

## **American History: Tradition or Truth**

### **Introduction**

*One Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.* This selection from the Pledge of Allegiance mirrors the message and intent of the traditional American National narrative. Both are closely integrated into American society through parents, football games, grade school education, and national holidays. Both are introduced and repeated often in these environments from a young age onwards. They speak volumes about what being "American" is supposed to mean. Both are successful as a method of controlling social temperament by instilling the decidedly "American" values of progress, unity, liberty, and justice. However, as with the current controversy over the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, the traditional national narrative is inherently flawed in describing the true nature of modern American society as a whole.

The problem with the classical interpretation of American history rests in its representation of America as having one voice, one culture. By focusing on certain, tailored versions of events in American history, this traditional tale ignores the voices that reveal the multifaceted nature of America's often unspoken histories. Contrary to the regularly used examples in American history, these discounted voices often diverge from the accustomed messages and values. By examining the contrasts and contradictions between these radically different interpretations of American history, the core strengths of the American identity can be revealed. While the power of America can be found in progress, these subdued events and

opinions speak against total unity, liberty and justice. These distinctions are best evidenced in the: settlement patterns, origins and intentions of the colonies in the seventeenth century, the reasoning and aftermath of the Revolutionary war that led to the conception of the American government in the eighteenth century, and the human rights issues that violently exploded in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. These events reveal that the true strength of America is its collective diversity.

### **The American Tradition**

Before examining the conflict between the traditional American narrative and the entire history of America as a nation, the traditional American narrative must be defined. While no telling or interpretation of the story is exactly the same, the general consensus is as follows. Christopher Columbus discovered the "New World" in 1492. An oppressed group of British citizens seeking opportunity and freedom from religious oppression chose the New World as a place to make their start. These "pilgrims" were a pure and godly folk who built a community that flourished in what is now the northeastern section of the United States. The subsequent immigration of Europeans introduced diversity and culture. The native American Indian people, immigrants, and puritan colonists mixed together in a "melting pot" that created a unified culture in early America. Demanding the abolition of taxation without representation, and angry with the controlling nature of the tyrant British King, these people and their descendants united in revolution to secure their independence and rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This led to the ratification of the United States Constitution by the "Founding Fathers" which was intended to secure and provide the American people their newly acquired freedoms. The values of progress, unity, liberty, and justice are clear even in summary. It is no accident that these particular events, and people were chosen specifically to express these values.

## **Seventeenth Century Origins**

It comes as no surprise then that the Puritans were chosen as the example from which to base the representation of early American colonists. Judging by their surprising population growth and high life expectancy when compared to the high mortality rates, poverty and disease that were rampant in the other colonies, the Puritans exhibited the strong unified values the traditional national narrative wishes to convey. New England was the only colony where natural population growth exceeded the death rate (Kornfeld Lecture One). John Winthrop, a founding member of one of the more prominent New England Puritan communities, echoes this message in his famous "City Upon a Hill" speech. While his community was not the first (separatist communities had been established in Plymouth as early as 1620), Winthrop's proposed ideals of leading by example were instrumental to the success of the New England colonial efforts (Kornfeld 55).

Why then, was the presentation of the puritan community altered so much in creating the images of the pilgrims? Contrary to the drab black and white clothing and somber attitudes the pilgrims are often depicted as, the puritans wore colorful clothing, drank often (though not excessively), and were far more lively than the quiet spiritual nature of the pilgrims. This does not mean that all puritans acted in this manner, but their communal nature led the majority of the New England population to act in this manner. Although the conditions in puritan communities appear jovial on the surface, embedded problems from within their religious principles had far more sinister implications (Kornfeld, Lecture One).

While the common illustration of American colonists would have you believe that they sought freedom from religious oppression, a more accurate description would state that the puritans desired separation from the Church of England due to differences in religious beliefs.

The fundamental philosophy of the puritan form of Christianity is that every person is born either saved by God or damned regardless of one's actions on earth. One's actions on earth were in turn supposed to reveal their status in the eyes of God and men. The righteous loudly proclaimed their nature in puritan communities, and those who accepted their fate as damned would essentially be free to do as they pleased. The decisions made upon the fate of every member of puritan society became nearly impossible to classify. Inherent segregation from within puritan religious beliefs created internal complications that eventually led to crisis. Uprisings such as the one led by Anne Hutchinson were forcefully quashed. Internal struggles continued until the massive change in American religion spurred by the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century.

When considering the use of the puritans as the model for American colonists, it is troubling that the puritans were representative of only a fraction of colonial immigration. Only three percent of colonists settled in New England in the seventeenth century (Kornfeld, Lecture One). New England was decidedly similar to Britain in terms of social structure and composition. However, the situation differs considerably when traveling further south along the American coastline. Where New England was colonized with community and religion in mind, a gradual shift towards wealth and personal gain is seen in southern colonies. For example, the Virginia Company's vision of success by flooding their colony with workers to generate profit with little regard to their survival wildly differs from the values that built the New England colonies. Further still, the reliance upon slavery in the Carolina and West Indies colonies presents a more desperate attempt at gathering wealth and personal gain. In fact, seventy-four percent of colonists settled in the West Indies, and sixty-one percent of those immigrants were African slaves (Kornfeld Lecture One). The economic institution of slavery in the southern colonies radically differed from existing European nations and the brutal communities that

developed as a result stand in stark contrast to the portrait of American colonial life in the traditional national narrative. Because the nature and voice of each individual colonial effort radically differs from one another, they cannot coexist as one unified perspective. However, immigrants across every colony share a common desire for opportunity, and although they satisfy that desire in different ways, the American colonies would not have survived without that shared necessity.

### **Eighteenth Century Revolution**

The reasons for the American Revolution are composed of a similarly diverse range of voices and situations. The traditional national narrative would have us believe that the American people were united in their purpose for revolution. However, not every individual in American society desired or needed independence from British rule. Conditions existing in urban communities would have been resolved by changes in local establishments. Members of the lower class would have little reason for revolution as the elements of British rule only indirectly affected their status. The same can be said for slaves, and the majority of women in America. Slaves had no control over their actions without direction from their masters. They had no choice in the matter, and should their masters feel that they would benefit from separation from British control, the slaves would be forced to comply. Women were generally without any measure for legal representation (unless widowed), and the prospect of losing husbands and sons in war would be detrimental to the reasons for adopting revolutionary support. As with the urban communities, both groups would better increase their situation by instigating change at home rather than abroad.

The northern lawyers, the enlightened, southern plantation owners, the rich, the upper

class and ruling elite had far more reason to rebel against British control. The upper class and ruling elite needed revolution to shift focus from problems in colonial society, and to assert a more concrete grasp of their status and control. Compared to the lower economic rungs of society, the influence of British rule had a substantially larger impact upon their ways of life. Yet even in 1763 there was still no complete sense of revolution or national identity (Kornfeld Lecture Six). The situation dramatically changed immediately following one of the most widely misrepresented events in American history, the Boston Massacre, supporters of the revolution were given their "smoking gun" to tip the balance in their favor. A political cartoon depicting the event shows British soldiers slaughtering unarmed American citizens. The cartoon was heavily distributed across the American landscape, and was hung outside tavern doors, shop windows and homes. In actuality, the Boston Massacre was not nearly as bloody and involved only a few Boston citizens who instigated the event. However, the illustration of the massacre in the political cartoon enraged American citizens and was able to move those who were on the fence about revolutionary ideas towards supporting it.

During the American Revolution, support among American citizens was significantly divided as well. As seen in Mary Silliman's War, the conflict between British supporters (the Tories) and American patriots often pitted neighbor against neighbor and scattered communities. Murder, arson and rape were used as instruments of war at home, and due to the danger of being caught in the crossfire, neutrality became the most dangerous position (Kornfeld Lecture Six).

These divisions were not repaired once America finally won their independence. More importantly, satisfying the needs of all those who sacrificed for freedom proved to be an impossible task. Soldiers went unpaid for their services, and this almost resulted in a military coup

that would have destroyed the government created to preserve what the American people had died to obtain. This led to a political struggle on how the country should be run that had vast implications for the immediate future of the nation.

### **Nineteenth Century Humanism**

The most obvious extension of this conflict over how the country should be governed is the American Civil War. By not immediately addressing the issue of slavery when drafting the Constitution, the battle over its presence in America was inevitable. While slavery in America was abolished as a result of this conflict, racial injustice was not the only human rights issue to peak during the mid nineteenth century. The issues of poverty, slavery, economic division, immigration, and women's rights all began to increase their presence in the minds of the American people during this period. Widespread adoption of evangelical faiths and moral institutions developed in the northern states during the mid nineteenth century split the working class population in two. One side identifies with the working population and the other side identifies more with the aspiring middle class. The effect of this division significantly increased the voting power and influence of the middle class in America, and the impact of this shift is still evident in modern American society. Increasing separation between class levels and the staggering rise in poverty in America erupted during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. Due to a severe economic depression, employers introduced a twenty percent pay cut that kept workers from providing for their families (Kornfeld Lecture Twelve). In retribution, railroad workers began a strike that lasted for two weeks, and would involve eighty-thousand rail workers, five-hundred thousand sympathizers, close factories in eleven states, leave over one hundred workers dead, and numerous others wounded (Kornfeld Lecture Twelve). At its completion, the railroad

workers were forced to accept the terms of the owners, but this event, like the civil war, clearly shows that there is disagreement in American society.

Further diversification of the American national identity is seen during periods of heavy immigration during the late nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century one-half of the population of Philadelphia, two-thirds of the population of Boston, three quarters of the population in Chicago, and four-fifths of the citizens of New York were immigrants or their children (Kornfeld, Lecture Twelve). At this time, immigrants were primarily from southern and eastern Europe and faced similar barriers to entry that the Irish Catholics encountered earlier (Kornfeld, Lecture Twelve). Most of these "new" immigrants were met with attitudes of nativism and were often subjected to racial hate crimes. The multitude of different voices and struggles appearing during the nineteenth century in America directly contradicts the idea of total unity that is presented in the accustomed version of American history.

## **Conclusion**

Supporters of the traditional American narrative would argue that the benefits of introducing a simplified version of our history to teach fundamental positive societal values far outweigh the damage caused by ignoring the more violent aspects of our past. A simple story is far easier to teach, and significant developmental problems arise when teaching controversial subjects to children at a young age. However, the problems created by discounting the struggles of America as a developing nation are clear. Class divisions that have been present since the colony states, class distinctions developed during the nineteenth century, and uneven distribution of wealth plague modern American society. Human rights issues and racial anger still create dividing lines within the fabric of the American tapestry. These are problems that



cannot be addressed without examining the causes and means of their creation. With so many independent voices, and with the advent of the internet, telephone, and broadcast media it is far easier today than ever to give voice to these concerns. Every voice now has equal opportunity to take hold in the pages of modern American history, and it is impossible to deny that the American identity is not composed of one voice, one purpose, but rather a multitude of conjoined ideas and identities. This collective dissonance is where the true strength of the American nation exists, and it has always been this way. By relying on a simplified, fabricated version of our own history that focuses only upon its perceived strengths and denies its faults, we are denying ourselves the possibility of progressing as a nation. By instituting a new version of our national narrative that addresses all aspects of our past in a gradually progressive manner in schools, we can begin to develop a better understanding of our history amongst the entire American population. Only by addressing the nature of the great victories and faults of American development can we see the truth beyond tradition, and in turn learn the veritable nature of what it means to be an American. In order to be strong as a nation we must continue to develop by addressing these issues, and we must continue to fight the battles for progress and liberty to make the American Dream a reality.

### **Sources**

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