Introduction

On January 28, 2003, George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union address to Congress at a difficult moment in his presidency. Facing an ailing economy and the prospect of war with Iraq, Bush sought to reassure Americans not only of his political competence but of a higher purpose to the nation's history. "We Americans have faith in ourselves," the president noted at the conclusion of his speech, "but not in ourselves alone. We do not know – we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history."[1] While the President's religious rhetoric unsettled some observers, his suggestion of a divine role in American policy making is hardly unique.

At first glance, one might see this providential theme as an unbroken thread, reaching back from George W. Bush across the entirety of American history. His references to a divine plan recall the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Woodrow Wilson, Abraham Lincoln, and a host of other prominent Americans.[2] Indeed, a founding myth of America holds that the Puritans of New England inaugurated this divine mission, settling with God's approval in a hostile New World and producing a mighty empire from an empty wilderness. From this vantage point, President Bush's references to Providence are merely the most recent public iteration of a very old theme: God was responsible for both the founding of Massachusetts in 1629 and the invasion of Baghdad in 2003. The idea that God has directed the history of the United States has become a commonplace in American life, a way of imagining America's purpose and history

[1] George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," Washington, D.C., January 28, 2003. See also Laurie Goodstein, "A President Puts His Faith in Providence," *New York Times*, February 9, 2003, 4: 4. However, his speechwriter, Michael Gerson, later dismissed the notion that Bush had aligned God with American foreign policy. See Alan Cooperman, "Bush's References to God Defended by Speechwriter," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2004, A6.

[2] On the death of Ronald Reagan, Bush's vice-president, Dick Cheney, argued that the former president was "more than just an historical figure – he was a providential man." David von Drehle, "A Day of Ritual and Remembrance," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2004, A1.

that seems so thoroughly familiar that one can easily overlook its essential oddness.

This book is an attempt to recover the story of American providentialism and to answer two important questions about providential thinking that seem both obvious and elusive: How did Americans come to think that God had a special plan for their nation? And what did they do with this conviction in the 250 years between the founding of Virginia and the American Civil War? Historians have approached this topic on many occasions in the past, but they have been hampered in a number of ways. One group, exemplified by the great nineteenth-century historian George Bancroft, actually endorsed providentialism as a way of understanding America's development. Although he had trained in Germany and was a strong advocate of a more "scientific" scholarship, Bancroft nonetheless saw God's hand in American history with a kind of relentless assuredness.[3] Another group of historians has simply dismissed divine involvement in American history with the same enthusiasm as Bancroft's advocacy, maintaining either that Americans were uncertain about God's intentions or that providentialism had been eclipsed by secularism before the American Revolution.[4] Finally, historians who have taken providentialism seriously have tended to lose focus by generalizing or domesticating the idea. These scholars have presented the idea of God's involvement as a consistent and largely unchanging force in American history from the colonial period to the present, and they have usually portrayed providential thinking as innately American.[5]

This book takes a different approach. Based on a survey of sermons, histories, printed books, newspapers, magazines, diaries, and other sources from more

[3] Peter Novick discusses Bancroft's historical training and sensibility in *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 44–46. Bancroft died in 1891, but a tendency not only to study but also to practice providentialism proved surprisingly durable among American historians in the twentieth century. See, for example, Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Knopf, 1963). A recent (albeit unusual) call for a return to Bancroft's providentialist historiography is Jonathan Tucker Boyd, "This Holy Hieroglyph: Providence and Historical Consciousness in George Bancroft's Historiography," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999.

[4] See, for example, the debunking studies of an "American mission" in the seventeenth century by Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1988); and Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). On the secularizing thesis, see Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39, no. 3 (July 1982): 401–41.

[5] See, for instance, Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640–1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978); and Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

than two centuries of American history, I argue that providentialism played a leading role in the invention of an American national identity before 1865 and that its role was neither static nor timeless. A diverse group of people used the idea of God's involvement in history to influence some of the most important political debates in antebellum America. In the colonial period, providentialism offered a way to assuage anxieties about the brief past and uncertain present of the English settlements. During the Revolution and the early republic, providential thinking was used to promote the idea of American independence and to debate the place of nonwhite people in the new United States. Although the broad outlines of providentialism endured from the 1600s until the Civil War, the uses of this idea of divine involvement – and the political contexts in which providential arguments were deployed – changed profoundly. We should guard against the easy assumption of an American "mission" or "destiny" that links the seventeenth century to the nineteenth (or even to the present). To assess the true impact of providentialism, we have to recognize that the idea changed over time.

Beyond the core assumption that we should study providentialism historically, this book offers three fresh insights about the idea of divine involvement in American history. First, I reject the idea that providentialism was an American invention. The providential thinking of the colonial period originated in England rather than America, and we can best understand the emergence of American ideas about God's role in history by exploring their English and British analogues. In the seventeenth century, many English observers and politicians – including Oliver Cromwell himself – offered bold analyses of God's role in their national affairs, and a number of them suffered acute anxiety when events seemed to diverge from their predictions. A century later, as they gained an empire and then lost its American annex, Britons struggled to comprehend God's purpose in these events. While historians of Britain and the emerging United States have examined providentialism on each side of the Atlantic, this book offers an extended comparison between American and British providential thinking. This comparison is important not only in demonstrating that there was nothing intrinsically American about the idea of a national destiny but also in explaining why American versions of providential thinking proved particularly durable and influential.

The book's second innovation concerns the kinds of providentialism that prevailed in Britain and America during this period. While we can define providentialism simply as the belief that God intervenes in human history, Americans and Britons developed more specific visions of God's plan for their nations. Some argued that history was cyclical and that nations would rise and fall in God's estimation depending on the worth of their inhabitants at any given moment. Others believed that God had chosen some nations to play a special role in history and that this anointment confirmed benefits and responsibilities that set apart a particular place and people from the rest. Still others sought to map the specific books and predictions of Bible prophecy onto current events, looking to Revelation or Daniel for a primer to contemporary history. All three

of these beliefs were grounded in providentialism, but each constituted a distinct and important variation of the common theme. I argue that these variations are critical to our understanding of how and why providential ideas took such a strong hold in America, and why these ideas continued to appeal to Americans even after their eclipse in Britain.

Finally, I contend that providentialism was not only a component of American identity but also a strategy for achieving concrete political goals. Providential ideas were at work in some of the most important debates in early America, and this book focuses principally on the application of providence to politics. Part One describes how providential thinking came to America, and how the colonists struggled in their early years to understand God's involvement in the turbulent events of seventeenth-century England. By the 1660s American colonists had begun to develop their own understandings of God's purposes in America and to pay less attention to the providential meaning of English history. This exceptionalism was effectively forced upon the colonists by the political and religious confusion in England, but it provided a template for imagining American history as providentially significant and divergent from Britain. During the imperial crisis after 1763, this template was used to structure the colonists' demands and eventually to justify their separatist claims. By the time of the American Revolution, Patriots argued that God had given America a special role in history and that independence had been providentially determined. Although Britons initially dismissed this bold argument, they struggled during the Revolutionary War either to disprove the American conjecture or to sustain a vision of their own national purpose that could transcend it. Patriots continued throughout the war to argue that God had chosen the United States to advance the social and political welfare of the world. This claim, originally a justification for the Revolution, was vindicated and amplified by the Patriot victory.

Part Two explores the process by which this confidence about God's plan for America was undermined in the early republic, as Americans sought to determine the extent of their global influence and the relationship between race and citizenship at home. While Americans squabbled among themselves about the international significance of their political ideas during the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, they adjusted their providential claims to accommodate their disappointments. They also struggled to make sense of the persistence of nonwhites in America. Did God mean for blacks and Indians to become citizens of the American republic? If not, what was the providential meaning of America's racial diversity? Although many white Americans after 1783 sought to maintain a progressive understanding of American history and purpose – which held that God had placed the United States on an upward trajectory and had shaped its past and future toward the improvement of the world – the extension of slavery and the continuing tensions between whites and Indians confounded this effort. Worse, a loose coalition of providential interpreters – including white abolitionists, opponents of Indian removal, and blacks and Indians themselves – began to circulate a very different understanding of God's will, one that promised national humiliation and

perhaps even national collapse unless nonwhites received justice from the United States.

Southern secession seemed initially to confirm that Americans had forfeited their special mission, but the book's final chapters chronicle the extraordinary retrieval of this destiny during the Civil War itself. While southerners struggled to find a place for the Confederacy in a progressive scheme of history, northerners – led by Abraham Lincoln – suggested that the abolition of slavery might purify the United States and allow the nation to resume its providential course. This argument invited northerners to set aside their long-standing aversion to racial justice in order to preserve another enduring conviction: that God had a special plan for their nation. Unfortunately, the providential bargain that encouraged northerners to accept emancipation helped to deny the rights of blacks thereafter.

The sustained application of providential thinking to the questions of race and slavery in the early republic, like the profusion of ideas about God's direction of the American Revolution, amounts to a case study in the political possibilities of providentialism. The achievement of American independence and the abolition of slavery were radical projects that could be explained and made feasible through assumptions about God's will: facing the might of the British army or their own prejudices toward southern blacks, Americans could feel reassured about revolution or emancipation if they imagined these controversial objectives to be providential milestones on their journey toward the redemption of the world. But the compulsion to imagine American history as inherently progressive and to identify an upward vector in which Plymouth or Jamestown was linked to a vast future for the United States blinded Americans to the missteps and the wrong turns that would punctuate the career of any nation.

Some of the key terms that will be used in this study may be unfamiliar to historians, especially those who work on politics and national identity. "Providentialism" refers to the belief that God controls everything that happens on earth: providential commentators from the early modern period to the nineteenth century liked to quote Christ's words from the Gospel of Matthew that not even the killing of a sparrow could take place without God's knowledge and involvement.[6] Americans and Britons were, however, keenly aware of a distinction between the ways in which God dealt with individuals, and his treatment of nations: I therefore use the term "personal providentialism" to refer to the former, and "national providentialism" for the latter. One of the fascinating aspects of the history of providentialism concerns the relationship between personal and national providentialism: with an important exception in the aftermath of the English Civil War, many Britons and Americans came to regard personal providentialism as superstitious and backward even as they continued to believe that God directed the fates of nations. Although this book builds

[6] "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." Matthew 10:29–31.

upon important studies of personal providentialism in England and America, the following chapters focus overwhelmingly on the national inflection of God's control over history.[7]

Within the framework of national providentialism, I define three broad ideas about God's involvement in history that were commonly invoked between 1607 and 1876. The first version – in which God judged nations solely on the virtues of their people and leaders and then rewarded or punished them without reference to any grand plan for humanity – is described in the following chapters as "judicial providentialism." The belief that God imagined a special role for certain nations in improving the world and tailored their history to prepare them for the achievement of this mission is referred to as "historical providentialism." Finally, the belief that God was literally working out the narrative of Revelation in current events and that he had cast various nations in the leading roles of this drama is described as "apocalyptic providentialism." I say a good deal more about each category in the chapters themselves, but for now it is worth remembering not only that national providentialism was an important subset of the broader view that God controlled everything that happened on earth but also that Americans and Britons could imagine very different fates for themselves even as they accepted God's sovereignty over their history.

In researching this book, I have examined a wide variety of materials that might tell us something about how Britons and Americans imagined the relationship between their nation and God. This has led me to sources that discuss the development and the well-being of a nation, such as histories, newspapers, and political addresses, and sources that search for religious meaning in contemporary events, such as sermons and tracts. Because most can be described as public rhetoric – material written for a general audience and wide consumption rather than for private contemplation – it seems important to acknowledge the questions of audience and intention. What kinds of people wrote and spoke about providentialism in this period, and to whom were their claims addressed? Did these people actually believe what they were saying about God's role in history, or did they use providential language strategically to achieve a desired political or social end?

The first question is more straightforward than the second. The voices in the first half of this book are primarily privileged, literate, white, and male: preachers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals who dominated the intellectual and political life of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Yet the recurrence of providential thinking in sermons, political speeches and public festivals suggests that the broader population in both Britain and America was keenly attuned to a religious understanding of national history. In the political and religious rhetoric of Britain and America, providentialism was

[7] The key works on personal providentialism in early modern England and America are Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Michael Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

used to persuade ordinary people of the importance and rewards of a national political project.[8]

In the second half of the book, which focuses on the battles between Americans over the racial composition of the new United States, we can see evidence of a broad popular understanding of national providentialism both in the mass media of the early nineteenth century and in the willingness of those on the margins of American society to appropriate providential ideas. Blacks and Indians, in addition to white abolitionists and opponents of removal, based political appeals on the notion that God would revoke America's auspicious destiny if its leaders persisted in enslaving and expelling nonwhite people. While providential thinking continued to appeal to many religious and political elites, it was also directed at and appropriated by a diverse group of Americans who hoped to yoke their particular concerns to the fate of the entire nation. I conclude that providential thinking had considerable purchase among ordinary Americans and Britons as well as among elites.

This raises the question of intention, about which it is harder to generalize. Did everyone who employed the idea of divine involvement between 1607 and 1876 actually believe that God controlled national politics and world events? And that they might offer prescriptions for political action that would cohere with God's plan? This question is scarcely easier to answer even if we limit our focus to a single figure like Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell seems fervently to have believed that he was doing God's work in opposing Charles I and establishing the Commonwealth, and by 1649 – with the execution of the king and the triumph of Parliament – it appeared that God had rewarded Cromwell's efforts. By 1655, however, his providential arc had reached its zenith. Possessed of the idea that God intended England to challenge the Catholic empire in America, Cromwell launched a disastrous expedition to capture the Spanish island of Hispaniola. Upon the failure of his plan, he fell into a kind of providential paralysis, unable either to divine God's will or to muster sufficient confidence in his own actions to proceed in his course as God's instrument in England.[9]

Or we might study Thomas Paine, whose rejection of Christianity and other forms of revealed religion made him perhaps the most notorious writer in the Atlantic world at the opening of the nineteenth century. Paine's *Age of Reason*, conceived in captivity during the darkest days of the French Revolution, was intended to demolish Christianity. Paine spoke in his conclusion of taking an ax to the Bible, of leveling the forest of beliefs in which so many people had been lost for centuries. Earlier in his career as a Revolutionary propagandist, however, Paine had argued repeatedly both that God intended the United States to be independent and that America would play a special role in God's plan for the world. Had Paine changed his mind in the intervening years, or was

[8] On the relationship between public festival and nationalist sentiment, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989).

[9] See Chapter 1.

he merely a rhetorical opportunist? As he prepared his pamphlets *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* for a wavering audience of would-be Patriots, did he employ the language of divine involvement with his tongue firmly in his cheek?[10]

Providentialism could be ideological or rhetorical – or both – depending upon the convictions of a particular person, or the political exigencies of a particular moment. In this book, I have approached providential claims as *arguments*: efforts to explain God's purpose in the world that were harnessed to political goals in the present. This book is neither a religious history in the strict sense nor an analysis of some "American Mind" or collective consciousness for which providentialism was a universal grammar. Instead, I have focused on the application of providential thinking to politics and on the effects of providential claims upon some of the most important debates in early American history. It may be tempting to dismiss providentialism as simply a rhetorical device, a religious disguise that masked the true intentions and motives of brave revolutionaries, ambitious politicians, or committed racists. But the sheer profusion of providential language in early America demonstrates a broad public audience for these ideas. In many cases, we can be confident that a particular person who used providential ideas was a committed believer in God's control over history. Even those whose public piety diverged from their private convictions – like Thomas Paine – adopted providential language precisely because they realized that many Americans accepted its premises. Yet, while providentialism might serve to embellish political debates, it could also shape them in ways that its promoters did not anticipate. In some cases, those who discerned God's purpose in a particular debate or event would eventually rue their assertion.

This book describes how many Americans came to argue that their history and their nation were uniquely favored by God and shaped for the political and moral redemption of the world. These ideas were the building blocks of the nationalism that inspired the United States during the War of Independence; but they were obstacles to the resolution of the problems of racial diversity that confronted the new nation after 1783. (They also complicated the efforts of Americans to integrate themselves into a world that did not always share their redemptive optimism.) The idea of an American mission in the early republic was extremely powerful because it was based on an understanding of what God wanted the United States to do as well as on a progressive reading of American history that acted as a guarantor of God's intentions. But missionary assumptions depended on a willingness to tidy up the past to preserve the nation's upward trajectory and to elide or ignore those darker moments that might otherwise have been instructive. Providentialism in America offered its users enormous power to shape the future at the expense of a full accounting of the past. The benefits and the costs of this bargain deserve careful consideration.

[10] See Chapters 2 and 3.

PART ONE

BRITAIN, AMERICA, AND THE EMERGENCE OF PROVIDENTIAL SEPARATISM

1

Providence and the Problem of England in Early America

In March 1640 John Winthrop took up his pen to write an angry letter. There were many reasons for the governor of the fledgling Massachusetts Bay plantation to be aggrieved. After ten years of constant growth, the colony was not only drawing fewer emigrants but even losing some of its prominent inhabitants to England. Winthrop's ire, however, was directed at a specific and, at first glance, unlikely target: William Fiennes, Lord Saye and Seale, one of the strongest supporters of the Puritan colonies in England. Although Fiennes was not in complete agreement with the Massachusetts settlers' religious and political decisions – he would have preferred a more aristocratic form of government, for one thing – he was a resolute defender of the Puritan settlements at a moment when King Charles I and the Anglican Church were suspicious of religious dissent in America. Fiennes had even used Winthrop's famous words – that New England was "a city upon a hill" – in a letter to an American correspondent, suggesting that he appreciated not only the political but the religious importance of the Massachusetts experiment.[1]

In 1640, however, Winthrop discovered that Fiennes had thrown his support behind another colonizing effort. While the English settlements in New England and Virginia had achieved a modest degree of success by this date, they had hardly established themselves as the leading colonies on the vast American continent. Fiennes and a number of other Puritan sympathizers in England, disappointed both by Massachusetts's rigidly Congregational government and by reports of religious intolerance, simply decided to look for another location in which to plant a new settlement. They chose Providence Island, a small outcrop near the coast of Nicaragua, which promised a more salubrious climate

[1] William Fiennes to John Cotton, July 1638, in Sargent Bush Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2001), 283. Fiennes's proposals for a hierarchical New England are reprinted in ibid., 519–23.