

How to Make an American in the Early Republic:
Some Notes on the Limits of State, Structure, and Strife

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Western scholars tend to view the nation-state as a modern invention, an artifact of a global order that has existed for perhaps four centuries. It is also common for them to see some form of nationalism, defined either narrowly as a political ideology or more broadly as a form of identity, as a prerequisite for the nation-state's existence.¹ A nation comes to exist and matter, in this view, mainly because people already believe it exists and matters; "nations do not make states and nationalisms," says one famous pronouncement, "but the other way round."²

Because they prioritize the state or the class, some explanations of national identification downplay its personal character. Treating nationalism as a political ideology, they may not explore national identification as an affective experience. They try to explain how the Americans became Americans, but they neglect to ask whether this explains why an American became an American. They explain why a flag flies over a city hall, but not necessarily why it flies over a

¹ Defining *nationalism* narrowly and consistently is difficult because competing definitions of "the nation" (produced by the existence of both multi-ethnic and stateless nations and nation-states with ethnic self-conceptions) entail different conceptions of national consciousness. Some scholars, furthermore, have argued that revolutionary political nationalism is responsible for the very existence of nations; if they are correct, it is impossible to separate other forms of national consciousness or national identity from nationalism in a strict political sense. Worse, even narrowly political definitions of nationalism become internally problematic when applied to historical cases; the "nationalism" of national conquest and the "nationalism" of national self-determination can be identical, mutually constitutive, or mutually exclusive. In addition, attempts to distinguish between different forms of national consciousness sometimes produce anachronistic and stultifying terminology, as in the case of Eric Hobsbawm's use of the term *popular proto-nationalism* to describe national consciousness that emerged in Europe before his thesis was ready for it.

In this paper, I use *national identity* (for an image of the nation and its supposed attributes) and *national identification* (for any form of conscious attachment to the nation and its attributes) interchangeably with the term *nationalism* in order to facilitate a conversation among different theories of national identification. When I believe an author is using "nationalism" in a restricted sense that calls for more precision, I try to follow in that usage in a reasonably clear way.

² E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10.

front porch. They also often depict national identity as something that absorbs or overwhelms individual identity and agency, even though this blames the nation for conformism that seems inconsistent with the same sorts of national martyr-worship that these interpretations often endeavor to criticize.³ Their large-scale approach to political nationalism thus can lead to attenuated accounts of national identification and personal behavior.

In this essay, I attempt to sketch an outline of this problem as it relates to contemporary scholarship in American history, particularly histories of the early American republic, or the United States between roughly 1783 and 1828. I first describe some of the theories of national identification that are available to explain the evolution of “Americanness,” focusing on widely discussed accounts pertinent to the political thought of Western Europe up to that era. Then I describe how I see the current state of early-republic historiography. I argue that American histories generally share the European accounts’ focus on the state as constituting the national community. But they adopt a fundamentally different view of the state’s role because of the decentralization of American politics. Instead of the European models’ administrative elites, American histories highlight the leaders of competing partisan factions, and instead of the administered industrial economy, they point to a vast continental interior available, at the price of racial warfare, for incorporation into a national economy.

The effect of these substitutions is to ascribe the consolidation of an American nation-state to various forms of group conflict, which largely took place inside rather than outside the nation’s supposed borders. I suggest that these accounts of conflict fail to explain the flexibility of early American accounts of national identity. If internal group conflict generated national consciousness, it should have led to relatively exclusive conceptions of the American nation

³ That is, canonical national heroes tend to exemplify virtues of independence, self-possession, individual integrity, intellectual and physical distinction, and extraordinary personal honor as well as selflessness.

rather than the relatively inclusive conceptions held in the antebellum United States.⁴

I argue for a different approach, which I briefly sketch at the end of the paper and which I base in part on the work of Liah Greenfeld. I ascribe the growth of American national identification to rapid social change in a country with widespread literacy, particularly in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when American intellectuals could address them with an imported romantic literary vocabulary. The language of romantic national identity (developed by similarly unsettled writers in Britain) ostensibly gave modern individuals a sense of connectedness with their historic roots and authentic selves. Thus, a sense of belonging to an American nation addressed objective material conditions, but also involved a personal affective commitment, so that the image of the nation revealed the individual to himself. Such an approach to early American national consciousness may be more sensitive to Americans' longstanding and apparently ineradicable notion that Americanness is connected to flourishing individuality, or even militant individualism, without requiring the historian to surrender to essentialist fables about Americans' inherent consensual liberalism.

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Among historians of the United States, who are strongly influenced by Western European scholarship, the most readily available models for the origins of national identity can be separated into two general categories, which I shall call an "intellectual approach" and an "organic approach."⁵ Both are collective, large-scale models of nationalism that prioritize either the nation-state (and thus, in the United States, electoral politics) or the self-consciousness of a

⁴ The inclusiveness of American national identity had some glaring exceptions, including most notably the brutal exception of racism. Yet even in this case, many white Americans would have considered their black neighbors to be, in some sense, distinctly American, though not proper members of the civic nation. And some African-American reformers pursued recognition as members of the American nation on the grounds that nationality offered significant protections for their personal rights.

⁵ Both of these are "modernist" views; "primordialist" views of nationality are not very compelling in an American context except in special cases, such as the case of black nationalism.

class or race as the ultimate source of national identification. They differ mainly in the degree to which they treat the nation as a conscious elite invention or a spontaneous popular mode of life.

First, some scholars have treated nationality as an idea invented, more or less deliberately, by European intellectuals. Interestingly, this idea has proven congenial to both right- and left-wing critics. From the political right, Elie Kedourie, a critic of postcolonial Arab nationalism and a protégé of Michael Oakeshott at the London School of Economics, argues that modern concepts of the nation emerged from France's greatest crisis of social authority.⁶ The term entered common usage only after the French Revolution, and political nationalism took form as philosophers devised a theory of freedom that depreciated the individual, unleashing one of history's most destructive forces.⁷ According to Kedourie's interpretation, therefore, all forms of modern national consciousness are manifestations of nationalism. That is, they reflect an ideology that ascribes total sovereignty to the nation-state. Affiliation with a nation implies surrender to the state and opposition to its rivals, thanks to the philosophers who drafted the terms of nationality at the dawn of the nineteenth century. The nation, if Kedourie is correct, embodies a principle of state aggression.

From the left, Eric Hobsbawm similarly though less consistently views the nation as a creation of intellectuals and educated administrators. Hobsbawm writes that modern nations owe their potency to "invented traditions" that give them a fictional aura of ancient legitimacy.

⁶ For information about his career and convictions, see Efraim Karsh, "Elie Kedourie: Forgotten Iconoclast," *International History Review* 21, no. 3 (September 1999): 704–713; Sylvia Kedourie, "Aspects of Elie Kedourie's Work," *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 5 (September 1, 2005): 635–648; and Noël O'Sullivan, "Philosophy, Politics and Conservatism in the Thought of Elie Kedourie," *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 5 (September 2005): 689–716.

⁷ Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 1–11, 12–86; cf. Hans Kohn: "Nationalism as we understand it is not older than the second half of the eighteenth century. Its first great manifestation was the French Revolution, which gave the new movement an increased dynamic force. [...] The growth of nationalism is the process of integration of the masses of the people into a common political form. Nationalism therefore presupposes the existence, in fact or as an ideal, of a centralized form of government over a large and distinct territory. This form was created by the absolute monarchs [...]" *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 3–4.

He depicts these traditions as artifacts of nineteenth-century bourgeois society, which produced university-trained “professional intellectuals” as the spokesmen of the new ruling middle classes.⁸ Their nationalism took practical form in Europe between the 1830s and 1880s, when the cultural elites identified themselves as leaders of various political nations, but did not emerge in popular consciousness until the end of the century, when European states broadened political and educational participation for the sake of military-industrial mobilization.⁹ Hobsbawm admits that some forms of collective consciousness resembling nationality existed before the mid-nineteenth century, but he argues that even these forms of “proto-nationalism” emerged from consciousness of the state and identification with its symbols and elites, not with the horizontal identification implied by membership in a nation.¹⁰ In his account, as in Kedourie’s, an ordinary citizen’s consciousness of the nation is a product of statecraft.

Alternatively, the organic view, taken up by scholars like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, represents the nation as something that emerged naturally from the conditions of modern life.¹¹ In Gellner’s interpretation, the nation-state is simply the political unit that makes the most sense to humans living in an industrial society. Agrarian peoples may be content to leave literacy and culture to a specialized class—the cultural elites of Hobsbawm’s model—and to tolerate a multitude of vernacular languages and customs. But mobile industrial societies must foster widespread literacy (and therefore linguistic uniformity) and cultural homogeneity in order to produce and distribute goods efficiently. This usually requires the resources of a nation-sized state, complete with a comprehensive education system and uniform

⁸ Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Invented Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14; “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263–307; *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 132–135.

⁹ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, 80–130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46–79.

¹¹ This approach is compatible with the other; Hobsbawm acknowledges a particular debt to Gellner in *ibid.*, 9–11.

administrative apparatus. Furthermore, such a society must provide wide access to the dignities of citizenship. “A society which is destined to a permanent game of musical chairs,” he writes, “cannot erect deep barriers of rank, of caste or estate, between the various sets of chairs which it possesses.”¹² Economic modernization thus teaches people to look to the nation-state for justice and progress. Nationalism, according to Gellner, is the political form of the desire they feel to possess a state commensurate with their mobility and economic aspirations.

Gellner’s model of nationalism emphasizes industrial production within a set of natural borders. Conversely, Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” thesis, perhaps the most widely invoked model of national identity among American historians today, emphasizes particular forms of industrial consumption, which operate on a global scale. Anderson holds that the nation-state, thanks to modern mobility, reflects a new perception of humanity’s place in the cosmos as well as a new economic order. Instead of seeing themselves as subjects under the throne of God, enjoying commonality in a sacred universal order, he writes, modern Europeans (and their imperial subjects and antagonists) came to view themselves as haphazardly coinciding in space and time. Thanks to international trade and the substitution of vernacular official languages for Latin, their conceptual space was defined by the newspaper, the almanac, or the novel, which represented jumbles of events in endless, numbing succession. In these circumstances, the moderns needed a new basis for solidarity, a new explanation for their being thrown together on a chaotic, one-way journey through time. They found this, Anderson writes, in the nation, which was essentially a community of print circulation. The nation’s borders were defined not by personal mobility but by the mobility of ideas.¹³

Anderson’s view has been appealing in part because it joins the virtues of the intellectual

¹² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 25.

¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

approach, which privileges symbols and ideas, and the organic approach, which suggests that national consciousness might manifest truly popular desires.¹⁴ It has the additional advantage of not requiring the scholar to assume that cultural elites express the will of the state, or indeed, to assume that national identification means conscious identification with the state at all. The imagined community is likely to coincide with the post-imperial state, but the exercise of power is not its fundamental purpose. That makes Anderson especially useful for historians of the United States, who must contend with the implications of American federalism and Americans' reputation for individualism. But Anderson's account does not seem to encourage historians to inquire very far into the personal content of national belonging or the sources of specifically national language for modern community life. The imagined community leaves open the question of imagined individuality. To put it another way, Anderson's thesis has much more to say about national identification than about national identity.

Another theorist who has more effectively bridged the intellectual and organic approaches, however, opens a path between the need for an imagined community and the need for personal redefinition. Liah Greenfeld, reversing the usual terms of the organic models, has argued that nationalism (which she defines as including both national consciousness and the very existence of nations) provides a basis for the modern state and global order. Modernity does not create nationalisms, to paraphrase Hobsbawm, but the other way round. In Greenfeld's account, national consciousness emerged from an identity crisis among the traditional elite, first in sixteenth century England and then elsewhere in Europe—a crisis she characterizes as a condition of *anomie* or a “psychologically unbearable inconsistency between several aspects of

¹⁴ It arguably avoids their key weaknesses, which are, respectively, that they usually depict nationality as a top-down imposition by cultural elites and that they risk denying the content or unique characteristics of particular national identities.

reality.”¹⁵ The elite’s solution to the identity crisis took “national” form because of specific conditions in early modern England (a movement toward social equality, as the gentry encroached on aristocratic authority, which happened at the same time as Tudor monarchical centralization and the Protestant Reformation). Commoners seized upon the idea of the *natio*, or community of learning and opinion, and democratized it. Then English nationalism provided conceptual materials for elites elsewhere when they struggled through crises of their own. The Protestant English nation legitimized the new elite’s political self-assertion and specifically its pretensions to individual rights by way of literacy and the rights of conscience. Thus, structural changes in English society gave rise to ideas that transformed English government, could be transferred to other political communities, and perhaps even could be applied to communities that had not yet experienced the same structural reorganizations. These ideas outlived the conditions that created them and eventually traveled beyond Europe and the United States to inform the political behavior of the rest of the world.

The great philosophical and ethical advantage of Greenfeld’s account is its sensitivity to affect and a fuller range of possible concerns for persons living in community. It recognizes links between power, status, and psychological integrity. Its historical explanatory power, too, is increased by its dual focus on what national identification offers elites and how ideas about national identity are transmitted from place to place, though its relevance to the psychological needs of non-elites is less obvious. Most importantly, Greenfeld’s account leaves considerable room between the nation and the state, while maintaining their historical and logical connections—allowing for the existence of a national consciousness that has political implications but does not become political nationalism.

¹⁵ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 16.

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Gellner, Anderson, and especially Greenfeld come closer than the intellectualists to explaining how the nation might have entered American consciousness in a way I consider essential, as a way to order human experience in an age of disruption and displacement. Together, they suggest that as local affinities on the one hand and a universal religious order on the other gave way to modern socioeconomic fluidity, the nation became a vessel that looked big enough to carry modern humans safely into the future. Yet even these accounts, as sensitive as they are to the needs of the person, hold that nationalism is to be understood ultimately as a political ideology. All of these accounts begin and end as attempts to explain why political revolutions happen.

This presents a problem when applied to the American case. It seems inappropriate to depict the American Revolution as a nationalist war, in any sense of “nationalism” familiar from studies of nineteenth-century Europe. The American independence movement was populist, at least in some communities, and it was certainly shaped by print circulation and impelled by modern commercial concerns. But American colonists near the beginning of the war were often fiercely proud of their Britishness, both cultural and political, and happy to emulate the manners of London.¹⁶ (“Are not the people of America British Subjects?” asked the *Boston Gazette* in 1765. “Are they not Englishmen? ... The British Americans are at this time, more than ever attentive to their Rights and Privileges, and they will not become content with the shadow without the

¹⁶ See Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Jack P. Greene, “Empire and Identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. P. J. Marshall, vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 208–230; P. J. Marshall, “Presidential Address: Britain and the World in the Eighteenth Century: II, Britons and Americans,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9, Sixth Series (1999): 1–16; Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

substance.”¹⁷) They had a more complicated relationship with Englishness than with Britishness, however, and had come to suspect, according to T. H. Breen, that London’s idea of British nationalism “was actually English nationalism writ large” and had no place for them.¹⁸ Even so, their economic life was, and would remain for decades, inextricable from the British imperial economy, and most of their legal institutions were borrowed from Britain.

Likewise, colonial intellectual life at the time of the Revolution had little place for national particularism. The Patriots owed much of their intellectual life to the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, who articulated a provincial rather than national identity for non-English Britons, and to Francophone *philosophes* like Montesquieu and Burlamaqui, whose work lent itself more to universalism than particularism.¹⁹ The most important ideological basis for their revolution grew out of an English tradition that looked to ancient civic models available to any European people, not a unique ethnic history.²⁰ Some Patriot leaders did conceive of independence as somehow natural, owing to the American colonies’ position on the globe: “There is something absurd,” wrote Thomas Paine, “in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.”²¹ Yet when Paine finally held an elective national office, it was not in America but in revolutionary France, under the (attributed) belief that “where liberty is not

¹⁷ “To the Printers,” *Boston Gazette*, July 15, 1765, 2.

¹⁸ T. H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions Once More in Need of Revising,” *Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 23.

¹⁹ On Scotland, see Colin Kidd, “North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth-Century British Patriotisms,” *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 2 (June 1996): 361–382, doi:10.2307/2640185; Gilman Marston Ostrander, *Republic of Letters: The American Intellectual Community, 1776-1865* (Madison: Madison House, 1999), 20–28; Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 58–74.

²⁰ The standard treatment of this literature is still Robert E. Shalhope, “Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no. 1, Third Series (January 1972): 49–80; cf. Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

²¹ Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23; cf. James D. Drake, *The Nation’s Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 108–150.

[yet], there is my country.”²² As a revolution of intellectuals, at least, the War for Independence was universalist rather than nationalist.

Even after the war, many American intellectuals were suspicious of attempts to create an effective national political unit or a distinctive national culture in the United States. During the 1780s and 1790s, Federalists, aware of the United States’ military and economic weakness, aimed to build an administrative state comparable to Britain’s. But they also admired British institutions and culture to the point of disparaging Republicans’ attempts to differentiate America from the mother country.²³ Consider the evolution and reception of *The Vision of Columbus*, an epic poem published by Joel Barlow in 1787. The first edition portrayed Columbus’s arrival in the Americas as the seed of empire and unity in the United States, the beginning of a new European civilization in the west rather than the birth of a unique people. Twenty years later, Barlow published a thoroughly revised version, the *Columbiad*, reflecting his Parisian conversion to republicanism and his subsequent friendship with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. It depicted Columbus’s voyage as a source of moral regeneration and human intellectual progress, a blow to the philosophical errors of the Old World. Barlow even tried to model the rationalization of the English language in the *Columbiad* by indulging in neologism and unusual orthography.²⁴ The responses of the Federalist press were savage; the *Monthly Anthology*

²² Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine: Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers, &c. &c.* (London: Thomas Clio Rickman, 1819), 179.

²³ Here I disagree directly with Eve Kornfeld, and particularly disagree over her gloss of a remark by Noah Webster in 1788 to the effect that Americans needed to establish “a national character.” Kornfeld characterizes this as a call for a “national identity” based on a national culture. In doing so, she interprets the term *character* too much in its later sense, implying idiosyncrasy or distinctive internal qualities, rather than its more common eighteenth-century sense, meaning reputation and respectability. Webster’s call was for national maturity on European terms, not national originality (notwithstanding his efforts to delineate the unique characteristics of American English). For the most part, his and other Federalist intellectuals’ efforts to improve American culture between the Revolution and the War of 1812 were consistent with that view. *Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3.

²⁴ Barlow explained his linguistic innovations in an appendix to the poem: “Postscript,” in *The Columbiad: A Poem* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809), 413–416.

in Boston published a string of several hostile articles, calling Barlow “but an indifferent poet, a sorry politician, and a still worse philosopher.”²⁵ The Republican newspaper *Aurora* retorted that Barlow’s poem was “one of the most refined works of American genius.”²⁶ This conflict over the poem reflected Federalist editors’ unease with American pretensions to novelty. But the Republican poem also defied most of our conceptions of nationalism, for Barlow depicted the United States as the spiritual vanguard of mankind in general, not a nation destined to remain unique.

Generally, therefore, recent investigations of the development of American national identification have focused not on the Revolution’s origins but on its effects, and particularly on postwar conflicts that shaped the United States politically. Liam Riordan’s sensitive 2007 study of the Delaware Valley, *Many Identities, One Nation*, argues that the Revolution unsettled colonists’ perceptions of the relationship between public and private life, giving new significance to identities based on religion and ethnicity, and stimulating controversial (and contradictory) movements to unify Americans through partisan politics or religious revival over the next two decades.²⁷ That argument brings together two lines of thought dominating recent historiography.

Partisan conflicts have been at the center of many histories of early national identification. To some degree, these political interpretations are consistent with models of nationalism that highlight the state and its administrative elites. But typically, and especially among “neo-Progressive” historians, these accounts focus on popular conflict more than on elite

²⁵ H. Grégoire, “Critical Observations on the Poem of Mr. Joel Barlow, the Columbiad, in 4to. Philadelphia, 1807,” *Monthly Anthology*, July 1809, 3–11; “The Columbiad, a Poem, by Joel Barlow,” *Boston Review [Monthly Anthology]*, August 1809, 114–130; Joel Barlow, “Letter to Henry Gregoire,” *Monthly Anthology*, November 1809, 289.

²⁶ Reprinted in “From the *Aurora*: Whipping in for the Editor of the Port Folio,” *The Democrat* 6, no. 30 (April 15, 1809): 3.

²⁷ Liam Riordan, *Many Identities, One Nation: The Revolution and Its Legacy in the Mid-Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

state-building. These historians and literary scholars have scrutinized the party system that emerged in the 1790s, suggesting that ordinary Americans came to see themselves as Americans in the process of fighting over the policies of their young central state. Public parades, illuminations, banquets, newspapers, and printed broadsides all introduced the public, in towns and cities across the country, to the idea that they belonged to the United States.²⁸ These tools of political conflict led not only to consciousness of the democratic nation but also to new understandings of personal agency, as politically aware American women, for example, came to a new consciousness of themselves as “women of the Republic.”²⁹ Likewise, poor white men—farmers, mechanics, sailors, apprentices—and some African Americans came into self-awareness as political actors during the battles of the Revolution and the early national period.³⁰

Yet it is not clear that such republican identities qualified as national identities. Did men and women at the beginning of the nineteenth century have particular civic rights by virtue of being Americans, or did they have rights simply by virtue of living in a republic? Generally, these accounts suggest the latter, except insofar as there were few other republics besides the American states to choose from at the moment. Neither do these accounts generally imply that

²⁸ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

²⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

³⁰ Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1999); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Benjamin L. Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010); Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael, *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011); Edward Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

national belonging superseded local identities. For most Americans at the turn of the century, loyalty to the town, the state, or the region remained paramount. Furthermore, partisan accounts of national identity offer a paradox. They lead Andrew Robertson to go as far as to conclude that the United States between 1795 and 1815 had *two* national identities, one Federalist and one Republican, and that “each ... denied the legitimacy of the other.”³¹ Robertson tacitly acknowledges that this violates the key requirements of state- and elite-oriented theories of nationalism: Americans in the early republic “failed” to do what “most states have found necessary in creating a viable national identity,” that is, establish a unitary definition and a single cultural template for belonging.³²

One commonly invoked alternative to partisan conflict, though, may provide too much rather than too little of a cultural template to be a plausible cause of national identification. John L. Brooke suggests that evangelical Protestantism accomplished what political institutions could not: “After 1800,” he writes, “men and women of Federalist leanings turned to culture, religion, and benevolence” to build “a common nationality” out of “a broad and implicit establishment of Protestant denominationalism in the Second Great Awakening.”³³ A mirror image of this narrative appears in Amanda Porterfield’s new book *Conceived in Doubt*, which depicts evangelical Christianity as a tool of the party struggle for national power in the 1790s rather than a tool for building consensus.³⁴ Several others have made similar arguments about

³¹ Andrew W. Robertson, “Look on This Picture ... And on This!": Nationalism, Localism, and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (October 2001): 1267. Furthermore, neither of these identities was uniquely American; the Federalists adopted an Anglo-American identity and the Republicans adopted a French-inspired cosmopolitan identity: 1273-1274.

³² *Ibid.*, 1278.

³³ John L. Brooke, “Cultures of Nationalism, Movements of Reform, and the Composite-Federal Polity: From Revolutionary Settlement to Antebellum Crisis,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 29, no. 1 (spring 2009): 10.

³⁴ Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation*, 2012; cf. David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); J. Spencer Fluhman, *A Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

religion's role in creating a national culture, if not a national consciousness, including Eddie Glaude and Patrick Rael, who give Christianity pride of place in African Americans' antebellum national identities.³⁵ But although these accounts reveal a likely route for the distribution of a nationwide culture, they do not necessarily explain why Americans became attached to the idea that they belonged to a unique nation. Evangelicalism did not generally function in antebellum America as Protestantism functioned for eighteenth-century England, serving as a marker that distinguished the nation-state from its national rivals.³⁶ If anything, it represented a cultural tie with the elites of Britain. Instead, therefore, evangelical Protestantism makes more sense as a parallel and alternative identity that was absorbed into American nationalisms when they arose.

A third possible source of national identification is international, racial, or ethnic warfare, particularly on the country's terrestrial borders. A number of historians have suggested that early Americans' sense of community was forged in violence that defined them in contrast to common enemies. This process began long before the establishment of an American national republic; it began with wars that committed subjects of different colonies to a common cause, binding them together as members of the same British (or, as Peter Silver argues, white) people in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It continued in 1754-1763 with the Seven Years' War, which defined American colonists as non-French but also perhaps something

³⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Patrick Rael, "Black Theodicy: African Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North," *The North Star* 3, no. 2 (spring 2000), <https://www.princeton.edu/~jweisenf/northstar/volume3/rael.html>; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Thomas S Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), <http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=655815>.

³⁶ The authoritative account is Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. 11-43 and 324-334.

different from the British regulars who arrived from the east. It gathered momentum during the Revolution thanks to the experiences of soldiers and camp followers in the Continental Army. And it continued under federal supervision after independence, as white Americans demanded the right to push west into the continental interior, beyond the boundaries of their home states, provoking new conflicts with Native Americans (and other non-Anglo “others”) throughout the nineteenth century. The consolidation of American national identity, which was supposedly built on a foundation of political liberty and pluralism, took place in a process that excluded, oppressed, and violently subjugated other peoples. “The result,” according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “is an inherently contradictory, unstable national identity never quite at peace with itself.”³⁷

Warfare creates paradoxes, and one cannot deny the obvious relationship between the American nation-state and the wars that created and expanded it. Yet in wars from the Revolution to the War of 1812 to the Mexican War, violence was not a reliably unifying force for the citizens of the United States; it tended to aggravate partisanship and sectional differences.³⁸ And several questions remain to answer. Why did so many white Americans in the early republic, including members of communities who had to fight for their own political and social recognition, see themselves in the pluralistic nation, given its entanglement with the exclusive

³⁷ See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000); Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007); Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 466.

³⁸ For a tour-de-force recent account of a foreign war’s bitterly dividing early-republic Americans before unifying them, see Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

and violent one? Why did African-American intellectuals after the 1820s seek recognition as members of the American nation, given its racist premises?³⁹ And what are historians to make of the tendency of westward expansion to threaten as well as strengthen the authority of the national state during the first half of the nineteenth century?

* * *

Thus, most current interpretations put group conflict, whether in the form of electoral politics, religious competition, or literal warfare, at the center of American nationality. Together, they portray American independence as the tipping point in a long revolutionary moment that lasted from roughly the Seven Years' War (or even King Philip's War in 1675) to the American Civil War, precipitating white Americans into existence as a people by giving them permission, repeatedly, to fight.

For the most part, these interpretations explain the birth of the republican patriot or civic participant, not the American national. They founder on the insistent localism of American politicians and voters, which lasted well into the nineteenth century. As Robert Ferguson points out, until the Civil War "virtually every state, major faction, and interest group tried, at least once, to weaken the federal government or break up the union."⁴⁰ And the organization of truly national political parties had to wait for the talents of Martin Van Buren and the charisma of the war hero Andrew Jackson in the 1830s. In the meantime, something must have happened to make republican citizens of the United States receptive to the very idea of a national party system, willing to concede that such an arrangement could somehow represent them.

³⁹ Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007); James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African-American Communities Before the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).

⁴⁰ Robert A. Ferguson, *Law and Letters in American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 24.

For decades before and after the Revolution, there had been signs of a growing sense of commonality among the articulate classes in America. But as I have suggested, before the Revolution, this sense of commonality rested mainly on the idea that the North American colonies were a valuable part of the British Empire, and after the Revolution, it rested either on vestiges of British identity or on the idea that the United States embodied the hopes of the whole world. The continental self-consciousness evident in the print culture of the early republic represented Americans merely as a particularly enlightened portion of humanity. This was an image of America the outpost, not America the homeland. It evoked futurism, not nostalgia.

The true awakening of a national consciousness—not nationalism as a doctrine about the state, but nationalism as the conviction that one is a member of a unique people—came after the second decade of the nineteenth century. It followed the War of 1812, which alienated the two English-speaking peoples, induced Americans to reevaluate the meaning of their Revolution, and restricted imports of British books.⁴¹ But it also followed a “transportation revolution” of canals, highways, post offices, and railroads. These conveyances brought together different regions of the country, but not always harmoniously. They threw together people of different habits, value systems, and languages. They brought with them commercial capitalism (and thus increasing abstraction of thought), which eroded local attachments and required new

⁴¹ John C. McCloskey, “The Campaign of Periodicals After the War of 1812 for National American Literature,” *PMLA* 50, no. 1 (March 1935): 262–273; Marshall W. Fishwick, “The Portico and Literary Nationalism After the War of 1812,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 8, no. 2, Third Series (April 1951): 238–245; Herbert G. Eldridge, “The Paper War Between England and America: The ‘Inchiquin’ Episode, 1810–1815,” *Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 1982): 49–68; Joseph Eaton, “From Anglophile to Nationalist: Robert Walsh’s ‘An Appeal from the Judgments of Great Britain,’” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 132, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 141–171; Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Joe Eaton, *The Anglo-American Paper War: Debates About the New Republic, 1800–1825* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jaap Verheul, “‘A Peculiar National Character’: Transatlantic Realignment and the Birth of American Cultural Nationalism After 1815,” *European Journal of American Studies (Online)* (April 3, 2012), <http://ejas.revues.org/9638>.

standards of personal honor. They pitted classes against each other even while flattening the visible distinctions between them. These group conflicts did not simply encourage Americans to dispute the definition of the nation through rival political parties or race wars. They also carried, from city to town, town to village, and village to homestead, news of the daily events of a vast world that could not be easily divided into neighbors, strangers, and enemies.⁴² This transformation amounted to a second “crisis of everyday life,” as Liam Riordan refers to the unsettling effects of the Revolutionary War.⁴³

The key feature of the national identity that emerged in this crucible—and perhaps the key difference between my picture of nationalism and Benedict Anderson’s—is that it reflected a concern for individual agency. Representations of American nationality grew out of civic republicanism’s concern for individual virtue and independence, but they transformed it. Just as Protestant revivalism in “the Second Great Awakening” made it possible to be a good republican and still enter the kingdom of heaven, nationalism made it possible to be a republican and still live in the modern kingdom of mammon. Both systems of thought posited that a form of true spiritual belonging would wash away the differences that set people in conflict—not by depriving them of their independence, but by building a world that could use them in all their individuality. Thus the revivals of the Second Great Awakening promised opportunities for women, African Americans, and illiterate white men to claim public roles, and thus the print culture of American nationalism celebrated the outsider, the rebel, and sometimes even the atavist. There was room for all in the great progressive American project—or so people often

⁴² George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Riordan, *Many Identities*, chap. 2.

wished to think.

This dual process of nation- and person-building worked itself out vividly in middle-class print culture. In the first place, a profound sense of unease over selfhood was evident in the literature composed shortly after the Revolution. In the books of Charles Brockden Brown, Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster, and other early novelists, and in Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast*, for example, the slipperiness of personal identity in a postrevolutionary country dominates the plots.⁴⁴ Among the literati in American cities, in fact, distress over the personal implications of republican politics—that is, republicanism's corrosive effects on enlightened sociability—grew during the first two decades after the Revolution. As early as 1789, DeWitt Clinton, a member of Columbia College's Uranian Club (and soon no shrinking violet himself in politics), wrote an allegory that depicted "the Republic of Urania," once ruled by benign Friendship and Literature, being torn apart by an electioneering Alderman.⁴⁵ In 1813, the constitution of the Philadelphia (later Pennsylvania) Literary Association invited members to engage in "the written and extempore discussion of any questions *not* involving Sectarian tenets of Religion or politics."⁴⁶

After the first decade of the nineteenth century, indeterminacy gave way to irony. Washington Irving's pseudo-histories of old New York (which he began publishing seriously in 1809) simultaneously mocked the pretensions of the state's ethnic elite, provided Americans with an alternative to a British past, and celebrated individual eccentricity. This provided part of

⁴⁴ See Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Donna R. Bontatibus, *The Seduction Novel of the Early Nation: A Call for Socio-Political Reform* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Evan Cornog, *The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

⁴⁶ "Constitution and By-Laws of the Philadelphia Literary Association," bound ms. (Philadelphia, 1813), Am.3117, Historical Society of Pennsylvania emphasis added.

the language other American writers needed to define the emerging culture of America's most diverse city as well as the rest of the continent.⁴⁷ In the train of Irving's oddball characters came other supposedly "original" American literary figures, which provided the rest of that language. These included, most famously, James Cooper's hero Natty Bumppo, the Leatherstocking, a character who struck readers at home and abroad in the 1820s as quintessentially American precisely because he was a misfit in white society. Crucially, the Leatherstocking novels (along with other contemporary examples of romantic fiction in poetry and prose, like James Wallis Eastburn's and Robert Sands' *Yamoyden* and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *New England Tale*) could borrow a new vocabulary of national identity from writers in Europe, especially Scotland, that seemed to free them from the social uncertainties of the 1790s.

Less than a decade after publishing his first novel, Walter Scott enjoyed unparalleled stature on both sides of the ocean. The *North American Review* in 1823 considered Scott's work "a second nature of our intellectual constitutions" and joked that "the rising generation must be at a loss to know what their elder brothers and sisters talked about, before such things existed."⁴⁸ John Neal would guess rather optimistically in 1825 that half a million copies of "the great Scotch novels" had been printed in the United States, and he would claim that they were "read by everybody—everywhere—all over the States."⁴⁹ Scott was not the first Scottish romantic or vernacular writer to enjoy favor in America, but the most successful in a line of authors, including John Home, James Macpherson, and Robert Burns, who had benefited from Americans' interest in their fellow-provincials' literature since the 1790s. By the time the *Waverley* novels had appeared in the United States, Scott's ethos was so familiar that some of

⁴⁷ Elizabeth L. Bradley, *Knickerbocker: The Myth Behind New York* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

⁴⁸ "The Works of Maria Edgeworth," *North American Review* 17, no. 41 (October 1823): 384.

⁴⁹ John Neal, "Late American Books," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 18, no. 104 (September 1825): 318.

the literati believed the Waverley novels were the work of a Canadian, or at least someone who had spent time in America.⁵⁰ And some critics had also begun to suspect that Scott's formula would work for a setting besides Scotland. In early 1821, the *North American Review* greeted a narrative poem about King Philip's War with an expression of relief that "somebody has at last found out the unequalled fitness of our early history for the purposes of a work of fiction."⁵¹ By adapting the Scottish romantic approach to tell stories from the history of the United States, Cooper's generation was both participating conventionally in the transatlantic print sphere and making a well-timed bid for American independence from British narratives.

In national politics, art and life imitated each other in the following decades. Politicians like Andrew Jackson and David Crockett made the most of outlandish personas to fuse populism and individualism in the 1830s. As David Reynolds has shown, they transformed American politics just as American literature took a turn for the grotesque; readers bought salacious and satirical stories revealing deeply "subversive" impulses. Often, these stories featured untamable backwoods characters, incorrigible urban enclaves of vice, and (on the "respectable" end of things) thoughtful but profoundly alienated people like the most famous characters of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville.⁵² Meanwhile, as Jane Tompkins showed nearly thirty years ago, popular women writers in the 1840s and 1850s produced literature that asserted the importance of the individual's sentiment or emotional disposition as the key to the moral health of the nation. In the view of writers like Susan Warner and Harriet Beecher Stowe, it was impossible to attempt to reform the nation without trying to

⁵⁰ Andrew Hook, *Scotland and America: A Study of Cultural Relations, 1750-1835* (Glasgow: Blackie, 1975), 116-173, esp. 148-149.

⁵¹ [John Gorham Palfrey], "Yamoyden, a Tale of the Wars of King Philip, in Six Cantos. By the Late Rev. James Wallis Eastburn, A. M. and His Friend," *North American Review* 12, no. 31 (April 1821): 480.

⁵² David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Harvard University Press, 1989); cf. Patricia Cline Cohen and American Antiquarian Society, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

reform the individual. For untold thousands of people, reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* meant peeping not only into the national slave system but also into one's own soul.⁵³

Whatever American nationalism was in the first half of the nineteenth century, an adequate account should take such personal dimensions and languages into consideration. For the people who experienced it, national identity was not simply an outgrowth of partisan interest or territorial jealousy. It was not only an ideology concerning the state. Neither is it adequate to explain nationalism entirely in communitarian terms. However much American nationalism promoted a sense of community, it was, to all appearances, grounded the conviction that the American nation produced extraordinary individuals. Thus, I think it makes more sense to describe American identification as an attempt, sometimes only half-conscious, to create a way for American persons to interpret their own lives. Nationality was an affective experience that promised to tell the literate American who she was, what her business was in the world, and perhaps what her future had in store.

⁵³ Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

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