E Pluribus Unum

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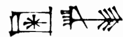
used on all official documents from 1782 through 1841

E Pluribus Unum

The Formation of the American Republic
1776–1790

Forrest McDonald



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To Edwin J. Soares and
Miss Livia Appel for being,
and for having to do
with the like of me

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Preface to the Second Edition

A book, like a child, has an identity of its own. It is therefore a strange experience to be offered, as I was, an opportunity to make changes in a book I wrote several years ago: it was almost as if one were invited to remake one's teenaged son. Tempting as such a prospect might be to many a parent, few could bring themselves to do it. The boy is himself, pimples and all, and to alter a single aspect of his character would be to destroy the integrity of the whole person. On that principle, I decided to decline the opportunity and—except for making some changes of form (principally by substituting footnotes for backnotes) and for correcting such factual errors as have come to my attention—to reissue the book as it originally appeared.

It might be useful to the reader, however, to know what changes I should be inclined to make, were I to make any. First, I should change somewhat the focus of the opening of the book. The alignment of republicans and nationalists was as I have depicted it, and so were the personal qualities and attitudes of the two groups of men; but further study has convinced me that the conceptual core of republican ideology was different from what I earlier supposed. Specifi-

cally, I have described the republicans as being rationalists and as believing in the inherent goodness or perfectibility of man. It now appears that to understand the more doctrinaire of them one must also take into account the quasi-paranoid ideas of the English Oppositionists—notably those of John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, Viscount Bolingbroke, and James Bergh.

Second, I should probably handle differently my analysis, in chapter six, of the deal in the constitutional convention between John Rutledge of South Carolina and Roger Sherman of Connecticut. It is not that I believe my interpretation is wrong; indeed, it is the only way I know to reconcile the known facts about the hard-nosed trading that went on behind the scenes at the convention. But the direct evidence supporting my account is skimpy, and when the book first appeared a number of reviewers who otherwise reacted favorably balked on that point. Some, in fact, treated it as if it were central to my overall thesis, whereas it is actually tangential. That is to say, though it is important to understand that artful wheeling and dealing were necessary to effect the compromises which made the Constitution possible, it is not so important precisely how the deals were made. Accordingly, if I were doing the book over again I should probably couch this particular episode in more tentative or conjectural language, though doing so would disrupt the flow of the narrative.

Third, I should probably handle certain individuals somewhat differently. After further study of Alexander Hamilton, for instance, I have come to realize that his historical image as a wily and devious manipulator is unjustified; similarly, I have come to realize that James Madison was much more devious and considerably more

able than I had thought. Most important, however, there was a dimension to the Founding Fathers which is neglected here: the ardent desire that some of them had for Fame, the secular equivalent of Christian immortality. The hope of winning the undying gratitude of posterity through noble creative statesmanship was clearly the "ruling passion" in Hamilton's life, and a similar urge impelled Madison, James Wilson, and other Americans of their generation.

That brings us to the final change I should be disposed to make. My respect and admiration for the Founders of the American constitutional system is large, yet most of the people who stalk these pages are described as driven by base motives, especially greed. That approach to the subject misled some into believing (or charging) that I had written a new economic interpretation to replace the Beardian economic interpretation I had previously challenged. If I were to redo the book (and if I knew how), I should attempt to make my central argument clearer. I do not maintain that the Constitution was the product of the interactions of grubby and greedy men. I do maintain that such interactions brought about the conditions in which a relative handful of men—whose idealism, fortunately, was tempered by a realistic understanding of their countrymen—could effect a constitutional revolution. If we would appreciate what the Founders did, we must understand their contemporaries as they did.

FORREST McDONALD

Coker, Alabama
November 1978

Preface to the First Edition

The first function of the founders of nations, after the founding itself, is to devise a set of true falsehoods about origins—a mythology—that will make it desirable for nationals to continue to live under common authority, and, indeed, make it impossible for them to entertain contrary thoughts. Ordinarily the founding, being the less subtle of the tasks, is also the easier, but with the American Founding Fathers the order of difficulty was reversed. On the one hand, widely different and deeply rooted local traditions separated the thirteen British colonies in North America, and space and the available means of communication separated them even further. Accordingly, logic dictated that if the colonies were to be independent of Britain they should be independent of one another also. They should be not one nation but several, and most Americans, including many devoutly patriotic leaders, so thought.

On the other hand, a condition inherent in British North America dictated that if the founding could be accomplished, the necessary myths would create themselves. For Americans reckoned values in the marketplace and by consensus, unlike the Europeans, who reckoned them through traditional institutions and by absolute standards.

Now, one of the peculiarities of the American way is that when contests of ideas arise, the view held by the winning side comes in time to be regarded as the unqualified truth, the only possible view; indeed, all subsequent battles must begin with the outcomes of earlier battles as unquestioned premises. Before independence, for example, few Americans espoused the doctrines about to be set forth in the Declaration of Independence, and hosts of divergent opinions were perfectly tolerable; but once the Declaration was made, it became not only immoral but virtually unthinkable to hold any other position. Similarly, those who in the 1780s believed that the nation should be one instead of many had rivals in abundance, but if they won, the winning itself would create the necessary mythology, for it would retroactively transform the winners' view into the only view.

The nationalists won, and their victory established as truth a pentad of fictions: (1) that the war for independence had been a united war for national independence, not for the independence of the several states; (2) that the question facing the new nation was not whether it should have a national government, but what form that government should take; (3) that the first form, that of the Congress under the Articles of Confederation, was unworkable and consequently public and private morality collapsed just after the war ended in 1783; (4) that in the ensuing political chaos and commercial stagnation Americans came to realize that the Confederation was inadequate to promote the national ends that all desired; and (5) that the wisest group of men ever assembled in a single body, a group of demigods, came to the rescue by writing a Constitution that would assure the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity.

For a hundred years historians of this epoch dutifully

performed the function that was the universal function of historians: they preserved the myths and adapted them to the changing needs of a changing society. Down through the nineteenth century they did so: John Marshall, Jared Sparks, George Bancroft, Richard Hildreth, John Fiske, each in his turn, recited the myths anew, each embellishing them only enough to adjust them to changing times, as each viewed those changing times.

Then came a sudden aberration, one with many American roots but no American precedents: Around the turn of the present century, a small group of historians disowned their traditional function as preservers and adapters of myths, and audaciously proclaimed that they would thenceforth seek and report only the truth. So spoke the "scientific historians" of Johns Hopkins and elsewhere, and so spoke the "New Historians" led by James Harvey Robinson, Charles A. Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Carl Becker. In a burst of creative scholarship, the followers of the New History unearthed an array of long-forgotten facts —most notably, facts demonstrating that the Fathers had been a cantankerous lot who fought one another, in unseemly fashion, for power and wealth—and devised a new interpretation of the national origins that would accommodate this information.

Such findings, like the truth-seeking heresy that inspired them, were scarcely welcomed. In a society in which the voice of the people is the voice of God, they were dangerous, subversive, downright blasphemous. Undaunted, the champions of the pursuit of truth in history fought the good fight for a whole generation, and in due course—because scholarly ideas, too, are evaluated at the marketplace—their interpretations came to prevail.

But then, in the early 1930s, Beard and Becker came to

believe (or realize) that their own works—even Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* and Becker's *The Declaration of Independence*—had also preserved and adapted the myths, adapting them differently only because of the rapidly changing circumstances of their own times. Whereupon they solemnly recanted the whole blasphemous ideal of the pursuit of truth, and not only declared that the historian should preserve and adapt myths to the changing needs of changing times, but proclaimed that he could in fact do no other. And where Beard and Becker led, the rest of their profession soon followed.

So it went until a scant dozen years ago. Then the study of history in America took still another turn: not because anyone planned it that way or because the tenor of the times so dictated, but because, as a result of a concatenation of physical and economic circumstances, it suddenly became possible and even easy to find out details about the American past, on a scale never before dreamed possible. The new generation of historians, inspired almost to the point of intoxication by their rapid consumption of vast quantities of new information, began to discover anew the blasphemous ideal. The old generation watched the upstarts demolish their every cherished interpretation—those having to do with the national experience as well as those dealing with national origins.

Ahead lay the gargantuan task of reconstructing all aspects of American history—that is, of building new narrative and interpretive frameworks that could accommodate the newly learned data. These, like the older accounts, would be products of the historian's imagination, mere made-up stories; but if they were properly made up their contours would reflect those of past reality—much as a

map, another product of man's imagination, reflects topographical reality—and not the immediate needs or aspirations of the present or any other generation.

The task would not be easy even if the new generation were entirely free in undertaking it. But it is not. Most modern historians have shaken loose the fetters of the old generalizations about American history, but have not entirely freed themselves from the old dogmas. The old dogmas, the philosophy of the New Historians in retreat, postulated that all judgments are subjective and therefore (1) that all truth is relative to the point of view of the observer, (2) accurate knowledge of the human past is not knowable, and (3) not worth seeking.

Now any sophomore student of logic should be able to perceive that it is indefensible to draw such inferences from that premise, but historians, even the modern ones, have somehow managed to believe that if the premise is sound the rest necessarily follows. Some therefore have challenged the premise, which is inherently a futile pursuit because the premise is true by definition. Others have tried to ignore it, but that is scarcely more satisfactory. Those who follow neither of these courses have most often tried to accommodate it by devising an analytical style of writing in which, instead of telling the reader what happened, they attempt to recapitulate the thought processes by which they came to believe that that was what happened.

I object to such writing on two grounds. One is simply that it yields works so dull that no reasonable man will try to wade through them.[1] The other is that it confuses the

[1] I cite as a prime example my own earlier work, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago, 1958).

three phases of the historian's cerebral processes—finding and taking in information, digesting and reducing it to meaningful generalizations, and writing it up. The first of these, ingesting, is systematic and logical: one utilizes one's training to find out where all the relevant materials are, and one by one takes them all in. The second, digesting, is partly logical but mainly intuitive and unconscious: the human brain can and daily does perform many thousand times as many calculations, reducing facts to generalizations, as can be performed on the brain's logical, conscious surface. The third, writing, is partly intuitive and partly a matter of hard and systematic work: one selects and arranges the data, not for their importance, but for their usefulness in communicating generalizations.

So believing, I have written a book which is unabashedly "subjective." It is myself: through the course of more than 20,000 hours of conscious work and several times that in unconscious work, I have taken in a hundred thousand or so scraps of information, and attempt here not to reproduce them but to tell you what they mean. Yet I believe that what I tell you is not only objectively true but also objectively verifiable. That is the purpose of the notes to this book. They are not—as it was once held that notes should be—designed to "prove," step by step, that each of the things I have said is true, so that the facts can "speak for themselves." Rather, they are designed so that anyone interested in doing so can undergo the mental gymnastics that I went through to arrive at my various generalizations (though without the false starts, dead ends, and other wasted motion that accompanied most of my efforts). I believe that if you read the materials they cite, in the order that they are cited, you will (in addition to noticing that

like all people I make mistakes) reach essentially the same conclusions that I have reached, though you would doubtless state them somewhat differently.

It could be, of course, that what I say is true in every detail but does not constitute a story whose contours reflect past reality; I have not said everything and what I have said might not measure up to, or be confined to, its proper context. But I believe that the story told here is not only true but also valid as history. A valid historical context (1) dictates its own point of observation (which is to say, of generalization), (2) has terminal points in time and space, and (3) is reducible to a single question that is self-answering. Valid historical inquiry ends, rather than begins, with knowledge of the pertinent point of observation, termini, and question; when one knows them, one is ready to write. In the writing, one is concerned only with such things as are meaningful on the appropriate level of generalization—in this instance, the United States *as* United States during the years of its founding—and not, for their own sake, with the parts that made it up or a larger whole of which it was a part. If one follows this procedure, the story that results will necessarily conform to past reality.

Now, from the point of view of the United States as United States, the only question that had any meaning between 1763 and some point around the time of the Declaration of Independence was, Would the British colonies in North America find a viable means of staying within the British empire, or would they not? That being answered in the negative, the next meaningful question was, Would the States be able to win in war the independence they had declared? This is not to say that these were the questions that from day to day occupied every Jedediah Strong in New

England or Peter Van Blank in New York or Henry Lee Carter in Virginia; perhaps they lived out their entire lives without ever once thinking of them. But if one would be concerned with the United States at these times, these questions and these only have any meaning.

And so, in the period under inquiry in this book, there was also only one meaningful question: Would this be politically one nation, or would it not?

If I have stated the obvious I do not apologize, for it is the obvious that is often most difficult to see.

FORREST McDONALD

Providence, Rhode Island
February 1965

E Pluribus Unum

Chapter One

From One, Many

Where patriots stood, in the spring of seventy-six, depended upon whether they believed in Original Sin. Two vital questions had been settled: war could not be averted, for war had long been a fact; and the empire could not be held together, for in almost every colony patriots had seized control of the military, royal governors had fled, and revolutionary assemblies had established themselves as *de facto* governing bodies. But as to what to do next, disagreement was sharp and deep. The practical question was, shall independence be declared now, or shall a national government be created first? The underlying question was, is man rational and virtuous or is he evil; is he to be trusted or not?

The group that took the first position had two wings: one led by John and Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Elbridge Gerry and, off and on, other New Englanders; the other led by Richard Henry Lee and Arthur Lee, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, George Wythe and, off and on, other Southerners. These men thought of themselves as the part of Congress having the "forwardness and zeal" that the times required; they believed, as Paine put it, that one