

If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty

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INTRODUCTION: The Promise

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INTRODUCTION The Promise Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* In the heart of Philadelphia, in a Georgian brick building that still stands, one of the most extraordinary events in the history of the world took place. There, in what is today called Independence Hall, over the course of about one hundred days in the summer of 1787, some of the most brilliant men of that or any other era created what would become the Constitution of a new country. They were creating the legal foundation for a form of government that had never been tried before;

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According to McHenry, Mrs. Powell put her question to Franklin directly: “Well, doctor,”

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she asked him, “what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?” Franklin, who was rarely short of words or wit, shot back: “A republic, madam—if you can keep it.”

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A government in which the people would govern themselves would be fragile and would require the people’s attention in a way that no other government would. If it had been a

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So the Constitution was a pointer to something beyond itself, a promise, as I have said, one that could be broken or kept by the people to whom it was entrusted.

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the question must be why did they trust the people of the republic to keep the republic? The only answer to that question is that they knew the people of the American colonies at the end of the eighteenth century were prepared for the job of keeping it. Many

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they were the heirs of the tradition of British law, going all the way back to the Magna Carta in 1215.

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they had a deep and abiding respect for religious freedom and were well practiced in living with those who held different beliefs from their own. And

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because of their general religiousness many of them had a fealty to their faith communities that made them already likely to be governing themselves in ways that made the reigning governmental authority redundant.

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Once it goes out, it goes out forever. If the flame given to us goes out, we not only lose the light ourselves forever but will also lose the ability to pass it along to all those others who are waiting for it.

That is what makes keeping it so important and the thought of letting it go out so terrible and tragic.

ONE: The Idea of America

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In 1776 a nation was formed in a way that a nation never had been formed. It was something entirely new: the nation as idea. For the first time, a nation was created that was not merely a group of ethnically or tribally similar people. Nor was it a nation composed of disparate groups held together by a strong leader. Until the advent of the United States of America, these were the two groups into which nations must fall.

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The country born in 1776, however, fit neither of these categories, standing quite apart in the history of nations and peoples. But what was it exactly—and where had it come from? It was a nation held together by an idea and by citizens who bought into that idea. They were of different backgrounds and different religions. Some of them lived in Maine and others in Virginia and others in Georgia—and others in all the colonies in between. But they all were Americans because they voluntarily believed in that idea. That a nation could be held together by people believing in an idea was unprecedented, as I have said. It had never happened before and has really never happened again.

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nothing less than this singular idea that held America and Americans together, and the idea in which they believed was, in a word, liberty.

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Today there are many nations around the world that, while not quite like the United States, nonetheless resemble her in one way or another. So the United States simply doesn't look unique as it once did. The freedoms that we alone had in 1776 are now freedoms that are enjoyed by the citizens of many countries around the world. We

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That's the question: Can we behold ourselves afresh, as we did in the beginning? Because unless we can do that, we cannot understand the ideas that brought us into being and allowed us to continue all these years. Unless we can see what brought us into existence, we cannot understand what so many other countries emulated in their various ways and degrees of success. It's our job to "keep" the republic called America, and we can hardly keep what we don't even know we have. So what is the secret of our success? You might simply call it the idea of American liberty, which might also simply be called self-government.

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nowhere on the globe was there a nation that had come near to throwing away the very idea of monarchy and declaring, "We will have no government but the people themselves." It was a decidedly radical notion, if not a preposterous one.

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Precisely how could "the people" govern? After all, when in the history of the modern world had anyone entrusted its government to the people? One had to look all the way back to antiquity, to ancient Greece, twenty long centuries earlier, to see anything at all similar.

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government exists to protect innocent people: both from within, from those who would steal and rape and murder; and from without, from foreign powers that would do the same on a wider scale.

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In order to deal with the passions of fallen human beings, some government is therefore necessary.

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American freedom is, of course, nothing like pure and unmitigated freedom—which would indeed be anarchy and no freedom at all. True freedom must be an "ordered freedom," at the center of which is what we call "self-government." So to be clear: People would not have freedom from government, but would have

would not have freedom from government, but would have freedom from tyrannous government, or from government that might easily become tyrannous. The ordered freedom given to us by the founders was meant to enable the people to govern themselves.

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No one in the history of the world had ever conceived of the idea that there could be a rebellion against a leader that would end not in a new leader but in a new kind of leadership altogether—a leadership that was accountable to those whom it led. This, as I have said, was a new idea in the history of the world. Where had it come from?

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The founders had studied history

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the founders knew that if they won the war they had another impossible obstacle ahead: creating a government in which the people could rule themselves. If it had never been done before, why did they think it could be done now?

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understanding of mankind that was corroborated by observation and history and that was, in the founders' estimation, a biblical understanding of things.

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The first understood that man was fallen, and the second understood that he could be redeemed.

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The first of the two things was simply the structure of the government. A view of mankind as fallen meant that a government must be created that took this into account and whose very structure limited the power of any one

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part, lest that power grow and take over, devolving into tyranny.

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the founders must create a government that somehow took this into account, that was structured so that this fallen and selfish human desire for power actually worked against itself.

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The founders came to the idea of checks and balances mainly through the writings of John Locke and Montesquieu, and to the idea of democracy through the ancient Greeks and Romans.

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The founders would take the best of these ideas and improve upon them in some revolutionary ways to create the freest country that had ever existed—and more than that, the freest people.

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How could they safely give citizens a far greater freedom than anyone had ever enjoyed? Their success lay mainly in the second thing,

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why should the founders assume that true self-government could ever work? The answer, as we have said, lies in the second thing. And that thing was, in a word, religion.

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in America the idea of religious freedom was paramount. It was always understood that one's religion was truly free, which is to say not coerced nor mandatory nor affiliated with the power of the state in any way. This was also unprecedented.

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religious freedom was paramount.

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They knew that the religion that was necessary to self-government was not coerced but free.

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freedom must have religion and religion must have freedom. One

without the other was in fact neither. Freedom without religion would devolve

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into license or end in tyranny; and religion without freedom would really be only another expression of tyranny. The challenge was to combine them. Somehow.

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What was required was a virtuous people who were prepared to handle the great freedom being proposed.

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George Whitefield and the Great Awakening would make possible was now in 1776 ready to

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be tested.

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The founders understood that the more each person governed himself, the less there would be a need for strong government,

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The faith and the virtue of the American people made possible the most free nation in the history of the world.

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Os Guinness in his important book, A Free People's Suicide. The term "Golden Triangle of Freedom"

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the Golden Triangle of Freedom is the engine that has enabled us to be the freest people in the history of the world for more than two centuries,

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The Golden Triangle of Freedom beautifully encapsulates the delicate and dynamic way that freedom and faith actually sustain each other.

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The idea that American freedom and democracy and self-government simply amount to being able to vote is false.

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Self-government will not work unless the citizens bear the responsibility to vote in such a way that continues their freedoms and their ability to have free elections, that continues their economic prosperity. They have to vote in a way that does not trade the future for the present.

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The people must guard this freedom, must use it or lose it,

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If you take God and faith and morality out of the equation, everything inevitably falls apart.

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Freedom is delicate and fragile. In the wrong hands it can be positively dangerous.

TWO: The Golden Triangle of Freedom

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Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor without faith.

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As he succinctly explains in his book *A Free People's Suicide*, the Golden Triangle of Freedom is, when reduced to its most basic form, that freedom requires virtue; virtue requires faith; and

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faith requires freedom. The three go round and round, supporting one another ad infinitum. If any one of the three legs of the triangle is removed, the whole structure ceases to exist.

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“Only a virtuous people,” he declares, “are capable of freedom.” It

is a staggering statement, especially from Franklin, who was no blue-nosed moralist, nor even a traditional,

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orthodox Christian.

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“As nations become corrupt and vicious,” he says, “they have more need of masters.” The root of the word “vicious” is “vice”—the word simply means “full of vice.” So Franklin, without feeling the need to explain himself much, is bluntly saying that “freedom requires virtue.” And that less virtue inevitably begets less freedom.

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In June 1776 another of the founders, John Adams—who in contrast to Franklin was a committed and theologically orthodox Christian—made the same point. In a letter to his cousin Zabdiel Adams, he writes: “The only foundation of a free Constitution is pure virtue.”

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Adams even went on to warn that if the people of the newly formed United States did not have virtue in “greater measure” in the years ahead than they did when he was writing, they would not have a liberty that would last.

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Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.

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The secret to American freedom was American virtue.

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This idea that freedom of the kind described by the founders requires virtue was central to the thinking of the founding generation and obvious to Tocqueville a half century later. It was the secret of the heart of America.

the secret at the heart of America.

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We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

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Adams understood that the secret to self-government is that the people must themselves be self-governing, which is to say they must be motivated by something beyond the law.

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(In our day everyone seems to know that helping the poor is important, for example, or that slavery is wrong, or that being good stewards of the environment is important, but what we have completely forgotten is that these ideas all stemmed from the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West.

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Tocqueville religion was clearly the reason. Upon my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things. In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.

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In other words, there is an authority, but it stems from a voluntary—which is to say a free—obedience to God, rather than from forced obedience to any man or government of men.

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Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic which they set forth in glowing colors than in the monarchy which they attack: it is more

needed in democratic republics than in any others. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to the Deity?

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Tocqueville writes, “while the law permits the Americans to

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do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust.”

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where there is no human sovereign there must be another sovereign, and for Americans that sovereign was God himself, to whom they would voluntarily submit themselves.

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According to Washington too the Constitution and the laws of the land were insufficient. Virtue and character were vital; and for these to exist, “religious principles” and “religion” must be present.

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Jefferson wrote in his Notes on the State of Virginia in 1785: Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people, that those liberties are the gift of God? That they are violated but with his wrath? I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that His justice cannot sleep for ever.

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studious perusal of the [Bible] will make better citizens, better fathers, and better husbands.” 3

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Guinness says that it is freedom itself that makes religion and faith thrive in America.

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freedom requires virtue, which requires faith—which in turn requires freedom—

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“In France,” Tocqueville wrote, “I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.”

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America in the twenty-first century has generally returned to the worldview of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment rationalists,

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Tocqueville saw it himself: The sects that exist in the United States are innumerable. They all differ in respect to the worship which is due to the Creator; but they all agree in respect to the duties which are due from man to man. Each sect adores the Deity in its own peculiar manner, but all sects preach the same moral law in the name of God. . . . Moreover, all the sects of the United States are comprised within the great unity of Christianity, and Christian morality is everywhere the same.

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American religious groups were judged not by their theology but by the behavior of their adherents. Thus the very diversity of the sects constituted the national religious strength, since all operated within a broad common code of morals, and their competition for souls mirrored the competition of firms for business in the market economy. In both cases the role of the state was to hold the ring and make that competition fair.

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because America was the place to which so many who were being persecuted for their religious beliefs in Europe repaired, it became a place where many Christian denominations lived cheek by jowl. The main thing was not that one belong to the right church but that all churches live in a way that upheld the common good. Simply put, the differences among the denominations were practically less important than their similarities.

less important than their similarities.

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the life and work of the man named George Whitefield, without whom the United States simply could not have come into being.

THREE: “The Wonder of the Age”

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By the time Whitefield walked down the gangplank onto the Philadelphia dock, he was already an impossibly famous celebrity. Not until two centuries later, when the Beatles landed at New York’s Idlewild Airport, would a British export to America create such giddiness. But

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At the very beginning of his ministry, Whitefield had been warmly welcomed into churches. But in time most respectable ministers found his message and methods shocking and objectionable, so they pointedly shut their doors to him. But this would backfire magnificently when Whitefield took to preaching out of doors.

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As there are today, so there were then several modes of resistance to his message. Some Church of England pulpits preached a withering, pinched sort of castor-oil moralism, while others preached a comforting and soapy lukewarm Deism, which was essentially nothing more than French Enlightenment rationalism. But Whitefield knew that these counterfeits had left many longing for the truth and the freedom of the Gospel, and he would let nothing stop him from reaching these hungry souls, wherever they might be found.

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so during this time in England he became the phenomenon of that time. But what was he saying that some felt such a threat to the social order? For one thing, Whitefield preached that everyone was equal in the sight of God, that the beggar and the duchess alike were sinners in need of a savior. But to elevate the lower classes to any kind of equality with their social superiors seemed to many the zenith of recklessness and folly. To those in the lower

to many the zenith of recklessness and folly. To those in the lower and middle classes, however, it was truth and beauty. They'd never heard anything like it, and certainly not from a pulpit.

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Many felt the Church of England was little more than an extension of the Crown,

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Whitefield's principal message concerned what he called the "new birth." After his own experience in Oxford, he knew that the Christian faith was not about how one behaved but about what one believed, and if one truly believed one could do nothing to achieve salvation but believe in Jesus, one's behavior would follow.

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Whitefield knew what he was up against. He understood that many, if not most, of the ministers in the Church of England were themselves merely going through their religious motions in jobs that were little more than sinecures. Many of them were therefore complete strangers to this startling message of God's grace and redemption for all. But when they became openly hostile to Whitefield and his message, he began to point out their spiritual shortcomings publicly in his writings, infuriating them the more.

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During his lifetime he would cross the Atlantic thirteen times, but it was this second trip to America that would forever alter the landscape of the New World, which in turn would affect the rest of the world.

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What would happen during his time in the thirteen colonies would begin the process of uniting them into something greater than the sum of their disparate parts, would begin the process of preparing them to become the United States of America.

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Before he left America in January 1741, he had visited over seventy-five cities and towns, and everywhere he went the

message was the same—that people must choose to be “born again” and must accept their new identity in Christ. Because Presbyterians and Congregationalists and Quakers and Baptists and others all heard the same message and all were free to respond similarly, Americans were becoming united in the wake of his nonstop preaching. People were being offered a new identity that fit well with the American way of thinking. Some were German by background and some were French and some were English, but none of it mattered: They were all equal under God; they were all Americans.

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He is a very devout and godly man, and his only aim seems to be to reach and influence men the best way. He speaks from the heart all aglow with love, and pours out a torrent of eloquence which is almost irresistible.

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were changed by what he said. But it was not a mere mental assent to some theological doctrine. Many, like Benjamin Franklin, observed that people’s behavior changed. Church rolls swelled and those who had merely been filling pews on Sunday suddenly understood why they were there. The Gospel came alive to them and they to it; and their common faith in God became the central animating force of the thirteen colonies that would in a few decades become the United States of America.

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the idea that everyone could have a direct relationship with God and that all were equal before God led to the idea that earthly authorities could be judged and should be judged. If God was the ultimate judge and the Judge above all other judges, then surely each person could consider whether those in authority over him were exercising that authority in accordance with God’s principles—or not in accordance with God’s principles, which is to say, in a way that could be considered tyrannous. This was an unprecedented development.

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The very message of Whitefield’s preaching was itself inclined

toward the ideas of liberty and self-government. By making each person see that God wished to have a direct relationship with every one of his children, no matter their social standing, the church authorities were effectively cut out of the equation.

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someone who might be outwardly common could know that all of God's children were the children of the sovereign of the universe, so they too were members of the only royal family that mattered, because the Scriptures said they were members of a "royal priesthood."

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The Gospel of Christ was the most powerful sociological leveler in history,

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The egalitarian strains of the Gospel extended to women and blacks as well. Many female preachers were spawned by the revival of the Great Awakening and many African American preachers too. Unlike

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Whitefield often spoke to "Negroes" and once remarked that he was especially touched when one of them came to faith. One of them even asked Whitefield, "Have I a soul?" That Whitefield believed he did meant that the Negro was in this most important respect perfectly equal to whites.

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his impact on the culture and thinking of early and mideighteenth-century America can hardly be overstated.

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while not brazenly antiestablishment, Whitefield often and openly criticized ministers and pastors whom he thought merely going through the motions and not living out the kind of real and vibrant faith he preached about.

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George Whitefield has been called the spiritual founding father of the United States.

SIX: “The Almost Chosen People”

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“The Almost Chosen People” The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835)

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The great writer G. K. Chesterton once said that “America is the only nation that is founded on a creed.”

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It was the virtuous behavior of Americans, driven principally by their thriving faith in the God of the Bible. It was this far more than anything else. Without that we would be like a body with everything but the heart. This was the animating principle and force behind everything else.

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But then we have to ask, what does it really mean to be good? We have to conclude that for the founders and for many before and since, being “good” means believing there is a God who expects us to do unto others as we would have others do unto us, both locally and globally.

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John Winthrop. It was probably while aboard that ship during that historic crossing that he delivered his now famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity.”

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In that sermon he said that the future settlement of these people headed to the New World would be a “city upon a hill.” It was a significant statement, not meant to be taken lightly, and his hearers all steeped in the Christian scriptures would have

hearers, all steeped in the Christian scriptures, would have understood the reference immediately. Winthrop was referring to Jesus's statement from the Gospel of Matthew: "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid." When Jesus said it he was speaking to his followers in general and for all time, but now Winthrop was applying it to these followers of Jesus about to inaugurate a new kind of settlement in a new world.

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He was making clear to them that what they were about to do was a tremendous burden, that they bore a responsibility to all other peoples then living and to history—and to the future. "[W]e must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill," he said, "The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."

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They understood that freedom was not merely the freedom to be left alone; it was the freedom to do what was right.

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This idea of freedom as something to be used in the service of others is at the very heart of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures; and through Winthrop and the Puritans of Massachusetts it became an important idea at the heart of the American project in the seventeenth century and in the centuries after. The first place in the Hebrew Scriptures where this idea is mentioned is in the very beginning of the Old Testament. In Genesis chapter 12, God speaks to Abraham about how he will use him to bring the nation of Israel into being, but he makes clear to Abraham that the point of it is that Israel will bless others beyond itself. It is less about Israel than about the God who chose Israel to be his vessel to reach the rest of the world. That is the great blessing and the terrible burden of being chosen by God.

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So far from being a selfish idea, it is the idea of living for others—of showing them a new way of living—that was at the heart of America.

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President-elect John Kennedy in a speech he gave to the Massachusetts General Assembly days before his inauguration: I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship Arbella three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. “We must always consider,” he said, “that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us.”

