

In a time of popular disillusionment,
historians recall the promise of the
American experiment

Requiem for Patriotic Piety

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In 1964, when race relations in America were under the sway of Martin Luther King's dream of future amity, and before President Johnson's war policy had destroyed the moral cohesion of the country, Paul C. Nagel published his impressive study, *One and Indivisible: The Union in American Thought, 1776-1860*. Now his second massively researched volume, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (Oxford University Press; 376 pp.; \$9.50), brings his account down, with some shift of emphasis, to the debates over imperialism occasioned by the War with Spain. Though the book ends almost seventy-five years ago, it has an obvious timeliness—not only because American imperialism is again a subject of worldwide debate but because American commitment to a sacred trust is seriously weakening. The traditional grounds of American loyalty are rapidly dissolving.

Nagel addresses the problems of American patriotism as successive generations have wrestled with them, and exposes a complex fabric of thought and feeling; the fabric is woven of dark and sombre threads, much finespun gold and, of course, hasty stitching of very uneven quality. Other works in this area have stressed limited forms of ideological expression or have concentrated on a few influential spokesmen for American ideals; Mr. Nagel, however, attempts an informal content analysis of American expressions of national loyalty. His reading is so wide and he moves through the decades with such sensitivity for changing nuances and emphases that he comes closer than anyone else to date in producing a trustworthy narrative of the changing quality of American civic concern.

His materials do not yield themselves to methodical quantification of the sort that Richard L. Merritt employed in his valuable study of the growing

sense of American self-consciousness during the pre-Revolutionary period, *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (1966). But Nagel steadily pursues his subject through an amazingly wide range of sources, even while the number of such sources on his period was multiplying. The method has inherent liabilities; his mosaic of excerpts, for example, precludes dealing in depth with the many great thinkers who have tried to expound the national purpose. Yet scholarly integrity is manifest throughout, and no sharply defined thesis subverts the extensive use of quotations. Even the danger of overstating his case through repeated recurrence to expressly patriotic addresses is balanced by the probability that such speakers were in most cases trying to give voice to the common sentiments of their various audiences.

Nagel's two books yield at least two important impressions. The first, so overwhelming that no reader is likely ever to forget it, is that between 1776 and 1898 most Americans conceived of their country as the bearer of transcendent norms. The citizen was committed to an idea: The Union is far greater than the individuals or component states that are its parts; the United States is more than a large practical arrangement or prudential compact—it is the bearer of eternal values. Because the religious and ethnic diversity of American people was a celebrated fact, and because the nominal British heritage of the majority had lost its allure for many, the simpler varieties of folk-loyalty were very weak or strenuously repudiated. Americans were not committed merely to preserving an accidental political entity but shared the Puritan's conviction that they were an Elect Nation. As the national seal proclaimed (consult a dollar bill), the Republic was no less than a new order for the ages, set apart by divine Providence.

Thus were Americans the bearers of a sacred trust. From the beginning, patriotism had a profoundly transmundane dimension, for indeed the future progress of the world depended on the integrity of

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this "city on a hill." Civic duty and religious obligation were intimately blended. This was the vision shared by penetrating theologians of nearly every faith and confession. Even those with sharp eyes for heresy withheld their anathemas. Indeed, they doubted that infidels could fully meet the awesome demands of citizenship.

This dominant note of Professor Nagel's study, however, is persistently qualified by a less exuberant line of thought. Lack of confidence in the nation's capacity to carry out its mission is a constant sub-theme. Hope and fear coexisted. Many Americans doubted that this nation could long sustain the high expectations of the founding fathers. The nation was threatened by a heedless search for wealth, by flagging concern for liberty and equality, or by the corrupting spirit of political factionalism.

Perhaps the greatest of threats to national loyalty was factionalism; that is, Americans disagreed about the content and priority of their ideals. Those who distrusted popular democracy enacted repressive laws. Those who hated slavery and other inequalities doubted the nation's very foundations, and the failure of Reconstruction only made their doubts more urgent. Some Protestants were convinced that only a general revival of religion could save the Republic from sloth and corruption; they saw ominous signs of subversion on every side and sought to deny the blessings of liberty to the conspirators. Timothy Dwight and a long line of evangelical successors doubted that sinful man was capable of altruistic conduct. Those who loved peace, respected the Indian treaties and decried imperialism were grieved when militarism and expansionism corrupted the country's sense of mission in the name of "manifest destiny." The negations accrued.

These tensions and anxieties, to be sure, are not new discoveries; some of them are described in a mode fairly similar to Nagel's by Fred Somkin in *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (1967). Somkin provides an impressive account of the incredible series of patriotic celebrations that accompanied Lafayette's grand tour of the United States in 1824-25. Another form of fear, verging on paranoia, is exposed in the documents edited by David Brion Davis in *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of UnAmerican Subversion From the Revolution to the Present* (1971). Nagel's comprehensive overview adds significantly to these studies and heightens one's interest in a sequel.

The crisis of the present decade finds America's patriotic piety more seriously endangered than ever before, not least because it is strangely entangled with other more recognizable religious developments. The Jesus People gain increased attention, Transcendental Meditation flourishes, and a rumor of angels is reported in unexpected quarters; yet the bookkeepers of traditional religion continue to pub-

lish evidence of declining zeal. A crisis of belief accompanies institutional malaise.

Parallel to these confusing trends, the country's "civil religion" reveals its own contradictions. A major survey finds 47 per cent of those interviewed expressing fears of an impending national "breakdown." Congress demeans the patriotic tradition by transforming the national holy-days into a series of long—or lost—weekends. Given the uninspiring lead of their elders, students of all ages use American flags to patch their jeans. One senses a widespread loss of faith in the nation. Flag-waving becomes the special proclivity of militant fundamentalists, racists and the law-and-order crowd. Non-whites seeking rooms for rent learn to avoid districts where flags flutter by the doorsteps. We are threatened, in short, by the snapping of those bonds of loyalty and affection essential to the health of any collective enterprise.

Yet during these very years when fear and hopelessness are corroding the national faith, we have witnessed a renaissance of scholarship about patriotic piety. Is it possible that here we have evidence of a familiar fact—namely, that we often study the history of something only after its demise?

Perry Miller, who added much to our knowledge in this area, brought support to that possibility when he observed, in a rare confessional statement, that one major reason he was able to shed new light on Puritanism, despite the enormous labors of his nineteenth-century predecessors in the field, was that, unlike them, he was willing to think of America's world destiny not in comparison with the glories of Rome but with the shadowy empire of the Parthians. In any event, in our present time of trouble, we can welcome this scholarly revival and be provoked to reflect on the patriotic piety that has, for three and a half centuries, animated what Abraham Lincoln called this "almost chosen people."

As we have seen, fear and doubt hold a continuous place in the history of American national devotion. They might even be viewed as a condition of health, as a bridle to national arrogance. Radical dissent could, and did, raise its voice, but almost invariably it spoke for traditional ideals that were being forgotten or ignored. Only at a later date does the heritage itself lose its authority. The tradition was not decisively weakened by the conflict over slavery and the Civil War; indeed, those events brought a temporary release from inherent tensions and allowed two opposing forms of patriotism to flourish separately for a while. Moreover, the war did bring forth a "new nation" to face old problems.

My own search for a break in the tradition leads rather to the Great Depression and to its disenchanting aftereffects; during those troubled years Americans became aware of alternative ideological options. Nearly a million Socialist votes were cast

in 1932, and about the same number for Father Coughlin's strange Union Party in 1936.

Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) symbolizes the contemporaneous rise of Neo-Orthodoxy, in which the providential note disappears almost entirely. "Civil religion" now came to be seen as an ironic form of idolatry or a naive belief in progress. Others, who spurned theological guidance of any sort, harvested the intellectual alienation of the twenties. Later, during the cold war, "Americanism" began to be allied rather continuously with various types of conservatism. Americanism was increasingly invoked as an antidote to social criticism. This trend became more pronounced after 1965 when urban riots, Black Power, Vietnam and student protest claimed the headlines. To an unprecedented degree, the limitations of *laissez-faire* exploitation and white supremacy created ideological dissonance at the popular level.

By 1972 styles of despair and confusion had gained a strong hold in such diverse sectors of the population that one could speak of a crisis of loyalty. Nearly all Americans now have reason to wonder if the "mystic chords" of memory and affection are still audible. Neither liberal critic nor militant radical can any longer afford simply to attack the patrioteers. Neither can blandly pronounce patriotism's requiem. The bell tolls for them, for the death of patriotism undermines the force of both criticism and protest.

The principles that ring through the national scriptures and anthems have in the past been a powerful force for cohesion, a challenge to conscience and an exalted rationale for loyalty. The United States did in fact come into existence by an unprecedented series of events which gave the Union fundamentally transcendent properties which theories of social compact can only camouflage. Even the nation's rationalistic founders, quite free of mystical or romantic

propensities, recognized this transcendence. They became theologians of a new kind of civil religion, and the later immigrant multitudes half-consciously adopted their civil theology as an aspect of becoming American. Reformers of all eras have used the nation's "self-evident" principles as levers to move the nation's conscience. Even the black slaves liberated by Union armies between 1861 and 1865 held to this faith; only later did disillusionment settle in.

Today even governmental policies extend this loss of faith in ever-widening circles. This new apostasy springs in part from problems earlier generations knew nothing about, such as the federally stimulated exploitation and industrial growth that threatens our environment. All the while, bombers in Asia work around the clock.

We must now face the irony in the phrase "under God," which was so confidently added to the Pledge of Allegiance in the halcyon days of President Eisenhower—when God was for us and we were for God. Now the primary meaning of that once complacent affirmation is "under judgment." The nation is not absolute. As Seward proclaimed in 1857, there is a higher law. This is the major premise of all conscientious social criticism.

Professor Nagel concludes: "Two hundred years after its [national] career began, America is still a probing of man's nature and not an apotheosis of nature's man." If at all levels of American life we were "solemnly pledged" to such an interpretation, one could envision a revival of the national reverence on which the health of this nation depends. If, however, we ignore or repudiate this understanding of our national experiment, the prognosis for American democracy is negative. A United States that does not take "this sacred trust" seriously is a contradiction in terms. E PLURIBUS UNUM is then bereft of meaning.

Present-day scholars have by no means opened an unexplored field. Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* thoroughly expounded a tradition that was already well-established in 1702, while three brilliant French observers, Crèvecoeur, Chevalier and Tocqueville inaugurated the modern inquiry over a century ago. Julius Pratt published his two important monographs on the expansionists of 1812 and 1898 in 1925 and 1936, respectively; while Albert K. Weinberg's *Manifest Destiny: Expansionism in American History* appeared in 1935 and H. Richard Niebuhr's *Kingdom of God in America* in 1937.

Other facets of the question were pursued in Arthur A. Ekirch's *The Idea of Progress in America, 1812-1848* (1944); Merle Curti's *The Roots of American Loyalty* (1946); R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955); Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955); Edward M. Burns's *The American Idea of Mission* (1957); John H. Schaar's *Loyalty in America* (1957); Charles L. Sanford's *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (1961); and Perry Miller's "From Covenant to Reward," a 1961 piece reprinted

in his *Nature's Nation* (1967).

1963 saw the appearance of William Haller's *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, Sidney E. Mead's *The Lively Experiment*, and Frederick R. Merk's *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*.

Since Paul C. Nagel's earlier work appeared, we have Yehoshua Arieli's *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (1964); Robert N. Bellah's widely read article on "Civil Religion in America" (*Daedalus*, 1967); Ernest L. Tuveson's *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (1968); an excellent volume of essays edited by Elwyn A. Smith, *The Religion of the Republic* (1971); two extremely insightful collections of documents, one edited by Winthrop S. Hudson, *Nationalism and Religion in America* (1970), the other by Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (1971); and Robert T. Handy's broad survey, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (1971).

—S.E.A.