Introduction

The Making of a New World

> Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.
>
> (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, 1976)

Any historian of the United States working in Europe may easily lose count of the number of times she is advised – by students, by colleagues, by friends and family, by complete strangers – that the history she studies is a short one. The observation is frequently accompanied by a wry smile; a short history, it is implied, therefore a simple history. And anyway, short or long, who needs to study it? Don't we all know it? Are we not all thoroughly imbued, or infected, depending on one's perspective, with American culture? Does it not permeate our lives through television, film, popular literature, the Internet? Are we not as familiar with American culture, with American politics, as we are with our own? Perhaps even more familiar; perhaps there is no culture anymore, beyond that refracted through American-dominated media and communications networks. We live in the global village, and the corner store is a 7-11. Is America not in the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the music we listen to, and the Web we surf? America's history is already internationally inscribed. It is not just in the political landscape of the East Coast, the racially informed social landscape of the South, the reservation lands of the Dakotas, the borderlands of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. It is much bigger than that. It is a history frequently contorted through the entertainment industry that is Hollywood, encountered in the heritage

industry built on Plymouth Rock, and, above all, commemorated first, in the national landscape at Valley Forge, Stone's River, and Gettysburg, and then the global one, at Aisne-Marne and Belleau Wood, near Omaha Beach, Normandy, and at Son My. Why go looking for America? Surely it is everywhere.

And yet America is also nowhere. America is vanishing. If we stare, or glare, at it long enough, it may disappear before our eyes. It is already slipping away into an Atlantic paradigm, that of the "Americas," in which the very invocation of America as the name of the United States is deemed potentially offensive to those who live proximate to the nation-state that has selfishly seized that signifier. Their lives, it is assumed, are subsumed by an imperialist superpower that casts its dark shadow over the borderland that separates the United States, *Los Estados Unidos*, from its neighbors to the south. Hundreds perish each year trying to cross this fatal *frontera*, to reach a New World whose shadow now extends into the Old. From the detonation of its atomic power over Japan in 1945 to the current "war on terror," do we not all live in the shadow of this superpower, a shadow now filtered through the floating fragments of the World Trade Center and rendered darker still by the retribution that followed that atrocity?

For those who fear the still further extension of the power of the last superpower, there may be hope. America's perceived cultural, military, and political dominance can be countered, negated, diminished, some assume, by denying it the name it took to itself. Through the power of language, it is anticipated, an imperial power will be brought down to size and forced to accept that it is not first among nations, *primus inter pares*, the "indispensible nation," as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described it in 1998. It is portrayed instead as, in sociologist Michael Mann's phrase, an "incoherent empire," and in hues so dismal that one can only be grateful that its imperial and militarist ambitions have not achieved greater coherence. For others, the very lack of coherence and concomitant absence of a strong imperial impulse is a problem both for America and for a world in need of what historian Niall Ferguson perceives as a "liberal empire," a new "Colossus" driven as much by conscience as by commerce to effect global stability and security. For still others, more interested in America's internal constructs rather than its external impact, the United States is simply a nation among nations, with all the complexities and contradictions that accrue to the modern nation-state. Yet some would deny it even that status. Some would deny that America is even a nation at all.

In the upsurge of academic interest in nationalism that accompanied the end of the Cold War, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, all of which prompted the reemergence of nationalist impulses long buried beneath an externally imposed overarching social and political ideology, the ethnic origins of the modern nation came under scrutiny once more. Yet no ethnic paradigm could accommodate the United States. A nation of immigrants could, at best, be described as a plural nation. At worst, it could be relegated to a category all of its own, a non-nation; a collection of competing *ethnies*, riven by racial, religious and linguistic wrangling, out of which only cultural confusion – certainly no coherent nation, let alone empire – could emerge.

As the debate continued, however, the idea of the United States as a civic nation, one held together by a civic nationalism, began to gain ground. In fact, this was little more than the application of new terminology to what some were perhaps more used to thinking of as the "American creed." Although the debate recognized that, from the outset, natives and nonwhites, women and non-Protestant religions were often relegated to the margins of an American identity predicated on an exclusive white ethnic core, nevertheless the emphasis turned increasingly to focus on its inclusive civic ideal. This ideal was predicated on the Declaration of Independence, the nation's founding document, its mission statement, its rejection of Old World values, the beginning of a New World republic.

That New Word republic today comprises more than 300 million people. It is the third largest nation on earth, both in terms of population and geography. Only China and India have (much) larger populations; only Canada and Russia are physically bigger. America's geographic and oceanic coverage, at 9,826,675 square kilometers (9,161,966 on land), is still twice that of the European Union. Bordered to the north by the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence seaway, separating it from Canada, and to the south by the Gulf of Mexico and the Rio Grande (*Río Bravo*) River, separating it from Mexico, it occupies a geographical middle ground and, arguably, a national one, too.

This was not a land, however, that the population always took care of. America's abundance of natural resources, from silver to oil, gas, coal, timber, and fauna, was overexploited to the point of near-extinction of the buffalo (bison) herds on the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century. Deforestation, too, inevitably accompanied the nation's population and industrial growth over the centuries. A land that seemed limitless to early settlers too soon became a man-made, or degraded, landscape; however, since the same nineteenth century, the contrary impulse to protect that

land emerged in the establishment of the nation's National Parks. Today, indeed, the National Park Service (NPS) is about much more than just land husbandry and natural resources. It is fundamentally about heritage, a contentious and potent political and cultural issue, one often fought over, with the battlefield sites that the NPS is responsible for as much the flashing point as the wilderness sites such as Yellowstone (the nation's first National Park) or Yosemite. Under the administration of George W. Bush, and partly in the context of the national security imperative, land that came under either NPS or Indian Nation jurisdiction was designated available for oil exploration and mining once again, thereby threatening to destroy a national landscape while simultaneously trying to defend it.

Before defense of the homeland became an issue, establishing that homeland was the main focus for America's peoples. For much of the nation's early history, populations and markets mainly functioned on a north-south axis, one aligned along the Mississippi River that runs through the middle of America from Minnesota in the north to the Gulf of Mexico. Settlers from the east seeking to reach the west coast along what became known as the Oregon Trail had, before the completion of the transcontinental railroad, to negotiate the Rockies, the mountain chain that runs from New Mexico up to Alaska. Today, with the wagon trains that traveled the Oregon Trail long gone, much of the nation's wide-open spaces remain relatively empty. The bulk of America's population – more than 80 percent – is urban. More than 80 percent of that population designates English as their first language, and 10 percent Spanish. Protestants remain in the majority, but only just, at some 51 percent. Of that population, the majority are still classified as white (almost 80 percent), almost 13 percent as black, some 4 percent as Asian, and some 15 percent as Hispanic. Sometimes Hispanic can be designated "white," which is why the figures appear to exceed 100 percent.

The question of ethnic designation is more than a census peculiarity, however. It goes to the heart of the question of American national identity, of what it means to be American and what the nation stands for. At less than 1 percent of the population, for example, Native Americans nevertheless comprise more than 2 million people, subdivided into hundreds of tribal units. Whether one is, or is not, "native" depends on a combination of genetic inheritance and cultural affiliation; some groups emphasize the former, others the latter. Similarly, whether one is deemed black or white tends to be geographically and/or linguistically determined. Hispanic covers pretty much everyone living, or coming from, south of the

Rio Grande, from a white perspective; and African American can appear no different from "Anglo" to those lumped together as "Hispanic."

African American, indeed, is one of the most context-sensitive designations of all. New arrivals from an African nation may encounter resistance from American blacks to their, possibly natural, assumption that "African American" automatically applies to them. Black and white in America represent descriptors derived as much from culture, heritage, and the history of slavery as from any objective genetic markers. African American almost automatically implies an enslaved ancestry. This brings its own set of problems and assumptions, of course, because not all African Americans were enslaved. The historian Barbara Jeanne Fields highlighted the contrary nature of contemporary cultural assumptions relating to race when she observed that in the United States, a white women may give birth to a black child, but a black woman cannot, at least as far as society is concerned, give birth to a white one. So white may create black, but not vice versa. Unless one turns to literature, in which case, as leading African-American author Toni Morrison contends, that is precisely what has happened. "Whiteness," she notes, required a black presence. Being American required something, someone to be positioned outside the nation, at least as it was culturally conceptualized. In this respect, concepts of "whiteness" and "blackness" (or "Africanism") functioned together, but for much of the nation's history it was hardly a relationship of equals.

Clearly, laying claim to an identity in the United States is, for the nation as for the individual, an endeavor fraught with difficulties and challenges but, increasingly, few political or cultural compromises. The once-compelling idea of the United States as a "melting pot" has over the years given way to, first, an emphasis on multiculturalism, and second, to ethnic and cultural (increasingly religious) distinctions that, some fear, are destabilizing the nation. Rather like the federal system itself, in which the states have been accorded varying degrees of autonomy over the course of the nation's history, so individual Americans sustain a sometimes uneasy balancing act between state and social identities and federal and national ones. Sometimes, as in the case of the American Civil War (1861–1865), this has broken down dramatically. At others, in periods of external conflict or crisis, internal divisions diminish – although they never disappear – in favor of a patriotism either promoted from the center, as during World War II, or derived from the grassroots, as was the case after 9/11 and in the ongoing "war on terror."

The link between warfare and American identity, indeed, is a complex one. Most nations have violent histories, and the United States is no exception. Yet understanding how a set of loosely connected colonies that relied so extensively on enslaved labor reached the point of coming together to overthrow a colonial power in the name of liberty, equality, and freedom requires an appreciation of the many and various contemporary impulses that led to this apparently contradictory position. Not the least of these was the early consolidation of the relationship between conflict and a New World identity that the colonists forged in relation to both indigenous natives and imperial power.

The land that became the United States became settled, in some cases only temporarily, by European migrants, missionaries, armies, and traders, driven there by the religious conflicts in Europe. From the beginning, therefore, conflict informed both the migration process and the attitudes of European outsiders to America's indigenous populations. Early propagandist efforts to persuade European monarchs and merchants that the "New World" promised profit in the cause of piety – there were natives to be converted and money to be made – established a deadly combination of the rapacious and the religious out of which conflict was, perhaps, inevitable. The martial origins of the nation were established, of course, in the ultimate colonial conflict, the American War of Independence, that forged the relationship between the nation and the concept of citizen service, between American nationalism and warfare.

That at least part of the story of the Revolutionary War was exaggerated after the event to suggest an enthusiasm not always in evidence at the time in no way diminished the enduring power of the myth of the "Minuteman" as an American martial ideal. This should not be exaggerated but nor should it be underestimated. In the United States today, veterans of America's wars comprise some 10 percent of the adult population. Ten percent, in the grand scheme of things, is not an overwhelming statistic, and hardly a universal troop movement. However, veterans, and through them the impact of warfare, has a powerful influence on American politics and society (and defense budgets), because as a group, veterans turn out to vote in a higher percentage (c. 70 percent) than the population as a whole (c. 60 percent).

In this context, it is unsurprising that one of the crucial threads in America's national story is the way in which the unity forged through warfare informed American national identity via the resultant emphasis on freedom or liberty as the fulcrum around which that identity was constructed. Yet even before the emergence of the nation itself, freedom in

the "New World" had both positive (freedom to) and negative (freedom from) connotations. Freedom, as the contemporary slogan has it, is not free. And of course it never was. Freedom for the early European colonists impinged on already existing freedoms enjoyed by native nations. Freedom from monarchical rule, as the case of the loyalists during the Revolution made clear, was not the freedom all fledgling "Americans" sought, nor was it one they necessarily welcomed. Liberty was the animating principle of the American experiment, but it was a principle promulgated most vociferously by slaveholders. The Enlightenment, a process that Immanuel Kant described as the "emancipation of human consciousness," in the eighteenth century may have informed the American revolutionary impulse, but it did not translate into the emancipation of the American revolutionaries' slaves.

"We hold these truths to be self evident," the Declaration of Independence (1776) stated, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." For too long such "truths" only really held true for those who were either part of, proximate to, or had the potential to join the white, male elite whose perspective these truths had only ever partially represented. Although fully prepared to believe English radical Thomas Paine when he advised them that theirs was "the cause of all mankind," Americans interpreted Paine's message in the context of a republican ideology through which the promotion of equality and liberty went hand in hand with the defense of slavery. Facilitated by the development of markets and communications networks, the individual colonies could at least conceptualize a unified political and cultural whole. Achieving it was another matter. For some, liberty as the national ideal could only be achieved if it applied to all. For others, the nation's future would only be secure if some were permanently enslaved. By the middle of the nineteenth century, one truth was self-evident to Abraham Lincoln, struggling to hold the nation together during the Civil War. "We all declare for liberty," Lincoln observed, "but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*."

The nation that emerged from the Civil War was one in which slavery had finally been abolished, but racial and ethnic distinctions remained as the means through which American identity was negotiated and refined, especially as the population expanded further west, fulfilling the nation's "Manifest Destiny" to achieve hemispheric hegemony. The persistence of, as well as the challenges to, Anglo-Saxon dominance in America on the eve of the twentieth century were exacerbated by concerns over racism,

immigration, crime, and the city in a period that saw the United States dip a tentative toe into international waters in the form of a war with Spain. By this time, the generation that had fought the Civil War had reached political prominence. The experiences of their youth informed but certainly could not prepare them or the nation for the century to come, the so-called "American Century," which really began after World War II with the economic and, arguably, cultural global dominance of the United States.

Yet over the course of the "American Century," overshadowed as that was by the Cold War, and dominated, to a large extent, by the conflict in Vietnam, the idea of the American nation became nuanced. The national story of the civic nation with an ethnic core became one that emphasized the efforts of the excluded to challenge their exclusion. A renewed interest in America's cultural diversity became the means through which to complicate any lingering complacency about the reality of the civic ideal in the United States. At the same time, it highlighted the ways in which, in drafting the Declaration of Independence, America's founders had, as Abraham Lincoln argued, established an inclusionary premise through which all Americans, regardless of ancestry, could claim the nation "as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration." In this context, too, the Atlantic world paradigm served not just to assuage international fears, but to stress the power of the civic ideal. It emphasized how permeable the nation's borders were not just to immigrants but to international influences – if not international influence as such – and how susceptible it was to shifting understandings of colonialism and postcolonialism, nationalism, sectionalism, warfare, identity, race, religion, gender, and ethnicity.

The imperative of making the civic ideal match or even approximate reality continues to confront America today, of course, and is a particularly problematic one in a nation of its geographic, demographic, and cultural complexity. Often more interested in how the democratic ideal has been exported, or imposed beyond the nation's borders, popular analyses of the United States sometimes underestimate the historical struggle to achieve that ideal within the nation itself. If the New World "Colossus" has frequently found itself in the paradoxical position of "dictating democracy" or "extorting emancipation" abroad in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, its own history, be that from the 1860s or the 1960s, reminds us that it has frequently been forced to deploy similar processes at home. Less a paradox than a pattern, the sometimes uneasy balancing act between civic and ethnic, positive and negative freedom

is hardly an unfamiliar one in a nation that seems to want for others what it sometimes struggles to achieve for itself. The challenges it faced, the choices it made, the compromises it reached are ones that all nations must contemplate; increasingly so in a world in which communication is all but instantaneous, in which all borders can be breached, and in which the challenges posed by immigration, religious intolerance, and racial and ethnic divisions continue to compromise the stability of the modern nation-state.

1

New Found Land

Imagining America

Thus in the beginning all the world was *America*.
(John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, 1690)

America was a land, and later a nation, imagined before it was ever conceived. Although the dreams and ambitions of its first human settlers can only be surmised, whether crossing the Bering Straits on foot or arriving by sea, early migrants to the North American continent came in search of a better life. Whether their original intentions were settlement or possible trade routes, whether they sought a new home or simply new resources to take back home, the lure of a New World proved a potent one. With the exception of the peoples that Christopher Columbus identified, wrongly, as Indians, the earliest migratory endeavors produced few permanent settlements. The continent's indigenous inhabitants were little troubled by the initially tentative forays of adventurous Vikings in the tenth and eleventh centuries, whose eventual settlements in Greenland were, although unwelcome, relatively short-lived, as quickly forgotten by the native tribes, perhaps, as they were by the world in general.

Absent external interference, therefore, the peoples that later comprised the many Native American ethno-linguistic and nationalist groupings of the modern period gradually developed what Jeremiah Curtin, a nineteenth-century folklorist, perceived as essentially primitive societies based on a combination of religious faith and consanguinity. As Curtin saw it:

The bonds which connect a nation with its gods, bonds of faith, and those which connect the individuals of that nation with one another, bonds of blood, are the