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Myth and Memory in the American Identity

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I'm delighted to be here today, at the kind invitation of my friend Matt Spalding, and to have the honor of taking part in this very distinguished series of lectures on the sources of American national identity and about how we might go about renewing or restoring them. It's a subject of the first importance, and I'm glad that Heritage is devoting attention to it. Man does not live by tax cuts and fiscal discipline alone—although a little more of each would be perfectly fine with me. Still, it is impossible to rally a nation to fight for its soul if it no longer knows what that soul is.

As before in our history, our current challenges have forced us to think more deeply and clearly about such things—about who and what we are. And it is not entirely a bad thing that we find ourselves at this juncture. Periods of decline and crisis are inevitable even in the healthiest society, precisely because what is good in the past can never be passed along mechanically and effortlessly from one generation to the next. Each generation has to rediscover those things for itself and relive the truth of Goethe's dictum: "What you have as heritage, take now as task, for only in that way can you make it your own."

This is a more majestic and momentous thing than is covered by the word "reappropriation." And it is not at all the same thing as saying that each generation gets to invent its own Constitution and its own history. In fact, it is the exact opposite. But more about that later.

My point here is that, human nature being what it is—and human society being, in some sense, the

Talking Points

- Such essential traits as civility, restraint, and loyalty are not sustainable for long without the support of strong and deeply rooted social and cultural institutions that are devoted to the formation of character, most notably the traditional family and traditional religious institutions.
- The American culture is unimaginable apart from the influence of the American creed, from the sense of pride and moral responsibility Americans derive from being, as Walter Berns has argued, a carrier of universal values, a vanguard people.
- Perhaps the Constitution itself is our epic, or what passes for one, in function if not in form. Although it does not narrate a shared story, it certainly presumes one: the long and complex Anglo-American experience that produced our understanding of constitutionalism, federalism, individual rights, religious liberty, and separation of powers.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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amplification of human nature—it usually takes a crisis to cause an individual, or a nation, to renew itself. These things aren't covered under any program of regular maintenance. They are not the product of jet-smooth steady-state development, overseen by planners and bureaucrats. Renewal of a culture is a more jagged and lurching thing. Sometimes it takes a fight for survival to induce it.

Arnold Toynbee, a great historian of the last century whom no one except Samuel Huntington bothers to read anymore, was right in seeing the dynamic of challenge-and-response as the chief source of a civilization's greatness. And he was also right to assert that great civilizations die from suicide rather than murder, which is to say that they die when they lack the will to respond vigorously and creatively to the very challenges that would otherwise make them stronger. So what we're doing here today could hardly be more important.

Defining National Identity

I think it's clear that the American national identity, like love, is a many-splendored thing. *Defining* it is *also* a bit like love, or war—meaning that it ends up being a much more complicated, even contentious, undertaking than you ever thought it would be at the outset.

And doubly so for the task of *restoration*, the real subject of these lectures. The very question of *restoration* presumes some measure of agreement, not only about what we are, but what we once were and what we ought to become. But it is in the very nature of our current woes that we don't have any such agreement, even among people who call themselves conservatives.

One of the chief points at issue arises out of the tension between *creed* and *culture*, to use a shorthand way of putting it, in the ways we think about America and about standards of membership in American society. This is a tension between, on one hand, the idea of the United States as a nation built upon the foundation of self-evident, rational, and universally applicable propositions about human nature and human society and, on the other hand, the idea of the United States as a very unusual, historically specific and contingent entity, underwritten by a long, intricately evolved, and very particular legacy of

English law, language, and customs, Greco-Roman cultural antecedents, and Judeo-Christian sacred texts and theological and moral teachings, without whose presences the nation's flourishing would not be possible.

This is a very profound tension, with much to be said for both sides. And the side one comes down on—if one comes down entirely on one side—will say a lot about one's stance on an immense number of issues, such as immigration, education, citizenship, cultural assimilation, multiculturalism, pluralism, the role of religion in public life, the prospects for democratizing of the Middle East, and so on.

At the risk of being labeled a straddler, I would contend that any understanding of American identity that excluded either of the two elements would be seriously deficient. Any view of American life that failed to acknowledge its powerful strains of universalism, idealism, and crusading zeal would be describing a different country from the America that, for better or worse, happens to exist. And yet, any view of America as simply a bundle of abstract normative ideas about freedom and democracy and self-government that can flourish just as easily in any cultural and historical soil, including a multilingual, post-religious, or post-national one, takes too much for granted and will be in for a rude awakening.

Clearly, then, the creed v. culture antagonism is better understood not as a statement of alternatives but as an antinomy, one of those perpetual oppositions that can never be resolved. In fact, this may be more of a problem in theory than in practice, since the two halves of the opposition so often serve to support one another. The creed needs the support of the culture—and the culture, in turn, is imbued with respect for the creed.

For the creed to be successful, it must be able to silently presume the presence of all kinds of cultural inducements—toward civility, restraint, deferred gratification, nonviolence, loyalty, procedural fairness, impersonal neutrality, compassion, respect for elders, and the like. These traits are not magically called into being by the mere invocation of the Declaration of Independence. Nor are they sustain-

able for long without the support of strong and deeply rooted social and cultural institutions that are devoted to the formation of character, most notably the traditional family and traditional religious institutions.

But by the same token, the American culture is unimaginable apart from the influence of the American creed, from the sense of pride and moral responsibility Americans derive from being, as Walter Berns has argued, a carrier of universal values, a vanguard people. It is no fluke that one sees such a strong sense of that status even in the attitudes of young people from the remotest parts of small-town America. I see it in some of the young men from my own tiny town of Signal Mountain, Tennessee, who are serving in the Marines and National Guard in Iraq. They may be boys from the provinces, but they are in no sense provincial in their outlook. They do not see their overseas mission as something out of phase with their local affinities and duties. They are not unusual in that.

Looking Back to First Principles

So I don't think that forcing a choice between creed and culture is the way to resolve the problem of cultural restoration. But clearly, if we want to locate something like the original meaning of America and reorient ourselves toward it, we need to develop the ability to look backward in a more fruitful way.

It is a natural enough impulse to do so in times of turbulence and uncertainty—to try to think oneself back to the beginnings of things, ask how on earth did we ever get into this situation in the first place, and why. It is especially natural, even obligatory, for a republican form of government to do so, since republics come into being at particular moments in secular time through self-conscious acts of public deliberation. Indeed, philosophers from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt have all insisted that republics *must* periodically recur to their first principles in order to adjust and renew themselves through a fresh encounter with their initiating vision.

A constitutional republic like ours is uniquely grounded in its foundational moment, its time of creation. A founding is no ordinary occasion. It is not merely the instant that the ball started rolling.

Instead, it is a moment that presumes a certain authority over all the moments that will follow—and to speak of a founding is to presume that such moments in time are possible. It most closely resembles the moment that one takes an oath, or makes a promise.

One could even say that a constitutional founding is a kind of covenant, a meta-promise entered into with the understanding that it has a uniquely powerful claim upon the future. It requires of us a willingness to be constantly looking back to our initiating promises and goals, in much the same way that we would chart progress or regress in our individual lives by reference to a master list of resolutions or fend off temptation by remembering our marriage vows—rather than rewriting the vows when someone really irresistible waltzes into the room. (Which is a good example of what it means to have a “living constitution.”)

Republicanism means self-government, and so republican liberty does not mean living without restraint, but rather living in accordance with a law that you have dictated to yourself. Hence the especially strong need of republics to recur to their founding principles and their founding narratives in a never-ending process of self-adjustment. There should be a constant interplay between founding ideals and current realities, a tennis match bouncing back and forth between the two. And for that to happen, there need to be two things in place.

First, there need to be founding principles that are sufficiently fixed to give us genuine guidance, to actually *teach* us something. That such ideals should be open to amendment is, perhaps, the least important or valuable thing about them—which is precisely why a living Constitution is not really a Constitution at all. This is why I compare a founding to a promise or a vow, which means nothing if its chief glory is its adaptability. The analogy of a successful marriage, which is also, in a sense, a *res publica* that must periodically recur to first principles and learn to distinguish first principles from passing circumstances, is actually a fairly good guide to these things.

Second, there needs to be a ready sense of connection to the past, a reflex for looking backward.

And that is no easy matter. Cultivating it ought to be one of the chief uses of the formal study of history. Or so one would think. But the fostering of a vital sense of connection to the past is, alas, not one of the goals of historical study as it's now taught and practiced in this country. Nietzsche saw a certain kind of abuse of history along these lines coming long before it was even a germ of a possibility on these shores. But it has reached a kind of full flower in the present day. This has been particularly true of the study of the American founding, as it has been for a century now, since the early sallies against the Founders by Charles Beard; but it is more generally true of the entire profession of history.

This is a highly ironic development. The meticulous contextualization of past events and ideas, arising out of a sophisticated understanding of the past's particularities and discontinuities with the present, is one of the great achievements of modern historiography. But that achievement comes at a very high cost when it emphasizes the pastness of the past so much as to make the past completely unavailable to us, separated from us by an impassable chasm of contextual difference.

My grandmother lived in Charleston, Illinois, site of one of the Lincoln–Douglas debates, and I remember as a young boy fantasizing about the crowds at that great event as I tromped around the site, feeling myself to be in a kind of direct contact with it. I was too ignorant then to realize how remote the actual world of that mid–19th century audience was from that of my imagination. Now I know better. But does that knowledge detract from, or add to, my sense of connection to the place, and to the words spoken there? And does such a sense of connection matter? These are genuine questions—ones that ought to be seriously entertained.

In the case of the Founding, where there has been a century-long assault taking place, the sense of connection is even more tenuous. The standard scholarly account takes the form of insisting that there was nothing emerging out of this heated series of 18th century debates among flawed, unheroic, and self-interested white men to which we should grant any abiding authority. That was then, you see, and this is now.

In a curious way, such insistence upon the pastness of the past serves only to imprison us ever more thoroughly in the present, and the present alone. It makes our present all that much more antiseptically cut off from anything that might really nourish, surprise, or challenge it. It erodes our sense of being part of a common enterprise with those men. One would have thought that the study of the past would do just the opposite.

The Debunking Imperative

It is not hard to see how such an emphasis upon scholarly precision would dovetail effortlessly with what might be called the debunking imperative, which generally aims to discredit any use of the past to justify or support something in the present and is therefore one of the few gestures likely to win universal approbation among historians. It is professionally safest to be a critic and extremely dangerous to be too affirmative.

I once was interviewed for a job as the director of a lavishly funded Center for the Study of the American Experience at Washington College on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The college had wangled a huge grant from an ingenuous foundation on the basis that the college had a unique claim as a site for such a center, since George Washington had been a member of the board of trustees and the college was the first to bear Washington's name by his express permission.

I thought this all sounded very promising, and the college's successful grant proposal was downright exciting. But from the moment I arrived on campus and was interviewed by the dean, I heard the same dismal and anxious refrain: "We want to make it clear that the work of this center is not to be celebratory." They had no idea what else they wanted their center to be...but they wanted to make damned sure it was not celebratory.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the state of the American academy. Scholarly responsibility demands the deconstruction of the American Founding into its constituent elements, thereby divesting it of any claim to unity or any heroic or mythic dimensions deserving of our admiration or reverence. There was no coherence to what they did, and looking backward to divine what they did makes no sense. The

Founders and Framers, after all, disagreed, fought among themselves, produced a document which was a compromise, a document that waffled on important issues, that remains hopelessly bound to the 18th century and inadequate to our contemporary problems, etc. They did not, in short, bring down tablets from Mount Sinai. (And, of course, Moses himself is not all he's cracked up to be, but that is another story for another time.)

And so, in much the same manner as "source criticism" of the Bible challenges the authority of Scripture by understanding the text as a compilation of haphazardly generated redactions, so the Constitution is seen as a concatenation of disparate elements, a mere political deal meant to be superseded by other political deals and withal an instrument of the powerful. The last thing in the world you would want to do is treat it as a document with any intrinsic moral authority. Every text is merely a pretext. This is the kind of explanation one has learned to expect from the historical guild.

In this connection, it is amusing to see the extent to which historians, who are pleased to regard the Constitution as a hopelessly outdated relic of a bygone era, are themselves still crude 19th century positivists at heart. They still pride themselves on their ability to puncture "myths," relying on a shallow positivistic understanding of a "myth" as a more or less organized form of falsehood rather than seeing myth as a structure of meaning, a manner of giving a manageable shape to the cosmos and to one's own experience of the world, a shape that expresses cultural ideals and shared sentiments and that guides us through the darkness of life's many perils and unanswerable questions by providing us with what Plato called a "likely story."

Even granting its many successes, modern historiography has left us without a way of rendering a compelling story of the nation. "That's not our job," historians say in response. But it is not as if the nation has disappeared from historical writing. Instead, it has become, in the late historian John Higham's wonderfully apt phrase, "the villain in other people's stories"—the indispensable negative precondition for the only heroic tales that are still legitimate to tell: those of marginalized individuals and certifiably oppressed groups.

There is, of course, a good deal of fresh myth-making and romanticization in the tales of those marginalized groups. But the point is not to be consistent about rooting out *all* myths. It is to demythologize the American nation and the national past and bring its major players down to our own size and level, to free us from the moral burden of having ever to regard them as heroes or exemplars who have set a mark we have to live up to.

To be sure, there are good things to be said of a critical approach to history, and there are myths aplenty that richly deserve to be punctured. I am glad, for example, that we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Washington, D.C., in the Kennedy years had very little in common with the legendary Camelot aside from the ubiquity of adulterous liaisons in both places. That kind of ground-clearing is important, and we are better off without that kind of propagandistic myth.

But ground-clearing by itself is not enough. And to think otherwise is to mistake an ancillary activity for the main thing itself—as if agriculture were nothing more than the application of insecticides and weed killers. History as debunking is ultimately an empty and fruitless undertaking, which fails to address the reasons why we humans try to narrate and understand our pasts. It fails to take into account the ways in which a nation's morale, cohesion, and strength derive from a sense of connection to its past. And it fails to acknowledge how much a healthy sense of the future depends upon what can only be called a "mythic" sense of the nation.

In that sense, I would not ridicule the impulse, the felt needs, behind the embrace of the Camelot myth or, for that matter, behind the myths of the various marginalized groups. The human need to encompass life within the framework of myth is not merely a longing for pleasing illusion, though it may well lead one to the embrace of an illusion. It reflects a fundamental need for a larger shape to our aspirations. And it is an illusion to think that we can so ignore that need, and so cauterize our souls, that we will never again be troubled by it.

The debunking imperative operates on the basis of its own myth. It presumes the existence of a solid and orderly substratum, a rock-solid reality lying

just beneath the illusory surfaces, waiting to be revealed in all its direct and unfeigned honesty when the facades and artifices are all stripped away. There is a remarkable complacency and naïveté about such a view. The near-universal presumption that the demise of the nation-state and the rise of international governance would be very good things has everything—except a shred of evidence—to support it.

And as for the debunking of bourgeois morality that still passes for sophistication in some quarters, and has been the stock-in-trade of Western intellectuals for almost two centuries now—it has always been a form of moral free-riding, like the radical posturing of adolescents who always know they can call Mom when they get into trouble. But nothing lasts forever, and what happens when the solid substratum is gone, when Mom is no longer there to answer the phone? Anyone reading the accounts of Theodore Dalrymple's experiences with the underclass of Great Britain will be disabused of the idea that human nature, once the bourgeois artifices are stripped away, will be in anything but a free fall toward the worst kind of physical and moral squalor.

These considerations may seem to be taking us far afield, but I don't think they do. They underscore the fact that the critical tradition of modern historical writing *itself* deserves to be criticized in turn as a naïve undertaking that fails to deliver the goods, fails to give us what we seek and need from the past. Impressive in so many ways, it is also a dead end in others. We need to begin looking elsewhere for guidance.

“Mystic Chords of Memory”

One place to begin, I believe, is in thinking again about the need to look backward with a sober realization that human knowledge about human affairs always has a reflexive quality about it. It is never a matter of the tree falling unheard in the forest. There is always someone listening, always a feedback effect. And most prophecies tend to be either self-fulfilled or self-averted.

The best social scientists understand this perfectly well—after all, they were the ones who gave us the term “self-fulfilling prophecy”—but they give us such knowledge in a vocabulary and form that

are often all but self-subverting. Who, after all, wants to embrace a myth while *calling* it a myth? But to do so may be preferable to the alternative of 19th century positivism.

In this connection, and with a particular view toward more constructive ways of thinking about the role of looking back, I think there may be particular value in our revisiting Ernest Renan's celebrated 1882 essay “What Is a Nation?” (“Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?”), which defined a nation as an entity *sustained by its historical consciousness*.

It is important to remember how different such a conception was from the alternatives on offer in late 19th century Europe. For Renan, a nation was fundamentally “a soul, a spiritual principle,” constituted not only by “present-day consent” but also by the residuum of the past, “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories” which form in the citizen “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” Permit me to quote from Renan at greater length:

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present, to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions for being a people.... A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.

Renan strongly opposed the then-fashionable view that nations should be understood as entities united by racial or linguistic or geographical or religious or material factors. None of those factors was sufficient to account for the emergence of this “spiritual principle.” Active consent had to be a part of it. But it was insufficient without the presence of

the past—the past in which that consent was embedded and through which it found meaning.

I think this account of the nation provides valuable insight for us. The ballast of the past, and of our intimate connection to it, is similarly indispensable to the sense of American national identity. It forms a strain in our identity that is in some respects far less articulate (and less frequently articulated) than the universalistic principles that writers like Walter Berns have emphasized, precisely because it seems to conflict with American assertions of universalism and its intellectual basis is less well-defined. But it is every bit as powerful, if not more so, and just as indispensable. And it is a very *particular* force. Our nation's particular triumphs, sacrifices, and sufferings—and our memories of those things—draw and hold us together precisely because they are the sacrifices and sufferings, not of all humanity, but of us in particular.

Fortunately, one does not have to rely exclusively on a French writer for such insights. No one has spoken of American national identity with greater mastery than Abraham Lincoln, and his words still endure. In his 1838 speech on “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” delivered to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln responded to the then-raging violence directed at blacks and abolitionists in Southern and border states with an admonition that could have come from Toynbee: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”

The danger he most feared was that rampant lawlessness would dissolve the “attachment of the People” to their government. And the answer he provides to this danger is remarkable for the way it touches on the same themes that Renan recounts:

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the

support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that *to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father*, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, *let it become the political religion of the nation*; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

The excerpt shows Lincoln's remarkable ability to intertwine the past and the present and evoke a sense of connection between them. The speech performs the classic republican move, back to the founding origins, connecting the public order explicitly with something so primal as a son's love of, and respect for, his father. Obedience to the law and reverence for the Constitution—these are directly connected with memory, the reverence owed to the sufferings of the patriot generation, and the blood of one's own father.

Such words gesture toward his even more famous invocation of “the mystic chords of memory” in his First Inaugural Address, chords “stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land,” chords that provide the music of the Union. He performs a similar move of memorial linkage in the Gettysburg Address, beginning with the Founding “fathers” and ending in a rededication and recommitment, drawn from knowledge of the “honored dead” who hallowed the very ground with their sacrifice.

It is pointless to ask whether such a vision of the Union reflects an “objective” reality. The mythic reality upon which such rhetoric depends, and which it helps to create and sustain, is powerful in

its own right, too compelling to be dismissed or deconstructed into the language of “state formation” or “cultural hegemony.” You could say that the antiseptic scholarly language offers insights that Lincoln cannot give us, and you would be right. But you could also say that Lincoln’s reverent and hortatory language offers insights that the antiseptic scholars cannot provide, and you would be equally right. The real question is which language tells us more, and for what purposes.

The Constitution as America’s Epic

The mythic pull of the American Founding relates directly, as I’ve tried to stress, to the republican character of American society and to the republican requirement to recur to origins as a way of correcting and renewing ourselves. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that the Constitution be a document that is not only respected and deferred to, but venerated and accorded a kind of mythic status. This is the sense in which Lincoln’s term “political religion” ought to be taken as something inculcated, not only on the level of reason and calculation, but on the deepest levels of habit and sentiment.

Every successful foundation requires a foundational narrative. Hence, it is no surprise that there were numerous efforts in early American history to produce something like a foundational epic, something that would perform for America the role that the *Aeneid* performed for Rome or that the Hebrew Scriptures did for the people of ancient Israel. That is one way to think about the formation and sustenance of national identity, though a shared story that serves as a cultural mirror, in which a people is able to see what it is and is reminded of what it was and should be.

And so, when Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge presented in 1771 a commencement poem at the College of New Jersey called “On the Rising Glory of America,” a poem that predicted an American culture that would eclipse the glories of European civilization, they were responding to a strongly felt need. Similarly, Timothy Dwight’s epic, *The Conquest of Canaan*, which appeared in 1785 with a fulsome dedication to George Washington, was a thinly veiled effort to relate the Biblical story of Joshua and the Promised Land as an analogue to

the American story—America as the New Israel. Then, in 1787, Joel Barlow offered up what was probably the most ambitious of these American epic efforts, entitled *The Vision of Columbus*.

Why, you are wondering, have you never heard of these poems? The answer is that they were among the worst poems ever written. At their best, they sound like John Milton as reinterpreted by Monty Python. Let me provide one example, from Barlow’s *Vision of Columbus*. What follows is his description of the convening of the First Continental Congress in 1774:

Columbus look’d; and still around them
spread,
From south to north, the immeasurable
shade;
At last, the central shadows burst away,
And rising regions open’d on the day. He
saw, once more, bright Del’ware’s silver
stream,
And Penn’s throng’d city cast a cheerful
gleam:
The dome of state, that met his eager eye,
Now heaved its arches in a loftier sky;
The bursting gates unfold; and lo, within,
A solemn train, in conscious glory, shine.
The well-known forms his eye had traced
before,
In different realms along the extended
shore;
Here, graced with nobler fame, and robed
in state,
They look’d and moved magnificently
great.

It’s all very amusing, and believe me, the other efforts are no better. Reading this stuff is a form of torture. And yet there is also a serious question here. If there was such a strongly felt need for a foundational epic, why couldn’t one have been supplied? Is the failure of these early American epics due to sheer lack of literary talent? Or is there some intrinsic obstacle to the creation of an American *Aeneid*?

I would venture to say the latter and that the chief reason why it is so hard is the fact that epic cannot be a republican literary form, for much the

same reasons that, it is argued, tragedy cannot be a Christian literary form—because the premises of the literary form are incompatible with the object to be venerated. Barlow’s poem tried to put new wine in old bottles, relying on forms and diction and social conventions and subject matter that are simply not available to the bard of a great modern democracy.

Yet the impulse behind these failed efforts, like the impulse to address George Washington as “Your Excellency,” was not entirely off the mark even if the results were less than stellar. The instinct for reverence was not wrong even if the objects of that reverence were not necessarily the right ones.

So there is no great American epic. Or maybe there is one. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to propose that the Constitution itself is our epic, or what passes for one, in function if not in form. It too functions as a text standing at the very core of our national identity. It too serves as a cultural mirror, in which a people is able to see what it is and is reminded of what it was and should be. It too is a vessel of American myth and memory. It is an amalgam of both creed and culture, particularly if read, as Lincoln insisted it should be, in conjunction

with the Declaration of Independence. Although it does not narrate a shared story, it certainly presumes one: the long and complex Anglo–American experience that produced our understanding of constitutionalism, federalism, individual rights, religious liberty, and separation of powers.

The fact that it does not seek to personify the American experiment, does not make Washington the new Aeneas, or indeed name any names at all, may be precisely why it is peculiarly suited to be the object of republican veneration. People will always disagree, and properly so, about the veneration of any particular leader, perhaps even George Washington himself.

But the Constitution itself ought to be another matter. The first three words of its preamble remind us of the republican character of the American experiment and the seat of sovereignty in our system. That is a reminder we stand in need of nearly every day, both as an encouragement and a challenge.

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