

# Why America Is a 'Creedal Nation'

By Gordon S. Wood

Democracy is a powerful and dangerous force, as America and the European democracies are discovering. Elites on both sides of the Atlantic haven't done a very good job of handling it.

We have some anniversaries coming up next year that may help us. We have, of course, the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The same day is the bicentennial of the deaths of the two founders most responsible for that great document, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration is vital to understanding who we are as Americans.

There has been some talk recently that we aren't and shouldn't be a creedal nation—that beliefs in a creed are too permissive, too weak a basis for citizenship and that we need to realize that citizens with ancestors who go back several generations have a stronger stake in the country than more-recent immigrants.

I reject this position as passionately as I can. We have seen these blood-and-soil efforts before. In the 1890s, we also had a crisis over immigration. Some Americans tried to claim that because they had ancestors who fought in the Revolution or came here on the Mayflower, they were more American than the recent immigrants.

My wife and I have recently gotten to know a couple who came from Romania in the 1970s and became American citizens in 1980. Although they speak with a slight accent, I believe with all my heart that they are as American as someone whose ancestors came on the Mayflower. That is the beauty of America.

The United States isn't a nation like other nations, and it never has been. There is no American ethnicity to back up the state, and there was no such distinctive ethnicity even in 1776, when the U.S. was created. Many European countries—Germany, for example—were nations before they became states. Most European states were created out of a prior sense of a common ethnicity or language. Some of them, like the Czech Republic, were created in the 20th century and are newer than the 249-year-old U.S. Yet all are undergirded by peoples that had a pre-existing sense of their own distinctiveness, their own nationhood. In the U.S. the process was reversed. Americans created a state before they were a nation, and much of American history has been an effort to define that nationhood.

America's lack of a national identity and a common ethnicity may turn out to be an advantage in the 21st century, dominated as it is by mass migrations from the south to the north. It certainly enables the U.S. to be more capable of accepting and absorbing immigrants. The whole world is already in the U.S.

America has its own problems with immigrants, especially those entering illegally at the southern border. These problems pale in comparison with the problems European nations are facing and will continue to face. But immigration must be handled carefully. Because assimilation isn't easy, no nation should allow the percentage of foreign-born residents to exceed about 15% of its population.

Right from the start we had problems with our nationhood. Although the first

sentence of the Declaration of Independence holds out the promise of Americans becoming “one People,” at the end of the document the members of the Continental Congress pledged only “to each other” their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. There was nothing else but themselves they could dedicate themselves to—no patria, no fatherland, no nation as yet.

In 1776 the 13 states, not the entity called the United States, commanded people's loyalties. When Jefferson talked about “my country,” he meant Virginia. John Adams's was Massachusetts. Since there was no definition of national citizenship until the 14th Amendment, ratified after the Civil War, people were citizens of a particular state, which is what made them citizens of the U.S.

The Declaration was actually proclaimed by “thirteen united States of America,” which pronounced that as “Free and Independent States they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all the other things which independent States may of right do.” At the outset the United States of America had a plural meaning that was lost only with the consequences of the Civil War.

These 13 states couldn't defeat Great Britain, the greatest power in the world, without some sort of union. Hence they created the Articles of Confederation by signing a treaty among themselves. The confederation wasn't a state but a “league of friendship” between separate and independent states, similar to the European Union, which is also based on a treaty.

Fears of democratic excesses in the states led to the calling of the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 and the creation of a real national government. That gave many Americans a new sense of oneness. “'Tis done!” Benjamin Rush declared in July 1788. “We have become a nation.” This was an exaggeration, to say the least, and most leaders were well aware that America wasn't yet a nation and that it wouldn't be easy to create one.

Because of extensive immigration, America already had a diverse society. In addition to 700,000 people of African descent and tens of thousands of native Indians, nearly all the peoples of Western Europe were present in the country. In the census of 1790 only 60% of the white population of well over three million were English in ancestry. Nearly 9% were German, more than 8% was Scottish, 6% Scots-Irish, nearly 4% Irish and more than 3% Dutch. The remainder were Frenchmen, Swedes, Spaniards and people of unknown ethnicity.

For 18th-century enlightened reformers, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism weren't good things. They sought to accelerate the acculturation and assimilation of the many immigrants into one people, which, as the Massachusetts political and literary figure Fisher Ames pointed out, meant, “to use the modern jargon, nationalized.”

The revolutionary leaders' idea of a modern nation—shared by enlightened British, French and German 18th-century reformers—was one composed of similar people, not broken up by differences of language, ethnicity, religion, tribe or local customs. All the enlightened reformers in Europe were desperately trying to eliminate the peasant peculiarities and plebeian dialects that divided the peoples of their nations. Nothing was more frustrating to them on the eve of the French Revolution than the realization that the majority of Frenchmen didn't speak French.

Sameness and uniformity among the people were desirable for any nation. As Montesquieu had emphasized, they were especially desirable for a republic. The

many state histories written in the aftermath of the Revolution were anything but celebrations of localism and diversity. David Ramsay, who wrote an 1809 history of his state of South Carolina, declared that these local histories were testimonies to the American commitment to enlightened nationhood, designed to “wear away prejudices—rub off asperities and mould us into a homogeneous people.”

A homogeneous people! That phrase separates Americans of today most decisively from the distant 18th-century world. Because we have survived as a nation for nearly 2½ centuries, we can indulge in the luxury of celebrating our multicultural diversity. But 250 years ago Americans were trying to create a nation from scratch and had no such luxury. They were desperately trying to make themselves one people and wondered whether America could ever be a real nation.

John Adams certainly had doubts that Americans could be a real nation. In America, he said, there was nothing like “the patria of the Romans, the Fatherland of the Dutch, or the Patrie of the French.” All he saw in the U.S. was an appalling diversity of religious denominations and ethnicities. At one point he counted at least 20 different religious sects, including some Protestants who believed in nothing. “We are such a Hotch potch of people,” he concluded, “such an omnium gatherum of English, Irish, German, Dutch, Sweedes, French, &c. that it is difficult to give a name to the Country, characteristic of the people.”

Although the War of 1812 with Britain ended in a draw, most Americans thought it had been a great victory. The U.S., once thought so fragile that it would fall apart, emerged from the war with a sense of strength and unity. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin observed in 1815 that the people “are more Americans; they feel and act more as a nation; and I hope that the permanency of the Union is thereby better secured.” The war seemed to vindicate America’s bold experiment in democracy. It also diminished the country’s sense of being English. The war tied Englishness exclusively to the Federalist Party, which was on its last legs and about to disappear.

Yet immigration from Europe continued, and the country became even more ethnically diverse and further from being a traditional nation. Hezekiah Niles, the most important journalist of the early 19th century, saw the problem and offered a new solution to the establishing of “a national character” for Americans. Niles knew that eliminating the old English habits of mind would never be enough to make America a real nation. We needed new principles, new ideas, new ways of thinking. “We seek a new revolution,” he said, “not less important, perhaps, in its consequences than that of 1776—a revolution in letters; a shaking off of the fetters of the mind.” To bring that about, “we should begin with the establishment of first principles,” principles that were best found in the Declaration of Independence, which Niles said “shall be the base of all the rest—the common reference in cases of doubt and difficulty.”

It might have been this extraordinary celebration of the Declaration of Independence (something neither Jefferson nor Adams anticipated) that convinced Jefferson that its authorship should be listed first among the three great achievements of his life he wanted engraved on his tombstone. He soon came to believe that the desk on which he had written the Declaration would become a sacred relic.

It was Abraham Lincoln who decisively developed Niles’s insight and clinched the case for the importance of the Revolution and the Founders to all Americans. When Lincoln declared in 1858 “all honor to Jefferson,” he paid homage to the founder

who he knew could explain why the U.S. was one nation and should remain so. Half the American people, Lincoln said, had no direct blood connection to the revolutionaries of 1776. German, Irish, French and Scandinavian citizens had settled in America, "finding themselves our equals in all things." They had "that old Declaration of Independence" with its moral principle of equality to draw on. That principle, "applicable to all men and all times," made all these different peoples one with the Founders, "as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration." This emphasis on liberty and equality, Lincoln said, shifting images, was "the electric cord . . . that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world."

Lincoln found in Jefferson's Declaration a solution to the great problem of American identity: how the great variety of individuals in America with all their diverse ethnicities, races and religions could be brought together into a single nation. As Lincoln grasped better than anyone ever has, the Revolution and the Declaration offered us a set of beliefs that through the generations has supplied a bond that holds together the most diverse nation history has ever known.

Since the whole world is in the U.S., nothing but the ideals coming out of the Revolution and their subsequent rich and contentious history can turn such an assortment of different individuals into the "one people" that the Declaration says we are. To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something. That is why we are at heart a creedal nation, and that is why the 250th anniversary of the Declaration next year is so important.

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