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Executive Director:
Timothy D. Manning, M.Div.
160 Longbridge Drive
Kernersville, North Carolina 27284-6333
Cell: (803) 420-5355 / timanning1@gmail.com

Lincoln, the Declaration, And Secular Puritanism: A Rhetoric For Continuing Revolution

by

M. E. Bradford

Though we have never been a “people” in the received and historic sense of that term, it is a commonplace of scholarship that Americans make up the most self-confident and least self-conscious of modern societies. For over two hundred years it has been our imagination that we “knew” our nature and destiny.ⁱ Unequivocally we affirmed that the obvious truth of who-and-for-what we were was contained in a set of sacred (but generally extra-legal) documents. Their authority was no more subject to question than that of the tablets given upon the mountain. Neither has a detailed inquiry into their formal properties (and therefore their intrinsic ambiguities) been encouraged. For our truth was “one and indivisible.” Of course, we sometimes quarreled over the meaning of these *a priori* guarantees of our future well-being, quarreled even as we agreed upon their canonical status. But whatever side of the disagreement the earlier American took for his own, his explanation of the dispute he had joined was always the stupidity and obscurantism of his antagonists.ⁱⁱ Moreover, the breathtaking pace, institutionalized good fortune, and periodic convulsiveness of our record could be trusted to prevent any single

view of the matters contested from being pursued into the hard divisions of a nationwide and nation-affecting conflict between permanent orthodoxies: trusted until after World War II, when the impact of said instruments had advanced a considerable distance in its purchase upon our common experience.ⁱⁱⁱ (Of course, I must except definite intervals of remorse, repentance, and (perhaps) remission. Ninevah was spared! But this wind said only “soon – very soon.” Therefore, without publicly specifying why, we are, as never before, prepared to doubt our secularized eschatology; to examine the “roads taken,” the evangels heeded, and the prophets deputized to lead forward the march. And, for similar reasons, there is an urgency to our retrospection on once “safe assumptions” which resembles not so much the curiosity of the antiquarian or the animus of the partisan as the anguish of the self-condemned.

In accepting the opportunity described above, in focusing as *a practicing rhetorician* on the aforementioned internal contradictions of thrust and presupposition, I must from the first admit that my illustrative selection of the sanctified American writings is nothing like a full one. Fortunately, some materials in this collection are more sacred, because more rhetorical, than others. Three in particular demand close inspection in any survey of the lot. Even more fortunately, these three stand at the center of the total series to inform it with such power as they possess. Ordered by the logic of our democratic tropology, they are illustrations of the national debt to what the older rhetoricians called a “mixture of the modes,” a species of confusion which has disguised from our view the probable sources of our present peril. (And, as I have excepted the South from my analysis, so must I except the Constitution. The two together, province and a rhetorical instrument of law *qua* law, are the foreground against which my subjects play out their effects.^{iv})

After the example of the poets, I must begin in the middle. For the significance of this procession comes clear only there, in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. To state my argument briefly, what the Emancipator accomplished by confirming the nation in (or “institutionalizing”) an erroneous understanding of the Declaration

of Independence made possible the ultimate elevation of that same error in Mrs. Howe's "war song" and set us forever to "trampling out the grapes of wrath." More importantly, the proofs of this synopsis – and the proper instruments for extricating our country from the now evolving political and intellectual impasse the South received from these generalizations. And even there the hardening process did not achieve completion until the conclusion of the War Between the States when the South was near voiceless and discredited, so far as political doctrine was concerned. Furthermore, before this localized firmness could affect the general "we," the ongoing flow of the national "business" had caught up the unruly children of secession and mitigated their "otherness" into the exception which proves the rule. In any case, even if Dixie had remained to the present in obdurate and principled rebellion of the spirit, it could not have altered the national self-assurance of Union and its grounds. For the rest of the Republic has always expected the South to be something like "another country," a heresy *bound* by geography and therefore beside the point in a discussion of America at large.)

My announcement at this point, and the occasion of my discourse, is thus simple: the for-the-sanguine-necessary process of disabusement by deserved disaster is near to fruition. It is not possible to consider the ambiguities of texture and design that make fair to divide us beyond all powers of healing – and to paralyze our hand abroad. For the first time in a century (at Gettysburg we were *almost forced* to learn how divided we could be), the generality of our countrymen have had some intimation of their subjection as a body to the ordinary laws of group mortality: some inkling that any number of circumstances in combination might ensure that they would cease forever to be anything recognizable as the United States. The realization has passed among us with little acknowledgement, like some cool subterranean breath of air freshening for an instant into a sunlight it has never before confronted and through a place of noisy, foolish celebration; and, while we shivered on the touch, each man and woman of our company sensed that no purpose could be served in

speaking of the foreboding we shared, no reason found for notice of the omen because its presage was immediate and well-nigh irrevocable. Earlier allusion to the far away trumpets of apocalypse, the reference points of a bygone righteousness, provided for an in- ? which it explains – *are available* in a conjunction of the ancient rhetorical distinctions between levels of style and kinds of discourse. There, and not in the straightforward dismemberings of the political philosophers. For the Declaration of Independence is a lawyer’s answer to lawyers, a counterplea to the English government’s explanation *cum* apologia of its American policy – a forensic counterplea in tone *and* organization. Moreover, the Gettysburg Address is an unmistakable memorial oration in the high epideictic vein prescribed for such solemn moments. And finally, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is certainly a “practical poem” of the Dorian variety, an exhortation to action which would have created no surprises had its numbers sounded through the ranks of Cromwell’s Ironsides.^{vi} Consistent with the pattern which produces all such “landmarks,” everything to be identified in (and complained about) each of these singular writings is available in other sources contemporary with them: a cluster of related speeches, histories, essays in opinion, and poems surrounding and supporting their separate splendors. As I said above, history did not give them to us in isolation or according to the order of time and importance which they have assumed. Their *form* finally determined their meaning, their “family tree” as we presently conceive of it. The Declaration, Address, and “Hymn” are therefore epitomes, hallowed by usage (and confirmed by their own internal logic) into a millennialist and gnostic injunction to the country (and indeed the species) at large: an injunction which can never rest easy with the given social and moral nature of the poor souls whom it enjoins.^{vii} The reason behind this movement of mindless rehearsal into myth is then the success of Mr. Lincoln’s battlefield performance. In such a cauldron history is easily remade. For Lincoln’s Pennsylvania miracle is visible in the shape and surface of its accomplishment, a retreat from proposition, discussion, and argument into oracle and glorified announcement: an advance from discourse of what is *believed to be* into an

assertion of what *must be, and yet forever remain in the process of becoming.*

The most important formal property of Lincoln's great address is the biblical language in which it is cast:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

For Americans, the effect of epideictic encapsulation is what the Greeks called “Asiatic,” after observing its prevalence and usefulness among nations living beyond their eastern boundaries. It is a prerhetorical rhetoric, suited to judges, prophets, and priest/kings who instruct and command without explaining: that is, suitable to a “closed” world. As no dispute concerning the materials it enshrined was imaginable, the end to which it was

employed was obviously very different from that of the deliberative and forensic discourses of which the Athenian philosophers approved.^{viii} Never did the epideictic serve in pure Hellenic “deciding before” or “judging after” a genuine choice.^{ix} Probably its intent was instead the affirmation of a common bond – often *in* its user, but always shared by those who heard or read after him. Of course, as long as there have been “authorities” among or over their people, the style has remained a part of every rhetorician’s equipment, a magic to be used whenever what was there for the saying was less important than the saying itself.^x Now, we may at first reasonably resist this association of Lincoln and Oriental despotism, especially if we know of his Necessitarian Rationalism.^{xi} But before we resist too strongly, let us look at what the biblical style implies, and conceals, in his address, and ask if he is not assuming the role of a Joshua, whose authority is such that he need only speak the command of the Lord for it to be obeyed.

Among Americans in the middle years of the previous century there was one authority above all others. Revival and frontier had deepened a relationship established with settlement. We were a fellowship of “the Book” and took all government and political philosophy – even the Constitution – to be practical and unworthy of mention in the same breath with Holy Scripture. Politics might, within reason, be tested against revealed truth. But we never imagined more than a tangency for the political and the sacred – never a holy beginning or conclusion *by* politics.^{xii} In putting away our Englishness, and in adopting the First Amendment, we made these distinctions plain. We were thus a religious “community” as opposed to divinized state, a polity with no god’s son to make us and no god’s city to build. (That is, except in New England – of which more hereafter.)

Now, the proper voice of this communal orthodoxy – its style, if you like – was that of the Authorized Version of 1611, the translation for King James. Therefore, anything spoken to us that hoped, in South Carolina *or* in Massachusetts, to suggest the transcendent had to sound and feel like “a Daniel come up to judgment.” Lincoln’s strategy in the first sentence at Gettysburg is

to life beyond discourse, away from the political and into the “moral” order, what stands in the Declaration (despite its reference to the Deist’s “Creator”) to be proved and argued. The world of the epideictic, of “four score and seven” (versus “eighty-seven”) or “our fathers,” is an ultra-prescriptive realm which claims God for a sponsor and a sanction from outside time for what is done within it; a sponsorship through a “righteous blood” or genealogy (where fathers are important – particular, as opposed to founders – and private) and according to partially mysterious purposes (as opposed to “reasonable ends”). Certain men belong to that world by *a priori* definition; they *know* it is theirs (plus a little more, lest they worship in it their own devices and “go-a-founding”). Others join the dispensation through the lending of the established blood, but only after that blood is “located.” Hence, “brought forth” – an equivocal phrase, again implying a source other than “our fathers” themselves for the “new nation” which they “birthed.” (The image, it is worth remarking, runs with a full set of corollaries throughout the speech. Its final result is sacrilege by submerged metaphor: a phony “new testament” out of a phony “old,” with dead soldiers for a bridge.)

In contrast, the remainder of this opening sentence is not of Mosaic or “pre-classical” (as political philosophers use the term) stock. With “liberty” we enter the English Whig commonwealth of slowly earned and evolved rights and law, and with “equality” the French Jacobin satrapy, where men are dignified by abstract “proposition” and loud musketry. However, since liberty and equality are hieratically marked as “brought forth” by “fathers,” their doctrinal status as emulsible elements in a settled, blessed, patriarchal, and republican solution are thus certified with finality. Moreover, the fundamental question of the irreconcilability of these terms of honor is left aside, forbidden. So much for Mr. Lincoln’s *exordium*, the background of his message for the day. Once it has passed the reader or auditor without examination, most of its work is already done.

The biblical note is quietly sustained and our problem with it compounded in the two major paragraphs of the speech. Some

of the religious language with which it opens is repeated, and some replaced. “Consecrate” and “hallow” are invoked to sanction a “new birth.” And the Union dead, not the clergy, shall provide an aegis for the event. Finally, the opening confusion issues in a peroration even more confusing. Collectively the red tide of battle is to redeem us – though this time the nation will midwife its own reincarnation. The godly work of the fathers will be complete (or more properly, replace) in a joining of three in one. But, like Lincoln’s first “offspring,” this final monster is a bit puzzling, his “New Testament” as peculiar as his “Old.” For government “by” the people might not be “for” the people (*vide* Plato on “elected” physicians and ship captains).^{xiii} Similarly, government “of the people” is possibly neither “by” nor “for” them (remember Disraeli on Tory Democracy). “Four score and seven” or “fathers” can be reconciled to “for” and perhaps “conceived in liberty” to “brought forth” (an interesting compromise between these first two realms of discourse of “families” of terms, as if a Pope should use his authority only to deny it); but none of these to “of” or “by.” For conception and dedication are portions of an organic process which gives us identities neither similar nor unbounded. “Equality” alone consorts well only with “by.” And “of” implies representatives, courts, and the “system of liberty” – not inheritance. But to see what is most mischievous in this “new birth” and “baptism” we should recall that Lincoln had predicted a “new founding” as early as his “Springfield Lyceum Speech.”^{xiv} And that concentration of power in the executive branch of government would be its final fruit. What it is that “shall not perish” (recalling perhaps the most familiar passage in the New Testament, John 3:16) is not the soul, the new man, the re-born Christian, but a divinized state.

Professor Eric Voegelin has written me that “Lincoln’s government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ is even more a millenarian blasphemy than becomes apparent from your paper.” Voegelin traces the formula to Wycliffe’s prologue to his Bible and beyond to Romans 11:36. Other sources are “in the stoic symbolization of the cosmos as brought forth of God, by God, for God” and in Marcus Aurelius. “There you have

the transportation of a cosmological formula into a millenarian formula for political action.” (Letter of Sept. 6, 1970)

Then let us forget the paradox and oxymoron before us and look back at “liberty” and “equality” in the Declaration of Independence and then forward to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

I have already mentioned the quality of counterclaim (or legal “charge”) in our manifesto of 1776. Only the opening sentences of paragraph two of that special pleading seems out of place in the Declaration’s forensic whole. And, as the epideictic/beatific swallows up “liberty” and “equality” in Lincoln’s Civil War speech, here also the disposition and weight of other components in the total apologia – their historic and prescriptive appeal to the customary and the English, the inherited rules governing price and subject – cancel out or modify the apparent vanity of “self-evident” and “all men.” There are those who argue that the peculiar lines were to serve as a concession to the Revolution’s “leftmost wing.” Others contend that they may be no more than what Mr. Jefferson was able to “smuggle in” (in satisfaction of his *philosophe* streak) because his compatriots in the Continental Congress refused to read into his composition anything more than was anticipated in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.^{xv} The reader should look elsewhere for a history of the Whig doctrine and idiom which could “neutralize” such words: only as much equality as is consonant with liberty and necessary to a modest minimum of human dignity for freemen; and only that liberty recommended by the English experience and enjoyed by the Anglo-Saxon forebears. But – and this is my point – the dominance of that Whig temper is evident, especially in the deletions from Jefferson’s original draft which the Congress imposed upon their young spokesman. We can presuppose it.^{xvi}

Now what is a solicitation *from* a given Whig law and *for* a good repute among the nations? First of all, it is a bill of particulars against the royal government making plain that the Crown – in violating its well-defined prerogative – has forfeited all

purchase upon its chartered creations, the American colonies. (It is noteworthy that the Declaration speaks for the independence of the *separate* individual colonies and thus belies Mr. Lincoln's purposefully mistaken chronology.)^{xvii} Following the pattern of another variety of legal instrument, it says, "You, not I, destroyed our connection." For under a rule of law, liegemanhip and lordship are indeed like partner and partner, man and wife: neither role exists unless both are observed with some strictness. Portions of Jefferson's catalogue, especially in his original version, are a reaching after visceral influence on natural (not reasonable) and emotional men: persons of distinctive temper, antecedents and culture. Often overlooked, they add racial and Christian/traditionalist appeals to the case at law. Certain lines evoke the horror of "servile insurrection" and black overpopulation; others refer to mercenaries and kindred affronts to the "common blood;" and still others complain of British involvement with "merciless Indian savages." Elsewhere we read of the impropriety of resemblance to the conduct of "Infidel powers" in the policy of a "Christian King." Lastly, all of this in-view-of-paragraph-two surprise is hedged with a disclaimer that the colonies intended no revolution when they first made remonstrance and is coupled with an admission that political restiveness and innovation are, in most circumstances, to be avoided. The close goes the same way – a retreat into "sacred honor."

Prescriptive laws and kings and honor have nothing to do with the "self-evident" and "metaphysically" proved first principles of Burke's doctors of the closet. History is their "legitimate" ancestor; trial and error, reputation and disrepute, sifting and selection stand behind Jefferson's appeal. In weight, this argument from the record will not replace revelation or anointment by a Samuel. But it is far removed from the abstractions of the Encyclopedists or mechanical universe of their perpetually absent "Creator." And therefore it does not pretend, despite "self-evident," to bespeak His will. Respected for what it is (and with its explosive sentences circumstantially grounded and converted into "mere argument" by a Whig rhetoric), the

Declaration is agreeable enough. Its implicit denial that there was a “founding,” its complexity and dialectic (recognized by most responsible American leaders who invoked the document before 1860, and acknowledged by the very different language of the 1787 Constitution), are, I repeat, inverted by Father Abraham.^{xviii} And the forces which he thus released in manufacturing his “political religion” find their tongue in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”^{xix}

There is no space here for detailed discussion of the two hundred and fifty years of New England self-delusion which are gathered in Mrs. Howe’s masterpiece. A private redaction will have to serve my purpose. I inject it because some such recalling is necessary to the explication I intend – and (in reverse) serves as evidence for the readings just concluded.

It is above all else a sense of having been “called out” for (and into) a special covenant with God, an awareness of a “mission among the Gentiles,” that distinguished colonial New England. As John Crowe Ransom writes, the Puritans were persuaded that they had caught God when He had caught them: had “fetched the Pure Idea in a bound box/ And fastened Him in a steeple.”^{xx} First they were to be “a city on a hill,” an example to the heathen, a sanctuary to which “the wise and just ought to repair.” And then, when stronger, they were expected to overreach the boundaries of that elevated place by more vigorous, impatient, and thorough reformations.

Early New England history is, for the most part, an examination of the covenant theory at work: a sequence of signs, rewards, and punishments. And the same holds true of biography. Even though the individual Puritan, in composing an account of his own life or that of another Saint, might find reason to doubt his subject’s election to the order of Grace, there was still satisfaction for the unfortunate through association with the “elected enterprise.” Poetry and of course theology offer evidence of the same assumptions, as do the great sermons, the dominant literary type in the milieu.

Later, as success in the exercise of free will undermined Calvinist assumptions concerning foreordination, and as scientism drove to cover the old certainties about original sin, blood redemption, and the limitations of human reason, the vital heart went out of the “Good Old Cause.” For without a lot of punishment to go with triumph, without some body of authority to restrain freedom and to channel the “inner light,” the godly commonwealth inevitably suffered from its own accretions of power and prosperity. The subjection of Nature and of enemies (to say nothing of New England’s full educational hegemony over other Americans) vitiated the ancient Puritan bias toward self-doubt and self-examination. However, the eschatology survived – tempered into a posture of proprietary responsibility for the nation’s (and world’s) moral, economic, and political life; survived mundane, yet zealous as ever before. From John Winthrop to Ben Franklin to the 1970 Massachusetts anti-draft legislation, this movement toward spiritual arrogance without spiritual substance has been uninterrupted. Indeed, the now familiar secular Liberalism of the American intellectual Establishment is the natural issue of the New Jerusalem in the West – by Unitarianism out of internecine strife. Faith in a chosen status is its continuing patrimony – though the chooser becomes some airy *Zeitgeist*, and not a living God. Mr. Lincoln’s “political religion” is a statement of its fullest revelation in this sequence and Mrs. Howe’s poem a device for ensuring the enactment of that “Word” as law.

If the epideictic manner may be broken down according to degrees of intensity and/or purity, the admonition of the “Battle Hymn,” an *ex cathedra* pox upon the Moabites in Dixie (and command that they “be laid waste, utterly”), *appears* to be of its highest flowering. These stanzas seem a marching order *sui generis*, a rousing somehow at once forensic, persuasive, and patriotic. Yet look again, closely:

Mine eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the

grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His
terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on!

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a
hundred circling camps;
They have builded Him an altar in the
evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the
dim and flaring lamps,
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of
steel;
“As ye deal with My contemnners, so with you
My grace shall deal;”
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the
serpent with His heel
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that
shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men
before His judgement seat;
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him!
be jubilant my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born
across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures
you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die
to make men free,
While God is marching on.

At this point harder questions are required. For the “Battle Hymn’s” outreach toward a nonpareil power identifies it as more than (or pseudo) epideictic. There is a note of hysteria in the poem, a discoloration very remote from the “speech of throne and altar.”^{xxi} Genuinely confident and secure authority, operating from transcendent ground, does not push quite so hard.^{xxii} And what such authority tells us keeps that ground at a greater distance from the labors of men – *does this in order to extend its connections in the world*. In a word, it performs no blasphemy. Of Mrs. Howe, we cannot say as much. Let me make the charge specific by glossing individual passages from her poem.

The most striking feature of the “Battle Hymn” – that is, after its confident appropriation of the flame, wind, and trumpet of Jehovah – must be its use of Christ’s Second Coming. We should at this point recall Mrs. Howe’s prototype, the solid doggerel of “John Brown’s Body:” a lively song itself (ironically) based on a Southern folk hymn concerning the way to *the* heavenly city, the city where there are *no politics*. The madman of Harpers Ferry is transformed in that anthem into a Christ-figure – modestly, and with no claim to a full equation, but transformed nonetheless. His is the redemptive death lifting the weight of a specific wickedness from our collective back. Brown, however, was an embarrassing personage to a respectable New England feminist Unitarian lady such as Mrs. Howe. Like Brown himself, she would use no vulnerable surrogate. The “Hero” in line three of stanza three is Christ, in *propria persona*. And therefore General Burnside on his way to Virginia is somehow metamorphosed into Gabriel ushering in the real millennium described by St. John of Patmos. The binding of the serpent and the Jesus of the Judgment are assuredly from Revelation. And the lilies keep the latter at the requisite remove from pure Thunder – from violations of the Trinity.^{xxiii} Then we are prepared for peroration: the identification of a socio-political goal with the sacrifice of the Cross. Even the slower tempo of the music in the last stanza exudes confidence and finality. She meant every word.

I have said enough of blasphemy. It is all too easy for us to be persuaded of the complaint – that is, *if we want to be*. Contemporary Americans are however perhaps so accustomed to a reversing of the original order of priorities in Christ’s redaction of the Decalogue that we forget His two commandments were not always so disposed. Hence, we are also prone to forget the private and cultural circumstances in Mrs. Howe’s life which compound and complicate her presumption and its meaning for us. In fact it is both most surprising and most predictable that she should thus proceed, and boldly: surprising with respect to historic Christian teaching (“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” was yet a commandment in 1862); and probably because of

the New England intellectual experience which set the “saints” aside from that teaching. And what was, though shocking, predictable in her abolitionist Boston is even more an established paradox today, a contradiction at ease in this Zion because she, and Lincoln, and the trends they bespoke accomplished their objectives. In a word, we do not see this quality in the “Battle Hymn” because it is now our “orthodoxy” – even in the most conservative circles. “All now are born Yankees in the race of men,” writes the poet Allen Tate.

Mrs. Howe’s verses *are* a reversion to long rejected beginnings. For the sound and feel of an authority she had to have, she was forced to reach back to her father’s God and Jesus of “wrath,” toward a doctrinal matrix set aside in “new hope” thirty years before. By 1845 New England had taught her children (and their heirs of the spirit in the Middle West) how to do this sort of thing. *How to do it, I must add, if the occasion be political.* Probably the educational process involved was an unconscious one, for both parent and offspring. And for a time all were forced to be careful with the “forbidden knowledge.” But 1820, 1850, and Southern secession gave the banner into their hands – and they were careful no more. Lincoln legitimized the process here under consideration – and, after the fact, gave status to the complex of forces and expectations which the “Battle Hymn” released, the “armed doctrine” of Manifest Destiny in its mature phase.^{xxiv} With Mrs. Howe we came up against the gnostic “thing-in-itself.” And we are still there.^{xxv}

I have earlier suggested that the way into this paradox *is* the way out. For a curious consideration of Julia Howe’s politically partisan Jesus should engender in the rhetorically and theologically literate the shudder requisite to its exposure – and should deflate the three “holy documents” to the status of stratagems instinctively, or with forethought, designed to an immediate practical end, formed to take advantage of an immediate practical situation. The Continental Congress needed to draw more people into the Revolution and to “improve its international image;” Lincoln needed to transform Jefferson’s composition in

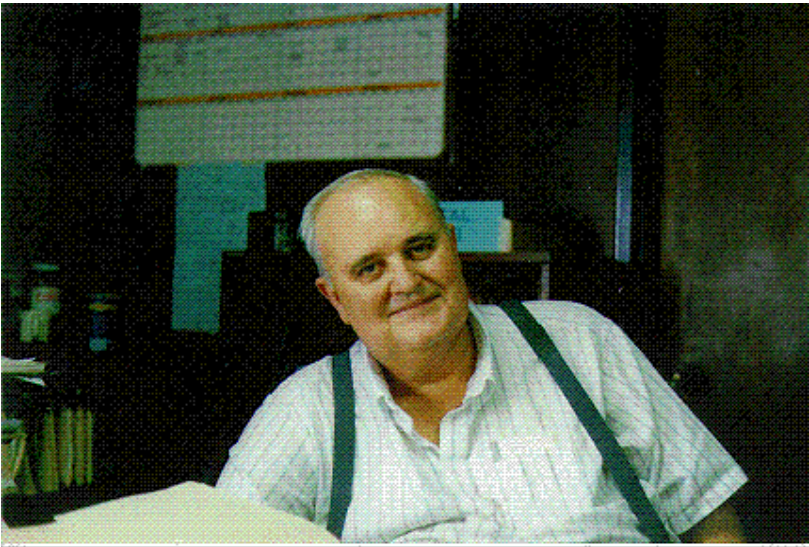
order to reconstitute the Union, “control” the war effort, and justify his 1864 re-election; and Mrs. Howe sensed instinctively that the North’s military spirit for late 1861 needed elevation if it were to be sustained against a vigorous enemy. Compromised forensic, adulterated, and then pseudo-epideictic were the proper engines for the performance of this business.

The problem these writings as a set have left with us in their accomplishment of calculated objectives thus begins in the rhetorical nature of the “tools” they employed. Perhaps nowhere in the history of man has the millennialist impulse been so thoroughly set at liberty as within our own borders. Certainly we cannot find an equivalent in the officially Utopian states behind the Iron Curtain, nor even in the brief revolutionary phases of French and English history. Only *here* have men, without major interference, labored *in time* a century or more in order to *abolish time, repeal contingency*. And only while masquerading in pious vesture could this gnostic aggression against Being have enlisted so many Americans under its colors, hidden from their eyes, by gloss and accretion, the sensible inertia built into our history with its sober inceptions of 1776 and 1787-88.

Millennialism can mean no other thing today – and always moves from an ontological reaction against the distance separating, by definition, creation and Maker; moves into either a “pulling up” or a “pulling down.” With it we worship ourselves: falsify, and then forget our birthright. Variety, structure, measure, and any form or differentiated order are likewise millennialism’s enemies – the original bill of things as written for our tenure in this place of test and trial. A new Beast is always to blame for impediments to the perfecting will. And therefore someone else is to be assailed. Millennium is always to come. But not yet, not until after the next revolution, peaceful or bloody! The freeing, however, is never done – that is, without new slaveries. To this succession and shifting of targets there can be no end, no conclusion to the wandering hither and yon in quest of terrestrial beatitude. “On to Richmond” is, through the Promethean will, made on with “On to Berlin” and “Out to Alpha Centauri, down into the sub-atomic

particle,” and finally, “On through the secrets of the grave.” With each new goal the frustration born of unfounded expectations comes closer and closer to rending the ties that bind. Said another way, the rhetoric of easy hope can produce only the politics of discontent. For some years we have been proving out that particular proposition – the basic truth and inherent danger of democracy. As I remarked in the beginning, the demonstration may soon be complete.

About Bradford



Melvin E. "Mel" Bradford (1934-1993) was a traditional conservative political commentator and professor of literature at the University of Dallas. He died just as the term paleoconservative was being coined and preferred the term traditional conservative. In his preface to *Reactionary Imperative*, he wrote "Reaction is a necessary term in the intellectual context we inhabit in the twentieth century because merely to conserve is

sometime to perpetuate what is outrageous."

Bradford's conservatism was rooted within the heritage and traditions of the American Southern States. He studied at Vanderbilt and wrote his doctoral thesis under the Southern Agrarian and Fugitive Poet Donald Davidson (whose biography Bradford was wrapping up at the time of his sudden death at age 58), and thus was admitted to the succession of this movement to recover the Southern tradition.

Bradford was a literary scholar and a student of rhetoric. He was known in literary circles for his work on William Faulkner, where he stressed the importance of the Southern setting and the primacy of community in understanding the action of Faulkner's novels and stories. He also wrote extensively on the subjects of history, literature, and culture. Bradford specialized in the history of the U.S. founding and Southern history. Bradford advocated the constitutional theory of strict constitutionalism and frequently wrote for *Chronicles magazine* and *Southern Partisan magazine*.

NEH Nomination: In 1980, Bradford was tapped by President-elect Ronald Reagan for chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The selection met with intense objections from neo-conservative (moderate socialists) figures, centering partly on Bradford's criticisms of President Abraham Lincoln. They circulated quotes of Bradford calling Lincoln "a dangerous man," and saying, "The image of Lincoln rose to be very dark" and "indeed almost sinister." Another issue was Bradford's support for the 1972 presidential campaign of George C. Wallace. The liberal neoconservative choice, William Bennett was substituted for Bradford on November 13, 1981.

Great random thoughts Mel penned:

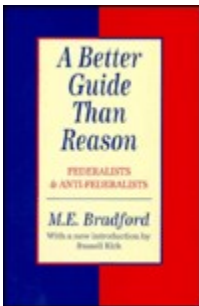
"All our social myths presupposed some version of the corporate life--that man is a social being, fulfilled only in the natural associations built upon common experience, upon ties of blood and friendship, common enterprise, resistance to common enemies, and a common faith." From p. 136. *Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political*

"'Equality before the law' is in the American [political] tradition only if we remember how restricted is the scope of the law's authority in most free societies." pp. 11-12. *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative*

"Americans do not wish to be governed by an omniscient, divinized state, so full of good intentions that it will stop at nothing to realize them." p135. *Original Intentions*

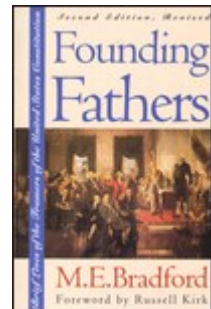
"In a regime of independent freeholders, commercial men, and self-governing communities (who had negotiated informally their own version of a civil compact, one they could in good heart defend 'together' without rewriting their common past and without any hope of reforming one another), such a balance was possible: a federal balance as that term signified to them." p. 136. *Original Intentions*

Some of Mel's Books recommended by the NCHF that are still in print or generally available used.

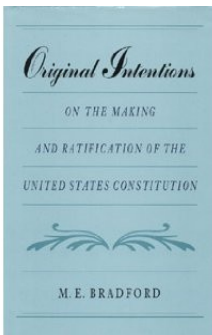


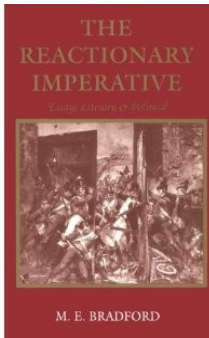
Better Guide than Reason:
Federalists & Anti-Federalists

Founding Fathers:
Brief Lives of the Framers of
the United States Constitution



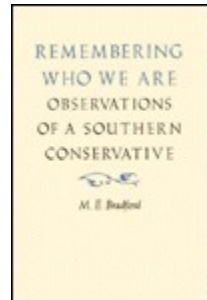
Original Intentions:
On the Making & Ratification of
the United States Constitution



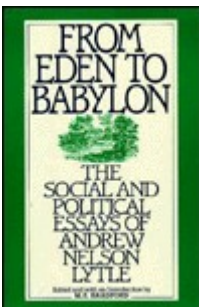


Reactionary Imperative:
Essays Literary & Political

Remembering Who We Are:
Observations of a
Southern Conservative



Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787



From Eden to Babylon:
The Social and Political Essays
of Andrew Nelson Lytle
[Edited and with an Introduction
by M. E. Bradford]

REFERENCES

1 For further discussion of this notion I recommend Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* (London: Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1952); Ronald Van Zandt's *The Metaphysical Foundations of American History* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1959); Albert K. Frederick Mark's *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); David W. Noble's *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (New York: George Braziller, 1968); and (especially) Ernest Lee Tuveson's *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). These are only a sampling of the relevant documents.

ⁱⁱ . For an epitome of the confusion, see p. 306 *et seq.* of Russell B. Nye's *The Almost Chosen People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966). Nye blandly assumes that liberty and equality are compatible imperatives. Far better on this subject (though still compromised) is Harry Jaffa's *Equality and Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

ⁱⁱⁱ . On this "know-nothing" consensus see Daniel Boorstin's *The Genesis of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) and his subsequent studies of the American experience.

^{iv} On this point we are indebted to William R. Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee* (New York: George Braziller, 1961).

^v Actually, the original Constitution has *some* rhetorical character – the total document, that is. For its flavor is that of a matter of fact codification of what already *is* and strikes any reader as very different from the flare and trumpeting of a *thing that knows it was made*. The significance of this distinction will become clear in the unfolding of my subsequent remarks.

^{vi} My basic source for these distinctions is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the Lane Cooper edition (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1960). However, I draw upon the whole of classical rhetoric at certain points (especially Quintilian).

^{vii} The use of the word "gnostic" indicates that I presuppose throughout this essay the calculus of Professor Eric Voegelin. The reader unfamiliar with his work should see *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952) and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969). Pages 90-100 *et seq.* of the latter have a bearing on the paradox I emphasize here.

^{viii} Epideictic, forensic, and deliberative rhetoric correspond more or less to the three voices of ancient rhetoric – Asiatic, Rhodian, and (of course) Attic. I mean by "Asiatic" political discourse disguised in the language of revealed truth – one of the ancient meanings of this term.

^{ix} St. Paul, we should remember, did not fare well on Mars Hill.

x My source here is Richard Weaver's *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), pp. 164-85, an essay entitled "The Older Rhetoric Revisited: Hugh Blair and the Public Virtue of Style," *University Bookman*, IX (Fall, 1968), 12-16. Voegelin's *Order and History*, vol. I and II (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956 and 1957), provides a basis for my understanding of this most ancient of rhetorics. Models for my analysis of composite realms of discourse are provided by James T. Boulton's *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963) and Paul Fussell's *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism: Ethics and Imagery from Swift to Burke* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965).

xi As touchstones, see the peroration to Lincoln's 1842 "Address to the Springfield Chapter of the Washington Temperance Society" ("Reign of Reason, all Hail"), the close to his 1838 "Address Before the Springfield Young Men's Lyceum" (on the substituting of "Reason" for "fathers"), and his 1846 election handbill, "The Truth of the Scriptures" (confessing only that his inclination to "The Doctrine of Necessity" was impolitic) – pp. 32-33, 21, and 40-41 of Richard N. Current's collection, *The Political Thought of Abraham Lincoln* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967).

xii On this "double America," see *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970); Kendall's "The Two Majorities," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, IV (Nov., 1960), 317-45; and some of Kendall's other comments on our national beginnings scattered in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1971). Further support (of sorts) for separation of state and community occurs in Martin Diamond's "Democracy and *The Federalist*: A Reconstruction of the Framers' Intent," pp. 10-24 of *Liberalism and Conservatism: The Continuing Debate in American Government* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1966), ed. By Willmoore Kendall and George Carey; and in Diamond's "The Federalist" in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. By Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally Co., 1963), pp. 573-93.

Also value in this connection is Daniel Boorstin's *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965).

xiii *The Statesman or The Republic.*

xiv All students of the Lincoln myth are in some debt to Edmund Wilson's magisterial *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 99-130. Wilson (pp. xvi-xx) seriously compares Lincoln with the other great "founders" of our age – Bismarck and Lenin. He identifies all three as Prometheans – "men of blood."

David M. Potter has some interesting comments on Lincoln and Lincoln scholarship in pp. 151-76 of his *The South and Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968). Harry Jaffa documents Lincoln's evolution into a democratic Caesar in *Crisis of the House Divided* (New York: Doubleday, 1960). I accept Jaffa's exposition, but, like Frank Meyer, deny the interpretation he has embedded in it. Gottfried Dietze's *America's Political Dilemma: From Limited to Unlimited Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) is a more convincing discussion of what Lincoln has really "done for his country." Also *Lincoln the Man* (New York: Dodd-Mead and Co., 1931), by the Illinois poet, Edgar Lee Masters.

xv There is no adequate account of the English Whig mind in the North American colonies. Of value toward a preparation of such a study are Zera S. Fink's *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1962); M. J. C. Vile's *Constitutionalism and the Separation of Powers* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967); H. Trevor Colbourn's *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Caroline Robbins' *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthmen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); and Gordon S. Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969). The customary ignorance of rhetoric leads to confusion in most of these studies. And especially the last two.

xvi I cite the evidence in vol. I of Julian P. Boyd's edition of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 315-19 and 413-33. Jefferson built the entire document around an original which was nothing more than a list of "crimes" by George III. Much was removed from his embellishments of this core, usually because it did not suit the form of the legal instrument. But not the beginning of paragraph two!

Willmoore Kendall in "The Civil Rights Movement and Coming Constitutional Crises," *Intercollegiate Review*, I (Feb., March, 1965) testifies to this quality in the Father (p. 56), to their view of George III's "abdication" or removal of himself. So does Gordon S. Wood. Both Wood and Bailyn read with "blinders" and see only the radical Whig influence on the revolutionary generation. But Wood is very wise at one point (p. 10), for he senses how instinct with meaning was the triumph of English common law inside the American system. (On this subject see also pp. 97-265 of Perry Miller's *The Life of the Mind in America* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965] ; Daniel Boorstin's *Mysterious Science of the Law* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1958]; and Anton-Hermann Chroust's *The Rise and Fall of the Legal Profession in America* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965].)

- xvii My point here is taken from Kendall's "Equality: Commitment or Ideal?" *Phalanx*, I (Fall, 1967), 95-103. Indeed, this essay is in large measure a supplement to Kendall on the Declaration and Lincoln's "magic" (p. 95) in rewriting it by allusion.
- xviii Lincoln himself acknowledges the limited abstract value of the Declaration – that is, unless its overall form be ignored – in his April 6, 1859, letter to Henry L. Pierce (*The Political Thought of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 124).
- xix Consider p. 17 of *The Political Thought of Abraham Lincoln* (again the Springfield speech of 1838) for Lincoln's use of these words. A nation like the one made at Gettysburg must, of course, divinize its author. Therefore the predictability of the Lincoln myth – of a political god.
- xx John Crowe Ransom, "Address to the Scholars of New England," p. 73 of *Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).
My summary of New England thought and letters is supported by Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).
- xxi Two recent readings of the "Battle Hymn" are in Tuveson (pp. 197-202) and Wilson (pp. 91-96).
- xxii For a discussion of the confident epideictic, I recommend pp. 266-306 of Bernard N. Schilling's *Dryden and the Conservative Myth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).
- xxiii she withdraws nothing of her inflammatory "general order" to the North. Her procedure is a miniature of the entire gnostic process.
- xxiv Lincoln and his poetic supplement are close here. The "blood" that is the "inevitable price" of "blessings" (rational egalitarianism) inhibits neither President nor poetess. See p. 32 of *The Political Thought of Abraham Lincoln*.
- xxv A recent summary of millennial thought in the North during the period of conflict appears in James H. Moorhead's *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).