

"History of American Life" series edited by Dixon Ryan Fox and Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., leading academic historians. He was now poised to become the premier popularizer of his day.

Adams wanted to write a one-volume history of the United States for the general reader, and his publisher, Little, Brown, agreed. As he noted in the preface, there was no shortage of such books. What he wanted to contribute was a broad interpretive sensibility that emphasized important historical themes. For Adams, no theme was more important than what he called

that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it.

Writing in the early years of the Great Depression—the book was published as *The Epic of America* in 1931—Adams sensed he was living on the cusp of such an uprising. "Possibly the greatest of these struggles lies just ahead of us at this present time—not a struggle of revolutionists against the established order, but of the ordinary man to hold fast to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' which were vouchsafed to us in the past in vision and on parchment." As it turned out, Adams was deeply disillusioned by Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal, feeling they represented a betrayal of American traditions of autonomy and a case of government collusion in the creation of a soulless, materialistic consumer society. Though he would remain popular for the rest of the decade, Adams was increasingly out of step with the temper of his times, and he died, disappointed with his country, in 1948.

In retrospect, it seems odd that Adams was talked out of his wish to call his most popular book *The American Dream*. While it's not clear whether he actually coined the term or appropriated it from someone else, his publisher's reluctance to use it suggests "American Dream" was not in widespread use elsewhere. In any event, Adams invoked it over thirty times in *The Epic of America*, and the phrase rapidly entered common parlance as a byword for what he thought his country was all about, not only in the United States but in the rest of the world. So in this regard it is notable that the edition of the book I happened to

pluck off the shelf at the Harvard College library came from a 1941 edition stamped as the property of an army educational supervisor stationed in Europe: the American Dream had become a weapon in the fight against Hitler (and later Stalin). One can only wonder that there was once a moment when the words "American Dream" could be dismissed as obscure or unappealing.

Times change. When, in an early phase of this project, I typed those words into a library catalog, I got back over seven hundred titles: *Education and the American Dream*; *Tenants and the American Dream*; *Advertising the American Dream*; *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*; *The Endangered American Dream*; *Prisoners of the American Dream*; and so on. None of the books I looked at makes anything like a systematic attempt to define the term or trace its origins; its definition is virtually taken for granted. It's as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands—which today appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough.

Actually, "American Dream" has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto. Jubilant athletes declaim it following championship games. Aspiring politicians invoke it as the basis of their candidacies. Otherwise sober businessmen cite achieving it as the ultimate goal of their enterprises. The term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like "democracy," "Constitution," or even "the United States."

The omnipresence of "the American Dream" stems from a wide-spread—though not universal—belief that the concept describes something very contemporary. At the same time, however, much of its vitality rests on a premise, which I share, that it is part of a long tradition. In this view, the Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American Dream, but they would have understood the idea; after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts. What Alexis de Tocqueville called "the charm of anticipated success" in his classic *Democracy in America* seemed palpable to him not only in the 1830s but in his understanding of American history for two hundred years before that. And it still seems so almost two hundred years later.

In the twenty-first century, the American Dream remains a major element of our national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may well be greater than ever before. Over the course of human history, peoples have used any number of means to identify themselves: blood, religion, language, geography, a shared history, or some combination of these. (Japan comes to mind as an example that draws on all of them.) Yet the United States was essentially a creation of the collective imagination—inspired by the existence of a purportedly New World, realized in a Revolution that began with an explicitly articulated Declaration, and consolidated in the writing of a durable Constitution. And it is a nation that has been re-created as a deliberate act of conscious choice every time a person has landed on these shores. Explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance, is the theoretical basis of American identity.

To be sure, the United States has also benefited from some of the glue that holds together other nations. But at the turn of the century, some of that social cement is loosening. In some ways, large transnational institutions like corporations shape the lives of ordinary citizens far more than local government does. Economic and racial stratification have grown markedly, raising doubts about the breadth and depth of opportunity. And amid the greatest surge of immigration in our history, one that brings more people from more of the world than ever before, we don't always speak the same language. At a time like this, the American Dream becomes a kind of *lingua franca*, an idiom that everyone—from corporate executives to hip-hop artists—can presumably understand.

Indeed, one of the more remarkable things about the Dream is its hold on those one might think are most likely to be skeptical, even hostile, toward it. In her 1996 book *Facing Up to the American Dream*, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild compiles data suggesting that working-class black Americans, for example, believe in it with an intensity that baffles and even appalls more affluent African Americans, who see the dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collective as well as personal advancement.

This book grows out of a belief that any attempt to assess the possibilities and limits of the American Dream requires a more thorough reckoning than we customarily give it. Such a reckoning begins with a recognition that the Dream is neither a reassuring verity nor an empty bromide but rather a complex idea with manifold implications that can

cut different ways. Some of those implications involve the oft-overlooked costs of dreaming. The unfulfilled yearnings of Jimmy Stewart's character in *It's a Wonderful Life*, for example, are never quite erased by the movie's happy ending. The failure of countless social reforms in this country, which founder on the confidence of individual citizens that they will be the ones who overcome the odds and get rich, is one of the great themes of American politics. And we've all heard stories about celebrities who find themselves overwhelmed by the very success they so fiercely pursued—and attained. On the other hand, simply *having* a dream has sustained, even saved, lives that otherwise might not be deemed worth living.

The American Dream would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or a scientifically demonstrable principle. Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals. Yet resolution may not afford clarity, either. Those who fail may confront troubling, even unanswerable, questions: Do I blame myself? Bad luck? The unattainability of the objective? Such uncertainty may be no less haunting for the successful, who may also question the basis of their success—and its price.

Beyond such considerations, a reckoning with the Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no *one* American Dream. Instead, there are many American *Dreams*, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity. What James Truslow Adams called in the epilogue of *The Epic of America* “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man” may be fine as far as it goes, but the devil is in the details: just what does “better and richer and fuller” mean?

The answers vary. Sometimes “better and richer and fuller” is defined in terms of money—in the contemporary United States, one could almost believe this is the *only* definition—but there are others. Religious transformation, political reform, educational attainment, sexual expression: the list is endless. These answers have not only been available at any given time; they have also changed over time and competed for the status of common sense.

This book explores a few varieties of the American Dream: their origins, their dynamics, their ongoing relevance. It does so by describing a series of specific American dreams in a loosely chronological,

overlapping order. I begin with what I regard as the first great American Dream, that of small groups of English religious dissenters who traversed an ocean seeking a way of worshipping God as they saw fit. Their dream was one of manifold ironies, not the least of which involved their clearing a space for subsequent generations to come and pursue aspirations they would have found reprehensible—if they could comprehend them at all.

I then proceed to examine what I call the charter of the American Dream: the Declaration of Independence. This political manifesto was the cornerstone of the American Revolution, the justification for a small group of men to seize the reins of power from the British. But almost despite itself and the intentions of the men who signed it, the Declaration resonated far beyond such relatively narrow aims; my point is to show that notwithstanding the almost impossible remoteness (and ambiguity) surrounding its creation, the document has an immediacy and appeal that has coursed through the marrow of everyday life ever since.

From there, I turn to one of the most familiar American Dreams: that of upward mobility, a dream typically understood in terms of economic and/or social advancement. This too took root early. At the locus of this chapter is a man widely regarded as the greatest American: Abraham Lincoln. Though Lincoln's career is typically understood in terms of the ending of slavery or the preserving of the Union, I argue that for him both were means to a larger end: sustaining the American Dream. Lincoln's rise from obscurity to the pinnacle of American life—and, in particular, the remorseless clarity with which he finally came to understand the dream he embodied—makes him a uniquely compelling lens through which to understand the possibilities and limits of upward mobility.

Moving on to the post-Civil War era, specifically the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896, I discuss what I regard as one of the most noteworthy—and unsuccessful—of all American Dreams: the quest for equality, focusing specifically on the struggle of African Americans. This chapter culminates with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and especially the great civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. It was King's genius to define his struggle in terms of what a foreign observer once dubbed "the American Creed"—a series of shared ideals that, like the Declaration of Independence, helped define the American Dream in the popular imagination (and

made it difficult for his opponents to resist him). It was also his achievement to compellingly define that dream in terms of something more than individual fulfillment.

I then look at the most widely realized American Dream: home ownership. Once again, this is an old dream; I pay special attention to the way it took shape in the years from the passage of the Homestead Act (signed by Lincoln in 1862) to the flowering of suburbia in the second half of the twentieth century. The triumph of the suburban dream has had consequences that have been both deeply reassuring and deeply troubling.

Which brings me to my final American Dream. This is also a dream of personal fulfillment, albeit of a very different kind than that of the Puritans or Abraham Lincoln. Like the others, its roots go back to the origins of American life, from the so-called adventurers seeking sudden fortunes on the plantations of Virginia to the speculators mining their prospects in western cities like Las Vegas. But nowhere does this dream come more vividly into focus than in the culture of Hollywood—a semi-mythic place where, unlike in the Dream of Upward Mobility, fame and fortune were all the more compelling if achieved without obvious effort. This is the most alluring and insidious of American Dreams, and one that seems to have become predominant at the start of the twenty-first century.

This by no means exhausts the list, of course. Indeed, as you read you may note any number of omissions, even begin to map out additional varieties of the American Dream. If so, then the book will have succeeded on some important level, as its goal is to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

As with many dreams that become a reality, much about this book has turned out differently than I expected. (A project that began as a history of American patriotism has turned into something else that took much longer, and was much harder, to produce.) One of the things I realized in writing it is that the American Dream is closely bound up with freedom and that this book had willy-nilly become a kind of exploration of that concept as well. For a while, I resisted this tendency, in large measure because I believe freedom today has largely become a slogan for marketers and conservative ideologues eager to enlist it in their causes. (As members of "some think tanks like to remind us, the American Revolution was a tax revolt.) But it is now clearer to me than ever before that freedom has meant many different, even con-

surrounding another turn-of-the-century president), to the nation's Puritan heritage. The American philosopher Richard Rorty has memorably summed up the prevailing contemporary view of the Puritans: "self-flagellating sickies."

This is not a new idea. "We call you Puritans," an English clergyman wrote in the early seventeenth century, "not because you are purer than other men . . . but because you think yourselves to be purer." Later American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and H. L. Mencken saw the Puritans as the source of most defects in American society. Hawthorne, writing more than two hundred years after his own Puritan ancestors arrived, was obsessed with them, indicting them (in his ironic, elliptical way) in his stories and novels. A far less ambivalent Mencken had few compunctions about using sarcasm. In one of his typically merciless epigrams, he defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Recent scholarly trends have emphasized the degree to which the Puritans were part of a broad wave of early modern European conquest in a hemisphere that was neither "discovered," "new," or even a "world." In such a context, the important point is that the Puritans not only made it difficult for the people who lived *among* them; they made it impossible for anyone to live *alongside* them. In the succinct words of a literary critic in the 1980s, the Puritans were people "who massacred Indians and established the self-righteous religion and politics that



PURE LEGEND An 1806 engraving of Massachusetts founder John Winthrop. Winthrop's American Dream was a communitarian one: "We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together," he reputedly said in his famous address "A Model of Christian Charity," delivered before the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts. (Photo from the collections of the Library of Congress.)

determined American ideology." Of course, they were not alone in this regard. From the Spaniards who enslaved natives (and imported Africans) to the British who sold disease-riddled blankets to Indians in North America, genocide was at best an incidental and at worst an avowedly embraced practice of European societies in the place they named "America." But if the Puritans were no worse than their contemporaries, there's little reason to think they were any better, as their track record in the Pequot (1637-38), King Philip's (1675-76), and other wars attests. One does not have to sentimentalize the Indians—who, in many cases, gave as good as they got—to nevertheless conclude that the lives of generations of Americans were only made possible by the slaughter of countless innocents.

And yet I admire them greatly. This attachment is in some degree irrational, tethered to some of the fondest memories of my early adulthood, like driving by white clapboard churches in Maine. But there's a firmer foundation for my feelings, too. To begin explaining why, I'll echo an heir of people the Puritans and others enslaved: they had a dream. In and of itself, that's not enough; so did Adolf Hitler. Nevertheless, the Puritans' dream, however strange and even repellent, was an exceptionally powerful one that had tremendous consequences, most of them unintended. In a palpable sense, it is only because of their dream that those Americans who followed had theirs, and only because of their ambitions that later Americans had the terms and standards by which they justly condemned the Puritans.

They had a dream. You don't have to love it, but you'll never really understand what it means to be an American of any creed, color, or gender if you don't try to imagine the shape of that dream—and what happened when they tried to realize it.

*The myth of America, if it persists at all, has always rested on a precarious foundation. It is precisely its fragility, not its audacity—the perpetual worry of its believers, not their arrogance—that has made it something different (dare we say, something better?) than just another version of nationalist pomp.*

—Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (1989)

"Puritanism" is one of those words—like "racism," or "democracy," or "feminist"—whose meaning is often far more clear in the minds of those

who speak or write them than those who hear or read them. Any social label associated, as "Puritan" often is, with figures ranging from Plymouth Colony founder William Bradford to U.S. Founding Father John Adams *has* to be a little vague (237 years separated Bradford's birth in 1589 and Adams's death in 1826). Indeed, some of the most important writers on early American history have given up on the word entirely.

Yet elasticity has its uses. Noted Puritan scholar David Hall, who believes that "the term 'Puritanism' is so lacking in precision that I have tried to do without it," follows his disclaimer with a good umbrella definition. "In general," he writes, "the term may be understood as referring to a tendency within the Church of England to practice stricter 'discipline,' as in limiting access to the Lord's Supper." *Discipline* was the key. With its connotations of sustained inquiry (like the study of history), an attractive capacity for deferred gratification (like an athlete in training), or a punitive approach to regulating behavior (like an authoritarian police officer), the concept of discipline went to the very heart of the Puritan experience. Of course, any number of other people were disciplined about their religion and much else, but relatively few Catholics, Buddhists, or atheistic workaholics lived within, or in the context of, the Anglo-American Church of England (also known as the Anglican Church) in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation.

Defined this way, the Puritan experience, like its membership, was varied and really *did* encompass people ranging from William Bradford to John Adams. It was useful to say so when one considered, for example, the characteristics that made New England culture distinctive in American life—like, for example, its relative receptivity to a government role in social and economic life when compared to other regions in what eventually became the United States. Yet texture that assertion was also important: Adams could only be called Puritan in the loosest sense of the term (such as when compared with his less morally rigorous friend, fellow Founding Father Thomas Jefferson); as an organized religious movement, Puritanism was on its last theological legs by the time Adams was born in 1735. And Bradford wasn't exactly a Puritan either, because he and his fellows who arrived on the *Mayflower* in December of 1620—popularly known as the Pilgrims—were, in the language of the time, "Separatists" who avowedly broke from an Anglican Church they viewed as corrupt beyond redemption, even as they shared many of the assumptions and practices of those who did not make that break.

One got closer to the heart of Puritanism with the founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony, who came to New England in 1630. *These* Puritans were—in theory, anyway—"nonseparating" members of the Church of England, who hoped its members back home would finally come to their senses; acknowledge their mistakes, and reform it on (more disciplined) Puritan lines. In practice, however, Massachusetts Puritans, like their friendly rival Pilgrims, wanted to get as far away from England and its Church as possible, and their particular brand of congregation-based organization eventually became a separate church in its own right in the increasingly sprawling world of early modern Protestantism.

Viewed in this light, the Massachusetts Puritans were actually moderates compared to the separatist Pilgrims and more radical sects like Quakers and Anabaptists, who had even less respect for traditional organized religion than the Puritans did. Indeed, one can visualize seventeenth-century Christianity on a spectrum, placing the nonseparating Puritans in the middle, with the Anglican and Catholic churches on one side and the Pilgrims and Quakers on the other. Thinking of the Puritans as middling figures departs from the traditional view of them as extremists, but doing so gives one a more accurate sense of their place in their American world.

Amid all the various abstruse concepts that complicate discussions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritanism—episcopacies and presbyteries, Arminians and Antinomians, covenants of grace and covenants of works—the irreducible foundation of *all* varieties of Protestantism was this: a belief that the world was a corrupt place, but one that could be reformed. *How* it could be reformed, of course, was another question, one that provoked all kinds of squabbling. But that it *could* be reformed has been central, a belief—actually, there were times it was an aggressive assertion—that distinguished sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism from Roman Catholicism (which did reactively reform itself by its own lights; though never enough for Protestants skeptical of its emphasis on institutional authority). This faith in reform became the central legacy of American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream. Things—religious and otherwise—could be different.

For the first generation of American Puritans, reform meant starting over, building a new society of believers for themselves and their children. Actually, this possibility had first been glimpsed in the sixteenth

century by Sir Thomas More, a man who persecuted English Protestants before himself becoming a martyr at the hands of Henry VIII, who decided they had the right idea after all and founded a Protestant sect of his own, the Church of England. In his classic work *Utopia*, first published in 1516, More imagined a place—inspired by the discovery of a previously unknown hemisphere, in which he had a keen interest—where the opportunity to create a new society would lead to religious freedom and a communitarian approach toward property. More's Utopia was a relatively abstract thought experiment, but in the following century more pragmatic utopians, who weren't much more happy with the Church of England than More himself was, moved toward actually acting on such impulses. These Separatists initially tried to achieve their goals more modestly by leaving England for Holland, where a successful struggle to achieve independence from Spanish Catholic rule inspired the belief that perhaps here was a true holy land. Yet here too they were disappointed. The most far-sighted of these Separatists "began both deeply to apprehend their present dangers [of moral corruption] and wisely to foresee the future and think of timely remedy," their future governor, William Bradford, later recorded in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. "In the agitation of their thoughts, and much discourse of things hereabout, they began to incline to this conclusion: of removal to some other place." Writing almost a hundred years later, the Puritan minister Solomon Stoddard added that they "would not have left England merely for their own quietness; but they were afraid that their children would be corrupted there." From the very beginning, then, a notion that one's children might have a better life has been a core component of the American Dream.

The place that later became the United States has been called "the Promised Land" by innumerable people in the past four hundred years, many of them Jews, but it's important to emphasize here that the Pilgrims who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 really did believe themselves to be literal and figurative descendants of the tribes who wandered in the desert for forty years after leaving Egypt and founded the nation of Israel. In trying to convince Separatists back home to leave England, Robert Cushman, author of *Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into the Parts of America* (1622), argued that for them there had been no "land or any possession now, like unto the possession which the Jews had in Canaan, being legally holy and appropriated unto a holy people, the seed of Abra-

ham." But British North America, Cushman said, would change all that. After all, there was no one there but heathen Indians who could be converted; "to them we may go, their land is empty."

Those Indians surely viewed the matter a little differently. But compared to later immigrants who arrived to find teeming citizens and a multiracial society, the Pilgrims and Puritans came to what seemed to them an impossibly remote place. In his *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law* (1765), a political pamphlet that fanned the flames of the American Revolution, John Adams imaginatively evoked the new world they confronted:

Recollect their amazing fortune, their bitter sufferings—the hunger, the nakedness, the cold, which they patiently endured—the severe labors of clearing their grounds, building their houses, raising their provisions, amidst dangers from wild beasts and savage men, before they had time or money or materials for commerce. Recollect the civil and religious principles and hopes and expectations which constantly supported and carried them through all the hardships with patience and resignation.

Let us recollect it was liberty, the hope of liberty, for themselves and us and ours, which conquered all discouragements, dangers, and trials.

Principles, hope, and liberty were powerful attractions, and would remain so for subsequent generations who came here from all over the world. But it's worth remembering that unlike many of those who followed, the Pilgrims were not immigrants with nothing to lose. Without minimizing the challenges faced by many of the teeming masses who arrived under the gaze of the Statue of Liberty, these immigrants were relatively well educated people who in many cases had substantial financial resources at their disposal, making their decision to leave everything behind all the more striking. This sense of worldly prosperity was even more true of the Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630. They were certainly not the first people of means who threw away their security for the sake of an idea; figures ranging from Saint Francis to Vladimir Lenin have done similarly. But the scope of the Puritan enterprise, both in its collective nature and its logistical complications, was amazing. Here, truly, were some astonishingly committed people, people who were all the more so for *not* being solitary geniuses, battle-hardened soldiers, impoverished peasants, or unwilling slaves.

So it was that some people with a strong sense of religious mission founded a new world they hoped would become a model for the old one. Their confidence—in themselves, in their sense of mission for their children, and in a God they believed was on their side—impelled them with ruthless zeal to gamble everything for the sake of a vision. In the process, they accomplished the core task in the achievement of any American Dream: they became masters of their own destiny. But a good Puritan would never put it that way.

*The Puritans were gifted—or cursed—with an overwhelming realization of an inexorable power at work not only in nature but in themselves, which they called God; whatever may have been the factors in their society and their experience that so sharpened their sense of awareness, the acuteness and poignancy of the awareness are phenomena which psychology will recognize though it cannot explain, and which history must take into account.*

—Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, 1939

The Puritans descended from the Calvinist branch of Protestantism, which meant that they were predestinarians; they believed individuals' fates were sealed from the moment they were born, and there was absolutely nothing they could do to affect their ultimate salvation or damnation. But they could not know for sure where they were actually headed and so had to live their lives hoping for signs that things would turn out for the best.

This psychology is alien to a modern Western mindset. Contemporary Americans in particular are typically contractual: being a good person isn't easy but seems like a reasonable investment, if, not in immediate or even earthly payoff, then perhaps in an afterlife, one will have racked up enough points on a moral scorecard to get into heaven (a forgiving God giving the benefit of any doubt). But if the matter is already decided before one is even born, then what's the point? One might as well indulge every instinct, since it won't affect the outcome.

Of course, one does not have to be a Calvinist to point out that such logic misses the point. In theory one *could* live a life of amoral excess,

but even articulating a *desire* to do so would not seem like an especially encouraging sign one was on the right track. Nor does God necessarily think like an accountant who keeps a careful set of books. (The Puritans were fond of comparing God to an indulgent landlord ready to forgive regular lapses on the rent—but not a cavalier attitude—from his spiritually impoverished tenants.) Calvinism may or may not have been a compelling element in some Protestant denominations, but our reaction to it may reveal more about the world we live in than the one they did.

In any case, the historical record is reasonably clear that in theory—and in widespread, though probably not universal, practice—Puritans followed a Calvinist line. To at least some extent, this was a response to one of the most important reasons for the Protestant Reformation in the first place: the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences whereby the rich could buy forgiveness of their sins. What made this so repellent was not so much what might bother someone today—a kind of class inequality that suggested salvation went to the highest bidder—but rather a suggestion that any human being could exercise prerogatives that belonged to God alone. For a committed Puritan, it was offensive to maintain that an ordinary sinner could somehow exercise the levers of destiny—more offensive, even, than garden-variety Catholic corruption, like priests who had neither the training nor inclination to actually minister to the people, or those who declined to even say mass at all (except perhaps for the dead landlord whose estate paid their income).

Perhaps you sense a tension, even a contradiction, here. On the one hand, the Puritans believed and acted as if a person could make a difference in making the world a better place—indeed, had an obligation to do so. On the other, they believed they were powerless to do anything but follow the dictates of God's inscrutable will. Here, it seems, is the worst of all possible worlds: accountability without power. The Puritans were haunted by questions: how do I know? How do I know that I really am sanctified and will thus have a place in heaven? How do I know that my beloved dead are at peace? And when there are conflicts, as there so often are, between contesting versions of what is truly right, how will I know which way to follow? Maybe they would hear an inner voice. But could they trust it? And if there was only silence, what would that mean? To ask these kinds of questions is to begin to imagine the sheer anxiety involved in Puritanism.

Like other people who have inhabited worlds governed by difficult,

even contradictory, ideas, some Puritans negotiated their way through life by trying to find a middle ground on their new native soil. For them, this middle ground was known as the doctrine of "preparationism." It was out of the question that one could actively affect one's fate through specific actions; this constituted a heretical "doctrine of works" embraced by Catholics, Protestants influenced by Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, and the much-hated William Laud, the Bishop of London who persecuted Puritans in the name of the Church of England. On the other hand, to live a life without knowledge of, or power to affect, who was saved—a doctrine known as the "covenant of grace"—was for many Puritans too much to bear. Preparationism softened the covenant of grace by suggesting that there were steps one could take to get in a proper frame of mind so that one could be fully receptive to sanctification if it were forthcoming. If this sounds a little fuzzy, that's because it undoubtedly was; even with the elaborate sequencing and terminology of preparationist doctrine—which must surely have confused, if not exasperated, many a lay Puritan—the line between preparationism and a doctrine of works seems gossamer thin. Indeed, one faction of Puritans specifically rejected the notion of preparationism as a slipshod compromise with the doctrine of works. (On the other hand, as Andrew Delbanco has pointed out, preparationism may well have increased rather than allayed anxiety, because it effectively ratcheted up expectations that Puritans *would* prepare rather than passively wait.)

Notwithstanding the widespread, and generally accurate, perception that the Puritans were mavericks in the world of early modern Protestantism, the doctrine of preparationism was an important indication of their instinctive moderation. It was evident, too, in the way Massachusetts Bay Puritans contrasted with the Separatists of Plymouth by not formally reneging on their ties to the Church of England. And it was evident again in their less than wholly intimate relationship with the Puritans in the English Civil War of the 1640s, a war that threatened the colonial "errand into the wilderness" because a reformed England would make a *New England* superfluous. That such pragmatism—some might say cynicism—could coexist with their rigorous theology suggested that these were flesh-and-blood people who lived lives that were very different than, and yet comparable to, our own. They made compromises in pursuit of what they wanted, and what they wanted often caused them a good deal of grief, whether they got it or not.

But what, exactly, *did* they want? And what happened when they tried to turn their dream into reality?

*It appeared as if New England was a region given up to the dreams of fancy and the unrestrained experiments of innovators.*

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

They wanted freedom—any high school history textbook will tell you that. They *themselves* would tell you that. But they didn't define it the way we typically do today. In fact, insofar as they did understand freedom as we do, they considered it monstrous. "There is twofold liberty—natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal," Massachusetts Bay founder John Winthrop explained in 1645. "The first is common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man as he stands into relation to man, hath the liberty to do as he lists." This kind of freedom "makes men grow more evil, and in time to be worse than brute beasts." True freedom, on the other hand, "is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority." Freedom involved a willing surrender to the will of the Lord, a choice to defer to Godly clerical and civil authorities that ruled in His name. Oppression, by contrast, involved having to live with—having to *tolerate*—self-evidently corrupt sects (like the Anglican Church back home, which was virtually as bad as the Roman Catholicism it supposedly reformed) and complacent rulers (like Queen Elizabeth I, whose noncommittal, split-the-difference approach to theology seemed more a matter of dispiriting indifference than anything else). To cast off such tawdriness and sloth: *that* was freedom.

The free new world of their dreams was to be a place of, by, and for the Puritans. There would be other people around; the best shipwrights, for example, weren't necessarily true believers, and there was always the possibility of Indians to convert, visitors to entertain, or even colonial officials to appease. But the leaders of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies planned to be in charge in both sacred and secular realms—which, while separate, were nevertheless intertwined. No one could join their churches without giving convincing testimony of their religious commitment, that is, without "conversion." And no one could vote in secular matters who was not a member of the church.



Religious toleration was out of the question; these people had not come all this way to accept the indolence, conflict, or obvious evil that had marred the Holland and England they had left. From now on, they would cut through all the clutter and cacophony: no more ornate iconography in churches; no more decadent amusements like plays and gambling; no more idolatrous distractions like Christmas celebrations. Long-standing convictions could finally become the law of the land.

This all sounds rather severe. But toleration was not a fixture of religious life in many places in the Western world of that time, and to the extent pluralism was present, it was as much a function of the irrelevance of religion as a principled embrace of diversity. And while Puritan stringency regarding recreation was notable even for the time, there was never any suggestion that pleasures like laughter, drinking, and sex were impermissible, only that they had a clear time and place. Moreover, the Puritans were unusual, even unique, for the degree to which popular participation in civic life was widespread; while it was not really a democracy as we would understand the word—there were far too many gender, racial, economic, and religious constraints on political participation—New England really did represent the leading edge of changes that would transform Western life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most important manifestation of this embryonic democratic impulse was the Mayflower Compact, a document binding the Pilgrims to frame and obey “just and equal laws” that they signed even before they landed. The signal institution in subsequent Pilgrim and Puritan life was the town meeting, in which members of a community could vote on matters of concern to them and elect representatives to voice their concerns to the colony as a whole.

Yet to focus too much on the procedural dimension of New England would be to lose sight of what these people were really after. And that was a sense of *community*: not a philosophical or legal framework so much as a series of deep emotional and affective bonds that connected people who had a shared sense of what their lives were about. Freedom was a means to that end. There is, of course, a paradox here, because so much of their faith was premised on the fate of the solitary soul, but the very intensity of Puritan individualism makes the need for some compensating dimension all the more important. If the Puritans were essentially alone in the world, they nevertheless wished to be alone together.

This longing for intimacy dominates one of the great early addresses of American history, John Winthrop's “A Model of Christian Charity.” Winthrop, one of the organizers of the Massachusetts Bay Company, was chosen by the company to govern the colony, a post he was subsequently elected to twelve times. While on board the *Arbella*, one of four ships that carried about seven hundred immigrants across the Atlantic Ocean, he delivered a lay sermon. Though its precise content is not certain (it was not published in his lifetime), the sermon captures both the world the Puritans sought—and the world they inhabited.

In some ways, “A Model of Christian Charity” was a document of hard-headed realism. “God Almighty in his holy and wise providence hath so disposed the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and duty, others mean and in subjection,” Winthrop began. God, he explained, ordered these differences “for the preservation and good of the whole” and exhorted the Puritans to maintain that order. Never a fan of democracy—he held out for as long as he could to prevent the election of representatives to the general court, even though the colony's charter explicitly called for it—Winthrop, like most Puritan leaders, affirmed sacred and secular hierarchy in government.

And yet the heart of the sermon was a call for interdependence, even equality, for all Puritans in the eyes of God. “No man is made more honorable than another or more wealthy, etc., out of any particular and singular respect to himself, but for the glory of his creator and the common good of the creature, man,” he asserted. Comparing the colony to a body with different organs that work in complementary effort to sustain it, Winthrop invoked a communitarian vision of American life: “We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.”

Such soaring hopes coexisted with mundane, even gnawing, realities. At first glance, one of the more surprising things about “A Model of Christian Charity” was the amount of space it devoted to financial matters. In the highly structured interrogative style typical of Puritan sermons, Winthrop posed a series of questions (How should one determine how much money to give to charity? What rules should govern lending?) that he goes on to answer in some detail. For a century after

Englishmen back home. But the price was high: it forced them not only to accept self-evident reprobates like Gortonists (who denied the Holy Trinity) or Anabaptists (who rejected any form of state church) but also to recognize that the Puritans *themselves* were nothing more than a dissident sect within a now firmly established Anglican Church that would never, as they once hoped, reform itself in their own image.

Perhaps, as the great Puritan historian Perry Miller suggested, it was a sense of brittle bitterness over such defeats that provoked the Puritans into one of the most notorious episodes of their checkered history: the Salem witch trials of 1692, an event that has lastingly stained their reputations. Twenty people were executed in the wake of the trials, which took place after a group of young girls became hysterical while playing at magic and were described as bewitched. (Tolerating religious diversity was one thing, but tolerating Satan was another.) Once again, this was a prismatic historical event that has been subject to multiple interpretations: sexual anxiety, economic distress, psychological trauma, and (especially) political hysteria.

It was, surely, all these things. But Miller's point—I mean historian Perry Miller, but playwright Arthur Miller applies as well—that the witch trials represented a grotesque effort to recapture a sense of lost cohesion, a lingering longing for communion curdled into a dictatorship of false virtue, remains salient. If the dispersal of the original Puritans suggested the degree to which the dreams of individuals compromised collective aspirations, the trials suggested the way in which collective fears could crush individual lives. More than three centuries later, the American Dream still straddles—perhaps it's more accurate to say it *blurs*—the tension between one and many, a tension we still all too often fail to recognize, let alone resolve.

Amid the changes, even reverses, the Puritans tried to forge a usable past for those who followed. Cotton Mather's 1702 history of the Puritans, *Magnalia Christi Americana* ("The Great Achievements of Christ in America") begins on a triumphal note that rarely wavers: "I write of the wonders of Christian religion, flying from the depravations of Europe to the American strand; and, assisted by the holy author of that religion, I do, with all conscience of truth itself, report the wonderful displays of His infinite power, wisdom, goodness and faithfulness, wherewith his divine providence hath irradiated an Indian wilderness." The point of this was to suggest all that had been, and still was being, accomplished, to celebrate as well as goad. Yet try as he might to affirm

an unbroken history, Mather—grandson of Massachusetts founders Richard Mather and John Cotton, and son of the powerful Increase Mather—could not help but realize he was not the man his forefathers were. (If nothing else, his many clerical, educational, and political enemies were there to remind him, for example, of his silence during the Salem witch trials and his subsequent defense of the judges.) As an early twentieth-century historian once wrote of Mather, "Essentially a conservative, he was always torn between allegiance to inherited ideals and realization that a newer day demanded new standards." A reluctant Mather was forced to realize that dreams are a difficult business. Not only must they compete with other dreams, but they are mortal, whether realized or not. Other dreams—better dreams?—were taking root in the very garden the Puritans had cleared and tilled.

*There is no object that we see, no action that we do, no good that we enjoy, no evil that we feel or fear, but we may make some spiritual advantage of all; and he that makes such improvement is wise as well as pious.*

—Anne Bradstreet,

"Meditations Divine and Moral" I (undated)

The basic outline of the Puritans' history in the century after their arrival in New England seems like one damning episode after another. Arrogance, querulousness, hypocrisy, and even murder followed them wherever they went. Here was a people who affirmed the primacy of the individual conscience yet demanded religious orthodoxy. Who denied knowledge of salvation but devised doctrines, like preparationism, that resembled the very practices they most severely condemned when practiced by others. And who claimed to want to convert Indians, only to destroy them. Most fundamentally, their dream of a city on a hill became an empire on a continent, largely peopled by Americans who would have appalled them in their diversity and secularity.

In the end, though, it's their dream—the fact of it, the degree of good faith, however incomplete, that animated it and the degree to which it was realized—that despite all that has happened partially redeems them. The Puritans were not the first people to have a dream, even in North America. Virginia was founded before New England,

and its founders also had a dream: to get rich. They might not achieve it with gold, the way the Spaniards did in Mexico and Peru, but tobacco was a possibility (so was attacking Spanish shipping). The Puritans wanted to get rich too, and as a number of observers pointed out, their temperament was exceptionally well suited to an emerging capitalist world order. But Puritanism was not finally about money. For all its focus on the afterlife, it was also about making the world a better, more holy, place. Even among themselves, Puritans disagreed about how to do this, and many of their best intentions did indeed pave a road to hell. Yet it is also true that some of the most important reforms in American life, from the end of slavery to the creation of the nation's great universities, derived from conceptions of community and morality central to the Puritan worldview. In the Puritans one could find refuge in the faith that one of the most important things that makes us human—the capacity for ideas—might actually be a basis for living one's life, not as a matter of brute self-interest or of self-abnegation, from worldly concerns but rather as a possibility that one can simultaneously be intellectually and emotionally engaged with contemporary life even as one always remembers that something lies beyond it. Hence the Puritan injunction to "live in the world, but not of it." This is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. But it is precisely the willingness to do something difficult, painful, unintentionally mischievous, or finally impossible that gives purpose to individual lives, both as they are lived and as they are remembered.

The Puritans, of course, weren't the only ones to try. The Quakers, for example, followed some early forays into New England—where they would do unforgivable things like allow women to preach—by forming their own far more tolerant colony under the leadership of the remarkable William Penn, who founded Pennsylvania in 1682. And though it isn't exactly our idea of paradise now, the governorship of William Berkeley of Virginia (1642–76) helped transform a primitive Virginia colony into a highly elaborate slave society that captured the imagination of successive generations of southerners. In the centuries that followed, countless groups of Americans—from the Mormons who founded Utah in the 1840s to the hippies who founded communes in the 1960s—made their own efforts to found cities on hills, valleys, or plains. Hope sprang eternal in a promised land that straddled a continent.

## CHAPTER 2

## DREAM CHARTER:

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

THE WIGS, THE BREECHES, the unsmiling faces in formal portraits: for those of us who drink coffee at Starbucks, surf the World Wide Web, or stand at automatic teller machines that give us currency featuring those portraits, the American Revolution might well have occurred on another planet. There are places—for many Americans, they're thousands of miles away—that preserve battlefields and remind tourists what actually happened in the 1770s and 1780s. But even for those who visit them, the Revolutionary past is compartmentalized, an interlude in another time and place more likely to be accessed via resort hotels and interstate highways than classrooms or textbooks.

This isn't quite as true of other eras in American history. As already suggested, the Puritans remain vivid precisely because they're so irritating. And the Civil War, though it began a mere seventy-eight years after the Revolution—a lifetime for a hardy soul of those days—seems much more recent. There are a number of reasons why this would be so. The Civil War covered a much larger geographic territory, from the mountains of eastern to the deserts of western North America. Moreover, the documentary record is much fuller, particularly with regard to photography. The personalities of the Civil War era are more familiar; Ulysses S. Grant's unkept candor seems decisively more familiar than