the 1930s. Admittedly, what both preceded and followed that collapse is what one historian has accurately labeled a “mood of isolation” in the United States, but once again, it was limited to a desire to stay out of another European war.
- That mood would change dramatically in 1940–1941 under the impact of the Nazi conquest of Europe, and it would result in the permanent demise of isolationism in this country. Indeed, the United States would emerge after World War II as the most powerful and influential nation in the world.

### **Belief in the Myth of Isolationism**

- Belief in the myth that America was once isolationist and almost always anti-imperialist stems partially from our belief in an anti-empire history. It also stems from the fact that our Founders defined our nation as an “empire of liberty,” not tyranny, and we tend to equate empire with tyranny.
- The 19<sup>th</sup>-century idea that the North American continent was ours by divine right meant that our claims to land were superior to any contrary claims by Native Americans, Europeans, or Latin Americans and could not be considered imperialistic.
- Along with that went the belief that the entire Western Hemisphere was separated from Europe by a republican form of government, as well as geography. Consequently, the 1823 Monroe Doctrine was (and still is) perceived as a defensive document against European encroachment—and,

thus, isolationist and anti-imperialist, rather than expansionist and aggressive.

- Similarly, we believed that we were liberating the Cubans in 1898 and that we were both defending and spreading freedom against mortal threats in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.
- Our belief that we were anti-imperialist also partially stems from the fact that we equated imperialism with formal colonialism, rather than viewing the latter as but one form of the former. Further, we have always viewed trade as a rational alternative to empire and war, which it often is not.



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### Is America an Empire?

- A debate about whether or not America was an empire—and if so, what kind—began during the Cold War and accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
- To most Americans, the answer definitely remains no. Our political leaders tell us that our major foreign policies are and always have been to protect our own security and to promote democracy around the world—not to create an empire.
- But in the name of protecting our security and promoting democracy, we have created and consistently use the largest military force in the world. If this is not imperialistic, then what is? Further, isn't

**Many Americans believe that our nation's expansionism has resulted at least partially from the need to counter Soviet threats.**

promotion of American-style democracy imperialistic to cultures that do not share or want our democratic values?

- On the other hand, isn't much of our previous expansion the unplanned, defensive result of our need to counter mortal threats to our security, such as Nazi Germany or the communist Soviet Union?
- Perhaps so, but that does not negate the domination we have been able to exercise over others in the process of defending ourselves and ensuring our security—a domination those others clearly define as imperialistic.
- Indeed, in a world of nation-states all claiming sovereignty—including the right to make war—the only absolute security is expansion designed to preclude the emergence of any other centers of power that could pose a threat. In that regard, one nation's defense is another's aggression. And that will be the case as long as we live in an anarchic international system in which every nation maintains its right to make war on any other nation.

### Suggested Reading

Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865–1900*.

Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*.

Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Is the United States today an empire? If not, why? If so, how and why, and is its empire of a unique form?
2. Is free trade “the imperialism of the strong”? Why or why not?

# Early Progressives Were Not Liberals

## Lecture 14

Many Americans, whether liberal or conservative, trace contemporary liberalism back to the late-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century reform movement known as Progressivism. As with other historical myths, there is a kernel of truth in the supposed connection between Progressivism and contemporary liberalism, but it has been grossly overstated. It also distorts the history and meaning of Progressivism, as well as the meaning of contemporary liberalism and conservatism.

### A Contradictory and Confusing Movement

- Confusion over Progressivism is understandable because the movement was never unified. It contained many different groups with many different goals, a fact clearly illustrated by the incongruous legislation and constitutional amendments passed during the Progressive era.
  - Amendments Sixteen through Nineteen to the Constitution established the income tax, direct election of senators, alcohol prohibition, and the vote for women.
  - Major Progressive legislation included railroad and antitrust regulations, the Pure Food and Drug Act, creation of the Federal Reserve System, major attacks on civil liberties during and after World War I, and immigration restriction.
- The Progressive era would also see the creation of numerous professional organizations with enforced standards, the rise of social work and settlement houses, the beginnings of a national birth control movement, a further deterioration in the condition of African Americans, the Social Gospel movement in churches, and a racist eugenics movement that sought to sterilize those it labeled “inferior.”
- The movement elected two of our best-known presidents—Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—who ran against

each other in 1912 on two Progressive but diametrically opposed platforms and who hated each other.

- The Progressive movement included people famous in other areas of American life but with little if anything in common: philosophers, such as William James and John Dewey; ministers, such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden; jurists, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis; journalists; novelists; and others.
- Progressive programs included many ideas from the 1892 Populist platform, but most Progressive leaders had been anti-Populist in the 1890s.
- Most Progressives wanted to regulate big business, but numerous business leaders were part of the movement. Other opposing groups among the Progressives included immigrants and those who were anti-immigrant, African Americans and racists, and women and those who sought legislation to “protect” women because of their alleged inferiority.
- The movement was perhaps best described by the historian Robert Wiebe as a “search for order”—an attempt to redefine American politics and society in light of the radical changes created by the industrial revolution and the ensuing urbanization of the country.
- In this regard, a new class of urban, white-collar professionals created by the industrial revolution would join with the older urban middle class to be two of the driving forces in the movement.



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**The New Nationalism reform program of Theodore Roosevelt emphasized regulation of big business and economic and social welfare legislation.**

## **General Goals of Progressivism**

- In general, the Progressive movement sought to end the abuses of power and corruption that had come to dominate American economic and political life. Corrupted institutions would be replaced with reformed ones that would restore power to the people.
- Another general goal of the movement was to restore morality to American politics and life, that is, honesty in business, government, and production.
- Progressives sought to help the victims of industrialization—children and women who were forced to work, new immigrants, and others.
- The movement aimed to use scientific and efficiency principles and expertise from the academic and business worlds to minimize disorder and establish cooperation. A related goal was to professionalize and regularize certain aspects of American life by establishing clear standards for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals.
- Finally, the Progressives wanted to restore a sense of discipline, virtue, and service to the nation by encouraging people to look beyond their narrow self-interests to the good of others and the good of the country as a whole.

## **Progressivism versus Liberalism**

- For Progressives, the key tool to accomplish these goals was positive government action. This is the key shift in what we might call the “liberal perspective” and the one clear link between the Progressives and contemporary liberals: a belief that government is not the problem but the solution to the problems that plagued American life at this time.
- Traditional 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberalism feared government power as the source of tyranny throughout history and had sought to limit that power in whatever ways it could.

- But Progressives turned traditional liberalism on its head by arguing that the large monopolistic corporations and corrupt urban political machines had become the problems and that positive government action was imperative to control big business, reform the political and economic systems, and thereby restore and save the American dream.
- One of the most important Progressive thinkers was Herbert Croly, who attacked the notion of laissez-faire and Adam Smith's "invisible hand." The marketplace was no longer self-regulating and did not lead automatically to better things in the economic or in any other sphere. What was needed to restore the "promise of American life" was greater government power—nationalization and centralization.

### Competing Progressive Platforms

- Although Progressives tended to agree on these general goals and the positive use of government, they disagreed over just how government should be used, for example, how it should be used to regulate business. That fact is most clearly seen in the competing platforms of Roosevelt and Wilson in the 1912 presidential election.
- Wilson's New Freedom sought to use government to break up big business in order to restore competition.
- Roosevelt's New Nationalism argued that this was both impossible and counterproductive. Instead, government should seek to control and legitimize big business and play a key role in arbitrating differences between business and labor. Far from accidentally, this indirect attack on laissez-faire also led the New Nationalists to propose legislation to help the victims of industrialization.

### Progressivism and Contemporary Politics

- Those who opposed the Progressive call for positive government action would henceforth be considered conservatives. But in actuality, they were retaining one of the major principles of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberalism: fear of government power. American conservatives were, thus, diametrically opposed to traditional European conservatives, who favored strong government power.

- In this regard, American conservatives and liberals both base their belief systems on John Locke’s concept of the social contract, not the concepts of Thomas Hobbes and other European conservative thinkers that underlay the very different European definition of conservatism.
- Hobbes maintained that the natural, original state of human life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” and that the only way to organize a society to overcome this condition was to give total power and obedience to a monarch or small group empowered to decide every issue.
- Although some American conservatives might agree with Hobbes’s pessimistic view of human nature, they do not agree with his proposed solution of absolute obedience to a powerful, centralized, and authoritarian government. Instead, they argue that strong centralized government—not big business—remains the greatest threat to freedom.
- It’s also important to note that while the logic of Progressive thought leads to many programs contemporary liberals might support, it also led to many programs that are anathema to contemporary liberalism.
- For example, the desire to help the victims of industrialization, which contemporary liberals would applaud, combined with the desire to restore morality to American life would translate into an imposition of middle-class American morality via legal social coercion in numerous areas (which many contemporary conservatives would support).
  - The prohibition amendment and laws against certain drugs were partially justified on the grounds that alcohol and drugs are immoral and create dependency that holds back the working class.
  - Social reform thus becomes social control as the government assumes functions previously performed by the church, family, and local community.

- The desire to help the victims of industrialization would also lead to a major movement to Americanize the new immigrants at the expense of their traditional cultures.
- Further, the Progressive emphasis on science, expertise, and professional standards actually hurt the poor by depriving them of the doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who—although they might have been ill-trained—had at least previously served them.
- Similarly, Progressive efforts to destroy political corruption deprived the new immigrants and other poor of the urban political machines that took care of them—in return, of course, for their votes.
- The fusion of science with preexisting racism would reinforce the desire to help the new immigrants by Americanizing them and destroying their native cultures. It would also lead to immigration restriction to prevent any more of these “inferior” peoples from competing with American labor.
- That fusion of science with racism would further lead to the rise of eugenics and, with it, calls for forced sterilization of “inferiors” to improve the genetic base of the population.
  - It is no accident that the great Progressive Woodrow Wilson would expand segregation in the federal government and praise D. W. Griffith’s racist film *Birth of a Nation* as “history written with lightning.”
  - This racism, along with the emphasis on imposing American middle-class standards of expertise and morality, would lead many Progressives to become avid imperialists. Indeed, most of the military interventions in Central America and the Caribbean occurred during the Progressive era.
- The Progressive emphasis on nationalism and centralization would reinforce, if not create, the suppression of civil liberties during World War I in the name of patriotism. The Espionage and Sedition

acts of 1917 and 1918 virtually outlawed dissent against the war and criticism of the U.S. government.

### **The Legacy of Progressivism**

- Much of the legislation introduced in the Progressive era failed, and many of the movement's goals were not accomplished.
- Big business today is in many ways more centralized and destructive of competition than it was 100 years ago.
- Big government has also, in many ways, failed to do what it promised to do, and it appears today to many Americans as worse than the problems it originally grew to address.
- Nevertheless, Progressivism created much of the broad value structure we live with today, whether liberal or conservative, regarding such issues as efficiency, expertise, morality, and government control, as well as the inculcation of such values through our education system. In that sense, most if not all of us, liberal and conservative, remain linked to Progressive ideas.

### **Suggested Reading**

Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*.

Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*.

Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. In what ways do we still live within the value structure of the Progressive era?
2. Do contemporary liberals and conservatives truly divide over how powerful the national government should be or instead over the specific issues in which government should play a strong role?

# Woodrow Wilson and the Rating of Presidents

## Lecture 15

**W**oodrow Wilson is one of the most controversial presidents in U.S. history. In most presidential polls, he is put in the great or near-great category, yet to his numerous detractors, both at the time and later, he is vastly overrated. Examining the reasons for this sharp difference of opinion provides an opportunity to explore the broader issue of presidential ratings in general and the standards by which past presidents are judged.

### Wilson's Accomplishments

- Woodrow Wilson's high rating in presidential polls rests on what appears to be an extraordinary series of accomplishments during his eight years in office.
- During his first two years as president, Wilson's Progressive program included the first major downward revision of the tariff since before the Civil War, the establishment of the Federal Reserve System and the Federal Trade Commission, and the passage of the Clayton Antitrust Act to curb monopolistic business practices.
- In 1916, he obtained passage of a second round of Progressive legislation that included programs to provide farmers with credit, construct and improve rural roads, prohibit interstate shipping of goods made with child labor, establish an eight-hour day for railroad workers, and create a worker's compensation system for federal employees.
- In obtaining this impressive collection of Progressive legislation, Wilson became the first president to propose and receive from Congress a full program (his New Freedom program). He also exhibited exceptional political skill and, by 1916, had united Progressive forces from both parties to support him for reelection.

- In foreign affairs, Wilson's supporters argue, he kept the United States out of World War I for nearly three years. When finally forced by German actions to enter the war, he quickly became the moral leader of the Allied nations and the major force for reform of the entire international system.
  - That reform program, as enunciated in his Fourteen Points address and other major speeches, focused on establishing a new world order based on the creation of a League of Nations and the principle of collective security.
  - Wilson obtained his League of Nations and much of the rest of his international program during intense negotiations with Allied leaders in Paris. But he failed to obtain Senate ratification of the Treaty of Versailles because of Republican obstructionists and because of a major stroke that prevented him from mobilizing the American people in favor of the treaty and membership in the League.
- Despite this final failure, Wilson's supporters argue that his record of achievements is extraordinary. He brought the Progressive movement to its zenith and helped to redefine the role and power of the presidency, the federal government as a whole, and the United States in the world arena.

### **Criticisms of Wilson**

- Wilson's critics see a very different record and reach different conclusions. Although he carried 40 of 48 states in 1912 and won a massive victory in the electoral college, he was a minority president who obtained only 42 percent of the popular vote.
- Soon after he took office, Wilson abandoned portions of his New Freedom reform program and, by 1916, had embraced the much broader but diametrically opposed New Nationalism reform program of Theodore Roosevelt. This program emphasized regulation, rather than destruction of the trusts, and economic and social welfare legislation, which Wilson had previously opposed.

- Wilson also refused to support women's suffrage and was responsible for bringing racial segregation to the federal government.
- In foreign affairs, critics note, this supposed anti-imperialist intervened militarily in Latin America more than his openly imperialist predecessors, Roosevelt and Taft, and his military intervention in Mexico almost resulted in a war with that nation.

- His pro-Allied sympathies and actions made a mockery of American neutrality in World War I. By allowing extensive war trade and loans to the Allies, Wilson effectively made the United States an unofficial belligerent that Germany was more than willing to attack in 1917.



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

**Woodrow Wilson receives a relatively high ranking in most presidential polls, a somewhat puzzling result given the failures that seem to balance out his successes.**

- Once in the war, Wilson's administration amassed almost dictatorial powers. It established a propaganda bureau and virtually outlawed dissent with the Espionage and Sedition acts, initiating a period of government repression and some of the worst violations of civil liberties in U.S. history.
- Wilson also participated in the Allied military intervention that attempted but failed to overthrow the Bolshevik regime in Russia and refused to recognize that government. These moves embittered

relations between the two nations for decades and were an important factor in the development of the Cold War.

- At the same time, his administration attacked domestic and immigrant Leftists and, soon after the war, launched what became known as the first Red Scare.
- After World War I, Wilson's critics continue, he proved to be an inept negotiator at the peace conference and, in the end, abandoned many of the lofty principles he had previously championed.
- The primary cause of the Senate's refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and join the League of Nations was Wilson's arrogant refusal to compromise with Senate Republicans. That refusal led to a second and bloodier world war only 20 years later.

### **Presidential Ratings**

- Among the primary standards used in presidential rating polls are the consequences of presidential action. By that standard, Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt always rank as the top three: Washington for establishing the new government and setting key precedents, Lincoln for preventing the destruction of the country, and FDR for successfully leading the country through the worst domestic and international crises in its history.
- Similarly, the two presidents who preceded Lincoln, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, are usually placed at the bottom because their policies and incompetence resulted in the Civil War. In most polls Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson are ranked just below Washington, Lincoln, and FDR.
- Wilson's high ranking is a bit puzzling in light of his numerous failures and their negative consequences.
  - But consequences do not constitute the only standard involved in rating presidents; assessments are often based on the values the assessors bring to their task.

- Assessors who approve of the Progressive movement and an activist federal government in both domestic and international affairs tend to give Wilson positive assessments, while those who disagree with these positions tend to give lower assessments.
- Such value judgments play a major role in all presidential ratings. Presidents usually listed as the worst—Pierce, Buchanan, Ulysses Grant, and Warren Harding, for example—are put in that category for one of two reasons: incompetence or corruption. But those are not the only reasons to conclude that someone was a terrible president. What about hypocrisy, lying, breaking the law, or sheer stupidity?
- Similarly, those usually placed in the highest category—Washington, Lincoln, and FDR—are put in that category because of the enormous dangers the country faced during their tenures. But again, should this be the only category for determining a great presidency? What about political skill in office or, simply, lack of mistakes?
- Further, use of consequences as a standard requires treating the rankings of recent presidents with a grain of salt because we do not yet know the full consequences of their actions.
- It's also true that the consequences of presidential actions are sometimes both positive and negative, as can be seen in the record of James K. Polk or, in modern times, that of Richard Nixon.
- We should also recognize that presidential polls and ratings are affected by changing American values and perspectives over time. Andrew Jackson, for example, dropped from 6<sup>th</sup> place in a 1948 poll to 14<sup>th</sup> place in a more recent poll because of our changing views on just how “democratic” his presidency really was and the negative economic impact of his destruction of the second national bank.
- There is also often a sharp difference between the ratings of past presidents made by historians and those made by the general public. In a 2011 Gallup poll, Americans agreed with historians only on

Lincoln as one of the top three presidents. Instead of Washington and FDR, they put Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton in that elite group!

- Of course, the public's views can change with the passage of time as much as historians' views. The public's rating of Truman went up in the 1970s and 1980s, at about the same time that it began to decline among historians, who argued that he deserved partial blame for both the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism.

### **Wilson's Ratings**

- Wilson's ratings have gone down somewhat since the 1960s as a result of our changing views on race relations, women's rights, civil liberties, and perhaps, the UN. He was number 4 in 1948, 7 in the 1990s, and a bit lower in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Is he perhaps still overrated? As we have seen, both his achievements and his failures are consequential. Yet his supporters ask whether any of his predecessors or contemporaries could have done better given the significant problems he faced, both domestically and internationally.
- It's interesting to speculate what would have happened if Theodore Roosevelt had won the 1912 election instead of Wilson.
  - Whereas Wilson's New Freedom sought to return to a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century world of competition, Roosevelt's New Nationalism realized that was impossible and was the first program to address 20<sup>th</sup>-century realities in terms of business regulation (rather than trust-busting) and social welfare legislation.
  - In foreign affairs, Roosevelt was one of the most successful diplomats in U.S. history, at least in regard to the great powers. He won the Nobel Peace Prize for mediating an end to the Russo-Japanese War and secretly mediated an end to the Moroccan crisis that could have easily led to the outbreak of World War I in 1905–1906.

- Given that record, we must ask if World War I would have even broken out if Roosevelt had been elected in 1912. Certainly, he would have actively tried to prevent it, much more so than did Wilson, who was preoccupied at the time with the death of his first wife.
- Had Roosevelt failed to halt the outbreak of war, he probably would have joined the conflict earlier than Wilson, and it's unlikely that his record in civil liberties would have been any better than Wilson's. But it's also unlikely that he would have attempted to replace the balance of power with collective security, a concept that has proven to be unworkable in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

### Suggested Reading

Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*.

Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*.

Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do your values affect your ranking of Woodrow Wilson as president?
2. How do your values affect your ranking of other presidents?

# The Roaring Twenties Reconsidered

## Lecture 16

The popular view of the 1920s is that the country was tired of Progressive reforms and overseas crusades. In 1920, it elected a president, Warren Harding, who verbalized this mood with his call for a return to “normalcy.” The result would be a supposed return to the business values of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and an isolationist foreign policy. But in reality, the 1920s set the stage for contemporary America far more than this decade looked back to the past.

### An Economic Revolution

- Underlying all the changes that emerged in the 1920s is the economic revolution that took place at this time. This revolution was based on the continued consolidation and growing efficiency of business via “scientific management,” as explained by Frederick W. Taylor and known as Taylorism. With this movement came the rise of a new class of business managers and an explosion in productivity.
- On the surface, the increase in per capita output and the emergence of giant national chains, such as A&P, the Woolworth Company, and Bank of America, may seem like a continuation of trends from the 1890s. But this business growth and concentration was accompanied by a major shift in American industry during this decade, from heavy industry to the production of new and cheap consumer items.
- Equally critical to the new economy was the automobile. Thanks to assembly-line techniques and scientific management, Henry Ford cut the price of automobiles by more than two-thirds and made them available to the middle and lower classes.
  - Ford paid his own workers the unheard-of sum of \$5 a day so that they could buy the cars they made—in return for a ban on unions.

- Some consider this the start of welfare capitalism in industry to combat unionization, with the creation of pension funds, profit-sharing plans, and so on. This was hardly a return to late-19<sup>th</sup>-century conditions!
- As a result of Ford's innovations, auto production jumped from 4,000 in 1900 to 4.8 million in 1929, with auto ownership jumping from 8 to 23 million.
- Automobile production had a ripple effect on the entire economy, especially in such industries as steel, rubber, glass, and oil but also indirectly in the production of concrete, highway construction, and the emergence of roadside restaurants, gas stations, and motels.
- Along with this economic revolution came a phenomenal growth in advertising to convince people to buy cheap consumer products and automobiles.
  - Advertising was not new, but there was a massive expansion of the industry, along with a major shift, from informing the public of a product's existence to playing on psychological desires and needs, such as sex, acceptance, prestige, and popularity.
  - This advertising mania becomes known as "boosterism," a phenomenon epitomized by Bruce Barton's best-selling 1925 book, *The Man Nobody Knows*, which portrayed Jesus as the greatest advertising executive and businessman in history.
- The era also witnessed the rise of installment buying as a way for the middle and lower classes to afford all these new items.

### A Cultural Revolution

- This economic boom would both feed and be fed by the continuing urbanization of the United States. In the 1920s, urban dwellers outnumbered rural dwellers for the first time. Helping to spread the new urban culture was the mass media that emerged during this era, most notably radio and motion pictures. These would also create new national heroes.

- Radio contributed to the rise of spectator sports as a big business, both professional and collegiate. Especially noteworthy in the professional realm was baseball, which became the national pastime and made heroes of Babe Ruth and other players.
- With the advent of sound, the movie industry exploded in the 1920s, with 100 million out of a population of 120 million attending at least one movie each week. Movies also played a major role in the expansion of American culture overseas and created their own national heroes in movie stars.

### **Government Actions in the 1920s**

- The economic boom was fed by government assistance and other moves to help business and, thereby, create prosperity for all. As emphasized in a previous lecture, this was no “return” to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century laissez-faire approach, nor were the government’s efforts to expand prosperity on a global scale isolationist.
- The 1920s witnessed a return to Republican dominance in national politics and the election of what are usually considered three highly conservative presidents whose administrations supposedly hearken back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover.
- Each of these administrations also retains a stigma in historical memory: Harding’s for corruption, Coolidge’s for not heeding warning signs about the state of the economy, and Hoover’s for failure to act in the ensuing economic collapse. In reality, these reputations are not fully deserved, and they distort the records of all three.
- All three administrations believed in using the World War I experiences in government-business cooperation to foster even greater cooperation (rather than regulation) as a means to greater growth, efficiency, prosperity, and peace. Positive action in this regard included lowering taxes, raising protective tariffs, and

providing federal aid for state roads and a plan for a national highway system.

- Government itself became more efficient via the Budget and Accounting Act, which established a director of the budget and enabled the executive to plan and produce a unified, coherent national budget.
- Progressivism was not dead in the 1920s either: Thirty-four states passed worker's compensation laws, and women obtained the right to vote in this decade. At the same time, the immigration restriction supported by Progressives achieved its most notable success with the passage of the National Origins Act of 1924, and scientific racism spread. The 1920s was also the decade of continued government assaults on American and immigrant Leftists, known as the first great Red Scare.
- Prohibition was also a Progressive reform. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution passed in 1919, along with the



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Prohibition represents just one of many Progressive reforms carried over into the 1920s.

Volstead Act, and went into effect the following year—with such well-known consequences as the rise of bootleg whiskey and organized crime.

- Hoover, who was a key figure before his own presidency as Harding’s and Coolidge’s secretary of commerce, had been a famous Wilsonian Progressive and, in many ways, remained one.
  - In the 1920s, Hoover actively used his commerce department to help American corporations find new and expanded overseas markets. Along with the state department, the commerce department also promoted overseas investment.
  - Most notable in this regard was the Dawes Plan, whereby the United States loaned money to Germany and negotiated a linked reparations repayment schedule with France and Britain, ending a major European crisis. This was hardly isolationism, despite the continued refusal of the United States to join the League of Nations.
- Similarly, the state department, under secretaries Charles Evans Hughes and Frank B. Kellogg, was active in promoting and signing a series of treaties to help preserve the peace and prosperity of the era. These included naval arms limitation agreements and the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, outlawing war as an instrument of national policy.

### **Culture Clashes**

- The 1920s saw major clashes between the newly emerging national urban culture and traditional American rural culture.
  - At its 1924 national convention, for example, the Democratic Party split badly between its northern urban and southern rural wings over who to nominate and such issues as Prohibition and condemnation of the revived Ku Klux Klan.
  - The conflict over the presidential candidate, pitting New York’s “wet” Governor Al Smith against the “dry” Protestant William McAdoo, left the convention deadlocked for an incredible 102

ballots before a lackluster compromise candidate could be nominated on the 103<sup>rd</sup>.

- Equally if not more telling is the famous Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, where the state had outlawed the teaching of evolution.
  - High school biology teacher John Scopes challenged the law, was arrested, and was convicted at the trial.
  - But Scopes was quickly forgotten in the duel that emerged between William Jennings Bryan, who stood as an expert Bible witness for the prosecution, and the prominent lawyer for the defense, Clarence Darrow. Darrow humiliated Bryan and his cause by mocking his literal interpretation of creation, but at least as telling was the rural-urban enmity that surfaced during the trial.

### **A Multifaceted Era**

- Historians now recognize the 1920s as much more complex and multifaceted than the traditional popular image of the era.
- It was conservative in many ways, as in the passing of the 1921 Revenue Act that eliminated an excess-profits tax and dramatically lowered the income tax rate on the wealthy. But it can also be seen as both a continuation of portions of the Progressive era and the birth of the modern American economy and urban culture.
- We also see an active foreign policy in this era—despite the American refusal to join the League of Nations—befitting a nation with the largest economy in the world. At the same time, we see the continued development of a government-business partnership, both domestically and in foreign affairs, designed to achieve the twin goals of peace and prosperity.
- In most areas, the result was an incredibly peaceful and prosperous United States and world—probably the most peaceful and prosperous decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the one in which the United States was more secure than in any other decade of the

20<sup>th</sup> century. But all of this depended on the continued health and growth of the American economy, which would collapse in late 1929, transforming both the United States and the world.

### Suggested Reading

Allen, *Only Yesterday*.

Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*.

Wilson, *Herbert Hoover*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why did the 1920s gain a reputation for “normalcy” and conservatism, and what alternative words better describe the decade?
2. What ideas and policies from the 1920s do we still live with today?

# Hoover and the Great Depression Revisited

## Lecture 17

**H**erbert Hoover is generally considered an abject failure as president for his refusal to deal aggressively with the Great Depression, yet he did more than any previous president to combat serious economic decline. In fact, he began many programs that would later be associated with the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt, the man whose programs he would sharply attack. This lecture will take another look at Hoover to try to explain the reasons for the discrepancy between his record and his reputation.

### Hoover's Pre-Presidential Career

- Herbert Hoover started his career as a mining engineer and developed a reputation as an effective and efficient administrator and humanitarian. He was considered to be a Progressive with great political possibilities—and both parties courted him. He chose to be a Republican and was a major figure in the administrations of Harding and Coolidge as secretary of commerce.
- In this position, Hoover exemplified the continued Progressivism and organizational revolution of the 1920s. He personified the new managers and social engineers who worshiped efficiency and business-government cooperation. In 1928, he optimistically predicted that the nation would soon see an end to poverty.
- Hoover easily defeated his Democratic opponent, Al Smith, in the 1928 election. But his prediction about ending poverty proved to be anything but accurate as the stock market, the American economy, and the global economy all collapsed from 1929 to 1932.

### Causes of the Great Depression

- As numerous historians have noted, a mass production society requires mass consumption, and although the United States had become a consumer society by the late 1920s, its consumption was not adequate.

- One reason for underconsumption was the fact that the great prosperity of the 1920s was not shared by all; 40 to 60 percent of the population lived below the marginal subsistence level.
- Compounding this problem was an unsound corporate structure in which 200 of the 400,000 corporations in the nation owned 43 percent of the national wealth. That led to price rigidity despite a lack of consumer purchasing power and a “pyramid” structure that could collapse entirely via a chain reaction.
- The banking structure was equally unsound, with thousands of local, unstable, and unregulated banks. The Federal Reserve System, still in its infancy, was underutilized and had little or no control over many of these banks. The Fed’s 1927 policies actually played a role in bringing about the collapse, and in the wake of the collapse, it made the situation worse by pursuing adverse policies.
- All of this was aggravated by unprecedented speculation in the stock market because of the lack of investment opportunities and the belief that the market would always go up.
- The international economic and financial structure was equally unstable as a result of World War I and its aftermath. Both the United States and other industrialized nations had instituted higher tariffs in the 1920s, but that led to a decline in international trade—which led to more economic strains, the withdrawal of foreign funds from the United States, and eventually, the withdrawal of U.S. funds from overseas.
- Installment buying and the creation of artificial demand via advertising masked these problems, postponing the day of reckoning and worsening the situation.

### **The Stock Market Boom**

- Why did the stock market continue to boom with the economy already in serious trouble by 1928?

- With consumer demand saturated, corporate profits from the 1920s went into stock speculation rather than plant and machinery. And because there was less corporate demand for expansion loans, banks loaned more money for stock purchases.
- Much of this money went not into direct stock purchases but into call loans—loans that stock brokers make to customers at a high interest rate to enable customers to buy stock on margin (putting down only a percentage of the purchase price). This is actually a form of installment buying applied to the stock market.
- The Federal Reserve made matters worse by lowering the rediscount rate at which banks could borrow in 1927. With such easy credit, banks borrowed from the Fed at a low 3.5 percent rate and then reloaned the money to the call market for 10 percent or higher.
- The entire stock market boom had no economic foundation on which to rest; it was a bubble fueled by the belief that the market would go up forever, with previous shocks dismissed since they had stopped.

### **The Results of the Crash**

- Panic in the market hit full blast during the last week of October 1929. Stocks would lose one-third of their value in three months. The crash didn't cause the Depression, but it made the situation substantially worse.
- The loss of stock money wiped out purchasing power and led to bank failures. No loans were available, and industries were forced to cut back on production, which meant layoffs, lower wages, and even less purchasing power.
- The banking system as a whole began to collapse in late 1930, with a total of 1,352 banks failing by the end of the year. That led to runs on other banks, requiring them to call in loans and sell assets to meet those runs. That, in turn, drove down the value of other assets and further contracted the money supply and tightened credit.

- In 1931, the European financial structure began to collapse, a result of the drying up of U.S. loans, which led to the drying up of German reparations to World War I Allies that had been linked to those loans.
- At first, the Federal Reserve did nothing to save the banks. Eventually, it raised the rediscount rate to stop the outflow of gold, which is exactly the opposite of what it should have done.



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**Herbert Hoover, widely criticized for his failure to take action in the face of the Great Depression, actually did more than previous presidents had to combat economic decline.**

### Hoover Steps In

- Earlier financial collapses and economic depressions in U.S. history had been viewed as a normal part of the business cycle and part of the market's self-correcting mechanism via Adam Smith's "invisible hand." The traditional response of the government had been to do nothing and let the market correct itself, but Hoover did not accept this logic.
- Hoover came up with a program that reflected his belief in the so-called "associational society"—voluntary groups for rational, scientific planning, with government to stimulate and encourage such groups but not dictate to them. Hoover held a series of conferences with business and labor leaders to reach voluntary agreements to keep production and wages up.

- For agriculture, he used the just-passed Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929, establishing the Federal Farm Board, to promote agricultural cooperatives and stabilization corporations that agreed to limit production (with limited ability to buy surplus).
- Hoover also supported the Smoot-Hawley Tariff—the highest tariff in U.S. history—to eliminate external competition for agriculture, encourage business, and restore confidence.
- He agreed to a modest public works program to provide some jobs and encouraged state and local public works projects via the 1932 Emergency Relief and Construction Act.
- He supported voluntary programs to provide loans to endangered financial institutions, with sound banks providing funds to banks in trouble.
- When these programs failed to end the Depression, Hoover went even further, taking direct government action that marked a shift from his previous insistence on volunteerism. Measures included the Glass-Steagall Act (to address frozen assets), the Federal Home Loan Bank Act, and the institution of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.

### Hoover's Reputation

- Given these efforts, why does Hoover have such a “do-nothing” reputation? Part of the explanation can be found in Democratic campaign propaganda of the 1930s, and part of it is the fact that later New Deal measures that went further than Hoover made his efforts appear nearly nonexistent in comparison. In this regard, future events distort our understanding of what Hoover did during his presidency.
- Equally important was Hoover's own behavior from 1929 to 1932. Rather than a deeply respected efficiency expert, as he had seemed in good times, Hoover came across as cold during the Depression. He also consistently made optimistic statements that were at odds

with reality, believing that he needed to restore confidence in what was basically a sound system.

- It's important to realize that Hoover had a tremendous fear of what would happen if government began to dictate policy. For this reason, he stuck with a voluntary, cooperative approach (at least at first), which failed because the agreements made could not be kept.
- In addition, and linked to this fear of the consequences of having the government dictate policy, Hoover adamantly refused to supply federal relief, believing it would destroy individual initiative and the American system. In this refusal, the great humanitarian came to be perceived as inhuman.
- To make matters worse, Hoover refused to take additional measures to provide federal aid to business. He rejected the so-called Swope Plan for an operation similar to what would become the New Deal's National Recovery Administration because of his fear of government control.
- If anything, Hoover became even more ideologically and personally rigid as a result of being forced into the drastic measures of 1931–1932. That rigidity can be seen in his continued support of Prohibition and his defense of the U.S. Army's attack on the marchers of the Bonus Army—World War I veterans who had come to Washington to demand early payment of the bonus granted them in the 1920s.

### **Perceptions Distorted by Future Events**

- Our understanding of Herbert Hoover and his policies has been seriously distorted by a number of factors beyond the failure of his programs: the propaganda of his political opponents, later government measures that made his efforts appear almost nonexistent, and his own later attacks on those measures. In this regard, future events distorted our perceptions of what Hoover did from 1929–1933 and who he was.

- Equally important was Hoover's own behavior, most notably his ideological rigidity, which made him appear cold, heartless, and willing to save banks and big business but not the people.
- All of Hoover's intelligence, training, and experiences were, if anything, counterproductive. He is not alone in having had such an experience as president. Indeed, it is interesting to note that two of the brightest men elected president in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—both of whom were failures as presidents and were not reelected—were engineers: Hoover and Jimmy Carter. Intelligence and ability in the areas of engineering and administration, it appears, may not translate into success in the political realm.

### Suggested Reading

Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*.

Wilson, *Herbert Hoover*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How does the contemporary economic situation compare with what took place during the Great Depression? What similarities and differences do you note?
2. Given Hoover's failure as president despite his proven abilities, what personal characteristics are needed for success in the presidency?

# What Did Roosevelt's New Deal Really Do?

## Lecture 18

**F**ranklin D. Roosevelt is simultaneously one of the most beloved and one of the most hated presidents in U.S. history. Despite what his critics say, Roosevelt and the New Deal did not destroy economic or political liberty in the United States, but it is equally true that the New Deal spawned many of the political and economic problems we now face. In this lecture, we will look at the New Deal in detail, noting a host of unintended consequences that resulted from its implementation.

### Ending the Immediate Crisis

- Franklin Roosevelt was elected amid the greatest economic crisis in U.S. history. On inauguration day, March 4, 1933, the Great Depression had brought the economic and financial life of the country to a virtual standstill.
- The new president's first and most important goal was to end the financial crisis, primarily by psychological means that would restore people's confidence and prevent further runs on the banks. In this, he was quickly successful.
- On the day after his inauguration, Roosevelt used a World War I-era law to close all banks in the country that were still open in order to prevent more runs and a total financial collapse. He ingeniously labeled the measure a "bank holiday" and then disappeared with his staff to draft legislation that would provide for government inspection and assistance to reopen sound banks.
- On March 12, Roosevelt gave the first of his famous "fireside chats" over the radio; 60 million Americans heard him say that the banking system was sound and the banks would reopen on the following day. On March 13, people lined up at the banks, not to withdraw their funds but to make deposits! The immediate financial and psychological crises were over.

## Relief, Recovery, and Reform

- Beyond ending the immediate crisis, Roosevelt and his advisers sought to achieve three fundamental goals—the “three Rs” of relief, recovery, and reform.
- To this end, Roosevelt proposed 15 major bills in the first few weeks of his administration, all of which Congress passed. These included the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the National Industrial Recovery Act, the Homeowners Loan Act, and others.
- In 1935–1936, Roosevelt and Congress went much further, passing the bills of the Second New Deal, including a massive public works program, the Social Security Act, the Wagner Labor Relations Act (establishing the National Labor Relations Board), higher taxes on the wealthy, rural electrification, and more federal control over banking and public utilities.
- These bills from both New Deals were only partially successful in achieving the three Rs.
  - In the First New Deal, the downward spiral was halted and recovery started, but the recovery stalled by 1934.
  - As a result of the Second New Deal measures, additional and major recovery took place, and the economy was nearing its 1929 levels by the end of Roosevelt’s first term. But most of the gains were then wiped out by a major recession in 1937–1938.
  - The New Deal’s relief bills succeeded in helping many of those who were suffering the most, but they were too modest to help all. And New Deal recovery policies simultaneously made the economic situation worse for many people.

## Roosevelt’s Thinking

- Roosevelt may well be the greatest politician the United States has ever produced, but for that very reason, he is extremely difficult to figure out. He was a master manipulator of people, with a front of jovial simplemindedness masking a complex and secretive interior.

- Ideas and consistency were not important to Roosevelt, and he was not a deep thinker. He also had a short attention span but a mind, according to one biographer, “like flypaper.”
- He was willing to experiment and see what worked, but his experimentation had severe limits. He had no socialist or Marxian ideas and was actually a conservative man who wanted to preserve the essentials of the American system.

- Roosevelt’s expertise was in getting ideas accepted by both Congress and the American people. In this, he was a political and a media genius, but his programs often made more political sense than economic sense.



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- His advisers, known as the Brain Trust, disagreed sharply in their recommendations. All had roots in the Progressive era and believed government had the responsibility to ensure some sort of security for all, but there was no unity regarding the specific policies needed.
- Contrary to popular mythology, most of the reformers associated with Roosevelt wanted a balanced budget and did not believe in massive deficit spending to create purchasing power, as recommended by the British economist John Maynard Keynes.
- The result of Roosevelt’s thinking and style of government was a hodge-podge of legislation, all concerned with the three Rs but with different emphases at different times.

**Roosevelt’s New Deal was much more conservative than is generally recognized; indeed, its initial emphasis was on government planning in conjunction with big business.**

## Limited Recovery and Opposition

- The recovery of the First New Deal was quite limited, primarily because of the competing nature of the spending programs and the continued fiscal conservatism of Roosevelt, his advisers, and Congress.
- The goal of the First New Deal remained a balanced budget, as seen in the early legislation to cut federal spending and increase revenues via a tax on beer and wine. Contrary to the myths, there was no great increase in government and deficit spending at this time.
- The relief measures were too limited to generate full employment and, thus, full recovery, and were often at cross-purposes with the recovery measures.
- Early failures made Roosevelt willing to experiment with more drastic measures in 1935–1936. At the same time, despite the pro-business orientation of some New Deal legislation, business turned against Roosevelt as the immediate crisis receded. He also came under attack from the Left and faced growing militancy among farmers, newly unionized industrial workers, and congressional Democrats.
- As if all that was not enough, in 1935, the Supreme Court declared both the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the centerpieces of the First New Deal's recovery legislation, unconstitutional.

## The Second New Deal

- Under the impact of these attacks and threats, Roosevelt swung to the Left in 1935–1936 and sided with both the anti-big business New Freedomites and the big spenders in the Brain Trust.
- The Second New Deal measures—particularly the heavy deficit spending and subsequent employment of millions of workers in work-relief projects—raised the economy nearly back to its 1929 levels and lowered unemployment to 14 percent.

- As with the First New Deal, however, these measures were much less radical than they appeared and negatively affected many Americans.
- Roosevelt made clear that he was not in favor of long-term relief, and he never called for an egalitarian society. One of his foremost biographers labeled him more a British-style classic conservative than a Progressive or liberal.

### **Major Recession, 1937–1938**

- Contrary to the mythology, Roosevelt never accepted Keynesian concepts of deficit spending. He saw any deficit spending as a temporary expedient and remained firmly committed to the balanced budget.
- After his 1936 reelection, he incorrectly concluded that the Depression was over and tried to balance the budget by cutting government spending, with deep cuts in work-relief expenditures.
- At the same time, the new Social Security tax removed another \$2 billion of potential spending money, with no benefits due until 1940. And the Federal Reserve, fearing inflation, contracted the money supply by increasing reserve requirements for member banks.
- The result was a major recession in 1937–1938 that wiped out many of the gains of Roosevelt’s first term.
- In 1937, Roosevelt’s ill-considered attempt to “pack” the Supreme Court broke his political hold over Congress and led to cries of dictatorship, in effect ending the New Deal after a final burst of legislation in 1938. Full recovery was not reached until 1941 and then largely under the impact of World War II.

### **The Real Results of the New Deal**

- Clearly, the New Deal did not end the Great Depression; World War II did. Nor did it establish socialism, accept and institute massive deficit spending (that happened only during World War II),

redistribute wealth, or change the basics of the American capitalist system. In retrospect, it was quite conservative in what it attempted to do.

- But that is only part of the story. It did not appear conservative at the time, and it had an enormous impact on almost all aspects of American life. Although some of these consequences were planned, many were examples of the historical law of unintended consequences.
- The New Deal stopped the downward economic spiral in the United States and achieved a good measure of recovery. As such, it may well have prevented a total collapse of the capitalist economic system and the American democratic political system. It also experimented and, in the process, created a new role for government in people's lives and the modern American government and economy—the so-called “welfare state.”
- During the New Deal, power shifted from Wall Street to Washington, with the president becoming the nation's “chief economic engineer.” Two of the negative results of this shift were a hodge-podge economic system and a growth in executive and federal power that has proven quite dangerous to the constitutional system of checks and balances.
- Although the New Deal did not redistribute wealth, it clearly brought previously “forgotten” groups into American politics and cultural life: labor, the elderly, the unemployed, and immigrant groups from eastern and southern Europe. Its pro-union stand broke with previous government policy and helped to create the largest middle class in history. Its impact on American agriculture, however, was mixed, as were its effects on African Americans and women.
- The New Deal helped to reassert an ethic of social consciousness in arts, letters, and society in general and pioneered government patronage of the arts. It also firmly established the Progressive

concept of using experts in government and brought intellectuals back into government service.

- Politically, the New Deal made the Democrats the majority party of the country and created the Democratic coalition that would dominate U.S. politics for the next 40 to 50 years.
- This mixed bag of results should not blind us to all that the New Deal accomplished. In a nutshell, it gave us the American economic and political systems we still live with—and argue about—today, with all of their successes and problems.

### Suggested Reading

Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*.

Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*.

Sitkoff, ed., *Fifty Years Later*.

### Questions to Consider

1. If the New Deal, in retrospect, was so conservative, why did conservatives condemn it and label it radical?
2. What personal characteristics led to Roosevelt's enormous popularity and success as a president, especially in comparison to his predecessor, Hoover?

# World War II Misconceptions and Myths

## Lecture 19

**W**orld War II remains one of the most popular of all U.S. history subjects, but the version of the war that exists in our collective memory is filled with misconceptions and myths. Unfortunately, these myths have dominated our worldview ever since 1945 and have heavily influenced, often disastrously, our foreign and military policies. This lecture explains how some of these myths developed and challenges them with a comparison to the actual history of the war.

### Myths about the Origins of World War II

- The standard approach to the origins of World War II holds that it was caused by dictators in Germany, Italy, and Japan who illegally seized power against the will of their peoples, sought to conquer the world, and combined into the Axis alliance for that purpose.
- They were aided in their efforts by the disastrous British and French policy of appeasement, a policy indirectly reinforced by American isolationism in the two decades between World War I and World War II.
- The Axis powers came close to total victory in 1940–1941 but were stopped by belated American recognition of the threat they posed and the ensuing decision to aid militarily those nations still fighting the Axis. That, in turn, led the Axis powers to make war on the United States via the Japanese sneak attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor.

### The Reality of the War's Origins

- The historical reality regarding the origins of the war is quite different, on at least seven major points.
- First of all, it is a misnomer even to think about a single war before December 1941. In effect, what began in the years 1931–1941

was a series of regional and largely unconnected wars in Asia and Europe that became partially fused in late 1941.

- Second, the Axis dictators did not seize power against the will of their peoples. Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Tōjō Hideki all took power with the acquiescence and/or connivance of the existing powers in their countries.
  - It's important to understand, in this regard, the enormous worldwide appeal during the interwar years of the ideology of fascism. This ideology held that true freedom lay in acting as part of a group, not individually, with a single dictatorial leader serving as the incarnation of the group's spirit.
  - Fascism arose and gained enormous popularity during the interwar years as a result of World War I and the Great Depression, which was viewed as the failure of capitalism and democracy.
- Third, despite their common ideology, the Axis powers were united in name only. Their alliance was basically a diplomatic bluff designed to scare potential adversaries into inaction via the threat of having to fight all of them rather than just one.
- Fourth, as we've seen, the United States was not isolationist during this period. Despite its refusal to join the League of Nations in 1919–1920, it remained active in world affairs throughout the interwar years.
- Fifth, appeasement was not a new policy during the 1930s, nor a dirty word. It was, and still is, one of the oldest practices in the history of diplomacy. The British had practiced it vis-à-vis Germany during the 1920s and 1930s, as had the Americans.
  - The problem in the 1930s was that Hitler was unappeasable. Successful appeasement is usually based on shared desires and values, something totally absent when Hitler dealt with the British.

- Earlier appeasement, especially at Munich in 1938 with regard to Czechoslovakia, had helped Hitler by allowing him to begin the war enormously strengthened, but it also helped the British. It enabled them to be much better prepared from a military standpoint in 1939 than they had been at the time of Munich and to go to war with the full backing of the Commonwealth countries and the British public.
- Sixth, the Axis bid for total victory in 1940–1941 was halted not by American material aid but by the continued and successful resistance of the Chinese in Asia and of the British and Russians in Europe.
- Finally, the attack on Pearl Harbor was not brought on by U.S. aid to the Allied countries but by American economic sanctions against Japan in 1940–1941, combined with opportunities created by Hitler’s European victories for the Japanese to pursue access to resources in Southeast Asia. The attack on Pearl Harbor was designed to remove the threat presented by the U.S. fleet to further Japanese conquests, and neither Hitler nor Roosevelt had anything to do with its conception or launch.

### Myths about Fighting the War and “Losing” the Peace

- Our collective memory holds that the United States was primarily—and almost singlehandedly—responsible for total military victory over the Axis powers.
  - We provided our allies with critical military supplies free of charge via the lend-lease program, while undertaking a massive military and economic mobilization that placed more than 15 million Americans in uniform and enabled us to equip them and our allies simultaneously.
  - We then deployed our uniformed forces around the world, destroying the German and Italian armies in major battles in North Africa, Italy, and western Europe and the Japanese army and navy in the central and southwest Pacific theaters.

- At the same time, our air forces smashed German and Japanese war production and cities, culminating in the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki and ended the Pacific war.
- Our collective memory also holds that during the war, the American people realized we had made a terrible mistake by refusing to join the League of Nations at the end of World War I and that we had been granted a chance to correct this error by joining a new international collective security organization, the United Nations. This time, however, there would be no talk of disarmament.
- Roosevelt's great failure, Americans would soon argue, had been in not seeing a new Hitler in his Soviet wartime ally, Joseph Stalin, along with his naïve and futile attempt to appease Stalin, most notoriously at the 1945 Yalta Conference. There, Roosevelt supposedly gave away half the world to the Soviet dictator. The result of such naïveté and appeasement was the Cold War.



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**The American understanding of World War II is riddled with myths about the war's origins, our country's contributions, and our naïveté in negotiating the occupation of postwar Germany with Stalin.**

## The Reality of the Fighting and the Peace

- World War II was not won by the United States alone but by an Allied coalition whose other members contributed at least as much as our country.
  - The 15 million Americans in uniform constituted only 12 percent of the U.S. population and only 25 percent of the total Allied forces during the war. The United States did, however, produce more than 50 percent of the war material used to defeat the Axis powers.
  - At least as important as the U.S. contribution was the contribution of Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries, which played a major role in every victory claimed by the Americans in the North African, Mediterranean, and European theaters.
  - Although the British remain tremendously grateful for the American aid they received, it is important to note that the war would have ended in total German victory in 1940 without the British success in fighting alone in 1940–1941 and that, in British minds, we traded our weapons for British blood during that time.
  - It's also true that the Soviets' contribution to victory, and their ensuing casualties, dwarfed those of both the United States and Great Britain.
- As for Roosevelt's attempts to appease Stalin at Yalta, it's important to note that Yalta was a wartime conference, not a postwar peace conference.
  - Its accords were wartime agreements designed to maintain the alliance until the Axis had been totally defeated and to keep the alliance together in the postwar era so that the Germans could not rise again to start a third world war.
  - Roosevelt did not “give away” to Stalin any territory occupied by U.S. soldiers. Indeed, he struck some favorable bargains

with the Soviet dictator, despite the relative weakness of his military hand.

### **Why Do We Sustain Our Myths?**

- Many of our myths about World War II reinforce our preconceived ideological notions. Our faith in democratic elections, for example, is directly challenged by the fact that voters made the Nazis the largest party in Germany during the early 1930s. It's much easier to say that Hitler seized power than to admit this.
- Other myths reinforce our misconceptions about ourselves, such as the belief that we were ever truly isolationist or naïve.
- The overestimation of the American contribution to victory also reflects a traditional ethnocentrism shared by our allies, as well as a desire to downplay the critical Soviet contribution to victory. Admitting that the victory depended on alliance with a bloody dictator would challenge our view of the “Good War.”
- In addition to these factors, conspiracy theories, such as those about Pearl Harbor, feed into what the historian Richard Hofstadter labeled the “paranoid style” in American politics. They also reflect an anachronistic projection of contemporary knowledge of events onto policymakers of the past who did not have such knowledge. The Yalta myths feed into this paranoid style and the anachronistic projection of later events, as well.
- In addition, there appears to be a natural tendency to make and misuse historical analogies to support preconceived notions and plans. In this regard, the myths and misconceptions about the war have proven useful in justifying American policies since the war.
  - Almost every president since Franklin Roosevelt has used World War II myths in the collective memory to justify his own policies: Truman in Korea; Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon in Vietnam; Kennedy in Cuba; and both Bushes in Iraq.

- Many if not most American policymakers believe the myths as much as the public does. But these events—in Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and Iraq—had nothing to do with the reality of World War II, and relying on this historical analogy has consistently led to tragedy.
- Indeed, those tragedies emphasize the fact that faulty perceptions of history are in some ways more important than what actually happened—because people act on the basis of their perceptions. And when perceptions differ so dramatically from historical reality, the results can indeed be tragic.

### Suggested Reading

Adams, *The Best War Ever*.

Clausewitz, *On War*.

Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*.

Weinberg, “Some Myths of World War II.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Why are historical conspiracy theories so popular despite the fact that most of them cannot stand up to serious scrutiny?
2. Exactly how have presidents during the last 65 years used World War II myths, misconceptions, and analogies to justify their policies?

# Was the Cold War Inevitable?

## Lecture 20

We shouldn't be surprised by the fact that some of the World War II myths discussed in the last lecture feed into myths about the Soviet-American conflict known as the Cold War. It's not true, however, that the Cold War could have been avoided if Roosevelt had not been naïve at Yalta or that the conflict was inevitable. In this lecture, we will explore how and why this conflict took place and lasted for as long as it did.

### Conflicting Histories and Ideologies

- Russia and the United States always possessed diametrically opposed political systems: centralized autocratic tyranny versus decentralized democracy. Despite this difference, the two countries had been friendly throughout the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century because their interests did not collide and because they shared a common enemy, Great Britain.
- Still, there were predictions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the two expansionist powers would eventually come into conflict, and these predictions became a reality at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the interests of the two nations collided in Manchuria.
- Ideology became much more of a factor in the conflict as a result of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which established the communist government in Russia.
  - This took place at the very moment that Woodrow Wilson was restating and expanding the American mission to re-create the world in its own image.
  - The two nations thus had diametrically opposed and universalist ideologies, with each one claiming to negate the validity of the other.

## Changes Wrought by World War II

- None of these differences prevented Russia and the United States from collaborating effectively as allies, along with Great Britain, during World War II. What changed in 1945 was the fact that they succeeded in defeating Nazi Germany and Japan. With their common enemies gone, there was nothing to offset their differing interests and ideologies.
- The world in which the two nations existed also changed dramatically after World War II. The Allied victory had created a massive and unprecedented global power vacuum at the same time that the United States and the Soviet Union became superpowers. As their differences became obvious after the Axis defeat, each began to see the other as its major adversary.
- Each also tended to view the other through the prism of the events they had just lived through and, thus, as potentially similar to the Nazi enemy they had just defeated. The historical lessons they took from that experience were never to “appease” and to negotiate only from positions of military strength.
- Further, each viewed its own ensuing actions as defensive reactions to the aggression of the other, thereby leading to a constant escalation of conflict.

## Superpower Conflict, 1945–1946

- Given these factors, it is far from surprising that conflict between the two superpowers quickly erupted and escalated from 1945–1946.
- First came conflict over the boundaries and government of Poland, with cries on each side that the other was breaking the Yalta Accords. This was quickly followed by conflict over policies in occupied Germany.
- The American dropping of the atomic bomb without informing the Soviets heightened their suspicions and fears of the United States,

as did the later discovery of communist spies in the wartime project to develop the bomb.

- The activities of local communist parties in Europe simultaneously heightened American suspicions and fears. Those parties had gained enormously in power and prestige because of their anti-Nazi resistance activities during the war, but Americans perceived them as stalking horses for the Soviets.
- In 1947, when Britain informed the United States that it could no longer afford to support the Greek government against communist guerrillas or Turkey against Soviet pressure, the United States—with the famous Truman Doctrine—replaced the British in both countries and announced a global policy to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”

### **The Marshall Plan and Containment**

- With the failure of the foreign ministers conference in Moscow in 1947, Secretary of State George C. Marshall proposed the European recovery program that bears his name: the Marshall Plan.
  - The plan would include the economic rebuilding of Germany, which Stalin feared and opposed. Stalin interpreted the plan as designed to disrupt his empire in Eastern Europe.
  - Consequently, he refused to participate in the recovery program and forced his East European satellites to do the same.
- Later in 1947, in an effort to halt the rebuilding of Germany and the formation of a West German government, Stalin instituted a blockade of the western zones of Berlin. That move led to the Berlin airlift by the United States, escalated the formation of a West German government, and led to the formation of NATO by 1949.
- All of this was part of the new American policy enunciated in 1947 by State Department official George F. Kennan to contain Soviet

expansionist tendencies, a policy that he asserted would lead either to a mellowing or a collapse of the Soviet system.

- Containment resulted in a major expansion of U.S. power as our nation moved into areas around the Soviet Empire. It also increased Soviet perceptions of American aggressiveness, necessitating a response. By 1948–1949, this “mirror image” effect brought the two superpowers to the edge of World War III.
- As we know, World War III did not occur, but by 1949, the two superpowers had, in effect, divided Europe into respective spheres of influence, spheres that each was willing to go to war to defend.

### The Korean War

- In China, civil war between Chinese communists under Mao Zedong and nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek broke out soon after the Japanese defeat. In October 1949, Mao’s forces won and Chiang fled to the island of Formosa.
  - Although his defeat had long been expected by experts in the State Department, it sent shock waves through the United States.
  - The “loss” of China took place at the same time as a series of spy cases and the detonation of the Soviets’ first atomic bomb, all of which resulted in an anticommunist hysteria in the United States known today as McCarthyism.
  - In early 1950, Mao signed a treaty of alliance with Stalin.



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**The victory of Mao Zedong’s forces in 1949 shocked the American public and fanned the flames of anticommunist hysteria.**

- Meanwhile, the peninsula of Korea, previously part of the Japanese Empire, had been divided by Russian and American occupation forces after the Japanese surrender. The two superpowers had established rival governments in the North and South, but with Stalin's acquiescence, the North invaded the South on June 25, 1950.
- The Truman administration interpreted this as a Soviet move that could not be tolerated. Taking advantage of a Soviet boycott of the UN Security Council, the Americans obtained UN sanction for a military intervention to halt the North Koreans.
- The administration then decided to take advantage of the victory at Inch'ŏn to unify North and South Korea by force. General Douglas MacArthur's forces crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and moved toward the Chinese border on the Yalu River. That movement led to a massive military intervention by the Chinese communists. The conflict now threatened to turn into a full-scale world war.
- The Truman administration reverted to its previous aim of liberating only South Korea, and U.S./UN forces fought their way back up the peninsula. When MacArthur refused to accept this policy and pressed for an expanded war with China, he was dismissed. An armistice was signed in 1953.
- Also in 1953, Stalin died and was replaced by Nikita Khrushchev, who denounced Stalin and called for a more open society. For a brief moment, there appeared to be a possibility of a thaw in the Cold War, but instead, it intensified and expanded, becoming "hot" again in Vietnam.

## **Détente**

- By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the bipolar world that had come into being in 1945 no longer existed. Instead, new centers of power had emerged, as Europe recovered from the war and China emerged as a major player—and as its major split with the Soviet Union became public and more intense.

- Sensing both the limits of American power in Vietnam and the possibilities inherent in this development, President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, pursued a triangular balance-of-power approach that led to a major lessening of global tensions.
- Despite predictions, the Cold War did not come to an end; instead, détente ended by the late 1970s, and a new “hot” war emerged when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

### **A New and Fierce Cold War**

- In retrospect, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the simultaneous Iranian Revolution constituted the wave of the future and threatened both superpowers, but they remained locked in their old conflict and did not see this. Both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan reacted fiercely to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and supported the Islamic forces.
- A new and fierce Cold War thus began in the early 1980s—one we tend to forget because of what happened in the late 1980s, but one that nevertheless had many thinking that World War III was at hand once again.
- Again, World War III failed to materialize, primarily for two reasons. First, the old generation of Soviet leaders died and a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, instituted major reforms in both Soviet domestic and foreign policies. Second, Reagan embraced these reforms and, with Gorbachev, instituted a new era of Soviet-American cooperation.
- The Cold War finally did end between 1989 and 1991 when glasnost and perestroika led ultimately to the total collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.

## Reexamining the Cold War

- In one sense, the Cold War was not a war at all but a state of abnormal bipolarity following World War II. Still, there were numerous bloody regional wars fought within the Cold War, including Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and a series of civil and regional conflicts fought by proxies.
- As previously stated, conflict may have been inevitable when World War II ended, but the duration and intensity of the conflict was not. That intensity and duration resulted primarily from domestic and ideological factors in each country that, in retrospect, were almost totally at odds with international realities after 1949 or 1953.

## Suggested Reading

Clausewitz, *On War*.

Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.

LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War; 1945–2006*.

Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*.

Westad, *The Global Cold War*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Cold War never erupt into a direct, global, and total Soviet-American war?
2. Why did most if not all of the major “thaws” in the Cold War take place under presidents who had strong anticommunist reputations?

# The Real Blunders of the Vietnam War

## Lecture 21

**T**he Vietnam War was one of the most unsuccessful and internally divisive conflicts in U.S. history. Indeed, the reasons for our failure in that war continue to divide Americans today. But none of the scapegoats usually put forth—Lyndon Johnson, the military’s counterproductive strategy, the domestic antiwar movement—addresses the central reasons for the American failure in Vietnam, which lie in the realm of faulty perceptions—of both the nature of the conflict and of Vietnam itself.

### The Course of American Involvement

- American involvement in Vietnam began in 1950—if not earlier—and lasted until 1975. Throughout this period, the United States viewed Vietnam as part of its larger Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union.
  - This American perspective was partially explained by the fact that the insurgencies against French colonial rule and the South Vietnamese government were led by Vietnamese communists under Ho Chi Minh.
  - In addition, rebuilding France as a bulwark against communist expansion in Europe and helping to maintain French control of Indochina were key components of America’s Cold War policy of containment.
- The United States followed a policy of benevolent neutrality toward France in the early stages of its war with Ho and then active support of the French from 1950–1954, by which time our nation was paying for approximately 70 percent of the French war effort.
- That effort ended in failure, however, and in 1954, France decided to sue for peace. The result was the Geneva Conference of 1954; the withdrawal of the French; and the creation of the independent

states of Cambodia, Laos, and a temporarily divided Vietnam in what had been French Indochina.

- At that point, the United States shifted its support to the anticommunist entity below the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel known unofficially as South Vietnam. All U.S. efforts were now directed at defending South Vietnam militarily against the actions of both communist guerrillas in the South and the North Vietnamese army.
- The effort was at first limited to economic and military aid, along with military advisers, but when that failed, the number of military advisers was increased dramatically. And when that effort failed, President Lyndon Johnson began a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam and sent major U.S. military forces into the South.
- Those forces failed to achieve more than a military stalemate. That fact and the damage being done by the war—both domestically and internationally—led Johnson’s successor, Richard Nixon, to scale down U.S. military forces and sign a peace accord with the North. Simultaneously, he tried to build up the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese army, a process known as “Vietnamization.”
- This was done at the same time that Nixon was creating the policy of détente with the Soviet Union, which led to the belief that the Soviets would hold back the communists in Vietnam while Nixon completed Vietnamization and the American military withdrawal. The Soviets failed to do so, however; Vietnamization also failed, and North Vietnam was able to conquer the South in 1975.
- The key problems with the American approach were threefold: (1) The South Vietnamese government was never a viable entity; (2) the Vietnam War was much more than a Cold War conflict; and (3) the war was not a Cold War conflict at all to the Vietnamese fighting in it.

## Decolonization after World War II

- The Cold War was but one of two major international events to take place in the aftermath of World War II. The other was the decolonization of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as nationalist movements in these areas succeeded in throwing out the European colonial powers that had previously ruled them.
- Nationalist sentiments had been strong in the French colony of Indochina since its creation in the 1880s. At the end of World War I, Vietnamese nationalist Ho Chi Minh, having been rejected by President Wilson, pled the case for his country's independence to the Bolsheviks, who were more than willing to provide support.
- During World War II, the United States had supported decolonization, and after the war, Ho had worked with American agents to launch guerrilla attacks against the Japanese, who had seized control from a French puppet government in 1945. After the Japanese surrender, Ho announced the independence of Vietnam from France.
- But by 1945, both Roosevelt and his successor, Truman, were having second thoughts about decolonization. As the Cold War increased in intensity from 1946–1949, so did U.S. support for our nation's European allies with colonial empires.
- The final blows to any American support for Ho, or even neutrality during his ensuing war with the French, were the 1949 communist victory in China and the Korean War that began in 1950. From that point onward, the United States was determined to contain communism in Asia.

## The Geneva Conference and Its Aftermath

- American support for the French in the early 1950s failed to change the outcome in Vietnam. At the 1954 Geneva Conference, the French agreed to recognize Vietnamese independence, as well the independence of Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam itself was temporarily divided at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

- The United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords, though it did state that it would not disturb them by force. Privately, it labeled them a disaster that would lead to the communization of all Southeast Asia.
- To prevent this from happening, the United States found an anticommunist Vietnamese nationalist, Ngo Dinh Diem, to wrest control of the French puppet government in South Vietnam. The Americans hoped that Diem could establish an anticommunist alternative to Ho.

### **Increasing U.S. Commitments**

- South Vietnam appeared to be a success in nation-building, but beneath the surface, Diem's government was in serious trouble, leading the United States into deeper commitments. By 1959, Ho's communist government in the North had decided to support the insurgency brewing in the South.
- The Kennedy administration sent in military forces to stop the communists with the goal of "winning hearts and minds." But by 1963, that effort had failed, and the United States sanctioned a military coup that overthrew and assassinated Diem.
- Ensuing military coups added to the instability of the government and the failure in the war against the communists. By 1964–1965, the communists were on the verge of winning.
- President Johnson then escalated American involvement via selective bombing of North Vietnam, followed by a sustained bombing campaign against the North and the decision to send combat troops into the South in 1965.

### **Escalation, De-escalation, and the End**

- By 1968, American forces in Vietnam numbered more than 500,000. The Americans had succeeded in preventing the communists from winning but not in defeating them.

- In addition to misunderstanding the nature of the war, the United States had grossly miscalculated the enemy's will—perhaps because it tended to view that enemy in Cold War terms, as puppets of the Soviet Union rather than fierce nationalists.
- To make matters worse, the war was tearing America apart and weakening U.S. military containment of the Soviet Union elsewhere. The war had also prompted severe questioning of American policy by our European allies and increased the prestige and influence of the Soviets in the Third World.
- In 1968, Nixon realized the failure of the Americanization of the war and the damage it was doing both domestically and internationally, but like his predecessors, he would not accept defeat.
- Instead, Nixon began the process of Vietnamization and the de-escalation of the American presence in South Vietnam but combined with an expansion of the air war against the North. He also believed that with détente, the Soviets would lessen their military support of the North and apply diplomatic pressure.
- All of Nixon's efforts failed as badly as those of his predecessors. At the peace talks in Paris, he managed to obtain a return of U.S. POWs, an armistice in place, and the ability to remove the last U.S. combat forces from Vietnam, but no lessening of communist pressure.
- The South Vietnamese government continued to be weak, corrupt, totally reliant on U.S. aid, and unable to win nationalist support from the population. It thus collapsed in the face of the North Vietnamese offensive of 1975. As a result of the Watergate break-in and a host of related illegal activities, the Nixon presidency had also collapsed by this time.

### **The True Causes of American Failure**

- There were many additional reasons for the American failure in Vietnam, but the basic problem that underlay all the others was the

insistence on viewing the war in Cold War terms rather than Third World nationalist terms.

- Along with this went a related ignorance of Vietnamese history and culture, itself at least partially the result of the Cold War. That ignorance resulted in the underestimation of both the willingness of Hanoi to face American firepower and the difficulty of creating an effective government in the South.
- Given that Washington viewed Vietnam as part of the global Cold War, it did not ever make Vietnam its top priority. In effect, every administration put into Vietnam only what was necessary to avoid defeat during its watch, not enough to win. This decision was also motivated by domestic factors, most notably a desire not to be charged with being “soft on communism” or having “lost” Indochina.



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**By early 1968, American forces in Vietnam numbered more than 500,000, but those forces failed to achieve more than a military stalemate.**

## Consequences of the War

- Ironically, the negative domestic consequences of the American failure in Vietnam far outnumbered the international ones. It did not lead to the communization of all of Southeast Asia or seriously affect the global balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union.
- It did, however, rip the United States apart internally, destroy two presidencies, and end the bipartisan consensus in foreign affairs that had existed since World War II. It also shattered the faith of many Americans in their government and, indeed, their country.
- Decades after the Vietnam War and the Cold War ended, we still live with these negative consequences and their aftermath. Ever since the war ended, Americans have either sought to ignore it or to draw analogies between it and more recent military interventions. But the truth is that every event in history is unique. History does not repeat itself, and every analogy is, thus, inherently flawed.
- Although history does not repeat itself, patterns of human behavior do. With Vietnam, perhaps the most important lessons are in that realm, in particular, in the tragedies of faulty perceptions that result from historical and cultural ignorance.

## Suggested Reading

Clausewitz, *On War*.

Herring, *America's Longest War*.

McMahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What additional errors did the United States make in Vietnam?
2. Why were American policymakers and strategists so ignorant of the history and culture of Southeast Asia and, indeed, of Asia in general?

# Myths about American Wars

## Lecture 22

In the last lecture, we examined some of the major misunderstandings associated with the Vietnam War. But Vietnam is far from the only American war that is misunderstood. Indeed, numerous misunderstandings and myths exist about most American wars: the idea that America has a tradition of defense by citizen-soldiers, that we go to war only for defensive reasons, and that we always “win the war but lose the peace.” In this lecture, we will dispel such myths by examining the history and results of some of our wars.

### The Defensive War

- Many if not most of our wars have been wars of choice. Indeed, only in the two world wars were we actually forced to declare war by the actions of our enemies.
- In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both the 1846–1848 war with Mexico and the 1898 war with Spain were wars by choice—the first to acquire California and New Mexico and the second to force the Spanish out of Cuba. Similarly, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we chose to go to war in Korea in 1950 and in Vietnam in the 1960s as part of the Cold War.
- In a somewhat gray area is the War of 1812. Madison and the Congress went to war in desperation because of the failure of their previous measures of economic retaliation designed to force the British to cease violating American neutral rights on the high seas.
- In the Civil War, the South chose to secede and fight for independence, while the North chose war to prevent that. Similarly, Americans chose to fight against what they saw as British violations of their rights in 1775, while Britain chose to crush their rebellion by force.

- Even in the two world wars, our enemies argued that our previous non-neutral acts had made us an unofficial belligerent and forced them to attack us.

### Incorrect and Manipulated Evidence for War

- The fact that America went to war against Iraq in 2003 on the basis of faulty or manipulated intelligence regarding “weapons of mass destruction” is viewed incorrectly as an anomaly in American history. In reality, numerous past presidents have presented incorrect information—sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly—in order to obtain congressional and public approval of war.



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- In 1846, President James K. Polk sent an army under General Zachary Taylor into disputed territory along the Rio Grande River, and when that army clashed with the Mexican army, he asked Congress for war on the grounds that “American blood” had been shed on “American soil.” In reality, Polk may have sent Taylor’s army into the territory to provoke a war in order to obtain California.
- The faulty basis for America’s war on Iraq is not an anomaly in our history; presidents from Madison, to FDR, to Johnson, to Bush have relied on faulty intelligence to launch military actions.**
- In September of 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt claimed that the U.S. destroyer *Greer* had been “wantonly attacked” by a German submarine in the Atlantic and launched an unofficial naval war against Germany in response. In reality, however, the *Greer* had been trailing the German submarine and radioing its position

back to a British fleet, which had responded with air attacks. The submarine had fired on the *Greer* in self-defense.

- More common historically than such blatant manipulation of the facts has been the presentation of evidence that was believed at the time but that later research showed to be incorrect. Such was the case in the declaration of both the War of 1812 and the Spanish-American War.

### **Dispensing with Contrary Evidence**

- In a separate category are war-causing events that were believed at the time because the administration wanted to believe them and, consequently, ignored contrary evidence.
- In order to obtain passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara claimed, in August 1964, that two attacks had taken place against U.S. destroyers by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin.
  - The resolution authorized the president to use force to prevent future attacks and would later be used by Johnson to justify his Americanization of the Vietnam War.
  - Johnson's original aim in getting the resolution passed, however, had been to "send a message" to the North Vietnamese regarding American unity and seriousness of purpose and to neutralize the issue of Vietnam in the 1964 presidential election campaign.
  - The administration had, in fact, prepared the resolution months earlier and simply waited for an "episode" to justify presenting it. It thus chose to ignore evidence that the second attack may not have occurred, as well as its own actions that probably led to the first attack.
- Nearly 40 years later, the Bush administration relied on faulty intelligence to claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of

mass destruction and ignored contrary evidence, in all likelihood because it had already decided to go to war and had convinced itself that the Iraqi dictator possessed such weapons.

### **Winning the War and Losing the Peace**

- The belief that Americans always “win the war but lose the peace” because of our political naïveté is also incorrect. In point of fact, the reverse has often been the case.
- Militarily, the United States did not win the War of 1812, and politically, it did not lose the peace. In fact, U.S. military forces were consistently defeated by the British, and only last-minute defenses prevented total American defeat. Yet American diplomats at Ghent proved superior to British diplomats and obtained a highly favorable peace treaty.
- In 1846–1848, the United States both won the war with Mexico and achieved the original territorial aims of President Polk. In fact, one reason Polk accepted the final treaty was that despite its military victories, his small army in Mexico City was in danger of being cut off and having to deal with guerrilla warfare.
- The United States also won both the war and the peace in the 1898 war with Spain. Indeed, our nation acquired an overseas empire that territorially went beyond what we had actually conquered during the war.
- In World War II, the United States played a role in Allied victory, but its participation in the war was brief and it was not primarily responsible for victory. Still, the limited role played by our forces was sufficient to enable President Woodrow Wilson to claim a dominant role at the Paris Peace Conference.
- Similarly, the United States did not win World War II all by itself, nor did it “lose the peace.”

- There was, in fact, never a peace to lose because the Cold War precluded the negotiation of any peace treaty—or even the calling of a peace conference.
- The claim that we lost the peace at the wartime Yalta Conference, where a naïve Roosevelt gave away half the world to Stalin, incorrectly assumes that Roosevelt possessed half the world to give away, which he did not.
- Further, despite its limited contribution to military victory, the United States emerged from the war as by far the most powerful nation in the world.
- Militarily, the Korean War was a stalemate. Nevertheless, the United States succeeded in attaining its original political goal: the halting of North Korean aggression and the maintenance of the preexisting South Korea.
- In Vietnam, the United States clearly lost the war yet achieved, in the Paris Peace Accords, what Nixon and Kissinger had desired regarding a “decent interval” for Vietnamization and the removal of U.S. forces from what had clearly become a military quagmire.
- In the first Persian Gulf War, the United States succeeded both militarily and in its stated political goal of halting Iraq’s aggression against Kuwait.
- And, of course, with the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union, the United States “won” the Cold War without ever having defeated a Soviet army.

### **Roots of the Myths**

- To a large extent, our myths about war are the result of our bitterness and disappointment regarding its results, especially the results of the two world wars. That disappointment was linked to our unrealistic expectations regarding the ability of total military victory in a coalition war to translate into the total re-creation of

international relations in the image we desired. Victory in the two world wars did not—and could not—accomplish that.

- The two world wars, and the nature of American democracy, also helped to create a mythical belief that the only wars worth fighting are total wars for total victory and a total re-creation of the world. None of that is true.
- These myths are also part of our national mythology about ourselves—that we are a peace-loving people who go to war only when left with no choice; who are then militarily victorious against evil enemies because of our goodness, our military prowess, and divine protection; but who are foiled and defeated in the peace because as a peace-loving people we are naïve about war and peacemaking.
- That national mythology is, in turn, based on a belief that war is evil and should be undertaken only when we are attacked and there is no choice. Many of us believe that, but that does not mean that what we should do—avoid war unless we are attacked—is what we actually have done in our history.
- The mythology also stems from the fact that we confuse success in battle with success in war.
  - Our failure to understand the difference between war and battle was boldly illustrated after the Vietnam War by the American who commented to his Vietnamese counterpart that throughout the war, we never lost a battle. The statement may have been correct, but it was also irrelevant.
  - George Washington came to understand this idea during the Revolutionary War, as he achieved the political goal of independence despite the fact that his army lost most of its battles. The few that it won, as shown in an earlier lecture, were enough because of their political consequences.

- We have forgotten that lesson from our 18<sup>th</sup>-century past. Perhaps that is because as our power has grown, so has our arrogance and our blindness to our own history.

### Suggested Reading

Buhite, ed., *Call to Arms*.

Clausewitz, *On War*.

Paterson, et al., *American Foreign Relations*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why does total victory on the battlefield usually not result in obtaining stated political goals?
2. Why do Americans insist that war should be total when most of its wars have not been total?

# Who Matters in American History?

## Lecture 23

Most Americans think they know the names of the great political figures in American history: Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and so on. Yet there are numerous other figures whose contributions were just as important, but who are far less familiar to us. In this lecture, we'll examine a few such individuals and try to understand why, despite their accomplishments, they are less familiar than other figures. Our analysis will also enable us to explore who in history we choose to remember and why.

### John Adams

- John Adams was probably the most important and respected of all the Revolutionary leaders from New England. He played a major role in both Continental Congresses; he nominated George Washington to command the Continental Army; he helped draft the Declaration of Independence; and he drafted the instructions that would result in the wartime treaty of alliance with France.
- He also obtained a critical Dutch loan while a diplomat in Europe during the war, played a major role in the peace negotiations that ended the war, and became the first official U.S. representative to Great Britain after the war.
- When he took office as president, Adams inherited a diplomatic crisis with France, as well as a growing partisan rift at home, with the opposition led by Thomas Jefferson.
- The crisis with France erupted into an undeclared naval war in 1798 that the Hamiltonian wing of Adams's own Federalist Party wanted to turn into a full-scale declared war. Such a war, when combined with the recently passed Alien and Sedition Acts virtually outlawing dissent, would have guaranteed his reelection, but Adams refused to agree. He never filled the ranks of the special army Congress had

agreed to create, and when France proposed negotiations to end the conflict, he quickly agreed.

- He also fired the Hamiltonian members of his cabinet when he discovered that they were subverting his plans to negotiate an end to the war. As a result, he obtained peace with France but at the cost of splitting his Federalist Party and, thus, dooming his own reelection. Adams realized the political cost of his behavior but considered it the most meritorious act of his life.
- As the only one of the five Founding Fathers elected president but not reelected for a second term, Adams became the forgotten one. Recent biographers have done their best to give Adams his due, but he nevertheless remains relatively unknown to the public.

### **John Quincy Adams**

- At Adams's death in 1826, his son, John Quincy, was in the midst of his own largely forgotten presidency. Yet like his father, the younger Adams had had a brilliant career before he became president, primarily as a diplomat. He had helped negotiate the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812; had served as ambassador to the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain; and had been James Monroe's secretary of state.
- In these roles, Adams had been responsible for some of the most important treaties and announcements in the history of U.S. foreign relations: the agreement to limit naval forces on the Great Lakes, which was the basis of the peaceful border between Canada and the United States; joint Anglo-American occupation of the Oregon Territory; and the acquisition of Spanish Florida.
- As noted in an earlier lecture, the 1824 presidential election boiled down to a choice in the House of Representatives between Adams and Andrew Jackson.

- Speaker of the House Henry Clay encouraged his supporters to vote for Adams, even though Jackson had more electoral and popular votes.
- When Adams won, he appointed Clay secretary of state; Jackson cried that the appointment was a “corrupt bargain” and immediately began a campaign to win the election of 1828 and subvert Adams’s presidency.
- Unlike his father, Adams did not allow his failure to win a second term as president end his political career. He won election to the House of Representatives from his home district and became a fierce opponent of slavery and its expansion. He also opposed the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico.

### George C. Marshall

- In 1939, Franklin Roosevelt appointed George C. Marshall army chief of staff over 33 senior officers. He held that post from the day Hitler invaded Poland to begin World War II to the end of the war, and during that time, he created the largest American armed force in U.S. history.
- In the process, he won the respect and admiration of Congress, the American people, America’s wartime allies, and his colleagues on the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff. Churchill called him the “true organizer” of Allied victory.
- Marshall was the obvious choice to command Operation



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

**Unlike the elder or younger Adams, General George C. Marshall never became president—but only because he chose not to run.**

Overlord, the 1944 invasion of France. But questions arose as to whether he could be spared from Washington; he was, in effect, running the global U.S. war effort from that city.

- Marshall refused to request the command, telling Roosevelt that he had to do what was best for the country, not for himself. Roosevelt then chose Marshall's protégé, Dwight D. Eisenhower. As we know, the success of the operation guaranteed Eisenhower both historical immortality and the presidency.
- In early 1947, President Truman appointed Marshall secretary of state. In the two years he served, he established the containment policy of the Cold War and, as part of it, the European Recovery Program that bears his name and for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953: the Marshall Plan. He also established a bipartisan foreign policy with a Republican Congress that lasted for 20 years.
- In September 1950, at nearly 70 years of age, Marshall agreed to become secretary of defense in order to rebuild the U.S. army for the Korean War. He played a key role in the 1951 relief of General Douglas MacArthur in what many historians consider the greatest threat to civilian control of the military in U.S. history.
- When Marshall died in 1959, he remained one of the most respected men in the country, yet his reputation faded as the generation that knew him passed away.

### **The Reasons for Obscurity**

- One common factor that may account for the relative obscurity of John Adams, his son, and George Marshall today is their refusal to allow personal political ambition to control their behavior or violate their sense of what was right. Another factor may have been their utter honesty and refusal to compromise that honesty for political gain, along with their knowledge of history and ability to take the "long view" regarding what was truly important.

- For Adams, what was important was peace with France in 1800 more so than reelection. For his son, it was first the geographic expansion of his country without war, followed by the crusade against slavery. And for Marshall, it was the preservation of a truly democratic society in the midst of a global war.
- A fourth factor that may account for the relative obscurity of these three was the strong belief each had in the concept of selfless public service, a belief that may have precluded them from actively seeking the publicity and popularity necessary for lasting fame.
- Who matters most to us from a given past era may vary depending on what we wish to know about that era. Certain figures who are not well known to the public may be very important to historians who specialize in particular aspects of U.S. history.
- Beyond that, many figures who are known primarily to historians come from relatively recent fields of historical study that developed during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the “new” social history. This social historical approach examined groups that had been left out of the traditional “grand narrative” of U.S. history, a narrative that had focused on white, male political leaders. In the process, the new historians transformed and continue to transform the study of U.S. history.
- These historians also played a major role in the destruction of the traditional grand narrative, because minorities and women have histories of their own that do not appear to fit the political history of white men in that narrative—or do they?
  - One could argue, for example, that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was at least as important in the emergence of the United States as a superpower as Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman—for his religious concepts regarding the nature of power and the need to grasp it to do good and the simultaneous recognition of human limits and the corrupting nature of power.

- One could similarly argue that the revivalist preacher Charles G. Finney, active during the Second Great Awakening, was at least as important as any of the presidents of his era in that the link he preached between religious conversion and political reform had enormous political and societal consequences, including the antislavery crusade that led to the Civil War.
- Shifting to economics, one could maintain that Eli Whitney was more important than any political figures in “causing” the Civil War, not only for his well-known invention of the cotton gin and its enormous impact on Southern slavery but also for his impact on Northern industry via his pioneering work to mass produce muskets for the U.S. Army using interchangeable parts.
- Similarly, one could claim that industrial and financial leaders from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup> were more important in America’s rise to superpower status than any generals, admirals, or presidents. The foundation of U.S. military power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was its economic power that these men had helped to create.
- One could also claim that pioneers in the struggle for minority rights and women’s rights from the pre–Civil War years through the 20<sup>th</sup> century were more important than the presidents, legislators, and judges responsible for government actions in these realms. These leaders changed the consciousness of the public, mobilized people, and thereby pressured politicians into action.
- Our old grand narrative is dated and fractured, but a new one may be actually forming right now—one that synthesizes all of the “new” histories with the old one to give us a much fuller, more informative, and more useful picture of our past.

## Suggested Reading

Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings*.

McCullough, *John Adams*.

Pogue, *George C. Marshall*.

Stoler, *George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What other major American figures are lesser known than they should be and why?
2. What qualities lead to historical fame in this country, and are they appropriate?

# History Did Not Begin with Us

## Lecture 24

Many of us have the tendency to believe that history either began or was dramatically altered during our lifetimes. Many have argued, for example, that the personal computer has brought unprecedented change to our lives. In this final lecture, we will explore the historical realities that challenge several incorrect or questionable beliefs and look at why so many Americans tend to believe them.

### Antiwar Movements

- Contrary to popular belief, Vietnam was not the first American war opposed by many Americans. Indeed, even the War for Independence was, in all likelihood, not supported by a majority of American colonists.
  - The quasi-war with France in 1798–1800 was vehemently opposed by Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans and nearly brought on a civil war. The War of 1812 was opposed by an entire section of the nation (New England) and the Federalists. Major sectional and partisan opposition also existed to the 1846–1848 war with Mexico, as well as the Civil War.
  - There was no opposition to speak of during the brief 1898 war with Spain but plenty of opposition to McKinley’s ensuing decision to acquire an overseas colonial empire as a result of the war. Even more opposition arose to the ensuing war with the Filipinos.
  - Major opposition also existed with regard to American entry into World War I, even though the war vote passed the Senate and House by overwhelming majorities.
  - Although there was virtually no opposition to U.S. entry into World War II after the Pearl Harbor attack and Nazi declaration

of war, there had been plenty of opposition to Roosevelt's pre-Pearl Harbor policies, most notably aid to Britain.

- Opposition also existed to major U.S. policies in the early days of the Cold War. Even during the supposedly placid 1950s, major antinuclear and pacifist movements existed.
- Republicans attacked President Truman during the Korean War for executive war-making without congressional consent and his limited-war strategy, with backing instead for MacArthur's calls for an expanded war against China.
- Interestingly, similar dissent occurred during the Vietnam War, with those calling for escalation and expansion of the war outnumbering those who favored de-escalation or withdrawal before 1968.
- Why has this long history of major antiwar movements been forgotten by most Americans?
  - The history was partially buried in the outpouring of patriotism after the Pearl Harbor attack and by the bipartisan foreign policy during the early years of the Cold War. Related was the anticommunist hysteria during the 1950s that stifled dissent.
  - In addition, all these previous antiwar movements failed, including—contrary to mythology—the Vietnam antiwar movement, and we tend to study successes rather than failures.
  - The government also actively suppressed many of these antiwar movements—especially those during the Civil War and World War I.
  - Further, the bipartisan foreign policy and anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s created an environment in which “consensus school historians” tended to emphasize the lack of conflict in American history rather than the conflicts.

## The Civil Rights Movement

- The civil rights movement has an equally long history. For African Americans, it began with the antislavery movement that started in the mid- to late 18<sup>th</sup> century and accelerated in the 1830s. Simultaneously, free blacks and their white supporters fought against segregation laws in the northern states.
- Booker T. Washington gave up on such rights in his Atlanta Compromise of 1895, but he did so only temporarily in order to obtain white support for improving the economic condition of African Americans. He was almost immediately challenged by other black leaders, such as W. E. B. Du Bois.
- Du Bois would help to found the NAACP in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that organization would begin to challenge southern segregation laws and other denials of black civil rights throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Why was most of this history forgotten by many Americans before the 1960s?
  - The plight of free blacks and their efforts to obtain civil rights before the Civil War tended to be forgotten amid the much larger and more basic struggle against slavery.
  - The movement for black civil rights after the Civil War failed, despite the passage of constitutional amendments guaranteeing rights for blacks during the Reconstruction era.
  - Further, white America as a whole was racist and did not support equal rights for blacks either before the Civil War or in the century following it. Consequently, there was little interest in the history of the struggle for black civil rights outside the African American community.
  - Finally, the consensus historians of the early Cold War years tended to downplay if not ignore this struggle, much as they ignored previous antiwar movements.

## The Women's Movement

- The women's movement also has a lengthy history in this country. As noted in a previous lecture, it began with the prominence of women within the abolitionist movement of the 1830s.
- During the Reconstruction era, the women's movement pressed for inclusion in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments guaranteeing rights for black males, but those efforts were unsuccessful. Women finally gained the right to vote in 1920.
- Women also achieved symbolic moves toward equality with Franklin Roosevelt's appointment of the first female cabinet member and the political redefinition of the role of first lady by Eleanor Roosevelt during the 1930s.
- During World War II, the Women's Auxiliary Corps was established in the army under a female colonel, and women obtained jobs in a host of occupations previously closed to them.
- Why was this history lost in the years following World War II?
  - The situation in World War II was generally perceived as a temporary aberration caused by the exigencies of war and the removal of millions of men from the workforce for military duty.
  - After the war, working women were perceived as taking jobs away from men; the same attitude had been expressed during the Great Depression.
  - The combination of the Great Depression and World War II had led many women to postpone having children; that situation ended with the end of the war, leading to the postwar baby boom and the reassertion of women's "traditional" roles as mother and housekeeper. In this reassertion, the history of the earlier women's rights movement seemed largely irrelevant.

## **The Rediscovery of Histories**

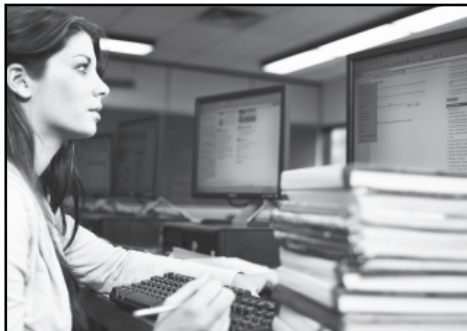
- Each of these three histories was rediscovered during the 1960s and 1970s as members of the three movements searched for a usable past.
  - At numerous teach-ins during the 1960s, professors and students challenged the myth of past wartime consensus (and, with it, the implicit attacks on their patriotism) by highlighting previous antiwar movements.
  - Civil rights activists and feminists similarly challenged prevailing racial and gender stereotypes and the idea that blacks and women had docilely accepted their inferior status in the past.
  - These rediscoveries led a new generation of scholars to explore these histories in great depth and produce a rich literature about them, which has since altered our views of American history and affected the ensuing development of the antiwar, civil rights, and women's movements.
- History is not an objective and unchanging discipline that simply studies the facts of a dead past. Rather, it is a subjective and constantly evolving study of a living past that is heavily influenced by the questions each generation asks of it in light of contemporary concerns. As a result, history tells us much about ourselves in the present, as well as the past being studied.

## **The Personal Computer: Unprecedented Change?**

- Consider our current belief that the personal computer is the most important invention in history, that it has ushered in a new era in history, and that the pace of change is accelerating at an unprecedented rate and influencing every aspect of our lives.
- A careful examination of American history reveals a series of fundamental technological changes long before the computer, each one considered at the time the most important and consequential in history: the steamboat and canal boom of the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the development of railroads, mass production, the

telegraph, the internal combustion engine, the automobile, the airplane, and nuclear weapons and power.

- Is the computer any different than these innovations, or is it just another major change—and perhaps one not nearly as significant and life-altering as these earlier ones?



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### An 80-Year Lifespan

- Imagine a man born on a Midwestern farm in 1835 or 1840 who lived into his mid- to late 80s. In the course of his lifetime, he might have experienced the railroad for the first time; participated in the industrial revolution; acquired a telephone, an automobile, a toaster, a vacuum cleaner, and a radio; seen the success of the Wright brothers; and witnessed the “war to end all wars.”
- Are we really experiencing technological changes more rapid, dramatic, and life-transforming than this individual did? Or is the belief that we are a distortion caused by our ignorance of history or by “tunnel vision”—whereby the past in front of us as we enter a tunnel appears longer (and more important) than the rest of the tunnel?

### The Spiral of History

- History does not repeat itself save, perhaps, in terms of the emotions—love, anger, fear—that drive human beings to behave in certain ways. Each event and era in history is unique, as is each new interpretation of the past that arises within each era.

- We should think of history neither as a straight line or a circle but as a spiral. In this view, we are separate from all past events but also linked to them in a multidimensional time stream of which we are a part. Being linked, we see that history did not begin with us and will not end with us either.
- In this course, we've learned to be skeptical, to challenge historical myths, and to search for the truth behind those myths. It's also important for us to realize that the search for truth is quite different from the claim to have found it; as we've seen repeatedly, historical truth changes over time as new events lead to new questions and new interpretations of the past.

### Suggested Reading

Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*.

Morison, Merk, and Freidel, *Dissent in Three American Wars*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why do we prefer to study successes rather than failures in history, even though failures can often teach us much more?
2. What other aspects of U.S. history have been “lost” and rediscovered, and why?

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