

edge of converging purposes, the means themselves were sharpened into tools for discriminating Americans from other people. More self-conscious than others about national cohesion, America's self-appointed architects exemplified the vitality of an ebullient democracy even when their tangible goals eluded them. They generated both solidarity and exclusion along an axis set by the first generation.

## 8

## A NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY

**D**URING THE LAST MONTH HE SPENT in the White House, Jefferson received a letter from the Westward Mill Library Society of New Brunswick County, Virginia, inviting his patronage. "Our society," the secretary reported "is composed of farmers, mechanics, Justices of the Peace, ministers of the Gospel—Military Officers, Lawyers, School masters—merchants—Postmasters, one member of the Assembly & one member of Congress. Our present president," the secretary continued, is "a substantial & respectable farmer." He then gave the names and a description of the Six Directors for the year 1809: two planters, "a naturalized citizen," an elder in the Methodist Church, a deacon in the Baptist Church, and "a Major in the Militia of Virginia." In closing his letter to the president, the secretary posed an arresting question: "Will such an heterogeneous body ever firmly ... coalesce?"<sup>1</sup>

Here in microcosm was the macrocosmic problem of the first genera-



tion of Americans: the intensely felt need to create a union from the disparate groups that formed their country. Americans knew that the ideal of a commonwealth was one king, one church, and one tongue. The Revolution had offered patriots the rhetorical opportunity to treat America's social diversity as a summons to a new kind of nationhood, but a successful social explanation necessary for an integrative national identity. That would take fresh experiences and opportunistic experiments—not the "mythic chords of memory" that fifty-four years later Abraham Lincoln summoned to the cause of the union, but rather the rooting out of sensibilities acquired in a colonial past. What seems remarkable in retrospect is that so many members of the first generation deliberately reflected upon their situation. From News Brunswick, Virginia to Walpole, New Hampshire to Lexington, Kentucky, men and women thought and wrote about the nation as their concern, its future their responsibility.

The familiarity with which these strangers addressed their president shows how easily Americans had sloughed off the skin of monarchical forms, abandoning entirely the formality that marked petitions to royal officials. The secretary's sweeping reference to a membership of farmers, mechanics, merchants, magistrates, lawyers, militia officers, and schoolmasters announced as well an egalitarian sociability among independent householders. The mingling of designations—planter, assemblyman, naturalized citizen, church elder—suggests also that there were many ways to earn acceptance in this rural community.

Noteworthy too is the purpose of the society. Each member paid two shillings a year to create a fund for book purchases. Such a pooling of purchasing power meant that the major in the militia, the Baptist deacon, and the member of Congress felt that they shared enough intellectual interests to benefit from a group collection. The mingling of Baptists and Methodists in the Westward Mill Library Society surprises, as well as the presumed compatibility of all of their reading tastes. Both sides of an earlier cultural divide had moved to the common ground of mutual accommodation. Venerable demarcations between the saved and the damned, the learned and the vulgar, the authorized and the unauthorized, had dissolved into a freemasonry of the tolerant and the self-improving. The intellectual ambitions that were once the hallmark of the free thinker were now embraced by Baptists and Methodists, who had earlier viewed with deep suspicion those who displayed book learning. They had all become people of the book, but the book could be David Ramsay's *History*

of the American Revolution or Jedediah Morse's *American Geography* as easily as the Bible.

This document does not explain, but it does epitomize the qualities in American life that gave shape to a new national identity. There is first of all this exercise of initiative. A group of undistinguished men form an association for personal reasons and unselfconsciously take on the responsibility for thinking about social cohesion. Matters of state—that once jealously guarded preserve of gentlemen, magistrates, and ministers—had been breached, the line between the public and private blurred. The neighbors in rural Virginia were also using the market in a way that strengthened the commercial linkages between country and city, no mean consideration in a society still predominantly agricultural. By pooling their money to buy books, these library societies—and there were hundreds of them all over the country—were stimulating the economy as they registered their consuming tastes. Their members' penchant for reading helped fuel the expansion of a print culture that itself became an integral part of a national identity rooted in the free and aggressive exchange of opinion. As they consumed the pamphlets and books that came from Philadelphia and New York, they were also taking in the views of those who took it upon themselves to articulate values for the country as a whole.

The letter to Jefferson was as likely to have come from Chillicothe, Ohio as Utica, New York. That it came from a southside county in Virginia reminds us of the similarities that might have drawn the country together in 1809 had differences over slavery not intensified with each passing decade. The question, "will such a heterogeneous body ever firmly coalesce?" makes salient what Americans confronted when they thought about their union. Could a people split into a dozen religions, shedding the social forms that separated mechanics from militia majors, divided between native-born and naturalized citizens, ever unify? And if so, on which and whose terms? Could Americans will themselves into a national culture as they had willed themselves into a War for Independence?

Questions about American nationalism have engaged the attention of pundits, politicians, and scholars for over two hundred years. It has simmered beneath the surface of this study. In my summing up of the public experiences of the first generation of Americans, three interconnected conclusions emerge. The statutes providing for the gradual abolition of slavery in the Northern states sealed the identity of the South with its peculiar labor system while the burden of rationalizing human chattel had been lifted from the Northern conscience. At the same time, successive Jeffers-

sonian victories at the polls opened the public realm in the North to a host of new men and women who took this opportunity to mobilize public opinion in the interest of their causes, many of them anathema to those who had first championed popular participation. The campaigns to abolish slavery became the "earnest money" for a sustained reform commitment that animated the Northern public and repelled Southern planters. Adopting a defensive strategy, Southern leaders retreated from the national enterprise that their own leaders had earlier launched, and the innovating newcomers and zealous reformers of the North, sensing the power of their views and virtues, appropriated for themselves the task of speaking for the nation as a whole. Active participants in the newly democratized world of print, they composed a powerful account of enterprise, success, and progress that dominated Americans' self-evaluations for the rest of the century, leaving Southerners bereft of a national narrative that included them.

Looking at these outcomes sequentially throws into high relief their unexpectedness. Neither Northern abolition, the displacement of the colonial elite, the cotton boom (which tightened Southern planters' attachment to slave labor), nor the cultural inventiveness of a group of middle-class aspirants in the North could have been predicted at the conclusion of the Revolution. Their manifestation demonstrates both the irony of unintended consequences and the invisibility of a society's latent possibilities that lie ready to be acted upon when all the predisposing forces are in place.

The alienation of Southern leaders from the "national panegyric" elaborated in the North is ironic, for Virginia's James Madison and George Washington had been at the forefront in creating the "more perfect union" of the United States Constitution. Southerners also pushed for continental expansion, the major national policy goal of ordinary farmers, when many Northerners, fearing the dispersal of the American people, opposed the Louisiana Purchase. The developing rift between the regions took decades to become salient. Southern nationalists like Charleston's Stephen Elliott continued to speak of the luster that "the rising generation . . . will give to national character," and a succession of Southern leaders occupied the White House even as younger planters gravitated towards John C. Calhoun, who pointedly declared, "I never use the word Nation. We are not a nation, but a Union, a confederacy of equal and sovereign states."<sup>2</sup>

The absence of slavery in the North mattered just as much as its presence in the South for erecting walls of distrust between the two sections. The cacophony of opinion that enlivened Northern public life grated on

Southern sensibilities, particularly after it became associated with a zealotry to reform social institutions. Northerners' straightforwardness seemed graceless, their assertiveness in argument strident. Contentious politics and moral reform campaigns found few parallels below the Mason-Dixon line. Defending against anti-slavery polemics, Southern spokesmen articulated a set of atavistic values. They employed a nostalgic imagery and an elegiac tone in their reflections while Northern entrepreneurs and activists imagined a future transformed by their efforts, aided by science and a general receptivity to change. The potency of this one distinction grew exponentially in the first decades of the nineteenth century. A passive difference in labor systems became dynamic when charged with the ideological fervor of conflicting attitudes to good and evil, truth and honor, past and future.

Northerners even changed the significance of work, the touchstone of slavery. Once tied to the drudgery necessary for survival, work became a part of a new discourse about inventiveness, opportunity, self-improvement, and progress. Writers rehabilitated wage labor, long considered debased by its implicit dependence upon a wage-giving master, by connecting it to economic development.<sup>3</sup> The foes of slavery dramatized the connection between pride and productivity when they lamented the personhood denied African Americans who could not work to improve themselves. Northern spokesmen attached disciplined labor to the expanded realm of freedom. Productivity demonstrated the benefits of democracy. What in an aristocratic society announced the badge of servility, democratic enthusiasts elevated to personal achievement.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Southerners viewed their way of life as genteel, warm, and stable just because they did not engage in the hard bargaining and unremitting application to business that characterized for them the Yankees' way of life. Although they participated in a capitalistic economy, Southern planters eschewed the culture of capitalism taking shape before their critical eyes up North. Slave labor created great fortunes for a small number of planters, who used their wealth to embellish themselves, their families, houses, and hospitality. Publicly active, they competed in politics as gentlemen, serving their neighbors as justices of the peace and vestrymen and their region as forceful advocates in Congress. The acceptance of the intrusion of commerce into all facets of Northern public life shocked Southerners, who used an almost biblical language to describe the rounds of work on their plantations. Recoiling from the crassness of Northern enterprise, Southern planters cultivated the courtly manners of an earlier era and celebrated the past for the intrinsic beauty of tradition.

The bulk of the Southern white population was composed of small farmers whose eagerness for political reform was as strong as that of Northerners, but owning slaves formed a part of the small farmers' plans far stronger than shared interests with large slaveholders, a bond that proved their drive for personal success, their white supremacist views effective in justifying slavery embarrassed their efforts to achieve the equality of esteem that their counterparts in the North acquired. While both regions saw a great deal of social mobility on the frontier, the equal-cotton booms in the Southwest quickly divided a few winners from the bulk of the aspirants, whereas in the North more diverse opportunities in farming, manufacturing, and trade sustained ambitious men of little property. The slave economy maintained an entrenched elite at the top of Southern society; their political influence outlasted the democratic momentum of the 1820s and 1830s.

Living arrangements differed in the two sections. Northern states, east and west, were honeycombed with towns, villages, and hamlets, unlike the South, where gatherings of more than a hundred people were likely to take place on the great plantations. The dispersal of population aided prominent Southern planters. The market had brought power to a large group of new men in the North who challenged elite preferences in matters of promi-values, and decorum, whereas the self-made planter fitted himself into the fully-scripted role of planter and master.<sup>5</sup> With fewer openings in the ship, patronage exerted a stronger influence in the centers of Southern life; newcomers more successfully competed for profitable positions in leader-ern states. Taking up frontier farms, plying novel trades, developing inven-tions, harnessing the water power of rivers and streams for hundreds of North-entrepises, ordinary New Englanders laid the foundation for a progressive economy, even though Southern profits from cotton produced the largest share of the country's income.

Models of masculinity diverged as well. One astute observer claimed that no pastime could flourish among Georgians that did not partake of danger or risk, a comment that helps explain the frequency of duels.<sup>7</sup> For Southerners, autonomy meant the absence of restraints on one's behavior, a state fully realized by having slaves of one's own. Only if one were clearly identified as being religious could a Southern gentleman reject a challenge without loss of honor. The popularity of dueling in the North demonstrates the pervasiveness of these masculine ideals of honor, courage—even

audacity—that Southern planters embraced and embodied. Yet commercial and religious developments in the North were bringing forth a new manly type—one that celebrated sobriety, restraint, dignity, and self-control—the mirror opposite of the impulsive masculine ideal embraced in the South by planters and hill folk alike.<sup>8</sup>

Even in their response to the evangelical Protestant revivals, the two regions differed. Although both Northerners and Southerners were deeply affected by this popular religious movement, they did not take equally to the possibilities for social action from a revived Christian piety. Salvation as surcease figured more prominently in the spiritual economy of Southerners, while Northerners who threw off "the old man" of spiritual indifference girded their loins for battle against society's many sins.<sup>9</sup> Northern evangelicals, freed of the moral complications of slavery, actively participated in the voluntary societies and print campaigns of an ecumenical reform program. Women throughout the country furnished the glue for the religious sociability that took the place of the ceremonial life of the more formal churches. North and South, they provided the essential independent upon converts for the new denominations that were utterly deduced expansive, even grandiose, reform campaigns that gave women an opportunity to cash in their social assets.

The Second Great Awakening reshaped American Christianity, pulling ordinary people, black and white, into the dense circuitry of meetings and services of the proselytizing denominations while reinvigorating men's and women's religious affections through vernacular preaching about the anguish of individual sinners. African Americans, both enslaved and free, joined the Methodist and Baptist congregations in great numbers. In the initial thrust into the South, evangelical preachers in great numbers. In their the sins for which God was punishing wayward Americans, but within two decades the planter patriciate had succeeded in containing evangelical fervor. Southern conservatives forced denominational leaders to back away from their antislavery commitments, blocking the momentum for spiritual awakening and inducing an otherworldliness that bordered on fatalism.<sup>10</sup>

Differences that were once merely the subjects of interesting observations became crucial factors in the evolution of two distinct social orders. A plainer style of living mediated the relations among diverse groups in the middle states and New England. A mutual respect based upon literacy, morality, and appreciation of work took the edge off disparities in wealth, rendering the Southern gentlemen's obsession with honor more and more

braced wholeheartedly the ideal of individual liberty, but recoiled when it was attached to a vision of social activism. Southerners neither shared Northern enthusiasm nor their optimism. Nor was everyone in the North swept up in these programs, but the clan they sparked stifled rival discourses.

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NOTHING WAS MORE striking in these years than the accommodation of American Christianity to the imperatives of commercial enterprise. Many of those brought into the new evangelical denominations actively pursued profitable careers, and they tended to prosper after their conversions.<sup>20</sup> For Christian leaders to embrace the very worldly aspirations evident in the larger culture involved a number of adjustments. Most of the evangelical preachers had been born into ordinary rural homes, making them particularly likely to judge the prosperity of plain folk as part of God's bounty, especially since their own opponents in the established clergy sprang from the old colonial elite. "The people of the United States have more reason to be thankful to God than any other people; for he had not dealt so with any nation," the Methodist leader James Finley explained, adding that "the pious mind can not fail to see a Divine hand overruling and conducting the whole."<sup>21</sup>

America's free churches, like its free men, appeared to thrive on expanded choices, personal autonomy, and ardent striving. Having reached new converts by preaching a very personal message about sin and redemption, evangelical ministers found it easy to look to individual success as a sign of divine approval. Since the Second Great Awakening had fragmented American communities, it was harder to see signs of God's work in the society as a whole.<sup>22</sup> Better it was to find cohesion in higher levels of abstraction, as when Gardiner Spring, an eminent Presbyterian clergyman, hailed America as a "land of freedom, peace, wealth, and privilege."<sup>23</sup>

There were larger intellectual forces at work in the early nineteenth century. The conviction that God's will could be read in the structure of the natural world relocated the sources of religious authority. Both secular and religious theories naturalized human action. By the end of the eighteenth century, most Protestant leaders in America had accepted the fundamental premise of a free market—the morality of individuals making private decisions about their resources, including the free use of their time and

talents. As the particularity of Calvinist ideas of salvation yielded to the universality of natural law assertions in public discourse, churches gradually acknowledged that individuals were to be regulated by an internalized understanding of moral principles. Disciplinary bodies within the churches focused more on sexual transgressions and alcohol consumption than on dubious moral standards in economic practices.

A more dramatic intellectual shift took place when thinkers started looking for God's will within the human lifetime rather than fixing exclusively on future rewards and punishments. The secular concept of progress fused with old millennial hopes.<sup>24</sup> As Charles Finney stressed, Christians were enjoined by God to revive religion themselves. No longer considered something of divine origin, revivals became the responsibility of the clergy and their lay followers. It was up to popular initiative to keep the spiritual fires burning. By ignoring conservative wisdom, taking risks and prospering, many Americans had demonstrated the power of independent thought and action. In response, ministers preached to their rich followers about the capacity of their wealth to serve God in the world, leaving to them the decisions about how to make their money.<sup>25</sup>

The permeation of business enterprise with lay religious activism can be found in the lives of a remarkable trio of brothers: Benjamin, Lewis, and Arthur Tappan. Pillars of reform establishments in New York and Ohio, they supported evangelical churches and progressive colleges and gave unstintingly to the cause of anti-slavery, even as they pursued successful careers in law, politics, and publishing. Lewis Tappan's "Mercantile Agency" supplied the first formal credit ratings in the United States and Arthur's *New York Journal of Commerce* helped stabilize New York's volatile business community. Devout Christians, they displayed in their inventiveness, zeal, and patriotism the potent synergy of virtue and know-how that strengthened the American public realm in both its commercial and religious sectors. Risk-taking infused all their endeavors, including Arthur and Lewis's initial support of William Lloyd Garrison's fiery abolitionist journal, *The Liberator*. Except in the eyes of purists like the Hicksite Quakers, the worldly connections of evangelical benevolence appeared among its greatest strengths.<sup>26</sup>

The underside of Northern enterprise was raw avarice. Among all the charges Southerners leveled against their Northern compatriots, none resonated quite as fully as the accusation that Northerners had become money mad. Disturbed themselves by the swiftness of the commercial penetration of their society, many agreed with Sarah Hale's excoriation of "this bank-

note world" with "its mundane values, materialism, competitiveness, and acquisitiveness."<sup>27</sup> Washington Irving coined the phrase "the almighty dollar," and even that booster DeWitt Clinton noted defensively that Americans would have to lean "for literary support upon Europe" since Americans seemed to be busy accumulating wealth.<sup>28</sup>

Foreigners—many of whom published travel journals—frequently converged on the same repellent qualities in their American travels: the miscellaneous mixing of social classes, the confident forwardness of American women, and the crassness of incessant money-making, all testifying to the distance white Americans had moved from their Old World origins.<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Latrobe chronicled the lamentable influence of personal avidity on society in New Orleans after Louisiana became part of the Union. "The opportunity of growing rich by more active, extensive, and intelligent modes of agriculture and commerce has diminished the hospitality, destroyed the leisure, and added more selfishness to the character of the creoles," he concluded sternly, adding that Americans' "business is to make money," "they are in an eternal bustle." Latrobe continued with a graphic summary: "their limbs, their heads, and their hearts move to a graphic object. Cotton and tobacco, buying and selling, and all the rest of the occupation of a money-making community, fill their time and give the habit of their minds."<sup>30</sup> Less censoriously, James Hall concluded that Arithmetic "comes by instinct among this guessing, reckoning, expecting, and calculating people."<sup>31</sup>

William Austin caricatured American money madness in *Peter Ruggs: The Missing Man*, the story with which this book opened. His hero, that manic colonial who survived mysteriously into the nineteenth century, returned to Boston in time for the auction of his property, which had reverted to the state. The auctioneer, eager to scotch the weird story of a still-living heir, ridiculed anyone who believed the rumor, warning how such credulity could check the spirit of enterprise and "bid farewell to all mercantile excitement." Your surplus money, he told the gathering, "instead of refreshing your sleep with the golden dreams of new sources of speculation" would cause a nightmare, for "a man's money, if not employed, serves only to disturb his rest."<sup>32</sup> The spirit of speculation had haunted Americans ever since the Revolution. E. S. Thomas called the rush for soldiers' notes in 1788 "a scene of *legal robbery*, such as the history of civilized nations can scarcely produce a parallel to." According to him, mechanics and journeyman carpenters made fortunes, the more enterprising participants in the race for unearned profits setting up relay horses from Albany to Boston for

*A New National Identity*

news of the New York ratification of the Constitution because they considered the mail stages too slow.<sup>33</sup>

There is evidence that even the clergy got caught up in the passion for making money. William Neill, a Presbyterian minister educated on scholarships at Princeton, acknowledged in taking a new pulpit that he had yielded to considerations, which, I fear, have, in many instances too much influence on such occasions, such as a more ample support.<sup>34</sup> Regretful that he had never been able to pay into the fund from which he benefited, he invested an unexpected gift of 700 dollars in a real estate scheme instead.<sup>35</sup> Money intruded into prayer requests. Charles Kirk, a Quaker elder, made a covenant with God when he got married "that if I ever acquired a home worth ten thousand dollars I would be fully satisfied, and not covet any more."<sup>36</sup>

The rate of growth in the early republic was largely set by ordinary men and women whose propensity to move, to innovate, to accept paper money, and to switch from homemade goods once commercial ones were available paced the expansion of farming, commerce, credit, and information.<sup>36</sup> The steady elaboration of the national market also depended upon many of them leaving the place of their birth, trying their hand at new careers, and using their imagination to make commercial connections. Frederic W. Lincoln, Jr., a self-made instrument-maker in Boston, celebrated the process through which capitalists were produced: "the laborer of today is the capitalist of tomorrow, and the son of the man who yesterday upon his own merits,—upon working for his daily bread. Every man stands in industry in acquiring, frugality in expanding the fruits of his labors. The fact that he may become a capitalist, is a spur to exertion to the very news-boy in our streets."<sup>37</sup>

In the first generation a society oriented around the free market economy took shape in America, its materialism plain to all. At odds with traditional mores and aesthetics, the market had a scope of social influence in the United States that was unparalleled. Its opportunities unleashed ambition; its cues drew the rapt attention of those attracted to the novel connections that knit the country into an ever-expanding network of trade ties. By no means absent in the colonial period, the market intensified and rewarded an array of personal characteristics, most of them masculine: alert self-interest, promise-keeping, pleasure deferral, attention to distant communication, commercial imagination, the capacity to initiate trade relations. There was also in the independence fostered by personal engagement

with market schemes an accompanying acceptance of the setbacks of commercial failures. These were the qualities necessary for a free-market system to flourish; they were also the ones that the system fostered. A later generation would call it the school of hard knocks.

The economy in the United States has never stopped changing; major transformations have marked each generation. Through the early nineteenth century Americans still had a producer's economy in which most people lived off their own exertions and those of family members, but by the 1820s, small-scale merchandisers and manufacturers had added to the rich mix of farmers in most Northern counties. The entrepreneurial values of the first generation ensured that there would be little serious opposition to industrialization. Americans were convinced, as public commentary would suggest, that inequalities were promoted not by capitalist development, but rather by the political privileges of an aristocracy.<sup>38</sup> More important than capital to economic development was the readiness of American women and men to move to improve their lot; they responded as well to the innovations that promoted material advances. Few cultural restraints to individuals' investing their wealth as they saw fit—regardless of its impact on the moral or physical environment—emerged to socialize this profound economic transformation, and the flood of immigrants, starting with the Irish in the 1840s, provided the factory fodder that enabled native-born Americans to ignore the cruelest forms of exploitation that industrialization brought.

Few understood the linked phenomena of economic change. Those who did try to discern its secret springs were almost always prompted by their commitment to a national policy; usually one that was being contested. Hezekiah Niles and Daniel Raymond analyzed the economy in terms that made high tariffs reasonable, yet Stephen Elliot offered a very sophisticated grasp of the blessings of free trade.<sup>39</sup> In their works we can see that the prod of sectional interests produced both capably imagined recommendations for facilitative legislation as well as effective arguments for restraining government interference. More important than an appreciation of economic theory to most Americans was an understanding of the character of the economic agent, the man—usually white and Northern—who committed his energy and talents to some productive enterprise.

Joseph Caldwell, recounting a harrowing tale from his youth, offered a revealing glimpse of the personal dimension of endeavor. One warm summer day he and a fellow Princeton divinity student decided to walk to a nearby pond to refresh themselves with a swim. When his friend realized

that he could not touch the bottom of the pond, he panicked, calling frantically for help to Caldwell, who hesitated to go to the rescue lest he become trapped in the wild gyrations of a drowning man. Torn between his conscience and his desire to regain the shore himself, Caldwell did return to help his friend, who immediately seized him as he had feared he would. Breaking free from the grasping hands, Caldwell swam with all his might to the shore, only to discover that his drowning companion, desperate to grab him again, had actually followed him to safety.<sup>40</sup>

At first blush this seems a strange story to include in the memoirs of a highly successful career. Caldwell had left his native New England to teach mathematics at the University of North Carolina, where he remained to become the university's first president and a leading spokesman for educational reform. Why would he wish to appear uncaring, maybe even cowardly? The answer must lie in the moral lesson to be extracted from the incident: strike out on your own, don't look back, set a strong example, and let others follow and learn.

Caldwell's story also conveyed metaphorically those elements of contemporary life usually excused from the personal narratives of his generation: the panic that could be triggered at being in over one's head and the desperate wish to find support from others. Fear of drowning in debt stalked almost all who set out to secure a frontier farm, set up a store, start a newspaper, or launch a professional career. The aspirations of Caldwell's peers rarely had the backing of savings, experience, or guidance. Failure was just as likely as success, and losses from death, economic downturns, epidemic sickness, and industrial accidents abounded. Almost everyone had relatives or acquaintances whose dissolute habits or mental instability brought them low. In such a social environment, the sudden shift of tenor in a day's outing could take on the qualities of a parable, particularly when personal strength and intuitive good sense saved both men's lives.

Only in the United States did the decisions that individuals made about their lives play so large a part in shaping the character of public institutions. In the absence of an acknowledged upper class, an established church, or a highly regulatory government, personal undertakings did the work of authority. Once the discipline of the market had been internalized, its workings appeared natural, a perception that discouraged purposeful intervention.<sup>41</sup> To be sure government—particularly state governments—dispensed licenses, bounties, and articles of incorporation while enforcing contracts and selling land with an abandonment that would have shocked Hamilton.<sup>42</sup> These benefits moderated the risk of enterprise, but they did



not alter the fact that private persons devised and executed economic schemes, mobilizing on their own the necessary money and labor. The rewards and punishments from economic effort gave people the cues to direct their work lives, making economic information a necessity. The society with few safety nets, most people were both vulnerable and free, exposed to market exploitation while being animated by thoughts of gain.

What needs to be considered is how potentially disruptive this general, pell-mell pursuit of personal ambitions might have been had those who lost in the scramble turned against the system that failed them. That such patterned hostility did not develop suggests the presence of a powerful and pervasive explanation of the individual engagement with opportunity. Successful Northerners wrote about their country as the locus for beneficial exchanges of talents and riches. This functional, future-oriented social blueprint replaced the older picture of communities unified around a stable set of precepts. The age-old concept of a structure with divisions of ranks was supplanted by that of a machine with interacting parts and interchangeable participants.

Repeated in orations and pamphlets, by mechanics in their association meetings and merchants in their economic treatises, the truths about a perpetually improving social engine were hammered home: farmers who produced agricultural surpluses could buy better tools; manufacturers who reinvested the profits from selling those goods expanded output; merchants who sold the farmers' crops and the manufacturers' goods enhanced the size and efficiency of the market.<sup>43</sup> Important here was the recognition of the interdependence of the productive sectors of the economy. Society divided among rich, poor, and middling gave way to one in which representatives of occupations—farmers, lawyers, schoolteachers, manufacturers, and merchants—interacted to create general prosperity. That writers and speakers elaborated these imaginative reworkings in the years when many farm workers and artisans were moving into factory employment helped mask their simultaneous disinvestment of hope.

Easy access to print guaranteed that the distilled experience of the first generation would fix ideas about ambition, success, effort, discipline, and responsibility. Enterprising Americans became objects of their own curiosity; they constituted themselves as objects of discourse because they were doing new things. Selectively construing liberty as the chance to strike out on one's own, writers and speakers narrowed their interest to a few archetypes, cultivating an avid interest in the successful. Within the image of an improving America, intelligence, honesty, determination, and enterprise

came to represent the personal forces animating the social whole. Accordingly, energetic, productive, inventive individuals became powerful nodes of attention and admiration. Their lives served as models of innovation in a society losing all desire to replicate past ways of doing things. Narrative accounts of their successes set forth in eulogies, testimonials, autobiographies, and memoirs formed a kind of cultural capital accumulating in the country alongside the savings from industry. In the division of ideological labor, life stories supplied the empirical evidence to validate sanguine assertions about American destiny. The easy access to opportunity, the just reward of virtue, the irrepressible pluck in the face of adversity—so simply depicted in the first person accounts of America's charter entrepreneurs—sank deep into the public consciousness.

This vision of a society of mutually accommodating functions no doubt applied to a vast number of ordinary men and women because it leveled their social superiors and refurbished an egalitarian rhetoric. As Samuel Latham Mitchell explained, since all citizens are equal, the only inequality that exists arises necessarily from office, talents, or wealth and as the road is open for every one to aspire to these, it is by the exercise of one or more of his rights that a man acquires these means of influence.<sup>44</sup> John Watson retailed the glories of American prosperity in his *Annals of Philadelphia* by crediting free institutions with the country's conspicuous material advances:

Here human life is not wantonly wasted in ambitious broils for sovereignty; we therefore beheld our population quadrupled in a term of forty years . . . and our hardy pioneers subduing the soil, or advancing their settlements, from the Atlantic to the Pacific wave. Canals, rivaling in magnitude the boasted aqueducts of imperial Rome are in successful operation. By these and turn-pikes, inaccessible districts are brought nigh; mountains charged with metallic treasures are entered, and their deposits of iron, coal, and lead, &c lavished over the land. Cities, towns, and villages, arise in the West, as if by enchantment—Many of their present inhabitants redeemed their soils from a waste howling wilderness . . . Our private law, commercial code, and bold diplomacy, have grown into a matured and learned system. Our inventions and improvements in the arts . . . make us, even now, "a wonder until many" . . . Here we have no lordly potentates in church, "lording it over the consciences of the people;" no stand-

ing armies to endanger their liberties, no despots to riot on the oppression of the subject. Nay, so exalted are our privileges, as a *self-governing* people, that the fact of our example and happiness is bidding fair to regenerate other nations, or to moderate the rigor of despotic governments throughout the world.<sup>45</sup>

In Watson's encomium one can see how the visible changes in the landscape predisposed the imagination to thoughts of progress, no small feat within a culture that had long looked back to the glories of Greece or the perfection of the Garden of Eden as acmes of human attainment.<sup>46</sup> Not the lofty achievements of genius, but the humble efforts of manual laborers, farmers, and engineers produced the towns in the West, arising as if "by enchantment." Watson's reference to Americans redeeming their soils from a "howling wilderness" signaled the common justification for dispossessing the indigenous people who once roamed the "waste" that had been replaced by fields of golden grain. Others echoed Watson in making the tangible signs of prosperity an American signature: Dr. Richard Carter claimed that "the rapid progress and dissemination of learning and politeness" distinguished "the inhabitants of these United States" from all others. Even when Americans were talking about something else, as in William Prescott's *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabel*, they could not resist making invidious comparisons. Writing a narrative that turned Spain into America's antithesis, Prescott attributed his country's enthusiasm and "bold commercial spirit" to the absence of Spanish despotism and religious bigotry.<sup>47</sup>

Many men and women of the first generation succeeded in creating their own myths as they analyzed what was going on in their experimental democracy. Extraordinarily self-conscious about the way that their lives fit into the whole, they demonstrated the power of the press to purvey attitudes as well. The individual stories of striving and succeeding poured into one large narrative. It was not the first generation's only story, but it was the one gaining the most momentum by the end of their lives. The repetition of themes in these texts exerted an adhesive, if not a coercive, force that pulled the collective imagination towards a few emblematic dramas. Expanded political participation, an unexpected free black population, novel economic and social opportunities, a revitalization of Christian piety, and a veritable folk movement onto the national domain in the West filled people's lives with novelties demanding reflection and explanation. The proliferation of all kinds of printed material assured that published

views would get a wide circulation. While few people were able to construct original interpretations, they at least conferred approval or disagreement with the ones advanced.

COMPELLING AS Northern interpretations of American successes were, they could not dissolve the very real tensions that divided the country. A sequence of wrangles about intensely-felt oppositions—slave and free, native-born and immigrant, black and white, male and female, saved and depraved, respectable and degraded, national and local, successful and failed, educated and superstitious, refined and vulgar—worked against the actual unity that the rhetorical consensus inferred. Differentiated as they were by region and religion, most white Americans after independence charted their course in life with two vivid and negative referents: those of savagery and aristocracy. Savagery lurked within and without, evoked readily by the presence of enslaved Africans in the South and the indigenous tribes west of the Appalachians. Aristocracy represented the British ruling class scorned by the colonists in their act of rebellion.

Savages in the American imagination were indolent and sexually permissive, living a hand-to-mouth existence that left few traces of *homo faber*, man the maker, for posterity. Aristocrats too were seen as lazy, self-indulgent, and sensual beings. They also appropriated the work of others and, more provocative of indignation, they defended their wealth as necessary to the very civilization that differentiated white Americans from blacks and American Indians. Both were atavistic—the one inexplicably neglected by the author of human progress and the other immured in feudal traditions of hereditary privilege, hierarchical authority, and overweening presumptions of superiority. Measuring their values against both savagery and aristocracy, the self-conscious shapers of American values spoke for a meritocracy in which merit was defined by ordinary talent, effort, and risk-taking. In embracing the virtues of personal autonomy and individual responsibility, they rallied around qualities with wide appeal across the spectrum of classes, faiths, families, and even races. The range of human potentialities engaged by this model of excellence was narrow, but widely shared.

Most Native Americans lived outside the reach of America's new liberal prescriptions, coming into contact with the United States, if at all, when purchases or treaties expelled them from their ancestral lands. The conti-

ment's indigenous population makes only a brief appearance in the United States Constitution, confined to a section granting Congress the power to regulate commerce "with the Indian Tribes."<sup>54</sup> Most policymakers shared in the settled, silent, self-fulfilling conviction that Native Americans would soon become extinct. Thomas Lorrain McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Trade and Commissioner for Indian Affairs, began collecting American Indian artifacts during his tenure from 1816 to 1830, and artists and ethnographers like George Catlin and Henry Schoolcraft promoted the study of Native Americans in a way that emphasized their remoteness. Under a War Department Commission of 1821, Charles Bird King painted the Kansas, Omaha, Pawnee, and Missouri American Indian delegates to Washington, producing in the next decade 139 studies of American Indians, including those of the southeastern tribes before Indian Removal, to display in the department's Indian Gallery.<sup>55</sup>

Real American Indians were memorialized after they had died or had been defeated. The greatest American Indian leader of the era, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, was old enough by the end of the American Revolution to perceive the threat that America's migrating families posed to the many tribes that he collected into a grand alliance. Brilliant as an intertribal organizer, Tecumseh was perhaps the one Native American capable of negotiating some kind of an accommodation with the United States, but up the upper Northwest to American settlement. Through the ritual opening of print, Tecumseh quickly became an American hero, praised in death as highly as he had been feared in life.

Tecumseh's fate found an echo in the other leaders who organized opposition to the onslaught of American families. Osceola rose to power among the Seminoles for opposing the Treaty of Payne's Landing that negotiated their removal across the Mississippi. Treacherously arrested under a flag of truce, he died at Fort Moultrie. Elias Boudinot, an important Native American editor, was murdered for his part in agreeing to the removal of the Cherokees. Black Hawk disavowed the cession of Sauk ancestral lands and fought unsuccessfully to repossess them, composing an autobiography that has become an American classic. Like Black Hawk and Boudinot, William Apes wrote to keep alive the memory of American Indian greatness in what could be considered an ironic variation of approval for the "dead Indian."<sup>56</sup>

Although the plight of Native American tribes elicited some sympathy, the fate of African Americans aroused much fiercer passions. Northerners

#### A New National Identity

took great pride in their emancipation laws. Not only had these gradual abolition statutes demonstrated to the world that an ancient institution could be deconstructed through legislative power, it also gave the force of action to the ringing phrases of the Declaration of Independence. Henry Adams noted that slavery "drove the whole Puritan community back on its Puritanism."<sup>57</sup> What he didn't say was that it also reanimated the rule of the North, a fact that Thomas Jefferson intuited when he became incensed by Northern efforts to check the entrance of Missouri as a slave state. Owning or not owning slaves became a political statement for those residing in Washington, D.C., even as the expanding free black population plumbed the depth of white hostility to blacks, North and South.<sup>58</sup>

Some Northerners took up the cause of black education and enjoined their neighbors to follow up emancipation with full citizenship for African Americans. Struggling to accommodate the racism around them with the Christian principles that white Americans professed to hold, black leaders looked for hints of change as signs of America's regeneration. Most white Christians straddled the issue—disavowing slavery, but allowing race prejudice to compromise their commitment to a higher law of political and social behavior.<sup>59</sup> Those who hoped that white Northerners might build a bi-racial society underestimated their fellow citizens' capacity to live with the tension of affirming natural rights while tolerating the denial of justice to blacks. A strong minority of white men and women felt keenly the injustices even as many resigned themselves or encouraged the degradation of African Americans in their midst. People sought answers to why blacks were not fully integrated into white society in new theories about race.<sup>60</sup> It was easier to talk about slavery than black civil rights.

Northern abolition had delivered an unexpected reproof to Southern planters. A sense of mutual betrayal soon complicated relations among state leaders. Antislavery Northerners thought that white Southerners shared their belief that slavery was evil and were asking only for time to end it, not taking into account the fact that a new generation of Southern planters was rushing to expand rather than contract slave labor. For their part, fully convinced of the hypocrisy of Northern antislavery sentiments in the presence of pervasive racial hostility, Southern leaders assailed Northern interference as a breach of the original political understanding, embracing states' rights as the only doctrine that could preserve a union of such dissimilar regions. Neither group could see what hindsight reveals: that each was reaching to changes in the other's section of the country and to differing attitudes towards change. Southerners had fewer incentives to

embrace social and economic innovations, and ordinary Northerners had found in the lexicon of progress, novelty, and advancement the language of liberation.

Virtue too played a different role in the emotional economy of the North. Having dismantled hierarchical authority among white males, Northerners relied upon internalized character traits, implanted in boys and girls alike, to supply the deficiency in external monitoring. Parents, employers, and religious leaders subscribed to the pedagogy that "as the twig is bent, the tree will grow" and instilled the principles of honesty, effort, self-reliance, and accountability in the young. Northerners had accepted a less ordered society as the price for being able to move freely, to express their own opinions, to seek economic gain, and to worship God as they wished. Government agencies still existed to police public spaces and facilitate legitimate endeavors, but the watchful censors of staid communities no longer enforced personal morals.<sup>35</sup> Adults had many options. Those who wanted to live within tight communitarian structures could find them, but others could as easily escape into cities or the heterogeneous settlements of the west.

AMERICA'S FOUNDING fathers, the men who engineered a constitutional convention and drafted a new form of government for the loosely-joined states in 1787, succeeded through the force of personal authority. They did not act in response to popular sentiments in favor of a stronger union, but out of their informed conviction that, with peace and independence secured, the people in the states would immerse themselves in local concerns and leave the eleven-year-old union perilously exposed to foreign intrigue. Because political union preceded the formation of a national identity, the first generation was forced to imagine the sentiments that might bind the nation together. If the Federalists had succeeded in institutionalizing their political upper class, American nationalism would have followed a trajectory more recognizably akin to European models, more conspicuously imitative of Great Britain. Or one could speculate further that if Southern leaders had used the new avenues of communication—circuit speaking, published speeches, newspapers—to contend with those Northerners who began speaking for the nation, they might have compelled respect for local mores and adherence to tradition.

Instead a virtual nation materialized out of the repeated messages about effort and accomplishment, virtue and autonomy, national prosperity and universal progress. Like a magnet, this imaginative construction of what it meant to be an American drew to it the filings of conforming views, anecdotes, and homilies. Those who shaped opinion as candidates, office-holders, organization leaders, editors, ministers, writers, and speakers obscured the heterogeneous nature of American life when they spoke of uniform impulses and universal goals. Ironically the self-conscious pursuit of national unity exacerbated the tensions created by its absence. The country's partisan institutions, rival newspapers, and conflicting evangelical societies enticed most adult white men into the public realm while simultaneously politicizing the entire culture.

The sequence of social developments in America also proved crucial in the transmission of precedents from one generation to the next. Modernization—as measured by literacy, social mobility, enhanced wealth, and participatory politics—ran well ahead of industrialization in the United States, a fact of considerable importance considering the hierarchical order that would later be imposed in factories.<sup>36</sup> The capacity of industrial capitalism to concentrate economic power and forge a new elite could not have been predicted in the decades after the Revolution. Commercial advance served as all-purpose evidence of American sagacity, acting as a moral and material handmaiden to the first generation's construction of a democratic and liberal society.

While commercial prowess was a source of pride to Americans, the market thrived on three discordant forces: competition, the indulgence of material wants, and the cultivation of self-interest—all of them at variance with political ideals of personal autonomy and religious commitments to neighborly love. Many lamented the creative destruction that Joseph Schumpeter called an inevitable accompaniment of the free enterprise economy, but the new goods, careers, and frontiers promoted by commerce had unleashed a thousand fantasies that distracted men and women from their losses.

Predisposed towards reform and resistant to radicalism, Americans in this first cohort promoted attitudes that still retain their vitality. Even their blind spots have survived. Successful in new ways, they often interpreted their accomplishments as the unique product of a free society and in doing so created a divide between the perpetually successful nation of the imagination and the sections and people who did not share their triumphs, values, or optimism. National identity might well have been built upon a

had been won and the price could be forgotten.<sup>50</sup> If, as it is said, victory has many fathers, it could be added that it tempts those triumphant fathers to silence discordant voices. Having pushed to include most white men and a few black ones in the citizenry, political radicals rested on their oars early in the century, leaving a different set of reformers to infuse their Christian morals into Americans' public and personal lives.

From the springs of ardor and enthusiasm issued a powerful myth about America that metamorphosed ordinary labor into extraordinary acts of nation building. It also attached personal virtue to a narrative about human progress and claimed for liberty the protean capacity to sustain economic development and maintain democratic vigor. In the simplicity of this national narrative there was little room for alternative constructions of reality, no place for failures, scant concern for diverging truths, and insufficient attention paid to prophetic voices. Only one division could not be printed and papered over—that between the Northern and Southern states that was leading inexorably to dividing the house that had gone into escrow at Philadelphia.

The American Revolution had not produced its own reactionaries. The Southern gentry had applauded the break with Great Britain with even more fervor than Northern leaders. What they disdained to share was the interpretation of America's revolutionary heritage as a call to innovation, enterprise, and reform. The success of Northerners in fashioning this understanding of their joint inheritance led to a new North that spoke for the nation and an old South that clung to values that pushed them apart. What was happening in the United States in its first fifty years—the elaboration of democratic institutions, the hardening of racist lines, the openness of opportunity, thinning of intellectual traditions, and reconfiguring of Northern and Southern states into the North and the South—could not be comprehended within a unifying story, yet this did not prevent those in the first generation most conscious of the nation from claiming their story for the whole. Rather than abandon the cherished object of an American truth, they accepted the half loaf of a half truth wrapped in a covering myth about the land of the free.

## NOTES

## INDEX

pluralist appreciation of a nation that protected diversity. One journalist wrote in 1876, no nation on the face "of the habitable globe" contains within its "expansive bosom a greater variety of individuals under the same species," going on to instance "the polished European, the tawny Asiatic and the sun-burnt Africans." More frequent were claims about the universal qualities that the nation embodied, leaving those who didn't conform culturally disenfranchised.<sup>57</sup>

Appealing as the American ethos is in its formal inclusivity, its self-congratulatory themes have discouraged a skeptical self-interrogation that could have challenged its unspoken assumptions. Rather than probe the nature of their economic and political systems, American writers acted as though they had discovered the secret spring of human effort—the desire to be free of external restraint in order to act on one's own. In truth, the release of human energy has been remarkable, a renewable resource of effort and inventiveness, but it has also demanded conformity to a strict set of rules of social engagement, inculcated by families and reinforced through didactic repetition. The broad support of the market system and the personal liberties that uphold it inhibited class formation, yet exposed the vulnerable to a form of ideological ostracism.

In 1824, the Greek struggle to gain independence from Turkey gave American leaders a chance to reflect on the role in the world of their path-breaking democracy. Throughout the Western world, people pressured their governments to help the Greeks, whose cause had been ennobled by association with the Golden Age of antiquity. In America, men and women—soon dubbed hellenophiles—raised funds, held public rallies, and memorialized Congress to do something for the brave defenders of Greek liberties. Obligingly, the House of Representatives engaged in an extended debate on whether or not to pass a resolution enabling President Monroe to send a mission to the Greek rebels expressing America's sympathy. The proposition created the occasion for Representatives to excoriate monarchs and despots who held their people in thrall, to express support for lawful resistance, and to attribute their own country's "rapid and irresistible" prosperity to its self-governing liberties.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the forensic flourishes of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay among others, those who did not want the United States to act like "the renowned Knight of La Mancha" prevailed. The resolution was defeated. What America had to offer, Congressman Silas Wood of New York explained, was "the moral influence of its example." The United States presented to the world "a model by which the rights of men may be secured,

and the benefit of good government may be obtained, with the least sacrifice to individual independence," he said.<sup>59</sup> Having kept up their flagging spirits in the long haul of nation-building with boasts about democracy's power, this truth turned the country into a metaphorical beacon. A year shy of the nation's fiftieth anniversary, a consensus had emerged. America was special not for what it preached but for what it was. Americans need only continue on course to be a force in the world.

As this congressional debate reveals, inheriting a revolutionary tradition had thrust upon an entire generation of Americans the responsibility for explicit articulation of what the United States stood for. Impossible to ignore, the bequest of the founders catapulted radical philosophical propositions into the center of American public debate, giving every group excluded by prejudice and custom from citizenship potent arguments for their inclusion. Reason and justice were expected to explain social arrangements, an expectation baffled by formal institutions of slavery and common-law traditions that bolstered the authority of white householders over family and employees. Natural law affirmations of liberty and equality gave the union the moral glue it badly needed while promoting a rift between those states that found a way to abolish slavery and those that did not. These contradictions and the conflicts they engendered paradoxically enhanced openness in government, popular political participation, a vibrant print culture, and inclusiveness in public life. Americans seemed to shed old conventions like a snake its skin, coming through with colors brighter than ever.

A flood of European visitors had come to the United States as they would to a zoo, to observe the only democratic society in captivity. Their commentary heightened many Americans' self-consciousness about their democratic experiment and induced a rush to interpretation. Not totally adventurous, the country's stellar growth in people, inventions, buildings, acreage, and goods produced and sold suggested that liberty and prosperity went together very much like the horse and carriage. Eager to draw attention away from their country's deficiencies in the arts and sciences, writers and speakers used this connection to explain American particularities as portents for humanity's future, invoking the statistics of conspicuous development like a mantra to ward off doubt.

The first generation guaranteed that America's revolutionary tradition would be celebrated as a successful one. Both in Indian country and throughout the South, the Revolutionary War had taken on the brutal ferocity of both an invasion and a civil war, yet the prize of Independence