

Lighting Out for the Territory

But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.

Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)

The concluding words of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* encapsulate an enduring promise of American life. West of the Mississippi, in 'Ingean territory', Huck Finn will be free. Aunt Sally's civilized society demands conformity to its structures and rules. Huck rejects it. His preferred course of action is to find a place beyond the reach of her authority – beyond civilization itself. Until the end of the nineteenth century, when the US Census Bureau declared the American frontier closed, the New World had always offered that opportunity for escape. So, in common with both immigrants and migrants, Huck could take advantage of the safety-valve of America's 'virgin land'. The opportunity was there to 'light out for the Territory'. Once that idea became established as part of the nation's mythology, moreover, it could take on a life that transcended geographical or territorial limitations. For the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the existence of the frontier as the dividing line between the wilderness and civilization, and the opportunities that it provided for the shaping of a unique national character, became a central motif that meant that his 'frontier thesis' could explain America's unique and exceptional history. Even after the frontier closed, it was possible still to escape into the 'American Dream': a myth that continues to shape America's political and cultural identity.

Imagine if Huck had nowhere to go. Then he would have faced a different choice: to stay and submit to his aunt's plans or to remain and rebel against them. It is because he lives in America that he does not have that decision to make. He can move on. The fact of that opportunity, moreover, is what makes America different from those nations – indeed most of the rest of the world – that do not provide the prospect for such an escape. This, then, is a defining characteristic of the belief in American exceptionalism. In the imagination of those who live there, and indeed of those who aspire to go there to live, it is what creates America as a world apart: the history of America is contained in that vision of being able to 'light out for the Territory' whenever authority threatens.

The Psychology of Escape

In the day we sweat it out on the street/of a runaway American dream.

Bruce Springsteen, 'Born to Run' (1975)

Among the initial emigrants from Europe to America were those who, as Louis Hartz put it, 'fled from the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World'. In *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), Hartz argued that it follows from this that 'the outstanding thing about the American community in Western history ought to be the non-existence of those oppressions, or since the reaction against them was in the broadest sense, liberal, that the American community is a liberal community.' It is true that another significant feature of American political life has been the comparative absence of ideological debate and conflict along European lines and a history unpunctuated by the experience of periodic radical reconstructions of the social order. The reason for this, Hartz suggested, is that 'in a real sense physical flight is the American substitute for the European experience of social revolution. And this, of course, has persisted throughout our national history, although nothing in the subsequent pattern of flight, the 'safety-valve' notwithstanding, has approximated in significance the original escape from Europe.'¹

How, then, has America's political culture been shaped by these circumstances of its settlement by Europeans – and particularly by the British who came to this New World from the sixteenth century onwards? The timing was critical. The impact of the Renaissance and the Reformation transformed Europe's cultural, political and religious

landscape just as the mapping of this New World – America – opened up opportunities of exploration, exploitation and escape. The colonization of America happened as the rigidities of contemporary Europe – its political certainties and religious dogmas – were being eroded from within. When Christopher Columbus made his historic voyage of contemporary discovery in 1492, Martin Luther was nine years old. Twenty-five years later, in 1517, he is said to have nailed his Ninety-five Theses to a church door in Wittenberg. These discussion points for a proposed debate on the medieval papacy's practice of selling indulgences – promissory notes whereby sins committed on earth would receive a reduced punishment in purgatory – sparked the Protestant reformation. Renaissance ideas and the new theologies of Protestantism in turn would convulse European societies; and as the civil and spiritual order of the medieval world decayed, the result was political, social and religious turmoil. America beckoned.

If it appeared to be a place of refuge, it was also seen as having a deeper historical and symbolic significance. So the discovery of America was described by Francisco López de Gómara in 1552 as 'the greatest event since the creation of the world, apart from the incarnation and death of Christ'. Moreover, for many Protestants, the existence of America, only now revealed to them, seemed proof that God had kept the New World as a place where their new faith might flourish. But even though some early colonists were inspired by a sense of mission that would in turn have a profound influence upon American political culture, still more came to the New World for other reasons.

As Adam Smith observed in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) – published in the year Jefferson wrote America's Declaration of Independence from British rule – it was thus 'not the wisdom and policy, but the disorder and injustice of European governments, which peopled and cultivated America'.² Those satisfied with the status quo in their own societies – conservatives – had no reasons to leave and vested interests to defend. But those who rejected the established order could either seek to change things, or look for asylum elsewhere. For Hartz, then, these contemporary 'liberals' were defined by the choice they made; they had differing political agendas, and it is important to recognize that fact.

It is interesting how romance has been thrown alike around the European liberals who stayed home to fight and the American liberals who fled their battle. There are two types of excitement here, that of changing familiar things and that of leaving them, which both involve a trip into the unknown. But though one may find a common element of adventure in flight and revolution, it is a profound mistake to confuse the perspectives they engender. They are miles apart – figuratively as well as literally.³

The map of America's unique political culture thus can be drawn from the circumstances and the history of its settlement and in subsequent patterns of immigration and migration. What Hartz referred to in testimony he gave to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations as 'the psychology of escape'⁴ became a substitute for the 'psychology of revolution' that inspired those who remained elsewhere to battle with the social, political, religious or economic structures that they felt were oppressing them. Those who went to America wanted to avoid that fight, to have a better life. Otherwise, why go?

So the contours of American politics are shaped by the aspirations of those who arrived there with the hope of transcending the perceived religious, political or economic injustices they had experienced elsewhere. Of course, that is not true of all those who have inhabited the 'last best hope for mankind'. If America became the refuge for religious and political dissidents, and the magnet for economic migrants and opportunists, it was also home to slaves and Native Americans. Yet, while not forgetting the ways in which both blacks and Native Americans have helped to shape American society, it is the first two groups who set the mould of America's democratic polity. As their power supplanted Spanish influence in the New World, moreover, it was the British who, through their colonial experiences in Virginia and in New England, mapped the political landscape of the United States.

The Promise of American Life

Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

*Inscription on the Statue of Liberty – from Emma Lazarus,
 'The New Colossus' (1883)*

Despite their different motivations for making the long Atlantic crossing, emigrants to America were united in one respect: they were prepared to reject their own culture and society, and to accept the challenges of re-creating their lives in a new, unfamiliar and initially hostile environment. It was a gamble. Little more survived of the first attempts to settle Virginia in the fifteenth century than the colony's name. In 1607, however, Jamestown was established there, and the

settlement survived. Others followed. This initial scattering of settlements along the eastern sea-board – isolated one from another, and with different purposes and agendas – would in time impact upon the framework of the nation's political institutions. Yet these first successful migrants were not seen necessarily as the potential architects of a new world order. For Alexis de Tocqueville,

[t]he men sent to Virginia were seekers of gold, adventurers without resources and without character, whose turbulent and restless spirit endangered the infant colony and rendered its progress uncertain. Artisans and agriculturalists arrived afterwards; and, although they were a more moral and orderly race of men, they were hardly in any respect above the level of the inferior classes in England. No lofty views, no spiritual conception, presided over the foundation of these new settlements.⁵

One hundred and fifty years later, however, Virginia would be home to, among others, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison: inspirational and indispensable influences in the creation of an independent America.

In 1620, at about the same time as the first slaves came to Jamestown, the *Mayflower*, sailing from Plymouth, brought its small congregation of puritans – Pilgrims – and others who had joined them on their journey to New England. The *Mayflower Compact*, agreed as they established the settlement, was signed out of necessity. It recognized the reality that a colony established so far from home would necessarily be largely politically autonomous, and that for the new community to survive, the colonists would have to be involved in the decisions that affected their futures and indeed their lives. In other words, government of the people would only work if it was government *by* the people. The *Mayflower Compact* represented an early example of a form of written constitution on American soil, and the Pilgrims made a significant contribution to the development of a new political culture there. Their efforts were to be supplemented, if not surpassed, by the example of spiritual and moral leadership given by later puritan immigrants to the Massachusetts Bay colony under the influence of John Winthrop. For the puritans, America indeed became the promised land.

Winthrop's contemporary was another puritan leader, Oliver Cromwell. Indeed, Cromwell and Winthrop encapsulate Louis Hartz's argument. While one stayed and fought and won a civil war, overcoming – temporarily – the entrenched power of the British monarchy, the other left for America. Cromwell's audacious victory came sixteen years after Winthrop founded his colony in the New World.

The contrast between their different but related experiments in creating fresh forms of civil and political society is illuminating. Britain's short-lived flirtation with republican government failed. It was almost as if the change brought about – and the execution of the king that accompanied it – was too dramatic for contemporary mainstream political discourse to rationalize and accept. Despite the attempts to establish a puritan democracy, with the monarchy and the House of Lords swept away, the political gulf between the radical and democratic demands of levellers, on the one hand, and the royalist desire to restore the political system from which they had formerly benefited, on the other, was too wide to bridge. Political power came to rest where it had traditionally been concentrated. Cromwell was king. The sovereign authority took the form of a limited monarchy during Cromwell's 'Protectorate' but after that it was re-established in the symbolic shape that has since remained. In 1651, during the interregnum, Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, a philosophical justification of the necessity of such absolute power; by the end of that decade Cromwell had died and the monarchy was about to be restored. The belief that kings – and the occasional queen – had a divine right to rule was finally destroyed only with the success of the constitutional revolution of 1688. Two years later John Locke published his *Two Treatises of Government* to lend philosophical weight to that new political reality.

Meanwhile, puritanism in Massachusetts had survived and prospered. The early New England colonists viewed America as both an opportunity and a refuge. In the nineteenth century, Lord Macaulay saw them leaving in 'despair of the destiny of their country'. They 'looked to the American wilderness as the only asylum in which they could enjoy civil and spiritual freedom'. It was there though that

a few resolute Puritans, who, in the cause of their religion, feared neither the rage of the ocean nor the hardships of uncivilised life, neither the fangs of savage beasts nor the tomahawks of more savage men, had built, amidst the primeval forest, villages which are now great and opulent cities, but which have, through every change, retained some trace of the character derived from their founders.⁶

So Winthrop lit a slow-burning fuse. A little over a century after the collapse of Cromwell's commonwealth, an American military commander, George Washington, once more defeated the forces of a British king. This time, however, it was the principles and practices established in colonies like New England that contributed to a climate of opinion ensuring that America's revolution brought to an end what

was then regarded by many as the pernicious influence of monarchy in contemporary political life. Moreover, in seeking a philosophical justification for their actions, Americans now had John Locke's ideas at hand. So the spirit of puritanism, which had sparked a civil war in Britain in the seventeenth century, but which had failed to achieve permanent and radical change there, survived as a source of political inspiration in America when, a century later, a new national identity was in the process of being formed.

Destiny and Mission

Religion stands on tip-toe in our land
Readie to passe to the American strand.

George Herbert, 'The Church Militant' (1633)

The puritan migration was not only an escape. Winthrop's mission was to forge a new society, based upon the principles of Protestant beliefs. The disciples had become apostles. As Christianity had spread westwards from the Holy Land, contemporaries saw America as inevitably its next destination. The puritan 'errand into the wilderness' thus established a religious element at the core of American political culture. Indeed, puritan ideas have moulded American attitudes, and the rhetoric in which they are expressed can be traced in contemporary political statements of America's purpose.

Central to this idea was the concept of the covenant. This went beyond the purely political accommodations of the Pilgrim's *Mayflower* Compact. It mapped out an 'idea of America': the spiritual purpose of the enterprise of settlement, which later became the basis for its secular sense of destiny and mission. 'Thus stands the case between God and us: We are entered into a covenant with Him [and if He] shall please to hear us then hath He sealed our commission.' Winthrop's words in a sermon to his small congregation aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 took on a significance that transcended the circumstances in which they were spoken. The 'Model of Christian Charity' that Winthrop outlined to his fellow-travellers aboard a small ship in mid-Atlantic is widely regarded as providing the rationalization and legitimization of the puritans' mission, and as establishing a dominant narrative voice in American history. It emphasizes the puritan adventure as central to America's image of itself as fulfilling a providential mission. If the puritan community obey the terms of their covenant with God, then their community will prosper. If they neglect the covenant, however,

‘the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us.’ So if things go well in America, then it is a sign that the covenant remains intact. If they do not, the puritans have fallen from grace, departing from their destiny, and God may extract His revenge.

The more famous passage of Winthrop’s sermon imbues the covenanted community with a vision of its mission. ‘For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.’ If America is to be the New Jerusalem, then it becomes a symbol of hope for the rest of the world. At the time, Winthrop’s suggestion that the community was the object of global attention was manifestly an exaggeration; indeed, the domestic events leading to civil war would continue to preoccupy even those puritans in Britain who might be expected to retain most interest in the experiment in America. Yet again, in future years, as the United States did indeed become the most familiar – and arguably the most fascinating – country in the world, even to those who had never visited it, his words would seem prophetic. This is despite the tendency to ignore the remainder of his sentence, which contains another important admonition. Given the assumption of universal interest in their mission, the community should beware that ‘if we shall deal falsely with our God . . . we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world.’ For Winthrop the stakes were high: if successful, the puritan experiment would become a beacon and an inspirational model for all other nations; if not, it would constitute a failure of global proportions.

So to fulfil its providential mission, to act as that beacon of hope, America has to prove an unparalleled success as a new religious and political community. From the perspective of the immigrants, moreover, it was. Subsequent history – the War of Independence, the establishment of the United States itself, westward expansion under the auspices of ‘manifest destiny’, even the preservation of the union through the trauma of a civil war, and underlining it all the motor of unprecedented economic development and growth – meant that a little over three hundred years after Winthrop’s sermon, Henry Booth Luce would style the twentieth century ‘the American Century’.

There is, of course, another history that can be written here: one that retrieves and respects the experiences of minorities, whether characterized by race, class, gender or sexual orientation, who have struggled to find political and cultural accommodations within the American Dream. But the story of the nation is more often retold in the celebratory images of its past. As Tocqueville put it: ‘I think I see the destiny of America embodied in the first Puritan who landed on those shores, just as the whole human race was represented by the first man.’⁷ In these terms, John Winthrop becomes an ‘American

Adam', the influence of his ideas imprinting themselves upon the nation's political consciousness. So in his inaugural address as president in 1965, Lyndon Johnson could remind his audience of the nation's origins and its future prospect:

They came here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind. And it binds us still. If we keep its terms we shall flourish. . . . Under this covenant of justice, liberty, and union we have become a nation – prosperous, great, and mighty. And we have kept our freedom. But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure . . . the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored. If we succeed it will not be because of what we have, but it will be because of what we are; not because of what we own, but rather because of what we believe.

The new president reinvents the nation in a vision shared with the puritan of old. Johnson's rhetorical commitment to building the 'Great Society' borrows the language of Winthrop, outlining his 'idea of America' to his few compatriots on the Atlantic crossing to the New World. Similarly in his 1992 election campaign, Bill Clinton talked of the need for a 'new covenant, a solemn agreement which we must not break', if America was to move forward.

The Melting-Pot and Frontier Dreams

And as long as our dreams outweigh our memories, America will be forever young. That is our destiny. And this is our moment.

Bill Clinton, State of the Union address (2000)

America as an escape; America as a reaction against the feudal and religious hierarchies of Europe; America as a promised land: the place where visions of destiny and mission can be projected upon a land of opportunity and abundance – these intertwining ideas are part of a continuing debate about 'the meaning of America'. Yet they also impart a dynamic sense of significance to the development of 'the first new nation'. The sense of exceptionalism, difference, importance, creates a climate of expectations and an unshakeable sense that the 'idea of America' is indeed special. Whether it is articulated in the language of religious conviction or secular rhetoric, it has contributed to the nation's sense of itself and has defined its political culture.

As Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean point out,

American national myths, like the promised land or Turner's frontier thesis, 'attempt to put us at peace with ourselves and our existence' . . . by confirming certain qualities and attributes. These could become the focus for attempting to define the 'national character' and aspirations by suggesting that all people held these beliefs as common and shared. American Studies has often followed and explored, even helped to define, some of these mythic frameworks.

Furthermore, '[o]ne means by which America has unified itself is through an imaginary communal mythology that all could share and that provided a cluster of beliefs through which the nation could be articulated, both to itself and to the world.'⁸ Central to that mythology are two beliefs: that 'becoming American' involves a process of personal reinvention that results in a reconfiguration of cultural identity; and that it was the American frontier that was the natural theatre for such a dramatic transformation.

The idea of America as 'the melting-pot' can be traced to colonial times. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur's famous 'letter from an American Farmer', written in 1782, saw those who had migrated to the New World as transformed by that experience. 'Urged by a variety of motives, here they came. Every thing has tended to regenerate them: new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system.' Furthermore, '[h]ere individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.' So once again, from that initial definition of American character, produced by the alchemy of the melting pot, flows the argument for American exceptionalism. The recipe is simple. Take immigrants – typically European, and preferably Caucasian – throw them into the melting pot of American life, and what will be distilled is a new, different, improved race: Americans.

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner identified the frontier as the catalyst for this powerful forging of a fresh cultural identity. The immigrant, projected into that wilderness, was forced to change: to adapt was to survive. To light out for the territory was to become an American. Thus, the pioneer encounters the wilderness as 'a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin.' And as the wilderness is tamed, 'the outcome is not the old Europe . . . here is a new product that is American.'⁹ Such encounters with the unique environment of the frontier shaped not only America's national character but also its political values. The

'frontier thesis' separates America from Europe, driving a wedge between the dynamism of American democracy and the traditionalism of European social structures. At the same time, however, such frontier dreams, like the myth of the melting-pot, are only one way of mapping the contours of American politics.

Other Voices

Perhaps thirty thousand years ago, the first settlers arrived in the land that would come to be known as North America. These pioneers did not travel by ship, nor did they claim territory for any monarch, but they did discover America. . . . They sought not empires to swell national treasuries but new hunting grounds to feed growing populations.

Peter Iverson, 'Native Peoples and Native Histories' (1994)

This is a different account of the settlement of the New World, one that precedes European voyages of discovery and colonization, and one that has to be retrieved from a history preoccupied with covenants, missions, destiny, myths and dreams. Those who became Native Americans – named Indians by the disoriented later arrivals to the continent – had walked to their new homeland during the Ice Age, across a land bridge over the Bering Strait. Theirs is a story of north-south settlement that would spread eventually as far as Patagonia. They too encountered a wilderness – a frontier – but evidently it did not mark their characters in the same way as it was to shape the European immigrants of subsequent eras in their movement from east to west. Instead their societies were destroyed; their culture and their history marginalized. They could not light out on their own for the territory – instead that was where they were placed upon reservations – nor indeed could they escape into the American Dream.

As Chief Seattle put it in an address to the governor of Washington Territory in 1854,

[w]e are two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies. There is little in common between us. . . . Day and night cannot dwell together. The Red Man has ever fled the approach of the White Man, as the morning mist flees before the morning sun. . . . I think that my people . . . will retire to the reservation you offer them. Then we will dwell apart in peace. . . . It matters little where we pass the remnant of our days.

Such a combination of realism and resignation is resonant of the fact that of all those whose influence upon the political culture of the United States has been in the main unspoken, the Native American voice is the one that echoes least in most accounts of the nation's development. Instead, as Indians, they would become foils by which to judge the achievements of the all-American heroes who would battle them on the ever-expanding – ever-receding – frontier. And when the migration from east to west eventually reached the Pacific Ocean, Seattle's name would be taken by an American city. His territory would become a state in a Union in which he had neither historical interest nor political capital. Native Americans were not granted full US citizenship until 1924.

Other voices have not been so forgotten. Six years prior to Seattle's speech, in July 1848, the Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The 'Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions' took in part the form of an ironic parody of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. It demanded for women 'the equal station to which they are entitled'. Furthermore, 'in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation . . . and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.' It would take another seventy-two years before the ratification of the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution assured that '[t]he right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any states on account of sex.' That was progress. But women's rights extend beyond the franchise, and there remained and remains more to be achieved.

'I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?' Sojourner Truth's speech at a New York City Convention in 1851 contains in its famous refrain a plea for recognition, not simply in terms of gender but also in respect of race. Hers is a voice that addresses the fundamental political, social and cultural faultline in America's democratic polity, but from a position of subordination. Yet the 'peculiar institution' into which slaves were sold, traded and subsequently born did impact upon the nation's historical and political development like no other. The existence of slavery in its southern states meant that until the Civil War national politics was haunted by the question: how could a democratic community call itself such? Slaves were by status unequal and by definition unfree. The war was fought in part to resolve that dilemma.

Reconstruction demonstrated once more, however, that changing habits of the mind was to prove far more difficult than amending the Constitution itself. So the legacy of the controversies that led to the Civil War rumbled on after it. The southern surrender did not end the matter: racism remained.

Sojourner Truth's plea was to be recognized on the basis of her common humanity. But early in the twentieth century William Du Bois understood still that the fact of racial difference in a racist society gave rise to a fundamental psychological trauma.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹⁰

If one response might be to withdraw into the privatized world of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), another was to take part in the civil rights movement, among the most courageous and ultimately most effective mass protest that any group within America has organized in the hope of political change. Yet as Samuel DuBois Cook argued at the time of the Bicentennial celebrations of America's independence in 1976, '[i]n a tortuous and anguished way, racism has been, on the ultimate level, both the affirmation and the negation of the American Dream.' So '[i]n black politics today, there is a profound and somewhat painful and melancholic groping for power and meaningful participation in the heart of the American political system. There is a strange mixture of alienation, hope, despair, confidence, frustration, apathy, feeling of futility of effort, and feverish activism about political things.'¹¹ A quarter of a century later, such sentiments may appear still valid.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the pace of social and cultural change in the United States quickened dramatically in the last half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s, it was possible – even essential – for many Americans to identify with a common national culture. During the 1960s, however, such a cultural and political consensus fell apart, not least because of the divisions caused by America's war in Vietnam, but also as a result of the success of the civil rights movement and the recognition of the contemporary political reality that America was a multi-cultural society. In discussing this move 'beyond consensus', therefore, Hans Lofgren and Alan Schima observe that

[i]f ever there was a stable and congruous understanding of what constituted the United States as a nation, as a people, as an ideal site of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the civil unrest and political movements of the 1960s undeniably challenged the sense of national unity. Consciously ambiguous, ‘after consensus’ is a term that connotes the social and political tensions that emphatically marked the United States after the assassinations of President John Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, after the national traumas of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal, and, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, after the long-standing politics of containment.¹²

In this new cultural dynamic, therefore, Native Americans, women and African-Americans form sections of the chorus of voices whose heterogeneous histories run counter to the narrative that projects the ‘idea of America’ as an unparalleled success. For many groups – minorities – within America’s increasingly multi-cultural society, the ‘American Dream’ is indeed a myth that is given the lie by their experience. And yet, with the possible exception of the Native Americans, most groups at some level seek to define themselves not simply in opposition to the prevailing myths of American national identity. At core, what they seek is inclusion. Discrimination, whether on the basis of race, gender, sexual preference or some other criteria of exclusion, is a denial of access to the political and economic benefits of living in American society. These other voices seek political change as part of a process of recognition: that they too can become stake-holders in the ‘American Dream’ rather than the forgotten victims of it. In so doing they are part of an important dynamic. They are the new pioneers who are mapping, in contemporary terms, the changing contours of American politics.

The Politics of Spectacle

The Declaration of Independence I always considered as a theatrical show. Jefferson ran away with all the stage effect of that . . . and all the glory of it.

John Adams, letter to Benjamin Rush (1811)

In an essay that attempts to answer the question ‘is there an American Culture?’, Allan Lloyd Smith observes that ‘[w]hat most strikes foreign observers of the American political scene is the element of *spectacle* involved: American politics seems to outsiders – and to many insiders – to have a show business ethos.’ In such an atmosphere, he

suggests, the political agenda can be manipulated ‘through the politics of “spectacle”’.¹³ In the absence of fierce ideological conflict, where the widespread agreement on the cultural norms that find expression in the idea of exceptionalism, the myth of the frontier or the pervasive temptations of the ‘American Dream’ is giving way to the kaleidoscopic images of multi-culturalism, style may matter more than substance in American politics. To a great extent, it has always been true; but the politics of spectacle – whether reflected in the organized hysteria of presidential nominating conventions, the advertising campaigns that market candidates as more or less interchangeable commodities, or the focus on political personalities rather than policies – may also be the consequence of attempts to reverse a progressive alienation from the political process. In such circumstances, politics has to be loud, brash, colourful, to attract any attention to itself in a society and culture both preoccupied with other concerns and wise to the ways of its elected representatives. For those who feel excluded from the American Dream, the concerns of mainstream politics are irrelevant: although they may have won the democratic franchise, they may not even vote. Indeed, for Michael Barone, ‘Americans today are engaged in a search for autonomy and empowerment, trying to live and work and engage in Tocquevillian community life outside and beyond the big units that have become corrupt and unresponsive and in some cases have withered away and died.’¹⁴ Local issues may matter more than even the various acts of state politicians or the ongoing dramas of national political life.

As John Kingdon points out, therefore,

[g]overnment in the United States is much more limited and much smaller than government in virtually every other advanced industrialized country on earth. . . . Public policies to provide for health care, transportation, housing, and welfare for all citizens are less ambitious. . . . Our constitutional system of separation of powers and federalism is more fragmented and less prone to action, by design, than the constitutional systems of other countries. Our politics are more locally based, and centralizing features like cohesive national political parties are weaker than in other countries. This description of public policies, together with governmental institutions, adds up without undue distortion to one phrase: limited government.¹⁵

Why is this so? Simply because, like Huck Finn, historically most Americans have had a healthy suspicion of authority and power.

The American republic was formed in the crucible of a reaction against what was seen by contemporaries to be the arbitrary use of tyrannical power by the British monarchy in its overseas colonies.

'No taxation without representation' may not be the most inspiring revolutionary slogan ever devised, but it reflects an outraged sense of justice and a pragmatic sense of purpose. After the War of Independence had turned off the tap of imperial power in the New World, and after a number of experiments in the newly independent states, when they constructed their federal republic, Americans were very careful as to how it was turned on again. So they devised an intricate system of government: a network of interlocking institutions at various levels of political authority through which power could flow, both diffused and defused. Power often became merely the power to persuade, or indeed to influence. The animating principles of American constitutionalism – federalism, the separation of powers, the division of the legislature into two separate houses and the intricate system of checks and balances – combine to define the parameters of power within the structure of government. The aim was to prevent the abuse of power through frustrating its use. From this perspective, if there is 'gridlock' in the American political system, things are working well.

The transparent desire to limit power is simple enough to understand, yet it has produced a complex political system, the very intricacies of which may seem to provide opportunities for clandestine manipulation and political corruption. Suspicion of power in America has been accompanied by scepticism about politics and its practitioners that has, at times, been translated into a fascination with the idea that the 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' is in reality a massive conspiracy against them. It is a view that has been reflected in popular culture, particularly when Hollywood has turned its attention to such subjects.

So the political culture of the United States has been shaped by an awareness and a wariness that government can misuse and abuse power if not kept under strict control. And if government is under suspicion, so too are those who run government: politicians. As his mother puts it in describing her son's initial disability in the film *Forrest Gump* (1994), he was born 'with a back as crooked as a politician'. That brief aside encapsulates an image that resonates through America's political history. Political scandal has tainted the administrations of numerous presidents, among them Ulysses S. Grant, Warren Harding and, more recently, with an apparently quickening pace, those of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Indeed, Nixon's 'breach of faith', when he was forced to resign under threat of impeachment following the revelations of Watergate, unleashed what has now become a world-weary cynicism about the political process.

In its broadest context, then, government has tended to be seen as a threat to individual freedom in the United States, and corrupt

politicians – indeed the corruption of the political process itself – is seen as compounding that threat. That is a strand in the nation's political culture, and one that was questioned only a couple of times during the twentieth century: during Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, and briefly during Lyndon Johnson's Great Society in the 1960s. On both occasions, government activity to help individuals was seen in a more positive light. But the dominant public philosophy in America, reflected too in Hollywood movies – from westerns such as *High Noon* (1952) or *Shane* (1953), to the *Dirty Harry* series (1972–88), for example – is to rely on the integrity of the individual in preference to the government or the corrupt agents of authority.

This, then is a prevalent and powerful image: the ordinary American individual has a core integrity that professional politicians lack. The nineteenth-century poet Walt Whitman, in an essay he wrote just prior to the Civil War, complained about the professionalization of American politics, in which political offices, including the presidency, were 'bought, sold, electioneered for, prostituted, and filled with prostitutes'. He argued that, instead, ordinary people should take on the responsibilities of government. 'I expect to see the day when . . . qualified mechanics and young men will reach Congress and other official stations, sent in their working clothes, fresh from their benches and tools, and returning to them again with dignity.'¹⁶ Successful politicians in the United States often run 'against government'. They go to Washington to 'clear up the mess': witness 'honest Abe' Lincoln, in Whitman's time, moving from his symbolic log cabin to the White House, and more contemporary examples such as Jimmy Carter in the immediate post-Watergate era, and indeed Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. A message on candidate George W. Bush's campaign website on the internet during the 1999–2000 primary season claimed: 'of the major candidates, I'm the only one who does not have a DC zip code. I come from outside the system with a record of reform and a record of results.' Hollywood's version of this is most obvious in the movie *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), starring James Stewart.

Yet, if Stewart went to the nation's capital to represent Wisconsin in the Senate at a critical time in contemporary politics – as war in Europe broke out and Franklin Roosevelt was about to embark on an unprecedented campaign for a third term as president – it is in the post-war period that the politics of spectacle began to compete with, and even overtake, such celluloid scenarios. During the 1950s, another senator from Wisconsin, the all too real Joseph McCarthy, would inflame the politics of fear and hysteria that accompanied the anti-communist witch-hunts of the decade. Hollywood would find itself in the front line of his indiscriminate accusations. The 1960s would be

marked by Kennedy's assassination, filmed by a bystander named Abraham Zapruder but ironically missed by the television cameras – although they were there to capture the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald. Vietnam would become the 'living-room war', fought each evening on the network news broadcasts. Images from the 1970s also resonate. Richard Nixon's trip to China in 1972 allowed media coverage of his historic meeting with Mao Tse Tung. Two years later, back in the United States, the president would announce to the nation on television his intention to resign. The following day the cameras would record the scene as he was helicoptered away from the White House for the last time. President Ford, Nixon's unelected successor, along with the rest of the nation, would witness via television Americans being forced to abandon the nation's embassy in Saigon as the North Vietnamese invaded the city. And Jimmy Carter's apparently spontaneous decision to stop his motorcade and walk down Pennsylvania Avenue after his inauguration was as much an action choreographed for the cameras as it was a symbolic populist gesture. In the 1980s, the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan was a televised event, and in the last decade of the century, George Bush's war in the Gulf appeared as a made-for-TV special, a drama that proved more of a ratings success than the soap opera of Bill Clinton's impeachment.

As these few random illustrations suggest, the politics of spectacle are given life through the presence of the media, and in particular by television. In an American world of 'infotainment', political life too may be about both informing and entertaining: a fact not lost on those like Jesse 'the Body' Ventura, the former wrestler elected governor of Minnesota in 1998.

Conclusion: The Map of American Politics

'Tis the star-spangled banner: O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!

Francis Scott Key, 'The Star-Spangled Banner' (1814)

In 1787, Minnesota could not have been imagined as a state of the Union by the fifty-five delegates from thirteen states who met in Philadelphia to frame a Constitution for the United States. They wrestled with different, though no less formidable, problems than those that confront politicians who now operate within the contours of the political system that they designed. At the same time, the

continuing hold of their achievement upon the American political imagination cannot be underestimated. The next chapter of this book thus considers the ‘politics of nostalgia’, illuminating how America’s political system still looks to the past for the ideas and the framework within which contemporary political activity is structured. It looks in particular at the influence of religion on American nationalism, and the way in which political values have been, and continue to be, shaped by religious beliefs.

Chapter 3 discusses aspects of America’s Constitution. The intention is to convey a sense of the challenges that the former colonists faced after winning their independence from Britain: how to ‘invent’ America as ‘the first new nation’. What was created was a democratic republic that could draw strength through expanding its sphere of political influence. By creating a system that allowed new states to join the Union, the founders imparted a dynamic to their constitutional settlement that would allow Thomas Jefferson’s ‘empire for liberty’ eventually to span the continental United States, and to extend its influence beyond its natural borders to Hawaii and Alaska.

In chapter 4 the framework of American government is described. Concentrating on the political dimensions of the system of government – one in which separated institutions (executive, legislature and judiciary) share powers – the chapter analyses the changing dynamics of the relationships between president, Congress and Supreme Court. Political institutions are organic, and the operation of the political system is affected thus by changing circumstances, technologies and alterations in the dominant political mood of the nation.

Chapter 5 – ‘Playing the Political Game’ – begins with a discussion of power. The workings of the American political system are considered through an analysis of elitism and pluralism in American society, an examination of the activities of political parties, a consideration of the nature of electoral campaigns and a discussion of the causes and the consequences of political corruption. This leads on to a description – in chapter 6 – of the role that the media have played in commenting upon and shaping America’s political culture.

Some of the faultlines in contemporary American political life are then considered. Chapter 7 looks at the stratification of American society, particularly in terms of race, class and gender, and considers how these divisions have impacted upon the nation’s politics. There may be no definitive answers to the problems raised, but the chapter conveys a sense of the energy and dynamism of political debate in the United States, which is essential to the democratic health of the nation. Chapter 8 traces American perspectives on the wider world and discusses the cultural underpinnings of the attitudes that have shaped

and that continue to mould the nation's foreign policy. The concluding chapter of the book draws together some of the themes that have been discussed and suggests how the ideas of Jefferson and Madison, as they have been embodied within American political culture, may still be taken to inform the nature of politics and the political processes at the end of the 'American Century' and at the beginning of the new millennium.

What, then, of Huck Finn in all of this? According to Ernest Hemingway, '[a]ll modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.' For Norman Mailer, moreover, '[i]t is always the hope of democracy that our wealth will be there to spend again, and the ongoing treasure of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it frees us to think of democracy and its sublime, terrifying premise: Let the passions and cupidities and dreams and kinks and ideals and greed and hopes and foul corruptions of all men and women have their day and the world will still be better off, for there is more good than bad in the sum of us and our workings.'¹⁷ If Hemingway betrays a fellow novelist's reverence for Twain as a founding father of American literature, then Mailer's assessment hints too at the continuing relevance of Huck's decision to 'light out for the Territory': to escape into the limitless possibilities of the American Dream. For Huck's adventure may be a timeless metaphorical construction of the 'idea of America' itself; one that would have been as recognizable to the founders of America's republic as it is to their present-day descendants. It is, moreover, a vision steeped in a simple and enduring nostalgia for the political spirit of 1776.