

**Spirit of an American Cult:
American Civil Religion and the Stories and Imagery Used to Shape American
Identity**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the use of language, myth creation, and the development of American civil religion to construct a national identity. It analyzes the role of religious language in imagining an identity for the American people, with Protestant Christianity being a driving force for this rhetoric. Throughout this thesis, I argue that specific historical figures have become symbols of American identity, creating an American cult that venerates these figures as sacred icons. This thesis traces the historical development of thought as it relates to American political figures taking on mythical and legendary status in the minds of the citizens. The role of monuments and memorials in Washington, D.C., as capsules into the past and symbolic representations of what is essential to the American people, is also explored. I argue that monuments and memorials have artistic perspectives and use specific imagery that shows how the designers want their audience to view and interpret the events and people who are the subject of the piece and how notions of national identity are projected onto monuments, memorials, and symbols. The thesis also examines the growing phenomenon of far-right nationalism in the United States and how President Trump used populism and rhetoric of American civil religion to strengthen his support. I also explore the variations of patriotic participation through protests by Colin Kaepernick and the Black Lives Matter Movement showing the diverse nature of national identity and civic contribution. The thesis also delves into the importance of the military in the United States and how soldiers have become a symbol of American patriotism and identity. By highlighting the role of religion, language, and mythology in shaping national identity, this thesis sheds light on the complex interplay between culture, history, and identity in the United States.

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Introduction

“What the fuck, man? Is this America?”¹ Throughout the day, people yelled at police officers, called them traitors, and said *their* boss invited them to the Capitol and that the officers should do what they were told. Officers tried to block the entrance to prevent more rioters from getting in; rioters beat, spit on, sprayed with pepper spray, and chased officers through the building. After hours of battling with rioters, one Capitol Police officer broke down in the Rotunda and cried.

Presidential elections have always been a contentious issue, and the United States' two-party system often leads to an us versus them mentality. Leading up to and following the 2020 election, there were some noticeable differences in the rhetoric used compared with previous election cycles. As early as the spring of 2020, President Trump began to sow seeds of doubt and mistrust in the election process, saying that the only way he could lose the election was if there was widespread fraud. This undermining of the election process called into question one of the fundamental concepts related to American identity – democracy.

President Trump had convinced his supporters that he could not possibly lose the election; furthermore, if he did, it would be due to the failure of, or to the opposition's

¹ Emmanuel Felton. 2021. “Black Police Officers Describe the Racist Attacks They Faced as They Protected the Capitol.” BuzzFeed News. January 9, 2021.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmanuelfelton/black-capitol-police-racism-mob>

intentional destruction of, the democratic system and, by extension, the American way. Rather than say that he would accept the election results and the will of the people, Trump stated that there would not be a transfer of power but instead a “continuation.” Additionally, President Trump said he would refuse to concede to a peaceful transfer of power if he did lose.

In the summer of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic became more serious, there was a shift to allow for more mail-in ballots so that the election would not draw large crowds. Trump continued to sow seeds of mistrust. Through speeches and numerous tweets, Trump cast doubt over absentee ballots and the ease with which fraud could be committed. He further encouraged his supporters to vote in person during the election.

Throughout his campaign for President and his four years as President, Donald Trump used nationalistic rhetoric during his rallies and speeches. Robert Rowland notes that “Trump used a rhetoric of nationalist populism along with a persona as a charismatic outsider to win the presidency” and that this was “an affective genre that responded to a broad sense of threatened identity among white working-class voters.”² One of the most prominent slogans was “Make America Great Again.” This particular slogan seems multifaceted in its meaning. Firstly, this slogan implies that some mythical time in American history served as an “ideal” to which the American public should return. The slogan also called back to President Reagan’s campaign slogan, “let’s make America great again,” connecting the idea of a Trump presidency to one of the most widely celebrated Republican presidents in recent history.

² Robert C. Rowland. “The Populist and Nationalist Roots of Trump’s Rhetoric.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2019): 345.

During both presidential campaign runs, Trump used slogans and language similar to that used by white supremacist groups, such as the phrase “America First” which he used in many tweets and speeches. Many find this phrase particularly troubling due to its history and nationalist overtones. Woodrow Wilson used these words as early as 1916 to keep the U.S. out of WWI and remain neutral. Around 1920, “America First” was adopted by the KKK. During WWII, Charles Lindbergh used this phrase to argue against joining the war effort, giving it anti-Semitic implications. While Trump did condemn white supremacists and other groups, he also seemed to “hedge” and argue that not everyone at his protests and events was a part of the “bad” side, and often argued that the left was much more to blame for any violence or wrongdoing.

Trump’s lack of condemnation of right-wing extremists brought criticism from Democrats and Republicans, who thought the President did not go far enough in condemning white supremacy.³ Trump denounced racist and destructive groups while at the same time using their rhetoric. Leaders from those groups also view Trump as being on their side; David Duke, the former leader of the KKK, endorsed Trump. The Proud Boys interpreted Trump’s statement of “stand back and stand by”⁴ as a rallying call and even printed the phrase on their merchandise.

Trump took an early lead on election day while the ballots began to be counted. Throughout the evening on election night, however, as more of the mail-in votes were included, the numbers started to grow in support of Joseph Biden. As Trump lost ground

³ Robert Farley. 2020. “Trump Has Condemned White Supremacists.” Factcheck.org. February 11, 2020. <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/02/trump-has-condemned-white-supremacists/>.

⁴ Donald Trump. “September 29, 2020 Debate Transcript.” Debates.org. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/september-29-2020-debate-transcript/>.

on election night, he tweeted, “We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Poles (sic) are closed!”⁵ This statement was an attempt to reassure his base that he would win; if not, it would be due to voter fraud.

Around 2:30 a.m., Trump spoke publicly and announced that he had won the election; however, the opposition tried adding votes to cheat. In his speech, Trump threatened legal action, saying they would take the case to the Supreme Court. Trump also called to stop the count, saying the election was “a fraud on the American people.”⁶ Election protests began as early as election day, November 4th, 2020, as pro-Trump protesters gathered outside election centers. In states where Trump started to lose the lead in the election, they chanted, “stop the steal, stop the count,” however, in other states where Trump was behind in the results, protesters chanted, “count all the votes.”⁷

Counter-protests arose on election night but did not last as long as pro-Trump protests. The counter-protests encouraged counting all the votes, chanting, “count every vote,” and “Black votes matter.” As the ballots continued to be calculated over the following days, the counter-protests died down, and Biden’s lead continued to grow.

The pro-Trump protests, however, continued, and protesters gathered at election centers and state capitol buildings. By mid-December, the Trump campaign spent around 50 million dollars to release ads using the slogan “STOP THE STEAL” and “the

⁵ Donald Trump, Twitter post, Nov. 4, 2020, 12:49 a.m. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>

⁶ Christina Wilkie. 2020. “Trump Tries to Claim Victory Even as Ballots Are Being Counted in Several States — NBC Has Not Made a Call.” CNBC. November 4, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/04/trump-tries-to-claim-victory-even-as-ballots-are-being-counted-in-several-states-nbc-has-not-made-a-call.html>.

⁷ BBC News. “US Election: Why Are Trump Protesters Saying ‘stop the Count’ and ‘Count the Votes’?,” November 6, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/election-us-2020-54835270>

Evidence is Overwhelming – FRAUD.”⁸ The campaign’s goal seems to have been to make the Trump voters feel disenfranchised, that their votes were taken away from them, and that the democratic system in the U.S. was in jeopardy.

An entire month after the election, Trump not only continued the rhetoric of a stolen election but began inviting supporters to D.C. on January 6th, 2021, to protest the certification of the election results. Throughout December, Trump repeatedly tweeted and encouraged his supporters to show up in D.C. On December 19th, Trump tweeted that there would be a “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”⁹

At 11 a.m. on January 6th, 2021, President Trump held a “Save America rally” at the Ellipse just south of the White House. The rally featured speakers such as Representative Mo Brooks of Alabama, Donald Trump Jr., Eric Trump, Trump’s lawyer Rudy Giuliani, and ended with, President Donald Trump himself. The language used during the event was often confrontational, presenting a dualistic perspective pitting the true patriots who wish to save the country against those who want to destroy the country. Representative Mo Brooks spoke early in the day saying,

We’re going to stop them. We have definitely had some setbacks with what happened in November. We had some setbacks with what happened last night in Georgia. But we are not going to let the socialists rip the heart out of our country. We are not going to let them continue to corrupt our elections and steal from us our God-given right to control our nation’s destiny.¹⁰

⁸ Eric Swalwell. Feb. 10, 2021. “United States Congressional Record.” Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

⁹ Donald Trump, Twitter post, Dec. 19, 2020, 1:42 a.m. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>

¹⁰ Paul Gattis. 2021. “Mo Brooks: Today patriots start ‘kicking ass’ in fighting vote results.” January 6, 2021. <https://www.al.com/news/2021/01/mo-brooks-today-patriots-start-kicking-ass-in-fighting-vote-results.html>

Critical elements of Brooks' statement reflect on the loss of both the November election and the Georgia Senate seats on January 5th. This statement also perpetuates the "big lie" that the election was "stolen" and was not a fair democratic process.

President Trump's speech at the "Save America rally" began around noon and continued until 1:10 p.m. During his speech, Trump continued the confrontational rhetoric used by other speakers. Throughout the address, Trump continued to perpetuate the "big lie" of a stolen election. Trump was suggesting that the voices of his supporters and voters were effectively being "silenced." Videos of the rally show supporters in the crowd chanting "fight for Trump" and "we love Trump." Later video evidence used by the impeachment trial managers showed some members of the crowd also shouting, "take the Capitol," "invade the Capitol," and "this is a revolution."¹¹ President Trump concluded his speech by stating,

And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun. My fellow Americans, for our movement, for our children, and for our beloved country. And I say this despite all that's happened. The best is yet to come. So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue. And we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give. The Democrats are hopeless – they never vote for anything. Not even one vote. But we're going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones because the strong ones don't need any of our help. We're going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country. So let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I want to thank you all. God bless you and God bless America. Thank you all for being here. This is incredible. Thank you very much. Thank you.¹²

¹¹ Impeachment trial. Feb. 10, 2021. "United States Congressional Record." Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

¹² Donald Trump quoted in Brian Naylor. 2021. "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part of Impeachment Trial." NPR, February 10, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

Around 12:30 p.m., as President Trump was still speaking at the Ellipse, a crowd began to grow outside of the Capitol Building to protest the certification of the election results. The group quickly became aggressive and, by 1 p.m., pushed past police barriers designed to keep people at a distance from the Capitol Building. Protesters drove the Capitol Police officers back and, in some cases, violently interacted with the officers themselves. As the “Save America” rally concluded, more people gathered outside the Capitol.

Around 1 p.m., a joint session of Congress convened to certify the electoral votes from the 2020 election. The certification of electoral votes is an administrative process that happens in January following the federal presidential election every four years. During this session, members of Congress count the electoral votes, and there are occasionally members who raise objections over the electoral votes for specific states. Without much fanfare, the certification of election results in previous years has proceeded, even with the occasional objection. As Congress was meeting to certify the election results, around 1:30 p.m., the crowds outside continued to push the Capitol Police back and force them to retreat up the stairs and into the Capitol building.

The crowd of rioters now occupied the front steps on the West side of the building. Around this same time, Capitol Police discovered pipe bombs outside of both the Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention buildings to the South. As the crowds surged out of control, a Capitol Police officer declared a riot at the Capitol over the radio at 1:49 p.m.¹³

¹³ Impeachment trial. Feb. 10, 2021. “United States Congressional Record.” Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

After the crowds were able to push the Capitol Police back inside the Capitol Building, many of the rioters began banging on doors and windows. At 2:15 p.m., rioters on the North side of the building near the Senate chamber started breaking windows and entering the building. Once a few crowd members had entered the building, they opened doors to allow more of the group inside. Both houses of Congress adjourned at 2:20 p.m., and many members removed their congressional pins in hopes of not being recognized. At 2:24 p.m., Trump tweeted criticizing Vice President Pence, “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the Truth!”¹⁴

Outside crowd members read Trump’s tweet to others using bullhorns.¹⁵ Some members of the crowd outside of the Capitol had constructed makeshift gallows, and chants of “fight for Trump” and “hang Mike Pence” from the group can be heard in various video footage. Inside the Capitol, the rioters banged on house chamber doors.¹⁶ Throughout the halls of Congress, chilling video recordings show rioters walking up and down the passageways calling out the name of Rep. Nancy Pelosi and other elected officials. At this time, members of Congress still in the building removed their congressional pins in an attempt not to be identified.¹⁷ The fear of being killed led many

¹⁴ Donald Trump, Twitter post, Jan 6, 2021, 2:24 p.m. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>

¹⁵ Impeachment trial. Feb. 13, 2021. “United States Congressional Record.” Govinfo.gov <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-13/pdf/CREC-2021-02-13-pt1-PgS717-2.pdf>

¹⁶ Impeachment trial. Feb. 10, 2021. “United States Congressional Record.” Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

¹⁷ Impeachment trial. Feb. 10, 2021. “United States Congressional Record.” Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

in the Capitol to call their loved ones. Congressional staff members barricaded themselves inside offices and waited out the siege.

A group of rioters attempted to get into the House Chamber in which members of Congress, staff, and police officers had barricaded themselves in using furniture. At around 3:15 p.m., Ashli Babbitt was shot by Capitol Police as she tried to push her way through the blockade. Babbitt was the only member of the rioters who was seriously injured by police and later died from the resulting gunshot wound to her neck.

At 4:17 p.m., Trump released a message urging his supporters to “go home; we love you; you’re very special.” Throughout the short one-minute video, Trump reiterated that the election was stolen and was “taken away from all of us, from me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election.”¹⁸ While Trump stated that people should remain peaceful and no one should get hurt, there had already been a considerable amount of violence.

Into the afternoon, as rioters continued to clash with police, bodycam footage at 4:27 p.m. shows an officer being beaten outside by the rioters. Attackers used different objects as weapons, such as a hockey stick, a crutch, flagpoles, and even a bullhorn. Officer Michael Fanone suffered a heart attack and a concussion after being dragged down the Capitol steps and tased by a rioter. Some rioters used pepper spray to attack the police, and officer Brian Sicknick was hit with pepper spray and had to retreat into the

¹⁸ Donald Trump. *Washington Post (Washington, D.C.: 1974)*. 2021. “Trump to Mob That Stormed Capitol: ‘You Have to Go Home Now,’” January 6, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-to-mob-that-stormed-capitol-you-have-to-go-home-now/2021/01/06/515e227c-0a1b-4397-91cd-f4542bb9ec0e_video.html.

Capitol. Officer Sicknick collapsed in the division office and was taken to the hospital, where he would later die.¹⁹

By 5:40 p.m., police had cleared the Capitol Building. At 6:01 p.m., Trump tweeted, “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!”²⁰ Some of Trump’s supporters read this as a positive message. One rioter, Jacob Chansley, also known as the “QAnon Shaman,” is on video describing the tweet to others and stating that “Donald Trump asked us to go home [...] we won the fucking day.”²¹ Chansley was a rioter who wore face paint and a horned fur hat and was photographed standing behind the podium of the Senate chamber. When asked how Chansley got out of the building, he responded that the police walked him out and let him go. After the Capitol Police declared the building safe, Rep. Pelosi brought the House back into session around 9 p.m. After all of the objections to the certification of the election results had been denied, Vice President Pence affirmed the election results and declared Biden president-elect at 3:42 a.m. on January 7th, 2021.²²

¹⁹ “BREAKING: Morgantown West Virginia Sandwich Operator Charged with Deploying Chemical Spray against Officer Sicknick, 2 Other Officers in Capitol Insurrection.” 2021. WV News. March 15, 2021. https://www.wvnews.com/news/wvnews/breaking-morgantown-west-virginia-sandwich-operator-charged-with-deploying-chemical-spray-against-officer-sicknick-2/article_5beef6fa-3d15-59bd-bcc0-ea9f696618b3.html.

²⁰ Donald Trump, Twitter post, Jan. 6, 2021, 6:01 p.m. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>

²¹ CNN. 2021. “New Video of Capitol Rioter: ‘Trump Is Still Our President,’” February 6, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/videos/media/2021/02/06/qanon-capitol-rioter-video-trump-still-president-sot-nr-vpx.cnn>.

²² Shelly Tan, Youjin Shin, and Danielle Rindler. *Washington Post*. “How One of America’s Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol.” Accessed January 6, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/capitol-insurrection-visual-timeline/>.

Jamie Raskin, D-Maryland, lead House impeachment manager, mentioned some of his experiences on January 6th during the impeachment trial. On January 5th, 2021, Rep. Raskin buried his son, who had committed suicide in December. Wanting to be with family, Raskin invited his daughter Tabitha and her husband to join him at the Capitol on January 6th. After hearing about Trump's speech and supporters, Tabitha asked if it would be safe for them to be at the Capitol. Raskin responded, "of course, it's the Capitol."²³ The events of January 6th, 2021, were beyond the imagination of Rep. Raskin and many Americans.

Nora McGreevy notes that "since President George Washington laid the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol in 1793, assailants with a range of motives have launched attacks on the building with varying levels of success."²⁴ While most of these attacks have been by individuals, only three have been organized by groups before January 6th, 2021. The first assault on the U.S. Capitol was during the War of 1812 by the British, resulting in the partial destruction of the building. The next attack was in 1954 by Puerto Rican Nationalists. In 1971, Weather Underground, later known as the May 19th Communist Organization, bombed the building. In November of 1983, the same far-left group detonated a bomb on the North side of the Capitol Building damaging the outside of the Senate Chamber.²⁵

²³ Jamie Raskin. Impeachment trial. Feb. 10, 2021. "United States Congressional Record." Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

²⁴ Nora McGreevy. 2021. "The History of Violent Attacks on the U.S. Capitol." Smithsonian Magazine. January 8, 2021. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/history-violent-attacks-capitol-180976704/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

The attack on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, was the deadliest attack since the War of 1812. The aftermath of Jan. 6th left at least 138 officers injured and three dead. Officer Brian Sicknick died after sustaining injuries while on duty, and two officers committed suicide in the following days.²⁶ Four of the rioters died during the attack on the capitol. As said by Representative Neguse during Trump’s impeachment trial on February 10th, 2021, “the harm was real, the damage was real.”²⁷

Conflict over patriotism and nationalism has come up throughout the history of the United States. Debates over the nature of American identity and what that looks like have been divisive and often reflect one’s political partisanship. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper’s article “Beyond ‘Identity,’”²⁸ highlights the various ways the term identity can be used, and problems associated with the terminology. A person’s or group’s identity is a multifaceted construction of ideas and experiences that are continually evolving and changing and nailing down a singular concept of identity has its challenges.

Throughout this thesis, I use the word identity to connect the ideas, principles, characteristics, and narratives that appeal to people and are attributed to a kind of “Americanness” and a way of interpreting themselves and connecting to a perceived national community through shared commonality. These ideas and principles set a foundational ethos for understanding oneself within society. Historical narratives have

²⁶ Michael S. Schmidt, and Luke Broadwater. 2021. “Officers’ Injuries, Including Concussions, Show Scope of Violence at Capitol Riot.” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/11/us/politics/capitol-riot-police-officer-injuries.html>.

²⁷ Joe Neguse. Impeachment trial. Feb. 10, 2021. “United States Congressional Record.” Govinfo.gov. [://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2021-02-10/pdf/CREC-2021-02-10-pt1-PgS615-4.pdf).

²⁸ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. “Beyond ‘Identity.’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47.

also helped to shape this identity by highlighting important people and events that have contributed to an American collective memory.

Throughout my thesis, I hypothesize that stories and narratives have transformed specific historical figures into idealized representations of American identity within US society. The monuments and memorials dedicated to these individuals often take on grand themes and imagery, sometimes depicting the person as a deity. Furthermore, these monuments and memorials are tied to contemporary issues related to notions of patriotism and nationalism. My analysis of the treatment of, and the rhetoric surrounding national symbols, as well as of the debates over public space and memorialization, calls into question what is worthy of being memorialized and the notion of a singular American identity.

Religious language has been used throughout American history to describe how the American people understand themselves and their place in the world. American citizens have often envisioned the U.S. as the new Israel, a promised land divinely anointed. There have been persistent myths regarding North America that have been particularly devastating for the Indigenous population. Early tales from early European conquest and colonization include that North America was a vacant land intended for new inhabitants to dominate and develop through manifest destiny and has been a driving force for expansion. Other myths include the idea that Native Americans, as non-Christians, could not own property; therefore, the Europeans saw it as their responsibility

to claim the land and remove the Native population, thereby causing the genocide of the Indigenous peoples and their cultures.²⁹

Throughout the history of the United States, religious language has been used to imagine an identity for the American people. Protestant Christianity has been a driving force for this rhetoric and has been influential in conceptualizing and developing American identity and American civil religion. Additionally, historical events have helped shape the religious rhetoric in the United States. The rise of communist movements following World War II led to the Red Scare and McCarthyism in the U.S., creating a contentious dichotomy between the “godless” communists and the “divinely” appointed capitalists. During this time, the phrase “under God” was introduced into the pledge of allegiance.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will examine the use of language and myth creation in the United States. Throughout its history, the U.S. has created its own identity through the use of religious rhetoric and collective memory. Various themes are used to construct this identity, such as manifest destiny and how the U.S. interprets its political system as a direct lineage with the ancient Greco-Roman empires, their foundational ideas of democracy, and its own Revolution and founding documents. These concepts and ideas have been prominent in the minds of Americans and their understanding of who they are in the world.

I hypothesize that Americans’ attitudes have transformed specific historical figures into symbols of American identity and, in so doing, created an American cult,

²⁹ Allan Greer. “Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America.” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 2 (2012): 365-86.

similar to Greco-Roman cults, that venerates figures as sacred icons. The use of the word cult here is to draw a connection between the Greco-Roman imperial and hero cults. This is meant as a symbolic representation, as Americans don't actually worship these individuals as deities. This research traces the historical development of thought as it relates to American political figures taking on mythical and legendary status in their citizens' minds. From George Washington and the Founding Fathers to Abraham Lincoln, the historical narratives used for these individuals have become embellished and elaborated to demonstrate a moral and ethical example of an ideal American.

Chapter 2 discusses how historical figures have become entrenched in the mythological narrative of the United States. Over time stories of individuals have been told and written, which presents them as symbolic figures representing American values and ideals. These stories are more concerned with the principles and beliefs they are trying to convey rather than the historical accuracy of the people and events they are about. Additionally, many of these stories have been adopted into popular culture through various media platforms capturing the general public's attention and making their way into the American consciousness.

To better understand how Americans have internalized these ideals and formed a quasi-religion around them, Chapter 3 focuses on the history and development of the theory of American civil religion. The importance of the Founding documents and national symbols has developed over time through the use of religiously charged language. The first scholar to develop this theory was Robert Bellah in 1967, arguing that in the United States, religious language has been a common theme throughout its history in interpreting its own character. Naturally, this theory was controversial with

some scholars objecting to the theory while others have continued to try to define and redefine the theory. This chapter serves as an overview of the scholarly discourse around the topic of American civil religion.

Far-right nationalism has been a growing concern over the last few years. In Chapter 4, I address the growing phenomenon of nationalism in the United States and how President Trump used populism and rhetoric to play off American civil religion. This chapter also explores the use of protests by Colin Kaepernick and the Black Lives Matter Movement and how they were perceived and, at times, vilified by the President and other far-right figures.

Finally, this thesis will examine the material elements used to memorialize and venerate American heroes. Monuments and memorials demonstrate what is essential to society by preserving the memories of figures and events and utilizing public space to display these idealized versions of the past. Monuments and memorials also have an artistic perspective and use imagery that shows how the designers view or want their audience to view and interpret the events or person who is the subject of the piece. Finally, sites influence the observers, dictate certain behaviors and performances, and evoke emotions. This research will focus mainly on monuments and memorials in Washington D.C. because, as the capital of the U.S., civil religion and state worship are concentrated there. Washington D.C. has been developed over time to highlight the desired history of the United States, with elements of martyrdom and sacrifice playing a vital role in the monuments and memorials on display.

Chapter 5 looks at the civil religious memorial landscape of Washington, D.C. This chapter examines the history and importance of monuments and memorials in the

nation's capital. Just as the art and architecture of American monuments and memorials mirrors the Greco-Roman styles these civic memorials display religious connotations by depicting the nation's presidents as gods. These memorials are capsules into the past and symbolic representations, revealing what is essential to the American people; however, they also contain elements and symbols often overlooked by the general public, which provide more profound meaning to the people and events they represent. Monuments and memorials also provide insight into how people, especially designers, felt about these people and events.

The importance of the military in the United States and themes of sacrifice and service are integral to the memorial landscape. Chapter 6 focuses on the history of Arlington National Cemetery and the transformation of soldiers into symbols. Arlington serves as the United States' shrine to its heroes and contains the graves of prominent figures, including Presidents, members of Congress, and Supreme Court Justices. Daily and annual rituals also occur in Arlington, including changing of the guard ceremonies and Memorial Day events.

My final chapter will discuss more recent efforts in memorialization in the United States. Within the last decade, there have been a few shifts in what is considered worthy of memorializing in public spaces. There has been an increase in memorials dedicated to Civil Rights heroes, as well as a focus on local figures who have contributed to society in meaningful ways. On the other hand, there has also been a push to remove divisive monuments, particularly those dedicated to the Confederacy.

Monuments and memorials have become sources of debate over the past few years. The reconsideration of what should and should not be displayed in public space,

what deserves our attention, and what should be remembered has become a divisive topic in the U.S. and other countries worldwide. Confederate monuments have been at the center of this debate. New Orleans was one of the first cities to act and remove many confederate statues that occupied prominent spaces. As citizens protested for the removal of confederate statues throughout the South and, in some cases, tore down statues themselves, a growing number of counter-protests began to crop up. In August of 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia, became a focal point when a “Unite the Right rally” was held. The focus of this rally was to protest the City Council’s decision to remove the statue of Robert E. Lee. Counter-protesters to the “Unite the Right rally” also came out, and Heather Heyer, a counter-protester, was killed by a white supremacist who drove his car into the crowd. A deeper understanding of why these material elements are so crucial to civil religion and people connecting to the past is needed.

Early research often touted American civil religion as a unifying system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals, however in recent years has devolved into divisive debates over what is and is not acceptable. American civil religion has also deviated from Robert Bellah’s early conception of it as a political religion based on the shared beliefs of the majority of the American people to a veneration of the state and its symbols. For some of its critics, such as Richard Fenn, civil religion leads to extreme nationalism and state worship. Additionally, American civil religion often has a limited focus on history and an overtly Christian white male perspective that encourages white nationalism in the U.S., which has become increasingly problematic.

The growing trend of nationalism in the United States and worldwide has made this topic an important one to study. Richard Fenn’s criticism of American civil religion

has become a prophetic warning. Patriotism and nationalism manifest in various forms and expressions, ranging from rejecting nationalism in favor of globalism to the more extreme conditions of nationalism that become destructive and dangerous. Nationalism may lead to a narrow perspective that focuses on the goal and needs of a specific nation and hinders concepts such as multiculturalism and diversity.

History has shown the dangers of extreme forms of nationalism in the rise of Nazism in Germany and Chile's military coup and dictatorship. With the recent attacks on the U.S. Capitol, there is a growing need to understand how civil religion and nationalistic ideas have developed over time and influenced American citizens. This research aims to show how religious rhetoric and influences impact the U.S. government and American citizens' understanding of their identity. The escalating use of divisive rhetoric that defines who is a "patriot" and those who want to "destroy" the country has been an increasing theme. This research has become increasingly crucial, given the growing prevalence of nationalism, which has become a pressing issue not only in the United States but worldwide.

Chapter 1

American Mythology

The stories and narratives we tell provide a lens through which we understand ourselves, our identity, and how we fit within the world, both consciously and subconsciously. Within the United States, historical narratives and collective memory have developed American mythology, a mixture of democratic/ republican “tradition,” symbolic religious themes, and historical legends creating imagined identities. Benedict Anderson argues that cultural artefacts are used to construct a sense of national identity and “command such profound emotional legitimacy.”³⁰ This chapter will chart the development of thought from the origins and influence of the European Puritan views through the founding of the United States to further recognize how religious language has influenced Americans’ understanding of themselves.

Much of American thinking and understanding is an extension of European traditions and lineage. The founders of the United States and the language used to talk about them will also be a central focus, as this will help us understand how they are remembered and how modern Americans understand their identity and their connection to the past.

³⁰ Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. 4.

From Columbus “discovering” America to George Washington’s inauguration, Americans have interpreted and invented their country’s mythical history and origin. My use of the word myth does not imply that these stories and elements of collective memory are works of fiction; instead, I assert that these myths are imbued with meaning and contain values important to American society and how U.S. history is presented. Furthermore, when I discuss myths, I am specifically talking about the stories and narratives that create meaning within US history often attached to the origins of America. I look at the way early settlers envisioned the land, imagining it as an untamed wilderness or New Israel and concepts like the Doctrine of Discovery, and manifest destiny that settlers used to justify their position in North America and their relationship with the Indigenous population.

The American educational systems and textbooks highlight how American history is constructed to portray specific American values and attempts to display a unified American identity. Jim Golden, an AP history teacher, has argued that not all history is taught in schools; this could be understood as a revision of history “so that you don’t have to acknowledge uncomfortable facts.”³¹ Throughout history, the United States has mistreated the Indigenous population and been responsible for destroying much of their culture. From its inception until the Civil War, the U.S. also took part in the subjugation and enslavement of Black people. While these facts are sometimes noted in history books, their effects on the people and their impact on history are often downplayed.

³¹ Jim Golden. “The Confederacy: You Have a Choice.” 2021. *Cloaking Inequity*. July 17, 2021. <https://cloakinginequity.com/2021/07/17/the-confederacy-you-have-a-choice/>.

While Golden's piece primarily deals with the Confederacy and the symbols used in American public spaces, his argument points to flaws in the American educational system, which often fails to adequately address the darker elements of America's history. The history of North America has been fraught with injustice, persecution, mistreatment, and exploitation of Indigenous people and immigrants to the area.³²

American mythology begins with the narratives of Columbus and the "discovery" of the "new world." While these myths have recently become outdated and debunked, they helped shape how Americans understood themselves and their identity. Hans Koning's *Columbus: His Enterprise*, notes that Columbus arrived to find populated islands that he would claim for Spain.³³ Heike Paul points out the contradiction of Columbus being hailed an American hero since Columbus himself had "never set foot in the land that would later become the United States and who never knew in his lifetime that in 1492 he had not landed in Asia."³⁴ Despite this, Columbus held a unique place in American mythology as a national icon with a national holiday, and until 1923 his image

³² Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.

³³ Hans Koning and Bill Bigelow. *Columbus: His Enterprise: Exploding the Myth*. NYU Press, 1991. 81.

³⁴ Heike Paul. *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Transcript Verlag, 2014. 44.

was featured on the five-dollar bill.³⁵

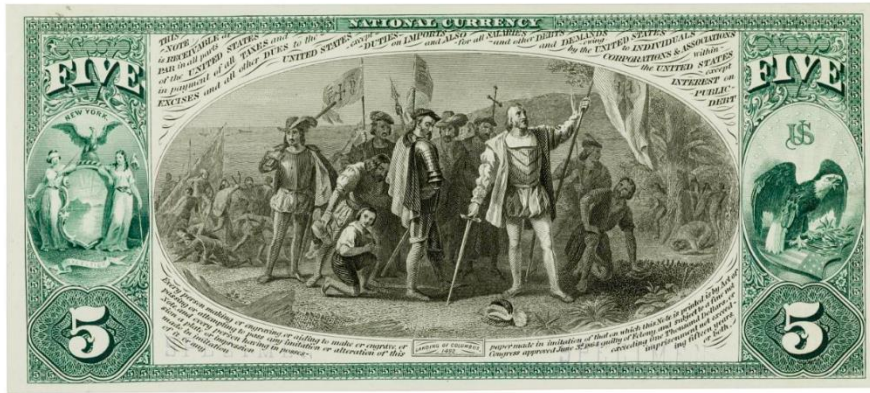


Figure 1 Five-dollar banknote from 1875. National Museum of American History.³⁶

Through Columbus' letters, Paul notes that he “describes the Americas in a *language of wonder and awe*, conjuring up biblical images of the Garden of Eden.” These letters also conveyed that the fertile land and abundant resources would be profitable for the Spanish monarchs to “find ‘as much gold as they desire’ as well as ‘spices, cotton, as much as their Highnesses may command to be shipped.’”³⁷ Columbus’ goal was to convince his financiers that his journey was worth their investment and to ensure they would continue providing the money he needed for future expeditions.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.

³⁶ More information on the five-dollar banknote can be found through the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History:

https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1671479

³⁷ Paul. *The Myths That Made America*. 47.

The lands that Columbus came across were by no means unpopulated, but in his letters back to Spain, he does not portray the Native inhabitants as owners of the land. Koning notes that Columbus' logs initially state how he wished to befriend the native population and gave them small gifts, however, his later treatment of the native people was quite harsh.³⁸ Paul states that "in the very beginning of his letter Columbus describes how he *takes possession* of the 'new world' by bringing the Native population under Spanish colonial rule."³⁹ Columbus' "taking possession" of the land was essentially a trick on the Native population, who by their passiveness "is read as forever forfeiting the right to the territory."⁴⁰

Misconceptions, fantasies, and stereotypes regarding Native Americans began as early as Columbus' first interaction with the Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean when he misidentified them as "Indios."⁴¹ Following Columbus, a barrage of other European explorers descended upon North America. According to Paul Jentz, the stories and images of the "New World [...] circulated widely throughout Europe."⁴² This created a Euro-centric perspective that defined and categorized Native Americans, which had a lasting impact on the Indigenous population and North American society.

The language used by Columbus to describe the Indigenous population created a hierarchy placing the Europeans as superior. Paul notes that the "Natives are described as 'children of nature' by Columbus, as 'extraordinarily timid' (in fact, they are "the most timid people in the world"), naked, instinctive, trusting, generous, gullible, and ignorant;

³⁸ Koning. *Columbus: His Enterprise*. 51.

³⁹ Paul. *The Myths That Made America*. 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴¹ Paul Jentz. *Seven Myths of Native American History*, edited by Alfred J. Andrea, and Andrew Holt, Hackett Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2018. xiv.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xiv.

and they have no weapons apart from ‘sticks of cane.’”⁴³ Furthermore, Columbus uses his rhetoric to place the “Native population clearly on the side of nature, lumped together with the wildlife and the vegetation,”⁴⁴ essentially stripping them of their humanity and setting the stage for European conquest through Eurocentric legal definitions and principles, i.e., the Doctrine of Discovery.

During the late 18th century, as the American colonies were trying to separate themselves from Europe, “the cultural work of American public intellectuals, writers and poets was to colonize the past in order to invent a meaningful beginning.”⁴⁵ These writers used “Columbus as a historical persona to affirm North American independence, and they represented him as a figure of national consensus exemplifying American national virtues and an American national character *avant la lettre*.”⁴⁶ Writers such as Philip Freneau and Joel Barlow honor Columbus through their poems “as an unrecognized genius, as a brilliant navigator ahead of his time, as an individualist and an idealist, and a figure of dissent who found ‘new worlds for thankless kings.’”⁴⁷ While these poets are glorifying and venerating the figure of Columbus they are also criticizing Spanish colonization, their greed, and destruction of the pristine land that Columbus “discovered.” Columbus’ “discovery” became a symbolic representation of the revolutionary era. Paul notes Columbus “establishes a non-English patrimony for the United States,” and his reliance on the favor of the monarchy “clearly cast him as an anti-monarchical, almost revolutionary figure; [American revolutionary writers] established a

⁴³ Paul. *The Myths That Made America*. 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

somewhat skewed analogy between Columbus's suffering under the yoke of greedy monarchs [...] and the fate of North American colonists under the rule of George III."⁴⁸

In the 19th century, writings took a more scholarly approach, with biographies by Washington Irving and George Bancroft taking up the mantle of America's historical hype-men. Matthew Dennis points out that "within fifty years of the American Revolution, versions of Columbus's name grace the titles of some sixteen periodicals, eighteen books, and a half a dozen scholarly societies."⁴⁹ The interest in Columbus and his elevation to national hero status in early American history shows how narratives and storytelling influence society and culture.

Along with the literary glorification of Columbus, there were also visual and artistic interpretations of his journey to North America. In 1836, Congress commissioned painter John Vanderlyn to paint the *Landing of Columbus* to be placed in the Capitol Rotunda, which was completed in 1847. According to the Architect of the Capitol,

This painting may be Vanerlyn's most widely distributed work. In 1869 it appeared on a 15-cent stamp, and in 1893 it was used on a 2-cent stamp among the nation's first commemorative stamps, the Columbian Exposition Issue. It also appeared on the reverse of a 5-dollar bank note issued in the 1870s.⁵⁰

Vanderlyn's painting depicts Columbus and his crew on a beach in the West Indies.

Columbus stands holding a sword in his right hand pointed at the ground and "the royal banner of Aragon and Castile" in his left.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁹ Matthew Dennis. *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 128.

⁵⁰ "Landing of Columbus." n.d. Architect of the Capitol. <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/landing-columbus>

⁵¹ Ibid.



Figure 2 “Landing of Columbus” featured in the Capitol Rotunda. Architect of the Capitol.

In *The Broken Covenant*, Robert Bellah addresses the two early European views of America, which characterize America as a paradise or wilderness.⁵² Through the writings of Columbus and later by John Locke, America was imagined as a paradise and a blank slate for the European settlers. Bellah notes that through these early writings, there is an “emphasis [...] on innocence as expressed in the Indians’ nakedness, [...] their freedom about sexual relations; their lack of any discernible government; their communal

⁵² Bellah, Robert N. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

sharing of property; and their lack of either religious dogmas or priests.”⁵³ These idealized accounts presented the “New World” as a new Eden, and its inhabitants took on the role of the “Noble Savage.”⁵⁴

According to Jentz, early Europeans compared what they witnessed and experienced in North America to the classical “Golden Age, a primordial period of peace and harmony when food grew in such abundance that people did not have to toil and all lived lives of goodness and nobility.”⁵⁵ Jentz asserts that Marc Lescarbot’s 17th-century writings “did not describe the Indians he met so much as use them to criticize European society. Again, Indians did not exist in their own right; rather, they served as tools for examining European society.”⁵⁶ Notions of paradise and the “Noble Savage” later turned into the “ecological Indian” in the 19th and 20th centuries, where Native Americans were again idealized as living in harmony with nature.⁵⁷

As the European settlers encountered the Indigenous population they put into practice the principle known today as the Doctrine of Discovery, which, according to Miller, “allegedly authorized European, Christian countries to explore and claim the land and rights of peoples outside of Europe.”⁵⁸ From the 15th through 20th centuries, European countries utilized this Doctrine to exploit Indigenous lands and peoples seen as not being able to own the land they occupied and used rightfully. Miller notes that “this

⁵³ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁴ Jentz. *Seven Myths of Native American History*. 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 136.

⁵⁸ Robert J. Miller. “The Doctrine of Discovery, the United Nations, and the Organization of American States.” *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 15 (2011): 849.

legal principle was created and justified by religious, racial, and ethnocentric ideas of European and Christian superiority over other peoples and religions.”⁵⁹

The origins of the Doctrine go back to the time of the Crusades. In 1245, Pope Innocent IV “concluded that it was legal for Christians ‘to invade land that infidels possess.’ Thus, the Crusades were ‘just wars’ fought for the ‘defense’ of Christianity and to reconquer lands that had once belonged to Christians.”⁶⁰ This definition was adapted to fit the “newly discovered” land in North America, stripping the Indigenous population of their autonomy and rights to property. Later Indigenous people were recognized as owners, but governments used a pre-emptive approach so they could control who could purchase the lands.

As European countries shifted their gaze toward the Americas for the expansion of their empires and their desire to increase their wealth through the exploitation of resources, the concept of “first discovery” became a tool these countries and their colonies used to justify the seizure and control over the land they desired. Miller notes that “for centuries, England argued that John Cabot’s 1496-1498 explorations and his alleged first discoveries of the east coast of North America from modern-day Newfoundland to Virginia gave it priority over any other European country.”⁶¹ North America was subject to various disputes over ownership based on “discovery” primarily between Great Britain, France, and Spain.

The United States continued this European tradition of claiming land through the Doctrine as soon as it achieved independence. The constitutions for many of the newly

⁵⁹ Ibid., 849.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 856.

⁶¹ Ibid., 867.

established states included the concept of pre-emption, in which they could purchase land from the Indigenous population without any contest from other nations or individuals. Miller also states that Congress “issued a proclamation on September 22, 1783 (that nearly mirrored the one issued by George III in 1763) to exercise its right of pre-emption over Indian lands.”⁶² The proclamation “recognized Indian titles to land”⁶³ but also gave the government the authority to dictate who could settle, buy, or be given Indigenous land.

Governmental control was not limited to just land itself; the “United States’ governments also tried to take complete control of tribal sovereign and commercial activities under the Articles of Confederation and later under the Constitution and federal law of 1790.”⁶⁴ These regulations were designed to limit Indigenous people’s interactions with other governments, mainly the British.

In the early 19th century, the U.S. also used the concept of “first discovery” to mark its claim to Oregon Country following the Lewis and Clark expedition. Miller notes that “United States Presidents, Secretaries of State, and diplomats, including James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, James Polk, James Buchanan, and many others, were involved in negotiations with England, Spain, and Russia on this issue.”⁶⁵ These four countries all claimed Oregon Country based on the Doctrine of Discovery.

While some interpreted the “New World” as a paradise, others viewed it as a wilderness. Bellah notes that those who interpreted America as a wilderness regarded the

⁶² Ibid., 881.

⁶³ Ibid., 886.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 893.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 868.

land as a harsh and cruel place. The inhabitants were “depicted as ‘horrid savages’ devoted to murder, rape, human sacrifice, and cannibalism and prepared to use every ruse of cunning and treachery.”⁶⁶ This understanding of wilderness has many negative connotations, and early settlers viewed this as something to fear.

The use of wilderness in colonialist and early American writing has biblical associations. Settlers used this rhetoric to connect their experience of leaving their homeland for the “new world” to the Israelites fleeing Egypt and roaming in the wilderness in the Hebrew Bible. Another biblical reference point is the New Testament, where Jesus goes to the desert for 40 days and faces hardships and temptations. While these stories relate to the difficulties and dangers of their new home in the wilderness, later writings present the wilderness as something purer, a place to explore and cultivate.

Henry David Thoreau’s “Walking” romanticized this wilderness and the virtues of the farmer for tending to the “virgin soil.”⁶⁷ Along these lines, the idea of a wilderness became connected to the concept of America as an empty land that needed to be explored, settled, and tamed. Jentz notes that this idea developed over time and gradually removed Native Americans from this idea of the wilderness.⁶⁸ These concepts are connected to the concept of manifest destiny and the United States’ westward expansion.

The west was idealized and became “connected to visions of an agrarian ideal that for a long time has been seen as standing for authentic Americanness.”⁶⁹ Proponents of expansionism would often “ignore or dismiss the indigenous population as inhabitants of

⁶⁶ Bellah. *The Broken Covenant*, 8.

⁶⁷ Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell. New York: Library of America, 2001, 235.

⁶⁸ Jentz. *Seven Myths of Native American History*. 54.

⁶⁹ Paul. *The Myths That Made America*. 312.

the land they seek to conquer and/or ‘cultivate.’”⁷⁰ Using force was central to the United States settlers’ push westward as they occupied territories belonging to others. Bradford Perkins notes that because the Indigenous population “were not considered sovereign, the State Department did not handle relations with them – that was the responsibility of the War Department – but until 1871 they were treated as ‘nations’ that made war and peace and negotiated treaties, primarily land cessions for white benefit.”⁷¹ As the Americans moved into California in 1846, there were around one hundred thousand Native Americans; by 1860, only a third remained.⁷² The United States’ expansion contributed to the genocide and removal of the Indigenous population across North America.

Manifest destiny and westward expansion took root in the minds of Americans early in the 19th century. In 1845, John L. O’Sullivan wrote an article in the *Democratic Review* stating, “The American claim is by right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self government entrusted to us.”⁷³ O’Sullivan was writing in support of the annexation of Texas that occurred in December of the same year. The language used by O’Sullivan points to his belief that there was a divine influence over the U.S. government’s westward expansion and even the desire to acquire the entire continent. Paul argues that O’Sullivan’s use of manifest destiny also “connected the myth of the West to notions of Puritan chosenness and ‘destinarian thought’ [...] by rhetorically linking west- and southward expansion to

⁷⁰ Ibid., 325.

⁷¹ Bradford Perkins. *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1993. 171.

⁷² Ibid., 171.

⁷³ John L. O’Sullivan, in Heike Paul. *The Myths That Made America*. 322.

notions of the Promised Land.”⁷⁴ Other writers in favor of expansionism, such as Frederick Jackson Turner, argued the “frontier’s importance in shaping the American nation and character by linking it to well-known foundational figures and events such as Christopher Columbus and American independence,” and that the frontier promoted concepts of individualism, democracy, and nationalism.⁷⁵

Within academia, there is often a bias toward secularism and the rejection of religion’s role in government systems and processes. George Carey writes, “religion is not and never has been a significant factor either in the development of our political institutions or in their operations”⁷⁶ Conversely, Donald Lutz writes, “It is relevant, nonetheless, to note the prominence of biblical sources for American political thought, since it was highly influential in our political tradition, and is not always given the attention it deserves.”⁷⁷ This does not mean that the U.S. was founded on religious principles; instead, religious thought permeated the minds of people in the 17th and 18th centuries.

When we consider prominent texts that may have influenced America’s early development, we may be prone to assume writings with the most significant influence derived from the Enlightenment. Donald Lutz’s study on analyzing texts from America’s founding notes that we must consider “the possibility of multiple influences.”⁷⁸ Lutz studied printed material from the late 18th and early 19th centuries and found that the most

⁷⁴ Paul. *The Myths That Made America*. 322.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁷⁶ George W. Carey. “Religion an American Government Textbooks.” *Teaching Political Science* 10: 7-19. As cited in Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. Seventh edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

⁷⁷ Donald Lutz. “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought.” *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 1 (1984): 192.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 190.

frequently cited source was the Book of Deuteronomy, which accounted for 34% of citations in reprinted sermon pamphlets and 22% of citations by enlightenment thinkers between 1760 and 1805.⁷⁹

The United States was not created in a vacuum. The concepts and philosophies that helped form the country's basis are interconnected with the history and development of thought brought over from Europe by early settlers. Various scholars, including Catherine Albanese, Kenneth Wald, Allison Calhoun-Brown, and Robert Bellah, point to the Puritan religious influence on American political life. Bellah states that “biblical imagery provides the basic framework for imaginative thought in America up until quite recent times and, unconsciously, its control is still formidable.”⁸⁰ Robert Linder argues, “the Puritans brought this concept of an elect nation, a new Israel, and a city on a hill with them to America.”⁸¹ As the Puritans traveled to North America in search of a place to freely practice their religion, they also sought to create these new colonies based on their religious perspective. Philip Gorski argues that the Puritans interpreted their place in North America as being “chosen,” entering into “a covenant with God [...] to uphold God’s laws.”⁸²

In 1620 a separatist group of English Puritans who had spent years living in Holland sought to establish a settlement in America. Before departing from their ship, they wrote the Mayflower Compact “As the statement of the nondenominational government acting ‘in the name of God,’ the Mayflower Compact became a founding

⁷⁹ Ibid., 192.

⁸⁰ Bellah. *The Broken Covenant*, 12.

⁸¹ Robert Linder. “Civil Religion in Historical Perspective: The Reality That Underlies the Concept.” *Journal of Church and State* 17, no. 3 (1975): 414.

⁸² Philip Gorski. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 38.

document of American civil religion.”⁸³ These separatist Puritans eventually established the Plymouth Colony. The folk stories regarding the First Thanksgiving and Plymouth Rock became encapsulated in American memory and quickly began shaping American identity. In 1793, “Chandler Robbins, pastor of the oldest Congregational church in town, first called the Forefathers ‘Pilgrims,’”⁸⁴ by this point, Plymouth had already become “a place of pilgrimage that cantered on its Rock.”⁸⁵ By the early 19th century, Plymouth Rock, a place that served original settlers as no more than a geographical landmark, “came to be seen as the foundation of an American empire.”⁸⁶ The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the commercialization of the site, with visitors taking souvenirs home with them. This included pieces of the rock itself. The site still serves as a pilgrimage site for many Americans.

⁸³ Peter Gardella. *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. Oxford University Press, 2013. 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

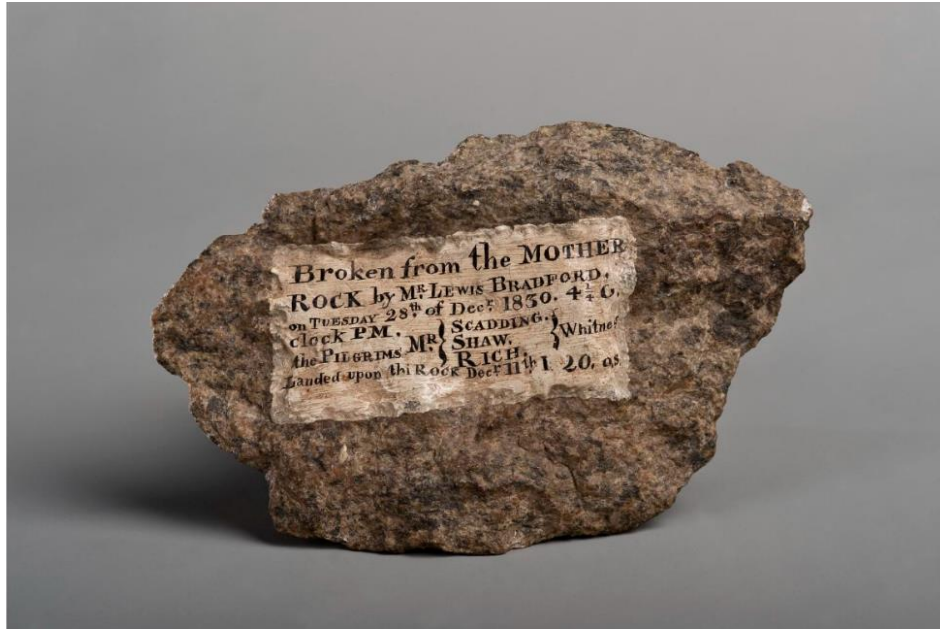


Figure 3 Rock fragment from Plymouth Rock. National Museum of American History⁸⁷

The Thanksgiving holiday stems from these early settlers and is enshrined in the American consciousness; while based on historical events, Americans have created a national myth that bridges the European colonists and Native Americans in a ritual act of communion. Dennis states, “in 1621, Pilgrims and Wampanoags feasted together, sharing their harvests and cementing their friendship based on a real – if sometimes grudging – mutual respect.”⁸⁸ This act of unity and generosity shifted from a historical moment to a symbolic emblem of national identity.

⁸⁷ More information on the Plymouth Rock fragment can be found through the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History: https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_523279

⁸⁸ Matthew Dennis. *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 112.

Throughout the American colonial period until the present day, the government has recognized various Thanksgiving holidays. T. K. Byron notes that following the surrender of British General John Burgoyne, “in October 1777, the Continental Congress suggested that a national day be set aside to recognize the victory. Commander of the Continental Army, George Washington, agreed, proclaiming December 18, 1777, as the first national thanksgiving day.”⁸⁹ Although Congress and Washington declared a day of thanksgiving, the annual practice was not fully realized until midway through the Civil War. The holiday became an official part of the national calendar in 1863 when Abraham Lincoln declared that the last Thursday in November was to be a national day of thanksgiving.

Since becoming a nationally recognized holiday, families generally practice Thanksgiving privately with personalized annual rituals that vary by family. Matthew Dennis notes that “without fanfare or manifestoes, Americans collectively shape the meaning of the occasion – and the meaning of America itself as a plural nation – and declare their national identity simply by convening privately and voluntarily and eating turkey.”⁹⁰ While there have been materialistic additions in the form of the Thanksgiving Day parade and Black Friday sales, the overall theme of “the Thanksgiving celebration nonetheless focuses attention momentarily on common American beliefs, values, and aspirations.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ T.K. Byron. “Thanksgiving.” The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington. Mount Vernon. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/thanksgiving/>

⁹⁰ Dennis. *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days*. 82.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

Thanksgiving serves as a civil religious holiday embodying the basic beliefs of the country's citizens. This non-sectarian approach creates a cohesive identity that connects people in a familiar ritual. Civil religious elements permeate American consciousness by uniting commonalities in the public's deeply held beliefs. Civic ceremonies and physical representations of these ideas and principles are designed to supersede personal differences.

One material representation that holds immense importance in the United States is the Declaration of Independence, the document that separated the American colonies from the British empire while establishing explicit values. Gardella describes The Declaration of Independence "as both a sacred text and an icon."⁹² The document is currently enshrined in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where millions of visitors each year gaze upon this influential text.

However, the ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence were not new or innovative but rather a continuation of European thought. Many of these ideas are derived from covenant theology understood by the Puritans.⁹³ This concept states that rulers and citizens are in a covenant in which both have a responsibility to the other. If either party does not uphold their end of the agreement, their contract is dissolved. Wald and Calhoun-Brown assert that "the idea of conditional allegiance, of a 'contract' between citizens and rulers that can be voided when the government misbehaves, is a cornerstone of American political thought."⁹⁴ The concept of a right to revolution is

⁹² Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 98.

⁹³ Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown. *Religion and Politics in the United States*. Seventh edition. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 43.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

embedded in the Declaration of Independence and is celebrated as establishing a government subject to the will of the people.

The Declaration saw many revisions by the drafting committee before being finalized and signed. Thomas Jefferson's original draft began with, "We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable."⁹⁵ All the drafting committee members did not widely accept this wording with religious overtones. Jefferson was fervent in his original language and had printed pamphlets to distribute and be read aloud in public gatherings. While his attempts to keep the initial wording were unsuccessful, this controversy over religiously charged language has been an ongoing debate in government discourse; however, it is not uncommon for public officials to use generically religious rhetoric today.

Once the final draft of the Declaration of Independence was completed, it was greatly admired. Gardella notes that annual celebrations began soon after the Declaration took its final form, stating,

it was reread in public on July 4, 1777, at festivities in Philadelphia, Boston, and Charleston, South Carolina. The custom of a July 4 holiday marked by bells, cannons, firecrackers, and a reading of the Declaration spread throughout the United States in the 1780s and 1790s.⁹⁶

The growing importance of government documents and political leaders did not take away from the importance of religion but added an element of veneration and validation to the state and its authority.

⁹⁵ Julian Boyd. "Declaring Independence: Drafting the Documents." Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html>

⁹⁶ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 101

While the Declaration separated the American colonies from Great Britain, the Constitution provided order and established the parameters of how the new government would function. The preamble to the Constitution begins with “We the People,” drawing inspiration from natural law and forming the new government based on the people's will.

Christian Fritz writes,

Because the people were the new sovereign, representatives and other governmental officers who serve them were subordinate to the new masters, the people. As the sovereign, the collective people inherently could act independent of government and even alter or abolish it. Written constitutions expressed the will of the collective sovereign.⁹⁷

Gardella notes that passages from the Constitution “have echoed through the public discourse, attaining a power equal to that of prayers or the invocations of gods. ‘Constitutional’ and ‘unconstitutional’ have become the equivalents of clean and unclean, kosher and *trayfe*, saved and damned.”⁹⁸ Within the American political context, the Constitution has been elevated to a revered status reminiscent of religious texts. The Constitution is a foundational document and Gardella suggests “no one could hold office in the United States without pledging allegiance to the Constitution.”⁹⁹ Politicians take oaths of office by raising their right hand and, in some cases placing their other hand on a Bible or other religious text and swearing to uphold the Constitution.

Because the United States is a “new Israel,” the Constitution represents not only the will of the people, but also the will of God. The myths surrounding the United States

⁹⁷ Christian G. Fritz. *American Sovereigns: The People and America's Constitutional Tradition before the Civil War*. Oxford, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 17.

⁹⁸ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 117.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

have contributed to the creation of an American identity through stories and collective memory. The narratives taught and circulated throughout the United States build the understanding that it is a divinely anointed nation. The idea of American exceptionalism originates in the 1600s with early Puritan settlers and the stories and histories that are passed down tend to emphasize this perception.

Throughout this chapter I have looked at the way early settlers envisioned and interpreted their place in North America, imagining it as an untamed wilderness or New Israel and concepts like the Doctrine of Discovery, and Manifest Destiny that settlers used to justify their position in North America and their relationship with the Indigenous population. Furthermore, this chapter focused on the development of American thought that stems from religious language used by European explorers and settlers used to envision a set of ideals for their “new world.”

Chapter 2

Legends

Embellishments and exaggeration are often used in the art of storytelling. Whether in folk tales or the historical descriptions of national heroes, we like to see larger-than-life figures do extraordinary things. The details and specifics become less important than the character, values, and meaning the stories seek to convey. Denise Aigle notes, “historians, heirs to a long tradition of distrusting myth, have often reduced it to a product of the imagination devoid of historical value,”¹⁰⁰ however, myths were created at a particular time in history and can be used as a lens through which we interpret historical people and events.

Historical and exaggerated stories have been used in the United States to project the values and principles it wishes to ingrain in the consciousness of its society. Common themes include individualism, military service, physical strength, honor, honesty, and integrity. Some stories are based on actual events and people, while others have been wholly invented; however, most of these stories also contain elements of overtly masculine performance. Judith Butler notes that “gender is performatively

¹⁰⁰ Denise Aigle. “Mythico-Legendary Figures and History Between East and West.” *The Mongol Empire Between Myth and Reality*, vol. Iran Studies, 2014, 17.

produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence,”¹⁰¹ thus, these stories show what is desirable in terms of American “manliness.”

Following their rise to American hero status, how the protagonists in these stories are memorialized often takes on grandiose imagery and symbolism. These stories can be found in various mediums, from prose and poetry to being incorporated into popular culture through film. Some of these stories have helped elevate historical actors to the realm of legendary and mythological figures creating an American cult that venerates these individuals and captures the general public's imagination to reinforce desirable cultural values. Aigle states, “in the collective memory, great historical figures are thus bound to become mythical characters richly endowed with virtues, the scions of legendary lineages destined for glorious posterity.”¹⁰² Moreover, many of these stories resemble hagiographies, with their inspirational and idealized representations of the people they are about.

Noted historian and Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, in *Hidden History: Exploring Our Secret Past*, states that “the historian is both discoverer and creator.”¹⁰³ Writers of history are influenced by their views and experiences. Their writings are not void of bias or unobscured accounts of people and events; instead, they are meant to convince their readers of how they interpret history as they write it. Boorstin states that a historian “chooses, defines, and shapes his subject to provide a reasonably truthful account from miscellaneous remains.”¹⁰⁴ This piecing together of events to try to form

¹⁰¹ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Florence: Routledge, 2006. 33.

¹⁰² Aigle. “Mythico-Legendary Figures.” 19.

¹⁰³ Daniel J. Boorstin and Ruth Frankel Boorstin. *Hidden History*. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

an understanding of the past is only part of the problem that historians face. Boorstin argues that to understand a particular people's time and place, "we must exercise what [he has] called 'a willing suspension of knowledge.' We must try to forget what *we* now know was happening during those years [around the world...] and what was to follow in the next century."¹⁰⁵ When we read back through history or recall the historical stories handed down through the generations, we can see how events and actions, as well as interpretations of those events and actions, have helped shape our world. The historical actors of the time could not know the full impact of their actions nor how stories about them would evolve and influence a nation for centuries.

During the nineteenth century, there was a growing interest in learning about the lives of influential people, some of which took on elements of folktales. A book published by the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1840 states that,

by carefully reading the biographies of persons, who have so acted as to cause themselves to be remembered, a more correct estimate of life, its duties, and the necessary preparation for them, may be formed. What man has done, man may do; and a diligent and careful study of the lives of others is a powerful help, in the formation of our own.¹⁰⁶

Stories and folktales about historical figures became popular subjects. One such historical figure was Paul Revere, who worked as a silversmith in Boston, Massachusetts. Revere is considered one of the United States' founders for his role in the events preceding the Revolution. Throughout the end of the 1760s and early 1770s, colonists

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁶ Massachusetts. Board of Education. *The lives of Christopher Columbus: the discoverer of America. And, Americus Vesputius: the Florentine.* Marsh, Capen, Lyon and Webb, 1840. *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*, 2.

became dissatisfied with the British Parliament's passage of a series of legislative Acts, primarily the Stamp, Townshend, and Tea Acts; colonists began to protest and revolt against the British government. The purpose and design of these Acts were to collect taxes from the colonies to provide continued support for the British military in the region following the French and Indian War and to help the British East India Company financially by providing them with a way to ship products to the American colonies duty-free.

Revere, in 1765, joined the Sons of Liberty, who "took a leading part in Boston's campaign against the Stamp Act,"¹⁰⁷ which was soon overturned. Following the passage of the Tea Act in 1773, colonies prevented the import of tea by British ships. On December 16, 1773, Revere and Joseph Warren were on guard to ensure that the British merchant ship Dartmouth could not deliver their shipment.¹⁰⁸ It was on this night that Revere and a group of other men, including Samuel Adams, took part in what would be known as the Boston Tea Party. While Americans often celebrate this event, this protest included destroying property and the people disguising themselves as native Americans to perpetrate the attack.

While the Boston Tea Party was momentous in early American history, Revere is probably better known for a different story. Fischer notes that "on April 14, 1775, the dispatch ship HMS *Nautilus* reached Boston,"¹⁰⁹ signaling the British forces' mobilization to confront the colonies and attempt to maintain their control in the region.

¹⁰⁷ David Hackett Fischer. *Paul Revere's Ride*. Oxford University Press paperback., Oxford University Press, 1995, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Joel Miller. *The Revolutionary Paul Revere*. Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Fischer. *Paul Revere's Ride*. 75.

Preceding the Battles of Lexington and Concord, which initiated the Revolutionary War, on the night of April 18th, Paul Revere took his famous “midnight ride” to alert his fellow American colonist militia members of the approaching British military. Revere’s ride is often depicted as warning the countryside along the way; however, “his specific purpose was to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock.”¹¹⁰

Revere was not the only rider that night; William Dawes also rode from Boston to Lexington as a contingency to meet with Hancock and Adams. Throughout their ride, Revere and Dawes alerted other riders of the threat of the British army. Other notable riders include Samuel Prescott and Israel Bissell. The reason that Revere has historically stolen the spotlight of this night is described by Malcolm Gladwell as a “word-of-mouth epidemic.”¹¹¹ Gladwell asserts that Dawes does not get as much recognition because “so few men from one of the main towns he rode through – Waltham – fought the following day,”¹¹² meaning that the lack of social involvement hindered his inclusion in the popular myth. In 1861, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published his poem “Paul Revere’s Ride,” propelling Revere to the status of an American legend. Longfellow’s poem does not mention the other riders involved, focusing solely on Revere’s contribution. The Old North Church added a plaque in 1875 to signify the starting point of Revere’s journey. The church also holds an Independence Day celebration using the story of Revere’s ride as a central theme.¹¹³ Behind the church is Paul Revere Mall, a small paved pedestrian street lined with trees and contains an equestrian statue of Revere dedicated in 1940.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹¹ Malcolm Gladwell. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002. 28.

¹¹² Ibid., 29.

¹¹³ “Old North Church & Historic Site.” The Old North Church & Historic Site. June 13, 2022. <https://www.oldnorth.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/July-4-Event-Media-Alert.pdf>

Whether because of a “word-of-mouth epidemic”¹¹⁴ or because of the influence of Longfellow’s poem, Paul Revere attained legendary hero status and has been bestowed the high honor in American history of being known as a Founding Father even though he was only one of many involved in these pre-revolutionary events.

After the Revolutionary War started, some figures emerged and were the key influential players of the era, chief among them George Washington. During his lifetime, George Washington received much praise and esteem, mainly due to his role during the Revolution and in helping to establish the new government. More than any other American figure, Washington’s status as an exemplary icon to emulate has been long lasting tradition. Coming from a wealthy family in Virginia, Washington started his career as a military officer with the Virginia militia before becoming a politician, serving as a member of the House of Burgesses. Washington served in this position until 1775, when war broke out between Britain and the colonies. Due to Washington’s previous experience in the military, the Continental Congress “nominated [Washington] as ‘General and Commander in Chief of the army of the United Colonies’ on June 15 and was unanimously elected.”¹¹⁵

Washington’s record during the war is quite mixed, with his battles won and lost being equal. There are, however, decisive points during the war that Washington’s leadership shines through. Crossing the Delaware marked a significant turning point during the Revolution, serving as an important military victory and boosting the Continental Army’s morale. The Continental Army had been previously defeated by

¹¹⁴ Gladwell. *The Tipping Point*. 28.

¹¹⁵ John Alden. *George Washington: A Biography*. Southern Biography Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984. 113.

British forces on several occasions, leading to heavy losses for the Americans. After losing Fort Lee, Washington retreated from New Jersey into Pennsylvania. Washington devised a plan to cross the Delaware river from Pennsylvania back to New Jersey on the night of December 25, 1776. Stuart Leibiger notes that the “crossing of the Delaware River is perhaps the best known moment in Washington’s long public career.”¹¹⁶ The weather was rough, with a mixture of hail, rain, and snow, and the river was full of ice, making their journey quite treacherous.¹¹⁷ The main objective was an assault on Trenton with two contingency plans for assurance. According to John Alden, the “attack on Trenton was to take place one hour before dawn” on the day after Christmas.¹¹⁸

The result of this maneuver led to the Battle of Trenton against the Hessian troops stationed there. Alden notes, “Rall, wakened, tried to rally the garrison, in vain. His men were assailed by artillery fire and charging Continentals from two directions.”¹¹⁹ Washington’s surprise attack marked a meaningful victory for the Continental Army and the death of the Commander of the Hessian troops, Johann Gottlieb Rall. Alan Taylor states that following the battles of Trenton and Princeton, “Washington became a great hero as Patriot morale rebounded.”¹²⁰

Following this victory, Francis Hopkinson wrote that Washington’s “public character [...] commands universal respect and admiration [...] he retreats like a General, and attacks like a Hero. Had he lived in the days of idolatry, he had been worshipped as

¹¹⁶ Stuart Leibiger. “The Crossing: The Trenton and Princeton Campaign of 1776-1777.” In *A Companion to George Washington*, ed. Edward G. Leger. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. 173.

¹¹⁷ Alan Taylor. *American Revolutions: a Continental History, 1750-1804*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016. 171.

¹¹⁸ John Alden. *George Washington*. 143.

¹¹⁹ John Alden. *George Washington*. 144.

¹²⁰ Alan Taylor. *American Revolutions*. 172.

a God.”¹²¹ Even during Washington’s life, his great victories in battle led writers to exaggerate his role to near-legendary status. Currently on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, painted in 1851 by German-American artist Emanuel Leutze which pays tribute to this historical event. This work reinforces Washington’s exaggerated status by depicting him as standing tall and surefooted in a small Durham boat crossing a large icy river, portraying him as brave, strong, and courageous. The painting, in turn, continues influencing perceptions of Washington among the general public.

A fascinating event in the early days of the United States, following the end of the Revolutionary War, was the resignation of Washington from his position as Commander in Chief. Washington appeared before Congress in Annapolis to deliver his resignation. In his speech, Washington stated, “I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my Official life, by commending the interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them, to his holy keeping.”¹²² Washington chose to relinquish his power as the leader of the Continental Army voluntarily. Washington was no longer an active military member when named Commander in Chief. This set a few different precedents for his role as Commander in Chief, the military being controlled by a civilian, and deferring to the authority of Congress and state officials.

¹²¹ Francis Hopkinson. “The Miscellaneous Essays and Occasional Writings of Francis Hopkinson, Esq.” Sabin Americana 1500-1926, vol. 1, Printed by T. Dobson, 1792. 120.

¹²² George Washington. “George Washington Papers, Series 3, Varick Transcripts, 1775-1785, Subseries 3A, Continental and State Military Personnel, 1775-1783, Letterbook 7: Jan. 3, 1783 - Dec. 23, 1783.” Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mgw3a.007/?sp=163&st=text>

The tradition of a civilian Commander in Chief continues today, with the President acting as a Commander in Chief without the requirement of any history of military training or experience. Washington's resignation and transfer of power in 1783 displayed that his desire or goal for the union's future was more important than his ambition. Additionally, the actions of Washington provided a model for subsequent leaders to follow in providing a peaceful transfer of power for the benefit of the country. Forty-three subsequent presidents upheld the tradition of a peaceful transition from one presidential administration to the next for 238 years until Donald Trump and the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol.

Following the Revolutionary War, Washington returned to his Mount Vernon property to focus on his private life and interests; however, Washington did not stay out of the public eye for long and took part in the Constitutional Convention, serving as the president of the proceedings. Washington remained a popular and well-liked public figure, and as plans were made for an election, the assumption was "that Washington would be chosen as president."¹²³ Washington served as the first President of the United States until 1797, when he refused to run for a third term¹²⁴ in office and instead retired to his home and businesses at Mount Vernon. Washington fell ill after a ride of his land through rain and snow in mid-December of 1799. His physicians could not clear the infection in his throat, which according to Alden, "could easily have been treated in the twentieth century, after the discovery of penicillin."¹²⁵ Washington died two days later, on December 14, 1799.

¹²³ Alden. *George Washington*. 234.

¹²⁴ Presidential term limits were introduced to the Constitution with the 22nd Amendment in 1947.

¹²⁵ Alden. *George Washington*. 303.

The death of George Washington created a desire from people who wanted stories about his life and legacy. Marcus Cunliffe notes that Washington's death "produced a huge crop of memorial sermons and tributes," as well as biographies.¹²⁶ Within a few months following Washington's death in December 1799, Mason Locke Weems published his first edition of a biography on Washington. Weems' goal with this biography was to produce a short and inexpensive book that could be popularized, widely distributed, and read by the public.

Of the famous stories of Washington, the story of the chopping down of the cherry tree has resonated in the minds of the American people. Weems begins this story by stating that the story was told to him "twenty years ago by an aged lady, who was a distant relative, and when a girl spent much of her time in the family."¹²⁷ It seems that Weems is attempting to provide some validation to his account of the story; however, this vague reference early on has been in doubt. The story recounts an incident when George Washington was around six years old and used his hatchet to chop an English cherry tree. When his father, Augustine, asked if he knew what happened to the tree, young George Washington replied, "I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet."¹²⁸ Instead of rebuking his son for the tree's destruction, Augustine told him to run into his arms and that the truthfulness of the boy was worth more "than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold."¹²⁹ Weems' focus in this story is the virtue of truthfulness displayed by young Washington. Even though the

¹²⁶ Mason L. Weems, and Marcus Cunliffe. *The Life of Washington*, 1970. Xiii.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

legitimacy of Weems' stories was often questioned, it seems apparent that Washington's virtues must have had a substantial impact on those who knew him. Virginia Townsend states,

the story of the hatchet and the cherry sapling, whether true or not, is singularly characteristic. It shows the strong impression which the sensitive conscience of the child must have made on those around him. Nobody would ever have thought of relating such a story in connection with the boyhood of Napoleon Bonaparte.¹³⁰

It is now widely accepted that this story is apocryphal in nature; the factuality and historical accuracy is less important than the meaning and virtues displayed by the protagonist. These apocryphal stories exemplify Washington's values and integrity even at such a young age and are a didactical reference for young readers to emulate.

Additionally, this story is similar to hagiographical tales of saints that often include stories from their childhood displaying a good or pious character.¹³¹

Commissioned in 1832, the centennial of Washington's birth, the statue *George Washington* created by Horatio Greenough depicts Washington modeled after the statue of Zeus, seated on a throne wearing a toga and with his left hand holding out a sheathed sword. The National Museum of American History notes that the statue was created as a

symbolic representation of Washington as a great exemplar of liberty. [...]

The most important symbol, however, is the sword in Washington's outstretched hand: this celebrates the fact that after he led the country to

¹³⁰ Virginia Townsend in Mason L. Weems, and Marcus Cunliffe. *The Life of Washington*, 1970. 19.

¹³¹ Louth, A. (2004). Hagiography. In A. Casiday (Author) & F. Young, L. Ayres, & A. Louth (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*. 359

victory in the American Revolution, he selflessly relinquished his power to the people.¹³²

This statue is one of the first memorials dedicated to Washington and, through its symbolic design, elevates him in status beyond a mere historical figure. The use of Greek imagery also tries to tie the lineage of the United States to that of ancient Greece, the original creators of democracy.

¹³² “Landmark Object: George Washington Statue, 1841.” 2012. National Museum of American History. March 15, 2012. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/press/fact-sheets/landmark-object-george-washington-statue-1841>

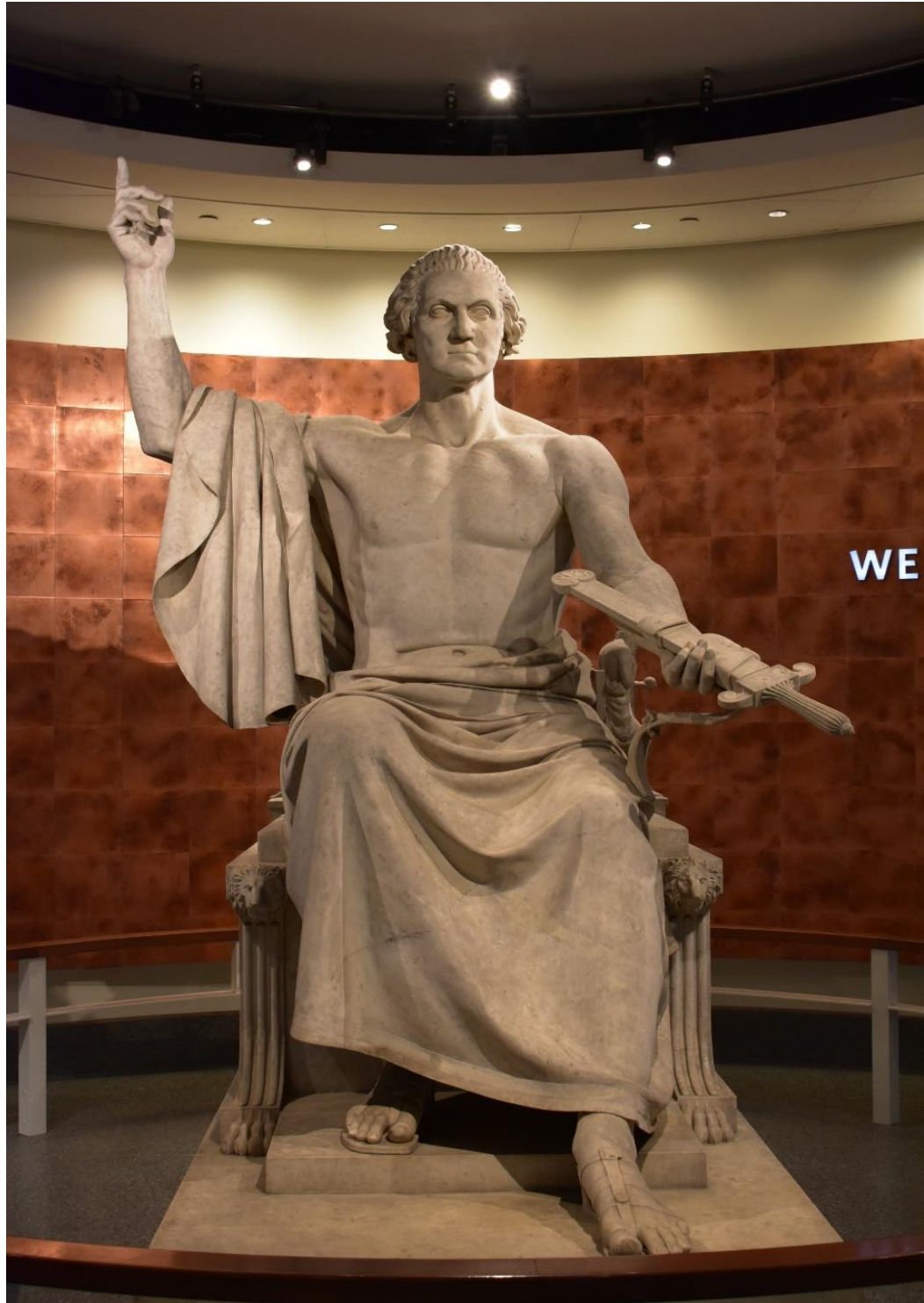


Figure 4 George Washington by Horatio Greenough. Photo by author.

For much of its history, the United States has had a restless nature, a desire to move and explore beyond its borders. Boorstin notes that,

A dominant theme in the writing of American history has been the filling of the continent, the consolidating of a great nation. But the desire to secede, to move *away* from the larger political community might have become the leitmotif. Just as the Puritans came to America as seceders from Britain, so the westward movers in the nineteenth century were seceders from the heavily settled, increasingly urban Atlantic coastal nation. If the South had won the Civil War, if the Bear Flag Republic of 1846 had survived, if the Republic of Texas had remained independent, the earlier American settlers too would have continued to shine not as nation builders but as courageous seceders.¹³³

As the United States expanded West, so did the folk heroes and tall tales. Throughout the nineteenth century, stories of people and their extraordinary deeds began to be told and spread throughout the U.S.. Among these various tales are historical and fictional figures who take on virtues and attributes that embody the “American spirit.” Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen’s book *The Parade of Heroes: Legendary Figures in American Lore* contains a collection of American folktales.¹³⁴ Coffin and Cohen note that many American folktales include contradictions because “American heroes trace some of their ancestry back to two contrasting European types that blended in this land: the backwoods Roarer [...] and the village Yankee.”¹³⁵ The Roarer model lives close to nature and is characterized by physical strength and courage. These characters, at times, violate social conventions and norms by robbing banks or stagecoaches; however, much like the character of Robinhood, they are generous to those in need and can be seen as a heroic

¹³³ Boorstin. *Hidden History*. 11.

¹³⁴ Tristram Potter Coffin, and Hennig Cohen, eds. *The Parade of Heroes: Legendary Figures in American Lore*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

outlaw or even a sympathetic villain. Intellect and hard work distinguish the Yankee, and “in many ways, the Yankee is not dissimilar to the tricksters of Indian and West African mythologies.”¹³⁶ The merger of these two European archetypes created a uniquely American version of a hero.

American expansion Westward was fantasized and glorified through stories of great strong men, full of courage and determination in pursuit of “winning the West.” An early American adventurer, Daniel Boone, resisted city life and first traveled to Kentucky as early as 1769. Dixon Wecter states, “Boone served as the apotheosis of the common man, the free-lance frontiersman, ‘ordained by God to settle the wilderness,’ and was seen by folklore as the new Moses leading millions into the promised land.”¹³⁷ Edward Ellis, writing about the life of Boone, notes,

Nothing can be more pleasant to the American boy than just such a life as that followed by Daniel Boone – wandering for hours through the wilderness, on the lookout for game, building the cheery camp-fire in some glen or gorge, quaffing the clear icy waters from some stream, or lying flat on the back and looking up through the tree tops at the patches of blue sky, across which the snowy ships of vapor are continually sailing.¹³⁸

This adventurous spirit, with its focus on nature and outdoor experience, was extended into the 20th century through the Boy Scouts of America. The mission of the Boy Scouts of America is also to develop moral and ethical youth by teaching values and encouraging good citizenship and participation in society.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Ibid., 242.

¹³⁷ Dixon Wecter. *The Hero in America: a Chronicle of Hero-Worship*. Scribner, 1972. 183.

¹³⁸ Edward S. Ellis, “Life and Times of Col. Daniel Boone.” In Dixon Wecter. *The Hero in America: a Chronicle of Hero-Worship*. Scribner, 1972. 181.

¹³⁹ “Boy Scouts of America.” 2017. Boy Scouts of America. October 23, 2017. <https://www.scouting.org/>.

The Boy Scout Memorial, on the East side of the Ellipse, contains three figures; at the center is a Scout in his uniform, representing

the aspirations of all past, present, and future Scouts throughout the world. The male figure exemplifies physical, mental, and moral fitness, love of country, good citizenship, loyalty, honor, and courage [...] the female figure symbolizes enlightenment with the love of God and fellow man, justice, freedom, and democracy.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ “Explore the Southern Trail (Ellipse) - President’s Park (White House) (U.S. National Park Service).” n.d. Nps.gov. <https://www.nps.gov/whho/planyourvisit/explore-the-southern-trail.htm>.



Figure 5 Boy Scout Memorial. Photo by author.

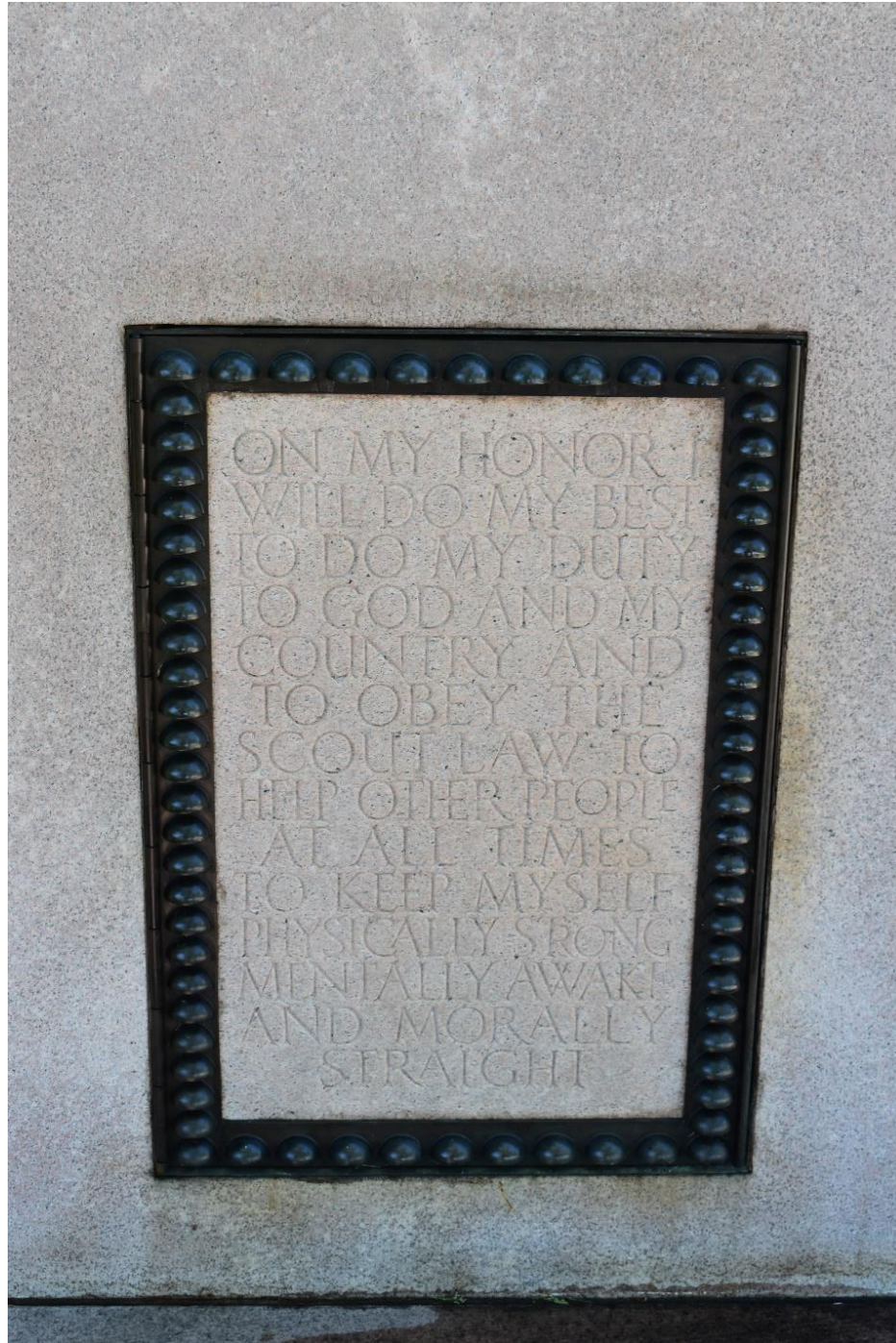


Figure 6 Inscription on Boy Scout Memorial. Photo by author.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Inscription reads:

“ON MY HONOR, I WILL DO MY BEST TO DO MY DUTY TO GOD AND MY COUNTRY AND TO OBEY THE SCOUT LAW; TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE AT ALL TIMES; TO KEEP MYSELF PHYSICALLY STRONG, MENTALLY AWAKE, AND MORALLY STRAIGHT.”

The mid-nineteenth century was full of folk heroes who took on attributes and values that American society wanted to encourage, effectively turning these figures into symbols of American identity. John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, became a folk hero as he traveled West introducing apple trees from the Northeast to the Midwest. His legend has been incorporated into poems, songs, tall tales, and even Disney books and films.

Figures such as James Bowie, Sam Houston, and Davy Crockett, all have extraordinary stories about their exploits in the frontier. Crockett was famous for his bear-hunting prowess and would later serve in Congress. When he was not re-elected, he was quoted as saying, "I told the people of my district, that, if they saw fit to re-elect me, I would serve them as faithfully as I had done; but, if not, *they might go to hell, and I would go to Texas.*"¹⁴² Bowie, Houston, and Crockett eventually went to Texas, where they fought and died at the Alamo.

On C-Span's Presidential Historians Surveys ranking the Presidents of the United States, Abraham Lincoln regularly takes the number one spot, followed closely by George Washington.¹⁴³ Lincoln holds an exceptionally prominent position in the minds of Americans. He is characterized as a virtuous man who, throughout his life, experienced much tragedy, dealing with arguably the most difficult challenge the U.S. has had to deal with in its history, and of course, his untimely death. Lincoln's

¹⁴² Texas Heritage Society, "David Crockett Quote." <https://web.archive.org/web/20131112173608/http://texasheritagesociety.org/David-Crockett-Quote.html>

¹⁴³ C-span. "Presidential Historian Survey 2021." 2021. C-span.org. <https://www.c-span.org/presidentsurvey2021/?page=overall>

assassination shocked the nation. The response was quite mixed, with some in the South celebrating and preachers throughout the U.S. giving sermons connecting various Biblical figures to Lincoln and labeling his death a form of martyrdom.

Early stories and biographies of Lincoln include details that place him in the American hero genre, celebrating his intellectual prowess and physical abilities. These stories of Lincoln tend to exaggerate and embellish details, often emphasizing his character, values, and integrity over historical accuracy. Merrill Peterson discusses how the “eulogistic tone of the apotheosis colored the early biographies” and that “the atmosphere was favorable to the generation of myths, pious falsehoods, and wayward traditions.”¹⁴⁴

In 1809, Lincoln was born to an impoverished family on the edge of the American frontier. Growing up, Lincoln had very little formal education due to his responsibilities at home; despite this, he was committed to learning independently and was an ardent reader. James McPherson writes, “Thomas Lincoln neither encouraged nor understood his son’s intellectual ambition; quite the contrary, he chastised Abraham’s ‘lazy’ preference for reading over working.”¹⁴⁵ Lincoln’s physical stature was tall and slender; however, a common theme in stories often tells of physical strength.

Dale Carnegie’s book *The Unknown Lincoln*, initially printed in 1931, includes stories that highlight Lincoln’s physical strength and dutiful work ethic. A gang in Lincoln’s town called the Clary’s Grove Boys was a group of young men known for their rough and rowdy nature, claiming “they could drink more whisky, swear more profanely,

¹⁴⁴ Merrill D. Peterson. *Lincoln in American Memory*. New York, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. 66.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

wrestle better, and hit harder than any other group in all Illinois.”¹⁴⁶ When challenging Lincoln to a series of contests, the young Abe Lincoln bested all of them. The final challenge was for Lincoln to wrestle the leader of the Clary’s Grove Boys, Jack Armstrong. Carnegie notes that “when Lincoln laid Armstrong out, he had arrived, he had achieved the ultimate. From that time on the Clary’s Grove Boys gave him their friendship and crowned him with their allegiance.”¹⁴⁷ His physical strength and bold personality garnered the respect of his peers. David Donald points to other stories that had been told, one of which “claimed Lincoln could lift a box of rocks weighing between 1,000 and 1,300 pounds,” and “one frequently reported anecdote, he squatted beside a barrel of whiskey, raised it by the chimes, and drank out of the bung hole.”¹⁴⁸

In his early 20s, Lincoln had gone into business with William Berry in a general store. McPherson notes that Berry “drank up all the profits and then died.”¹⁴⁹ With his business partner gone, Lincoln was saddled with the financial burden, and “although Lincoln was required by law to repay only his half share of the debts left by the store’s failure, he insisted on repaying all creditors in full.”¹⁵⁰ Paying off the debt of his failed business was no easy task; according to Carnegie, “Lincoln scraped and saved and denied himself for fourteen years in order to keep faith with [his creditors]. Even as late as 1848, when he was a member of Congress, he sent part of his salary home to pay off the

¹⁴⁶ Dale Carnegie. *The Unknown Lincoln*. New York: Pocket Books Inc, 1952. 22.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴⁸ David Donald. “*We Are Lincoln Men:*” *Abraham Lincoln and His Friends*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 14.

¹⁴⁹ McPherson. *Abraham Lincoln*. 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

last remnant of his old grocery debt.”¹⁵¹ This story of Lincoln honoring his debts highlights his integrity and character.

Lincoln’s assassination at the age of 56 heightens the virtuousness of his life and elevates his moral example. McPherson states, “Lincoln became a martyr and almost a saint after his death. His words and deeds lived after him, and will be revered as long as there is a United States.”¹⁵² Good Friday, April 14, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was shot at Ford’s Theatre and taken across the street to the home of William Petersen. Lincoln survived through the night but died early the following day. David Brainerd Williamson notes that news of Lincoln’s death spread quickly, “the telegraph conveyed the sad tidings to the remotest part of the continent, and before noon of the fifteenth, the nation was in tears from the Potomac to the Aroostook, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”¹⁵³ Along with the news of his assassination, the idea of Lincoln as a martyr captured the imagination of many people. Harold Holzer points out, “Lincoln the Christlike martyr—this concept arose from no single mind. It was everywhere at once, spontaneous, like an obvious truth.”¹⁵⁴ By Sunday morning, particularly in the Northern states, sermons on Lincoln’s death linked the assassination to the idea of martyrdom.

While Abraham Lincoln was a political figure, his death, within many of the sermons, attempted to minimize the political nature surrounding his assassination. Instead, these religious leaders emphasize more universally recognized traits tied together

¹⁵¹ Carnegie. *The Unknown Lincoln*. 37.

¹⁵² McPherson. *Abraham Lincoln*. 62.

¹⁵³ David Brainerd Williamson. *The Life, and Martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln Sixteenth President of the United States, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States: With a Full History of His Life, Assassination, Death, and Funeral*. Philadelphia: TBPeterson & Bros, 1865.

¹⁵⁴ Harold Holzer, Craig L. Symonds, Frank J. Williams, and Lincoln Forum. *The Lincoln Assassination Crime and Punishment, Myth and Memory*. North’s Civil War. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.

with religious imagery and figures from their religious traditions. For example, Reverend John H. Drumm states, “great sorrow which today swells the hearts of over twenty millions of people. They tell that a prince and a great man hath fallen in our Israel.”¹⁵⁵ Drumm not only appeals to the people's emotions but also adapts Biblical scripture to describe the account of Lincoln's death. These sermons use religious language to venerate Lincoln and appeal to God's plan for Lincoln and the nation. Within the speeches, these religious leaders attempt to create meaning for themselves and their congregations to deal with this terrible tragedy.

The concept of martyrdom has changed and developed over time. Thomas Freeman discusses this changing understanding of what constitutes martyrdom in his book, *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, c.1400-1700*. While this book is primarily concerned with martyrdom within England during the middle ages, Freeman presents different models of martyrdom which deviated from the traditional religious kind. Freeman states that martyrs were often compared with the “biblical trope of Christ's martyrdom, that of a lamb destined to be slain.”¹⁵⁶ As martyrdom became more politicized, other models became more prevalent and open to public veneration. Throughout the “Middle Ages there had been a number of different models of martyrdom, several of which enjoyed greater popularity than the Christocentric model.”¹⁵⁷ Of these alternative types of martyrdom, the most significant is “the innocent

¹⁵⁵ John Hetherington Drumm. *Assassination of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States a Sermon Preached on the Morning of Easter Sunday, April 16th, 1865, in St. James Church, Bristol, Pa. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*. Bristol: WBache, Printer, 1865.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas S. Freeman and Thomas F. Mayer. *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, c.1400-1700*. 48.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

victim of lethal violence”¹⁵⁸ and “martyrdom through [...] piety, chivalrous conduct and death.”¹⁵⁹ These two models of martyrdom are most relevant to the figure of Abraham Lincoln. As Lincoln was an unsuspecting victim of violence by being shot in the head from behind, he fits within the framework of the first populist model. Additionally, due to the nature and legacy of Lincoln’s moral and ethical characteristics, he can easily be seen as meeting the criteria for the second model as well.

As more populist models of martyrdom developed, there was a blurring of “the lines between religious and political martyrdom.”¹⁶⁰ What makes these martyrdoms somewhat tricky to distinguish from one another is that they both appeal to religious themes and motifs. Just as the Christian martyrs drew parallels between themselves and Jesus, so too were political martyrs pictured as savior-like figures. Freeman says, “Lincoln and Lee were seen to have suffered in expiation of the sins of their nations.”¹⁶¹ So not only were these figures the saviors of their nation but using even more religious language, they died for the sins of the people. For Lincoln, in particular, there seems to be a need to make sense of his death. In many of the sermons written about Lincoln’s death, there is a recurring trend to come up with an explanation of God’s plan for this underserved and tragic death.

Through the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, numerous biographies were written about the life of Lincoln. The biographies from this period often read as though they were hagiographical. Stephen B. Oates notes, “Lincoln was

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 68.

instantly deified following his assassination.”¹⁶² Furthermore, Beverly Klatt mentions that the literary genre of biographies during this time tended to deify Lincoln.¹⁶³ This seems to be a form of patriotic fervor that embraced the memory of a national hero, exaggerating his moral and ethical characteristics.

R. W. Wallace’s article “Lincoln: Patriot, President, Martyr,” in *The Journal of Education*, exemplifies the exaggerated nature of descriptions of Lincoln. Wallace explains his “admiration for Lincoln is like a grand symphony” because Lincoln is a “champion of the oppressed and the emancipator of the enthralled, by his experience in [...] political combat,” Lincoln is a “knight of freedom.”¹⁶⁴ While these quotes provide a hint into the thought process of Wallace himself, they also reveal how Americans have taken and extended the memory of Abraham Lincoln.

After Lincoln’s death, Peterson writes that the “activity of collecting and preserving letters, books, relics, photographs, and other memorabilia of Lincoln had grown from an avocation into an industry.”¹⁶⁵ One particularly enthusiastic collector was Osborn H. Oldroyd, who had served in the Union army and, after learning of Lincoln’s death, “devoted his life to preserving the martyr’s memory.”¹⁶⁶ Oldroyd initially displayed his collection at the Lincoln homestead in Springfield, Illinois, and later moved it to Washington, D.C., and was invited to exhibit his collection in Ford’s Theater.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Stephen B. Oates. *Abraham Lincoln, the Man behind the Myths*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984. 16-17.

¹⁶³ Beverly Klatt. “Abraham Lincoln: Deified Martyr, Flesh and Blood Hero, and a Man with Warts.” *Children’s Literature in Education* 23, no. 3 (1993): 119.

¹⁶⁴ R. W. Wallace. “Lincoln: Patriot, President, Martyr.” *The Journal of Education* 69, no. 4 (1914) (1909): 88.

¹⁶⁵ Merrill Peterson. *Lincoln in American Memory*. 144.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.



Figure 7 Ford's Theatre Presidential Box. Photo by author.



Figure 8 Furniture inside Petersen House where Lincoln died. Photo by author.

Ford's Theater and the Petersen House, where Lincoln died, have been preserved with tours starting under the theater in a museum detailing the life and times of Lincoln. After spending a few minutes in the theater's basement, the tour moves upstairs to the balcony where the Presidential Box Lincoln was sitting in can be viewed, decorated and furnished the night he was assassinated. At the end of the tour, participants are taken across the street, walking through the Petersen House, fitted with furniture and décor of Lincoln's day.

Four presidents have been assassinated; Lincoln was the first, and John F. Kennedy was the last. John F. Kennedy is well known today as the 35th President of the United States; however, Aidan Smith notes that "the beginning of [his] public persona is generally cited as the glorification of his naval service in the Pacific during World War

II.”¹⁶⁸ Kennedy was known to have been a sickly child and was initially unable to serve in the military due to failing the physical examination. Only after “an intervention from his powerful father Joseph Kennedy, former ambassador to England,” was he allowed to enlist.¹⁶⁹ JFK became the captain of a patrol boat in the South Pacific.

On one of his missions, “to attack a Japanese convoy on its way to supply enemy troops occupying neighboring islands,”¹⁷⁰ an incident occurred that would thrust JFK onto the national stage. According to John Hellmann, “at about 2:30 a.m. on August 2, 1943, the PT boat commanded by John F. Kennedy was cut in half by a Japanese destroyer.”¹⁷¹ Two of the crew were killed instantly, while the rest were thrown into the water. According to Commander Ted Robinson, after hearing his men crying for help, JFK searched for over an hour, “and he got his men back, and they all hung on to the boat.”¹⁷² After treading water for 10 hours, the men decided they needed to swim to shore. Robinson states that JFK “took the tie strings of [an injured] man’s jacket in his teeth” and swam for four hours through shark-infested waters arriving on Plum Island.¹⁷³ JFK carved a message into a coconut and asked a local fisherman to deliver it to a U.S. army outpost. Five days after PT109 was struck, JFK and his crew were rescued.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Aidan Smith. “The Patriarch and the PT-109: John F. Kennedy and the Construction of Autonomy.” *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency*, 1st ed., vol. 1, Routledge, 2018, 73.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷⁰ JFK: Seven Days That Made a President. <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/>. National Geographic, 2013.

¹⁷¹ John Hellmann. *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK*. Columbia University Press, 1997. 37.

¹⁷² Ted Robinson. In JFK: Seven Days That Made a President. <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/>. National Geographic, 2013.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ JFK: Seven Days That Made a President. <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/>. National Geographic, 2013.

Kennedy suffered a severe back injury and gasoline burns and would consequently “spend the rest of the war in the hospital recovering.”¹⁷⁵



Figure 9 Message carved on coconut by JFK. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

The story of PT109 and the actions of JFK became national news, with the New York Times publishing an article, “Kennedy’s Son is Hero in Pacific as Destroyer Splits

¹⁷⁵ Smith. “The Patriarch and the PT-109.” 74

His PT Boat,” on August 20, 1943, about the incident.¹⁷⁶ In 1944, John Hersey wrote a profile on Kennedy for the *New Yorker* magazine titled “Survival” that, according to Smith, “combined narrative fiction techniques with his own interviews from the survivors,”¹⁷⁷ turning Kennedy into what John Hellmann calls the “a mythic hero, not a simple celebration of a ‘war hero.’”¹⁷⁸ Moreover, these articles were not merely anecdotes that reached a national audience but became a part of the political discourse in the late 40s and 50s. Hellmann notes, “Hersey’s article as the literary work that would be adapted into the script for Kennedy’s first campaign for Congress in 1946, and it would be similarly used in his campaign for the Senate in 1952.”¹⁷⁹ Kennedy’s courage and determination were celebrated and, much like other heroes before him, used as an example to emulate. This distinction helped Kennedy to get elected to Congress and then later to the Presidency.

Many stories highlight the importance of masculinity in leadership. Aiden Smith argues that “the presidency is the most gendered institution in the American political system, holding the power to direct the forces of war as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces,” the “ultimate symbol of masculine power.”¹⁸⁰ The stories told about legendary heroes, particularly those told about American presidents, lend an understanding of the values that have helped shape American ideals, such as bravery, integrity, and justice. As stated by President Joe Biden during a 2022 speech, “America

¹⁷⁶ The Associated Press. *Kennedy’s Son Is Hero in Pacific As Destroyer Splits His PT Boat*. *The New York Times*, August 20, 1943. <https://www.nytimes.com/1943/08/20/archives/kennedys-son-is-hero-in-pacific-as-destroyer-splits-his-pt-boat.html>

¹⁷⁷ Aidan Smith. “The Patriarch and the PT-109.” 74.

¹⁷⁸ John Hellmann. *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK*. Columbia University Press, 1997. 39.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸⁰ Aidan Smith. “The Patriarch and the PT-109” 3.

stands up to bullies, it's who we are.”¹⁸¹ These legends create and reinforce the standard against which the Americanness of one's behaviour can be measured.

Within Chapter 2, I have placed an emphasis on the figures who are seen to embody the American character focusing on the historical actors, beginning with Paul Revere, followed by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and finally, John F. Kennedy. Throughout this chapter, I argue that the narratives about these individuals, which often take the form of hagiography, have elevated them from historical figures to legends resulting in an American cult that venerates these leaders. In the context of this thesis, my use of the word cult is to draw a connection between the Greco-Roman imperial and hero cults to the veneration of specific historical figures, while acknowledging a key difference being that Americans do not worship these individuals as deities.

¹⁸¹ Joseph Biden. “Remarks by President Biden on Russia's Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine.” The White House, February 24, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/>

Chapter 3

American Civil Religion

The general sentiment, as stated by numerous newspapers following the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, according to Jasper Trautsch, was that of “glorifying Americans’ achievements in their successful revolution, boasting that Americans enjoyed freedom, peace, and prosperity to a degree unparalleled in human history.”¹⁸² These values and principles became the building blocks for American identity and the construction of what scholars would later call American civil religion. The academic study of civil religion takes an interdisciplinary approach drawing from numerous fields, including history, political science, sociology, psychology, and religious studies. The varied nature of civil religion within academia reflects both the difficulty of defining the subject and the multitude of perspectives one can take in examining the topic. With a seemingly new reprise in nationalism worldwide, this topic has become an even more important subject. While civic religion can be found in many countries around the world, the concept has resonated with scholars in the United States. Much like the academic study of religion, scholars have had difficulty agreeing on a definitive definition of civil religion; nonetheless, they agree that there is a pervasive intermingling

¹⁸² Jasper M. Trautsch. *The Genesis of America: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Formation of National Identity, 1793-1815*, 2020.

of religious language and imagery embedded in how Americans view their history and national symbols. This chapter aims to detail civil religion's historical and academic development in the United States. This will provide a deeper understanding of how religion and politics in the United States are intimately connected through religiously symbolic language, imagery, and interpretation of U.S. history.

Since its inception, the United States has tried to distance itself from European thought and tradition, attempting to form its own unique identity, as we have seen in the previous chapters through myths and stories. During the 20th century, as the U.S. was moving onto the world stage and establishing itself as a military superpower, it began to define itself in comparison with other countries further. With the rise of communism during the early 20th century, the U.S. found an opposing political and economic ideology to define its own further and to compete against.

Throughout history, the United States has often connected its identity to religious ideas, themes, and motifs. Many within the U.S. view communism and socialism as complete opposites to themselves. In the minds of U.S. citizens, the United States stood for freedom (individuality), the free market/ capitalism (private ownership/American dream), and religious liberty (God). By comparison, communism and countries that used this political and social philosophy became anti-American. Terms such as communism, Marxism, and socialism became taboos in the American consciousness during the late 1940s and 50s and arguably remain today.

In her essay “Braveheart,” Kristin Kobes Du Mez states that “for more than a century, conservative Christians have identified Marxism and socialism as threats not just to America, but to Christian America. This was evident in anti-Bolshevism and

conservative opposition to the New Deal, and also in the strident anti-communism of the Cold War Era.”¹⁸³ Du Mez also notes that “within Christian nationalist circles, ‘socialist’ has now become a ‘catch-all for anything leftist...without naming a target,’ [...] it’s also a ‘dog whistle’ for unAmerican identity politics & atheism.”¹⁸⁴

Communism, in the American view, represents considerable government control and atheism. As the U.S. continued to try to define itself from a positive point of view, efforts were made to publicly mark its distinction from communism, particularly atheism, to strengthen the government’s claim to authority. Naomi Goldenberg states, “President Dwight Eisenhower’s move in 1954 to add the words ‘under God’ to the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance illustrates how a generalized reference to religion as a more exalted form of sovereignty is conjured to bolster and validate government.”¹⁸⁵

References to God were by no means new at the national level; in the mid-nineteenth century, the term “in God we trust” grew increasingly popular during the Civil War and was first printed on a coin in 1864. The 1950s, however, saw the U.S. government increase its promotion of “American values” with the rise of the “red scare” and fears in the U.S. from the potential growth of communism. In 1956 Congress adopted the phrase “in God we trust” as the U.S. motto, replacing “*E Pluribus Unum.*” Additionally, paper currency has only used the words “in God we trust” since 1957.

¹⁸³ Kristin Kobes Du Mez. “Uncivil Religion: Braveheart: President Donald J. Trump.” n.d. Uncivil Religion: January 6, 2021. <https://uncivilreligion.org/home/braveheart-president-donald-j-trump?path=part-i-christian-nationalism-on-january-6>

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Naomi R. Goldenberg. “The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance: An Argument for Understanding Religions as Vestigial States.” In *Religion As a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, 3:280–92. United States: BRILL, 2015. 284.

Throughout the 1950s and McCarthyism was a concerted effort by the government to establish a conformity of national belief towards a civic religion to combat communism.

The notion of nationalism as a form of religious interpretation has been floating around in academia since the early 20th century through the works of Carleton Hayes.¹⁸⁶

Building his theory of a form of religious nationalism, Hayes states

Nationalism, like any religion, calls into play not simply the will, but the intellect, the imagination, and the emotions. The intellect constructs a speculative theology or mythology of nationalism. The imagination builds an unseen world around the eternal past and the everlasting future of one's nationality. The emotions feed the theological virtues of faith, hope, and filial love.¹⁸⁷

The construction of American identity utilized these aspects of building a mythology around national symbols and ideas while aligning these concepts through established religious language and imagery.

Scholars often hearken back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work, the *Social Contract*. Rousseau structures the concept of civic religion based on four fundamental beliefs: a belief in God, an idea of an afterlife, a reward for virtuous behavior and punishment for vices, and tolerance for other religions.¹⁸⁸ Rousseau determined that these four beliefs could create a unifying connection between people in a civil society. The *Social Contract* became a building block for 20th-century scholars to continue forming their civil religion theories. Emile Durkheim is another influential figure whom scholars reference, even though his work never directly addressed the concept of civil

¹⁸⁶ Carlton J. H. Hayes. *Essays on Nationalism*. The Macmillan company, 1926.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁸⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *The Social Contract*. Translated by Maurice Cranston. Reprint edition. London: Penguin Classics, 1968.

religion. Durkheim's definition of religion as a collection of beliefs, rituals, and practices, which unite communities and form a collective identity, lays the foundation for how Robert Bellah and other scholars have perceived civil religion.¹⁸⁹

In 1967, Robert Bellah's "Civil Religion in America" brought attention to what he observed as mixing religion and politics, laying the groundwork for what he saw as a uniquely American religious system in the United States. While this topic was not necessarily new, Bellah's application of the subject to the American political landscape captivated scholars and was hotly debated. For Bellah, civil religion is the intertwining of religion into the political and public realms. Political elements, rituals, and symbols can take on a religious-like mythology and meaning, creating a unifying system of beliefs for certain people.

Bellah's central thesis is that the United States has a civic religion that revolves around a shared set of beliefs, primarily the belief in God. In his work in "Civil Religion in America,"¹⁹⁰ Bellah uses texts and speeches from presidents and founding fathers who evoke God within their political rhetoric, asserting that God is a universal concept and "a word which almost all Americans can accept."¹⁹¹ Beginning with Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address, Bellah argues that "what people say on solemn occasions [...] is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments."¹⁹² Through his examination of historical documents, Bellah presents a history of this tradition of religiously charged language within political rhetoric in the U.S. The documents which helped to found and

¹⁸⁹ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Free Press, 1965.

¹⁹⁰ Robert N. Bellah. "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96.1, 1967.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 3.

establish the country have thus become more than just historical; instead, the Declaration of Independence and Constitution have become sacred scripture.¹⁹³ In his argument Bellah also includes later additions of religious language from the 1940s and 50s, citing the United States' motto "in God we trust" and the phrase "under God" in the pledge of allegiance,¹⁹⁴ which was a reaction to the rising fears of communism. Bellah uses various elements and references to God as proof that an American civil religion exists. Driving home his point, Bellah states, "God has clearly been a central symbol in the civil religion from the beginning and remains so today. This symbol is just as central to the civil religion as it is to Judaism or Christianity."¹⁹⁵ This statement firmly plants God as a central belief within American civil religion, drawing parallels with other established denominational religions. This is done not to insinuate it as a competing religion but as a way to legitimize his proposed conception of American civil religion.

Over time Bellah has revised his arguments around American civil religion and points out that American values and beliefs have often been in contrast with the reality of American life and politics. Throughout his work in *The Broken Covenant*,¹⁹⁶ Bellah provides a historical account of American identity as seen through a religious lens. He argues that historically European inhabitants of America used Christian imagery and symbolism to interpret their experiences in North America.¹⁹⁷ Over time this imagery and symbolism developed the way that Americans understood themselves. Drawing

¹⁹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹⁶ Robert N. Bellah. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992,

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 9.

connections between American political figures and biblical heroes were a common trope throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

As well as utilizing biblical figures to situate American identity towards a religious understanding of itself, there was also the language of America as the new Israel or the new Rome. This language seems to have been a way to promote the United States' growth and expansion. Bellah goes on to mention the decline of Israel and Rome and points out that our ancestors did not overlook the dark histories of these societies; instead, they "hoped to construct a republic on principles so sound that it might avoid their fate."¹⁹⁸ It is these principles and values that Bellah interprets as a unifying structure of an American civil religion. Philip Gorski argues that Bellah's interpretation of civil religion is "more scriptural than ritual,"¹⁹⁹ placing an emphasis on the language used to talk about the common beliefs Americans hold.

According to Bellah, "the only major body of nonbiblical symbols that we find in the word and acts of the founding fathers is not English but Roman."²⁰⁰ With the rise of Neoclassicism in the late 17th century, Greco-Roman art, architecture, literature, and ideas spread and became popular throughout North America and Europe. Bellah argues that "it was not so much Latin myth or legend that dominated the minds of educated Americans in the late 18th century as it was the history of Roman liberty."²⁰¹ U.S. government ideology was influenced by neoclassicism, ingrained in the early American identity, which saw itself as the new Rome.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁹⁹ Philip Gorski. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 16.

²⁰⁰ Bellah. *The Broken Covenant.*, 22.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 22.

Bellah references Erik Erikson's work *Dimensions of a New Identity*, pointing out that "George Washington, the Cincinnatus of the West, went to his inauguration by passing under arches of laurel. Greco-Roman classicism dominated the architecture and much of the art of the early republic period."²⁰² While the U.S. used Greco-Roman art, architecture, and ideas throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries, I would add that Americans mimicked Greco-Roman religious expressions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As we have seen in Chapter 3, following Washington's and Lincoln's deaths, stories of their lives quickly changed from historical accounts to didactic literature. As these historical figures developed into legends, their status changed, and their depiction in art also took on religious connotations. Bellah acknowledges the Roman influences within civic religion but states that they were less compelling than the biblical language.²⁰³

Bellah's *The Broken Covenant* also details that the U.S. as a society, while holding these strong beliefs and values that form this civic religion, has overwhelmingly failed to meet these expectations. Bellah discusses the "primal crime" committed against the Indigenous population and enslaved African peoples, stating, "at the very beginning of American society there was a double crime, the incalculable consequences of which still stalk the land."²⁰⁴ Despite the injustices, these American values and beliefs are shown to be a continued source of pride and foundational for understanding American identity and unity.

²⁰² Ibid., 23.

²⁰³ Ibid., 24.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 37.

Since Robert Bellah introduced the theory of American civil religion, scholars have debated the structure and even the validity of the concept. In 1970, John Coleman wrote on civil religion and divided the subject into three distinct types: undifferentiated, secular nationalism, and differentiated. Undifferentiated civil religion relies on the church or state to provide its framework. Coleman uses examples of Christianity's development in Europe and the "sacredness of the monarchical form of government in the divine right of kings."²⁰⁵ In essence, the religious majority dictates how the civil religion appears and functions, which is often problematic for the religious freedoms of minorities. Coleman provides an example of a state-sponsored civil religion: State Shinto in Japan, in which "the emperor was worshipped as the link with the divine ancestors, his decisions beyond dispute; Japan had a divine mission among the nations of the East, even by means of expansionist war."²⁰⁶ Coleman explains that secular nationalism "arises as the alternative source of civil religion when the historic national religion is either too traditionalistic or too closely tied to prerevolutionary regimes to serve as the civil religion of a modernizing, politico-economic regime."²⁰⁷ For this reason, secular nationalism is not synonymous with the separation of church and state; notable examples include Russia and Turkey, and France fell into this category for a short time. Coleman's differentiated civil religion is not controlled by the dominant religion or the state, although both participate in its development by forming "an elaborate symbol system."²⁰⁸ American

²⁰⁵ John A. Coleman. "Civil Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 31, no. 2 (1970): 70.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

civil religion is differentiated from other religions by its vague and non-denominational religious rhetoric. Coleman states

Both church and state actively compete in recognizing the *civil saints* (the righteous Washington as a new Moses leading his people in a exodus to the promised land; the sinless Lincoln, a martyr giving his life so the many might become free), *the civil holydays* (Memorial Day, recalling the truth that from the seed of martyred American soldiers springs the church of freedom; Thanksgiving Day when all Americans thank an undifferentiated god for his national bounty; Mother's Day which celebrates the sacred character of family-life and includes the family unit in civil religion), *the civil sermons* (every president in his inaugural address has mentioned God and spoken of his role in America's destiny as well as America's role in his providential plan for the world.²⁰⁹

Russell Richey and Donald Jones, early scholars of American civil religion, break down civil religion into five broad meanings: folk religion, transcendent universal religion, religious nationalism, democratic faith, and Protestant civic piety.²¹⁰ Their interpretation essentially positions American civil religion as an umbrella term that can include various outlooks. Their concept of civil religion as folk religion deals with peoples' actions and experiences, stating, "civil religion in this sense emerges out of the ethos and history of the society."²¹¹ Religious nationalism, according to Richey and Jones, shifts the focus to the nation itself, where the state becomes "the object of adoration and glorification. The nation takes on a sovereign and self-transcendent character. Some have called this kind of civil religion the religion of patriotism."²¹² While they do not attach any kind of judgment to this notion of civil religion as a worship

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 75.

²¹⁰ Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974): 15-17.

²¹¹ Ibid., 15.

²¹² Ibid., 16.

of the state, later scholars have taken a negative view of this interpretation. Richey and Jones describe democratic faith as “the humane values and ideals of equality, freedom, and justice without necessary dependence on a transcendent deity or a spiritualized nation represent civil religion at its best in the American experience.”²¹³ Their interpretation of civil religion as Protestant civic piety is a “fusion of Protestantism and nationalism and the pervading Protestant coloring in the American ethos.”²¹⁴ Protestant civic piety focuses on “Protestant moralism, individualism, activism (‘deeds not creeds’), pragmatism, the work ethic, and the grand motif of ‘missionizing’ the world.”²¹⁵ The United States’ expansionism and interpretation of a national destiny fit within this scope of American civil religion. Lastly is the concept of civil religion as a transcendent universal religion, where Bellah’s interpretation fits into this theoretical structure. Civil religion as “a universal and transcendent religion renders prophetic judgment on the nation. It functions as a source of meaning and social solidarity for the nation.”²¹⁶ This view of American civil religion is what scholarship often focuses on; however, these interpretations overlap to varying degrees.

Gail Gehrig expands on Richey and Jones’ work by mapping out the various debates on the subject. Gehrig, though, decides to lump religious nationalism, democratic faith, and protestant civic piety together, stating that these ideas are more often found in the literature related to church history and philosophy and are not as applicable to civil religion.²¹⁷ At the time of Gehrig’s publication, religious nationalism

²¹³ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

²¹⁷ Gail Gehrig, “The American Civil Religion Debate: A Source for Theory Construction,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 1 (March 1981): 52.

“functions to reinforce cultural values and integrate citizens” that the nation itself is being glorified as a self-worship and interpreted with an “idolatrous component.”²¹⁸ However, since this time, religious nationalism has taken on a different meaning which is more in line with Coleman’s understanding of undifferentiated civil religion. Gehrig states that democratic faith is a humanistic philosophy utilizing values such as liberty, equality, and justice.²¹⁹

Scholars have noted the Christian and Roman influence on American civil religion. One does not have to look too deeply into the American historical and political landscape to see religious elements. Scholars argue about the standard rhetoric and imagery that often takes on a Christian model. Eric Miller examines the political rhetoric of Francis Schaeffer and his notion that “the United States was founded as an explicitly *Christian* nation [...] American *civil* religion was thus necessarily the *Christian* religion.”²²⁰ While no one disputes the influence Christianity has played in forming American civil religion, John Coleman posits that “while the provenance of many of the concepts of American civil religion is clearly from Protestant denominationalism, the peculiar genius of American civil religion is that it is not a substitute religion for the organize religions.”²²¹

Not all scholars have found the concept of American civil religion convincing. Two of the most prominent scholars with dissenting views regarding American civil religion are Richard Fenn and Frederick Gedicks. For Fenn, religions require a

²¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 52.

²²⁰ Eric C Miller. “Civil Religion as Christian Religion.” In *The Rhetoric of American Civil Religion*. United States: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2016.

²²¹ Coleman. “Civil Religion.” 74.

recognized authoritative organization to define the parameters of the religion. The concept of American civil religion lacks the authority to be taken seriously; he argues that religious symbols reflect more of a “personal style” rather than “an over-arching national religion.”²²² Fenn argues that

the theme of the American Israel has attempted to achieve a similar symbolic interpretation between the symbols of personal identity and national authority; and [...] further argue[s] that the synthesis, never complete even on the cultural level, is increasingly pulled apart by the development of separate corporate and individual systems of ideas, rules, and values.²²³

For Fenn, there are too many variables for American civil religion to function as a unifying system of beliefs for the American people.

Many of Fenn’s arguments against American civil religion focus on the practicality of the tradition and whether or not the concept should exist. Fenn does present some ideas disputing Bellah’s theoretical framework. According to Fenn, civil religion is a socially constructed myth adapted to try and eliminate ethnic and religious differences.²²⁴ This perspective is at odds with Bellah’s original intended purpose of American civil religion as a universal unifying system. Fenn also argues that “if there were an over-arching national religion [...] one would understand the politician’s oath or blessing as an individual expression of widely shared religious commitments. But such is not the case in America.”²²⁵ Fenn expresses that even if certain rituals or ceremonies

²²² Richard Fenn. *Toward a Theory of Secularization*. Monograph Series - Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, No. 1. Storrs, Conn.: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1978, 51.

²²³ Richard Fenn. “Bellah and The New Orthodoxy.” *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 2 (1976): 161.

²²⁴ Richard K. Fenn, *Toward a Theory of Secularization*, 41.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

contain meaning to some, they are not necessarily universal or unifying, nor do they include a religious meaning for all Americans.

From Fenn's perspective, American civil religion is a dangerous ideology that attempts to eliminate religious and cultural differences and is orientated toward a form of national worship.²²⁶ For Fenn, the concept of civil religion is very much connected with extreme conditions of nationalism which become destructive or harmful for individuals who lie outside this belief system. He points to examples such as McCarthyism, Nazism, and other authoritarian regimes as using forms of civil religion to promote their causes.²²⁷ Fenn envisions a model secular society, and civil religion disrupts that ideal.

Frederick Gedicks, another critic of American civil religion, argues instead that the model of American civil religion that has been established is unsustainable for our current time. He reasons that while civil religion is designed to provide a source of national identity, the reality is that it now excludes many Americans.²²⁸ Gedicks points to three factors that are problematic for the continuation of American civil religion, stating that "religious pluralism and the rise of a sectarian religious conservatism in the contemporary United States makes civil religion practically improbable, and civil religion's tendency to devolve into state idolatry makes it normatively unattractive, especially for minority religions."²²⁹ Gedicks' approach is not to eliminate civil religion altogether but rather transform it through a Rawlsian perspective derived from the 20th-century moral philosopher John Rawls, which was dedicated to procedural values of

²²⁶ Richard K. Fenn, *Beyond Idols: The Shape of a Secular Society*. Oxford England; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Frederick Gedicks. "American Civil Religion: An Idea Whose Time is Past" 41 (2010): 19, 891.

²²⁹ Ibid., 898.

fairness and equity.²³⁰ The framework of American civil religion has become problematic for many American, so Gedicks' solution is to focus on moral principles, which he thinks will be a more unifying method. Gedicks' perspective is that the original framework for American civil religion is outdated and unrelatable for many American citizens.

Charles Long argues that “a great deal of the writings and discussions on the topic of American religion has been consciously or unconsciously ideological, serving to enhance, justify, and render sacred the history of European immigrants in this land.”²³¹ American civil religion is no exception, where Indigenous and African-American citizens are often left out or ignored as it relates to this theory. Long goes on to state that

all interpretations of American religion, whether from the point of view of the revealed tradition or the civil tradition, have been involve with the subjective concealment of the inner dynamics of their own religious-cultural psychic reality and a correlative repression and concealment of the reality of the *others*.²³²

In discussing Sydney Mead's work on American civil religion, Long notes that “Mead mentions the Indian indigenous population only in passing and the Africans not at all. In the last analysis, the American is a person of European descent moving across and taking possession of a vast territory.”²³³ This exclusion of large portions of the population becomes problematic for a theory that is supposed to be, by nature, “unifying.”

²³⁰ Ibid., 891.

²³¹ Charles Long in *American Civil Religion*. Richey, Russell E., and Donald G. Jones, eds. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. 212.

²³² Ibid., 219.

²³³ Charles Long. “America, Religious Interpretations Of.” *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 62–69.

As we have moved into the 21st century, scholars have taken different approaches while examining the subject of American civil religion. Some scholars have focused on the changing demographics within the United States to suggest that there needs to be a change in our understanding of American civil religion. Dylan Weller's article, "Godless Patriots: Toward a New American Civil Religion," suggests that the growing number of non-religious or religiously unaffiliated in the U.S. has created a problem for understanding American civil religion. Weller states, "the rising percentage of American non-theists suggests that the ecumenically theistic foundation upon which American civil religion stands may be slowly crumbling."²³⁴ For the survivability of American civil religion, Weller suggests bridging theistic and non-theistic ideas of social justice and ethical principles. Weller also states, "a non-theistic civil religion, however, may be less likely to evolve into a defensive and self-aggrandizing nationalism."²³⁵ This suggestion seems to be aimed at critics like Fenn, who point to the destructive potential of civil religion.

Weller's position does not seek to abolish civil religion or substitute it with something else but to change the framework to be more open to non-theists. Weller argues that non-theists are not "any less likely to feel committed to fundamental moral values and ethical principles, or to desire to locate those principles within a civil religious framework that is supported by the weight of history and that is deeply embedded in one's sense of national identity."²³⁶ This notion of a civic religion that does not include

²³⁴ Dylan Weller. "Godless Patriots: Towards a New American Civil Religion." *Polity* 45, no. 3 (July 2013): 373.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 389.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 381.

the belief in God deviates from Bellah's original structure of American civil religion; however, Weller maintains the values and principles that characterize much of this theory.

Weller insists that "developing a non-theistic language of American civil religion might help to demonstrate that non-theists are invested in this space."²³⁷ With this language change, Weller hopes to create a more inclusive American civil religion that can incorporate the growing demographic of non-religious Americans and continue to be, as Bellah conceived, a unifying concept. The definitional boundaries of what constitutes American civil religion limit who is included. Even the focus on general values and beliefs poses challenges to nailing down a definition of American civil religion that scholars can agree on.

Civil religions are generally structured from a society's history and understanding of itself; however, that history tends to be limited to the history chosen by certain members of that society. This perspective often overlooks and sometimes whitewashes the darker parts of history, sometimes intentionally. This causes problems within the society, allowing many citizens and their histories to be excluded, and creating significant social divisions. The narrow construction of a civil religion also creates problems in edifying the field's legitimacy. Evidence of a growing shift towards acknowledging these darker histories can be seen in the recent removal of some of the monuments, which appear to glorify the chosen history as opposed to the entire history experienced by the country. Given that civil religions may alienate some citizens who cannot connect to this ethos, this raises questions regarding potential civil religious variations within a single

²³⁷ Ibid., 384.

country. With the increased polarization in the U.S., particularly on political grounds and the growing boldness of White Christian nationalism, understanding the interconnectedness of religion and politics in the United States is becoming even more critical.

The goal of this chapter was to provide a theoretical background and show the development of the theory of American civil religion, a set of beliefs and practices founded on a set of common values and principles many Americans hold. While many scholars of American civil religion point to Rousseau and Durkheim for the inspiration of the theory, I argued that the concept of American civil religion is also influenced by its historical setting, being developed after the US government increased its promotion of “American values” as a way to combat communism.

Chapter 4

Modern Nationalism

As we have seen in previous chapters, American identity and civil religion are structured around various principles and values. What it means to be an American is also wrapped up in patriotism and devotion to the country. How patriotism manifests differs considerably throughout the United States, and there are many different outlooks and perspectives regarding shaping America and its future by either maintaining the status quo or trying to bring about change. There is also a fundamental misunderstanding of how the U.S. political parties interpret the opposing side's patriotism.

The political outlook within the U.S. is divided primarily between two political sections with little to no room for alternatives. There is no doubt that claims of patriotism are made by both political parties in the U.S. while at the same time denouncing the other party as harmful to the “American way of life.” This chapter will outline the different modes of patriotism and how they have been utilized in political discourse. For many Americans, patriotism involves fighting injustices and striving to eliminate oppressive structures within American society. However, there is often considerable variation in beliefs about what constitutes injustice and oppression. Often what one party views as a fight against injustice, the other views as an addition of another oppressive structure.

Fathali Moghaddam's work, *Mutual Radicalization*, focuses on how both political parties have become increasingly polarized and have shifted away from the conventional political establishment. Moghaddam argues, "U.S. society was already fairly polarized at the start [of the 2016 presidential campaign], but it had become far more so by its end."²³⁸ The growing conflict between the two political parties creates an emotionally charged flashpoint that has led to darker elements in the theory of patriotism, such as far-right nationalism and destructive narratives that have encouraged individuals to act aggressively toward those they see as threats to the country with the events of January 6th being a prime example.

Within the United States, it is common for someone to describe themselves as being patriotic. Arguably, more than in most other countries, this patriotic identity in the United States is linked with being considered a good American. At the very least, patriotism is pride in one's country and culture. In their article, "American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement," Leonie Huddy and Nadia Khatib provide four scales of patriotism, "symbolic, national pride, uncritical, and constructive,"²³⁹ a person can subscribe to. Symbolic patriotism relates to the devotion or reverence toward national icons. Huddy and Khatib state that "liberals express some reserve about national symbols as a lingering historical consequence of opposition to the Vietnam War, in which flag burning became synonymous with liberal, antiwar sentiment," leading to the concept

²³⁸ Fathali M. Moghaddam. *Mutual Radicalization: How Groups and Nations Drive Each Other to Extremes*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2018. 167.

²³⁹ Leonie Huddy and Nadia Khatib. "American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement." *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007), 64.

of symbolic patriotism being “stronger among conservatives than liberals, raising needed questions about its utility as a broad measure of patriotism.”²⁴⁰

Another form of patriotism often linked with conservatives is uncritical or blind patriotism, which is generally described “as a rigid and inflexible attachment to country, characterized by unquestioning positive evaluation, staunch allegiance, an intolerance of criticism,”²⁴¹ often “linked to authoritarianism, which is characterized, in turn, by a tendency to defer to authority figures and support them unconditionally.” Schatz, Staub, and Lavine note that although uncritical patriotism is more on the politically conservative spectrum, it does not “suggest that all conservatives are blindly patriotic; it is to suggest, however, that the political philosophy associated with blind patriotism will often be a conservative one.”²⁴² Finally, constructive patriotism is “characterized by heightened political efficacy, information gathering, and activism,”²⁴³ by wanting to bring positive change to the country. Blind and constructive patriotism, however, are “positively correlated with national attachment [...] they share core patriotic sentiment.”²⁴⁴

The U.S. political system is caught up in a dualistic clash of power, with both sides believing they are acting in a patriotic way that ultimately serves the nation. While there are a variety of political tendencies throughout the United States, when it comes to voting for leadership, one’s options are generally limited to the umbrella of either Republican or Democrat. Both parties, of course, claim to represent the will of the people and claim to have the country’s best interest in mind. Cas Mudde states that

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 64.

²⁴¹ Robert T. Schatz, Ervin Staub, and Howard Lavine. “On the Varieties of National Attachment: Blind versus Constructive Patriotism.” *Political Psychology* 20, no. 1 (1999): 153.

²⁴² Ibid., 169.

²⁴³ Ibid., 163.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 163.

“American politicians (and citizens) are fond of stressing they are both the oldest and the greatest democracy in the world. The myth of “we the people” is instilled in Americans from an early age.”²⁴⁵ This political rhetoric of the U.S. being the “greatest” is commonplace, and a political device to prove or perhaps convince others of their patriotism.

On the right or Republican side of the political spectrum, people often see themselves as conservative concerning governmental regulations and spending and morally and ethically superior. Conservatives view themselves as more fiscally responsible, pushing smaller governments and reducing the budget, with the exception of military spending. Along with wanting decreased spending, conservatives push for less government regulation overall. They may point to their policies on abortion and their “pro-life” stance as evidence of their moral and ethical superiority. The Republican view of patriotism focuses more on maintaining the status quo and often aligns with uncritical patriotism.

In contrast with their views, conservatives look at the Democratic party, and liberals in general, as promoting a communist/Marxist agenda, even going as far as saying that liberals are seeking to get rid of public property. The right argues that the left is anti-capitalist, lazy, and wants “free” stuff, very much rooted in the United States’ historical opposition to and fear of communist regimes. To be communist, according to many Americans, is to be un-American.

²⁴⁵ Cas Mudde. 2020. “Trump Is Pushing Nationalist Myths. But Democrats Indulge Lavish Patriotism, Too.” *The Guardian*, September 20, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/20/donald-trump-nationalist-myths-democrats-patriotism>.

On the left, Democrats, or liberals in the U.S., tend to see themselves as more progressive and open-minded compared to their conservative counterparts. Additionally, they might also see themselves as more intelligent, driven by public service rather than promoting their own agenda, and willing to increase spending and regulation to provide government programs and services for the people. The more liberal interpretation of patriotism focuses on bringing about change to better the United States. The left has sought social justice and equal rights for marginalized people and communities.

The liberals tend to view the right as close-minded and, in some cases, would even call them bigoted in certain aspects of their perspective. They think the right wing is clinging to and wanting to revert to the “good old days” of American society, which arguably has never been a reality. There is a fear from the left that Republicans wish to revert policies in the United States that would harm people. The most recent example would be the Republican-appointed Supreme Court Justices overturning the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision in June of 2022.

While there are some considerable differences between the two political parties and their policies, there are some points of common ground. Both parties have overwhelming support for the military. This seems to be ingrained within American society as a whole to “support the troops.” Within congress, this takes the form of both rhetorical and monetary support. The military budget in the U.S. is far beyond that of any other country in the world, with neither political party pushing for any limits to military spending.

The concept of the “free market” is another common area in which both parties seemingly agree. The most basic understanding of this is that there should be as little

government intervention in the affairs of the economy. Although, the government seemed to agree by bailing out both the auto and banking industries following the 2008 financial crisis. In recent years politicians from both parties have received criticism for their involvement and participation in the stock market. Following closed-door meetings about the impending Covid-19 crisis, some politicians sold off significant portions of their stock portfolio before the market dipped in 2020. In late 2021 and early 2022, there was a public outcry to restrict congress members from participating in the stock market altogether, with many believing that representatives have insider knowledge and an unfair advantage over working-class Americans.

There is a common theme in the rhetoric used by members of both parties, essentially claiming, “we’re patriotic, and they are trying to destroy the country.” Both parties seem to be vying for patriotic superiority over the other. While both political parties try to appeal to symbolic patriotism, other forms of patriotism tend to set them apart and make them misunderstand each other. These views can be seen in the Pew Research Center’s study “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal.”²⁴⁶ The Pew Research Center states, “Republicans are substantially more likely to characterize Democrats as more unpatriotic than other Americans.”²⁴⁷

Additionally, “Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to describe members of their own party as more patriotic (71% say this). By comparison, just 29% of Democrats say Democrats are more patriotic.”²⁴⁸ Both political parties are fervent in

²⁴⁶ Sara Atske. 2019. “1. The Partisan Landscape and Views of the Parties.” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. October 10, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/the-partisan-landscape-and-views-of-the-parties>.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

their claim to be patriotic and that the U.S. is the “greatest country on Earth.” Mudde notes that “where most west European progressives abhor flag-waving and patriotism, let alone chauvinism, many American progressives proudly wrap themselves in the stars and stripes and attack Trump for not being patriotic enough”²⁴⁹ The over-the-top claims to patriotism are a persistent problem in the U.S. as they lead to further division and contribute to growing nationalism.

According to George Orwell, patriotism is a dedication to the place and culture one is from and a willingness to defend both, if required. While there is nothing inherently problematic with patriotism, it can often be hard to draw the line between patriotism and nationalism. George Orwell marks a distinction between patriotism and nationalism, stating

By 'patriotism' I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.²⁵⁰

Huddy and Khatib argue that the “sense of superiority and need for foreign dominance better reflect nationalism than patriotism.”²⁵¹ Similarly, Schatz, Staub, and Lavine point out that “a patriotism based in staunch and uncritical attachment to country predicts increase nationalism.”²⁵² Highlighting the delusional nature of nationalists, Orwell notes

²⁴⁹ Mudde. “Trump Is Pushing Nationalist Myths”

²⁵⁰ George Orwell and John Carey. *Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

²⁵¹ Huddy and Khatib. “American Patriotism.” 63.

²⁵² Schatz. “On the Varieties of National Attachment.” 169.

that “having picked his side, he persuades himself that it *is* the strongest, and is able to stick to his belief even when the facts are overwhelmingly against him”²⁵³

Historically, nationalist regimes have been violent and destructive and is defined by its attempt to control through force. William Cummings notes that “in Europe many nationalist movements that oppose an international world order and immigration into the continent are often overtly aligned with white nationalist and anti-Semitic groups.”²⁵⁴ A shining historical example of extreme nationalism can be seen in Nazi Germany, with its goals of a monocultural society, strong governmental control, and other oppressive regimes throughout history. For these reasons, the word nationalism has negative connotations. Nationalism is often described as a form of State control or a political ideology that puts the needs of one’s nation above those of all others. Schatz, Staub, and Lavine note that “nationalism is often accompanied by fears that external forces threaten both national security and national culture.”²⁵⁵ With its focus on domestic policies, nationalism generates a polarizing stance that violates concepts like multi-culturalism and globalism, striving to create a unified mono-cultural society with a concentration on the country’s desires and needs over that of international ones.

A more extreme form of nationalism, nativism, essentially creates a dichotomy and, in some cases, a hierarchy between citizens born within the country’s boundaries and people who immigrated to the country. Nativism has existed in the United States since at least the mid-1800s following significant “numbers of German and Irish

²⁵³ Orwell. *Essays*. 301.

²⁵⁴ William Cummings. 2018. “I Am a Nationalist’: Trump’s Embrace of Controversial Label Sparks Uproar.” *USA Today*, October 24, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/24/trump-says-hes-nationalist-what-means-why-its-controversial/1748521002/>.

²⁵⁵ Schatz. “On the Varieties of National Attachment.” 155.

immigrants came to the United States,” and “their tendency to live together in ethnic communities and embrace their cultural characteristics was viewed with suspicion by nativists and seen as a rejection of American society”²⁵⁶ Nativism has been a persistent ideology in the U.S. and although “the groups have changed [...] the language used to describe the groups and the ways in which they are vilified are eerily similar.”²⁵⁷ Following September 11, 2001, “Muslims were the target religious group for nativists.”²⁵⁸ This political rhetoric can be seen through the birthers concerned about Barack Obama’s birth certificate and would claim that Obama was religiously Muslim. There do not seem to be any limitations or restrictions on who can become a nationalist. Nationalism can be found in politics on both the right and the left. Additionally, not all forms of nationalism are considered bad; anti-colonial nationalism is viewed favorably as a way for previously colonized countries to liberate themselves from oppressive colonial superpowers.

Nationalism in the U.S., especially its emphasis on domestic affairs, has seemingly grown in popularity within the past decade. The rhetoric of America First, which has been around since at least the early 20th century, saw a resurgence. This slogan has a nationalistic message and was used during the early to mid-twentieth century to avoid getting involved in both world wars. The re-emergence of this slogan is an example of the revival of the strong push to advance the interests of the United States and a rejection of advancing foreign interests and policies.

²⁵⁶ Cherry A. McGee Banks. “Nativism in the United States.” *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education*, 2012.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

John Breuilly, in *Nationalism and the State*, discusses the idea of an “ideal” leader for the nation based on the commonly held views of the people. Noting that, in India, “Gandhi, with his asceticism, non-violence, and concern with tradition, embodied the national ideal for which he strove.”²⁵⁹ It is unlikely there will ever be a singular ideal leader that would satisfy the majority of Americans. In fact, often around general elections in the U.S., there is talk of being forced to choose between “the lesser of two evils.” However, Donald Trump, as a White Protestant heterosexual capitalist businessman, seems to fit many of the ideals that the conservatives in the US would have for a leader.

When Donald Trump announced his run for president in the 2016 election, many believed this was some elaborate joke, and to many, it seemed that Trump’s chances of succeeding were slim at best. Throughout his campaign, Trump, as a political outsider, made statements about how he would “drain the swamp,” a message that insinuated that he would push out the long-reigning political “elite.” Trump was part of a larger far-right movement utilizing populism to appeal to the concerns and fears of people.

The growing far-right movement in the U.S. around the time of Trump’s rise in politics was not a singular event but part of a larger far-right movement worldwide. Cass Mudde’s *The Far Right Today* provides a rich historical background of the far right and notes that there have been waves of far-right movements around the world. In the 21st century, we are in the fourth wave, which has had significant growth regarding far-right politicians’ influence on government policy. The events of 9/11, the 2008 housing crisis,

²⁵⁹ John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 65.

and the 2015 refugee crisis have contributed to the emergence of this fourth wave. As nationalism often feeds off of fear, these events became flashpoints for far-right nationalists to use to drum up support for their cause.

Mudde creates two classifications of groups who occupy the far right, the extreme right, and the radical right. The extreme right is characterized by their “anti-system” ideology, their distrust of liberal democracy, and their rejection of “the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule.”²⁶⁰ On the other hand, the radical right respects the will of the people and is more reformist in nature, choosing to work from within the system rather than a revolutionary approach of the extreme right. Trump's supporters range the full spectrum of these far-right categories that Mudde establishes.

Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), and his “America first” policy use nationalist language, which has mixed reviews. Trump’s supporters often embrace the language used by Trump, but critics, both conservative and liberal, take issue with the nationalistic rhetoric, given its ties to extremist views like Nazism. On October 22, 2018, at a campaign rally in Houston, Texas, Trump proudly proclaimed himself a nationalist. When asked in an interview by Jim Acosta the following day if “his embrace of the term could be construed as ‘coded language’ or a ‘dog whistle’ to Americans embracing a racist ideology, Trump said he was unaware the term carried any racist connotation and defended his use of the label.”²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Cas Mudde. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019. 7.

²⁶¹ William Cummings, 2018. “‘I Am a Nationalist’: Trump’s Embrace of Controversial Label Sparks Uproar.” *USA Today*, October 24, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/24/trump-says-hes-nationalist-what-means-why-its-controversial/1748521002/>.

Yamiche Alcindor also asked about Trump's claim to be a nationalist and "if [Trump] might be emboldening white nationalists, Trump told her she asked a 'racist question' and cited his poll numbers among African-Americans."²⁶² Whether Trump is willfully ignorant of the history of the language he is using or does so just for the media attention, his approach has successfully increased the amount of attention he gets. Max Boot notes that,

in the 20th century, nationalism has come to be associated with far-right politics, with fascism, with leaders like Mussolini, Hitler, Pinochet, Franco and others. And that is perhaps part of the reason why previous American presidents did not describe themselves as nationalists. They called themselves patriots.²⁶³

Trump's efforts to seize media attention included several tactics beyond his controversial use of socially charged language. In his public appearances and his use of social media, Trump is known for his elaborate and dramatic facial expressions and crass language, especially towards those who oppose him or those with whom he disagrees. He also used social media, such as Twitter, to engage in celebrity feuds and to launch criticisms against his opponents. One of the more famous online attacks that Trump committed was his criticism of NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and his choice to protest during the national anthem.

²⁶² Yamiche Alcindor in William Cummings. "I Am a Nationalist': Trump's Embrace of Controversial Label Sparks Uproar." *USA Today*, October 24, 2018. [https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/24/trump-says-hes-nationalist-what-means-why-its-controversial/1748521002/..](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/24/trump-says-hes-nationalist-what-means-why-its-controversial/1748521002/)

²⁶³ Max Boot in William Cummings. "I Am a Nationalist': Trump's Embrace of Controversial Label Sparks Uproar." *USA Today*, October 24, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/10/24/trump-says-hes-nationalist-what-means-why-its-controversial/1748521002/..>

Colin Kaepernick began protesting by sitting on the bench during the national anthem during the pre-season of 2016.²⁶⁴ He was motivated by the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of police officers in July 2016. Kaepernick's actions represented "a symbol of protest not against the flag or the song but against institutional social injustice and the violence perpetrated by police against black men."²⁶⁵

Beginning in September, Kaepernick changed the form of his protest by kneeling instead of sitting during the anthem. This shift was due to a discussion Kaepernick had with his teammate and former green beret Nate Boyer. Boyer says, "Well, if you're not going to stand, first of all, I think sitting on the bench isolated from your team is not very inspiring. It looks like you're sitting it out or you don't care."²⁶⁶ The change to kneeling was meant to be a more respectful protest for Kaepernick. Following this change, more players began to join Kaepernick in protest. The act of kneeling during the anthem brought the issue of systematic racism and racial inequality into the spotlight and inspired discussion about race on the national stage.

There have been a variety of different reactions to these protests. While Kaepernick intended his actions to be a respectful display of his convictions, the fact that he and others chose to protest was viewed by many as "disrespectful," and people wrongly made assumptions about the protesters, going so far as to say that they didn't

²⁶⁴ Jennifer Lee Chan, Twitter post, Aug 26, 2016, 10:02 a.m.
<https://twitter.com/jenniferleechan/status/769354272735531009>

²⁶⁵ Maquita Peters, and Vanessa Romo. "Trump Defends Pence's NFL Protest amid Claims It Was A Publicity Stunt." *NPR*, October 8, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/10/08/556531518/vp-pence-takes-a-stand-and-walks-away-after-nfl-players-kneel>.

²⁶⁶ Sam Farmer. "Must Reads: The Ex-Green Beret Who Inspired Colin Kaepernick to Kneel Instead of Sit during the Anthem Would like to Clear a Few Things Up." *The Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/sports/nfl/la-sp-kaepernick-kneel-boyer-20180916-story.html>.

like the country or that they were “traitors.” Jules Boykoff and Ben Carrington note that the differing reaction in the media follows two frames, the “Patriot Frame” and the “Traitor Frame.”²⁶⁷ The media articles that portray Kaepernick’s actions as patriotic discuss them as “expressions of First Amendment ideals” and Kaepernick as someone who is “standing on the shoulders of previous activists like Dr. Martin Luther King and athlete-activists like John Carlos and Tommie Smith who thrust their black-gloved fists into the sky on the medal stand at the 1968 Mexico Olympics.”²⁶⁸ Those who view Kaepernick’s actions in a more positive light would arguably fit within the constructive patriot scale outlined by Huddy and Khatib through the desire for positive change and activism.

On the other hand, the “Traitor Frame” follows the logic of symbolic patriotism, pointing to the kneeling during the national anthem as “anti-American and attention-seeking [...] someone going out of his way to be disrespectful of the national anthem, the US military, and/or the country more generally.”²⁶⁹ While the backlash towards the form of protest was widespread, Trump and other public figures led the charge in their contempt for the protests as a violation of symbolic patriotism. Utilizing Twitter, Trump spoke out against kneeling multiple times, calling for the NFL to force the players to stand or fire or suspend any player who participated in the protest.²⁷⁰ Rather than view this as a free speech issue, Trump saw the players as employees who should do what they

²⁶⁷ Jules Boykoff and Ben Carrington. “Sporting Dissent: Colin Kaepernick, NFL Activism, and Media Framing Contests.” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55, no. 7 (2020):

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Donald Trump, Twitter post, Sep 24, 2017, 7:13 a.m. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>

were told to do or suffer the consequences of defying the directions of their employers, who interpreted their actions as disrespectful.

The criticism of the form of protest was not limited to Republicans and conservatives; in an interview, Ruth Bader Ginsburg stated, “If they want to be stupid, there's no law that should be preventive, [...] If they want to be arrogant, there's no law that prevents them from that. What I would do is strongly take issue with the point of view that they are expressing when they do that”²⁷¹ Ginsburg later apologized for her comments stating that they were “inappropriately dismissive and harsh”²⁷² The criticism of the protests focus on the action and how it is acted out with little to no mention of the reasoning behind the protests.

Not all of the responses to the protest were negative, and Kaepernick received support from the Black Lives Matter movement and several corporations. Nike was one of the most vocal companies to show their support of Kaepernick and the cause he was promoting. In 2018, Nike signed Kaepernick to their brand despite no longer being an NFL player. Nike also released ads featuring Kaepernick reciting an inspirational monologue and another with a picture of him, including text stating, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” Nike’s endorsement of Kaepernick resulted in considerable support and a backlash, with people posting videos and pictures of themselves on social media, burning and removing Nike’s emblem from various

²⁷¹ Ruth Bader Ginsburg in Nick Wagoner. “Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court Justice, Says Colin Kaepernick’s National Anthem Protests Are ‘Really Dumb.’” *ESPN*. October 10, 2016. https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/17763208/ruth-bader-ginsburg-supreme-court-justice-says-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protests-really-dumb.

²⁷² Ruth Bader Ginsburg in ESPN.com news services. “Ruth Bader Ginsburg Apologizes for Criticizing Colin Kaepernick’s Anthem Protest.” *ESPN*. October 14, 2016. https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/17795159/ruth-bader-ginsburg-apologizes-criticizing-colin-kaepernick-anthem-protest.

products. On the other hand, Nike saw a significant increase in sales of their merchandise following their support of Kaepernick.

Kaepernick's form of protest was simple; kneeling during a ceremony at the beginning of a sporting event is not an outlandish act. Furthermore, a few years earlier, Tim Tebow was praised and celebrated for kneeling on the football field. One's reason for kneeling is wide-ranging and is often viewed as a form of submission, an act of worship, and a sign of prayer. Kneeling can be seen in various contexts, including religious services; however, Colin Kaepernick's kneeling is the only version I am aware of that has been interpreted as disrespectful. This begs the question: is there a right and wrong way to protest? Were Kaepernick's actions inherently "disrespectful" because standing during the national anthem is customary? Or is there something else going on in U.S. society, and Kaepernick's dissenters chose to focus on his actions in order to detract focus from the growing issue of police brutality against the Black community that Kaepernick was trying to bring awareness to?

The United States has a pervasive problem in the treatment of minorities in the justice system. Ron Ousley notes that the "research continues to show that minorities are represented at much higher rate in the criminal courts adjudication process [...and] receive much harsher sentences compared to white defendants,"²⁷³ who have comparable charges and criminal backgrounds. The problem is not limited to the justice system, with factors of discrimination found in the policing process as well. Felipe Goncalves' research analysis on police officers and prejudice found that "White officers are much

²⁷³ Ron Ousley. "Minorities in the Criminal Courts Adjudication: Perceptions of Fairness and Equality of Treatment." In *Police Brutality, Racial Profiling, and Discrimination in the Criminal Justice System*, edited by Stephen Egharevba, 239-253. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2017. 241.

more likely to be discriminatory against minority drivers.”²⁷⁴ In more recent years, with the wide availability of cell phones and the ability to record video interactions between the police and the public, incidents have been broadcast to wider audiences, gaining the attention and scrutiny of civil rights groups.

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin. BLM’s mission “is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.”²⁷⁵ There are some very concrete goals that BLM has, including removing any politician who played a role in perpetuating the “big lie” of a stolen election in 2020 and inciting an attack on the Capitol that sought to overturn the election. Another goal is to ban Donald Trump from holding future political office and social media platforms. BLM is also pushing to defund the police. Police forces have increased their arsenals over time and are more comparable to the military than ever before. K. Cyr, Rosemary Ricciardelli, and Dale Spencer note that the “1033 program, named after that section of the 1997 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), allows the Secretary of State to transfer excess Department of Defense property [...] to federal and state agencies.”²⁷⁶ In contrast to this, the Black Lives Matter movement has called for additional community resources and “investments in housing, education, health, and environmental justice.”²⁷⁷ Police officers killing African-

²⁷⁴ Felipe Goncalves. “A Few Bad Apples?: Racial Bias in Policing.” *The American Economic Review* 111, no. 5 (2021): 1427.

²⁷⁵ Blacklivesmatter.com. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

²⁷⁶ Cyr, K, Rosemary Ricciardelli, and Dale Spencer. “Militarization of Police: a Comparison of Police Paramilitary Units in Canadian and the United States.” *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 22, no. 2 (2020): 139.

²⁷⁷ Blacklivesmatter.com. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/blm-demands/>

American men has been an ongoing problem in the U.S., with little to no accountability to hold the officers responsible. BLM serves as a modern civil rights movement to fight against racism and systemic oppression.

In July and August of 2014, following the deaths of Eric Gardner and Michael Brown, the Black Live Matters movement amassed national attention about the cause. Brown's death, in particular, led to protests and general unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, through the end of 2014, with recurring demonstrations on the anniversary of his death. The murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2020 led to protests throughout the summer of 2020. As the BLM movement expanded within the U.S., the world also took notice. BLM and solidarity protests were organized in European and South American countries as well as in Australia and New Zealand. Along with the push for police reform, there was also a focus on removing statues and monuments that glorified white supremacy and those who fought to support slavery.

The BLM movement has garnered both support and criticism. Critics of the movement point to the decentralized leadership and structure of the movement, which leads to the ability for people, often those loosely affiliated or unaffiliated with BLM, to take advantage of the protests by looting and destroying property. The Pew Research Center's studies indicate that the majority of Americans support BLM.²⁷⁸ Summer of 2020, there was an increase in protests and reactions to the death of Breonna Taylor and

²⁷⁸ Deja Thomas, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz. 2020. "Support for Black Lives Matter Has Decreased since June but Remains Strong among Black Americans." *Pew Research Center*. September 16, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/16/support-for-black-lives-matter-has-decreased-since-june-but-remains-strong-among-black-americans/>.

the murder of George Floyd. These protests drew even more criticism because of the destruction of private property.

Other reactions resulted in counter-protests and slogans which attempted to remove the racial implications of BLM. David Theo Goldenberg notes that “All Lives Matter” is indicative of a perspective of “racial dismissal, ignoring, and denial.”²⁷⁹ He argues that the slogan All Lives Matter is a cliché and even a universal moral imperative that no one disagrees with; however, its use as a reaction to BLM serves no other purpose than to whitewash and remove race from the conversation.

The Blue Lives Matter countermovement and slogan, similar to the All Lives Matter, was a reaction to Black Lives Matter and their push for a more limited police force. The initial Blue Lives Matter slogan and movement arose from the deaths of two NYPD officers in December 2014. The individual responsible for the officers’ deaths was seeking retribution for the deaths of Eric Gardner and Michael Brown earlier that year.

The Black Lives Matter movement functions as a modern-day civil rights movement using its platform to try and better the country. BLM and Kaepernick’s style of constructive patriotism deals with positive change and unity. The right’s misunderstanding of this movement and Kaepernick derives from how they interpret patriotism and favor symbolic and uncritical patriotism over the more liberal form of constructive patriotism.

²⁷⁹ David Theo Goldberg. 2015. “Why ‘Black Lives Matter’ Because All Lives Don’t Matter in America.” *HuffPost*. September 25, 2015. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-black-lives-matter_b_8191424.

As we have seen in previous chapters, American identity, the principles and values of Americans have developed over the course of approximately 400 years. The stories and histories told generally bolster a conservative version of patriotism and devotion to the country. While liberal patriotism is not a modern invention, it seems it has only been given a voice in the shaping of America over the last 60 years. It is unsurprising that conflict would arise over the various delineations of patriotism. While the liberals work to create and understand a modern American identity, polarizing politicians, such as Donald Trump, use this conflict to exacerbate the tension and gain interest and support for their desire to maintain a system which keeps them in power.

This chapter has provided a discussion of modern notions of nationalism and patriotism in the US. The goal of this chapter was to address the question of what an American looks like from differing political perspectives. Throughout this chapter, I showed how both political parties appeal to symbolic patriotism, vying for patriotic superiority over the other. An examination of political rhetoric is used throughout, along with discussions on civic participation through protests tied to more liberal interpretations of patriotism and reactions by political leaders.

Chapter 5

Washington, D.C.

My first visit to Washington, D.C. as an adult was an illuminating experience. I was struck by the vast amount of religious imagery embedded within the civic commemorative landscape. Having researched religious shrines and spaces for a few years before my visit, I couldn't help but draw parallels between traditionally religious sites and civic monuments and memorials. In May 2022, accompanied by my father, I returned to Washington, D.C., to gather information and attend a Memorial Day ceremony. Without plans for our first day in Washington, D.C., my father and I wandered outside the White House and the National Mall. As we walked and talked about the history of D.C. and the memorials we came across, we also observed crowds of people walking around doing much of the same. As we reached the Vietnam Memorial, the crowds thinned, and the atmosphere became quieter and more reflective. To our right, we noticed three men reading the names on the memorial. The oldest of the three had served in the Vietnam War and was looking for the name of someone he had served with. When they found the name of the person they were looking for, they became quiet to either take a moment to pray or just to remember whom they had lost.

Walking through Washington, D.C. today, one notices monuments and memorials throughout the city. These homages to American heroes and significant historical events create a space of veneration and reflection. Monuments and memorials pay tribute to deeds, values, and principles represented by the people and events they honor. These

public markers reflect what society wishes to be remembered. In John Bodnar's *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, he argues that stories, ideas, and symbols behind American commemoration are forms of historical consciousness that do not necessarily preserve the past but reflect contemporary political matters.²⁸⁰ Monuments and memorials, then, are more than just reminders of the past; they are a reflection of the present and how Americans wish to view themselves and interpret their identity. As the U.S. has grown and developed over time, Washington, D.C. has continued to expand its commemorative landscape with sculptures, monuments, memorials, as well as abstract art that contain symbols and meaning designed to send a message to visitors about American identity.

Washington, D.C., has been an ever-changing and adapting city which has been thoughtfully designed and redesigned throughout history. Pierre Charles L'Enfant was the first architect to start planning the city. Although he only worked on his design for a year before being dismissed, his influence can still be seen today through the overall layout of the town with the diagonal avenues, sweeping vistas, and placement of prominent monuments and memorials. Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Ellicott, and his brother Benjamin Ellicott also contributed to the design of Washington D.C. following the dismissal of L'Enfant.

The U.S. capital was designed as a civil religious space inspired and modeled after Greco-Roman religious architecture. Wilbur Zelinsky notes that Washington "was

²⁸⁰ John Bodnar. Bodnar, John E. *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.

created for a definite purpose and has been developed according to a definite plan,”²⁸¹ meant to be “concentrated and powerful expressions of statist ideas”²⁸² intended to impress. What is unique about Washington, D.C. is that the city did not develop organically; instead, it started with a large big-picture plan and, over time, has filled in areas with more minor details, particularly that of monuments and memorials to significant historical figures. L’Enfant consciously planned green spaces and openings for monuments and memorials in his original plan for Washington, D.C. Over time these commemorative spaces have been used in different capacities, whether to connect to their history as Americans, quietly reflect on the service and sacrifice of others, or through civic engagement by those protesting and petitioning their government for change.

For many years in the early days of the United States, a fixed national capital did not exist. Jeffery Meyer notes that the “Continental Congress had moved from place to place since 1774 for its periodic meetings: from Philadelphia to Baltimore, Lancaster, and York during the war, then to Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and finally New York.”²⁸³ It was not until the passage of the Residence Act on July 16, 1790, that a national capital on the Potomac River was established. The Residence Act also authorized George Washington to appoint commissioners who would survey the newly established district.

One of the men selected by Washington to help establish the new capital was Pierre Charles L’Enfant. Born in Paris in 1754, Pierre Charles L’Enfant was the son of a painter, Pierre L’Enfant, and his maternal grandfather was a military officer. The elder

²⁸¹ Wilbur Zelinsky. *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 178.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁸³ Jeffery F Meyer. *Myths in Stone: Religious Dimensions of Washington, D.C.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001. 23.

Pierre L'Enfant, according to Scott Berg, "spent more than three years traveling with the French and Saxon forces in the employ of the war minister Count Marc-Pierre d'Argenson, his days spent studying and sketching cities and landscapes."²⁸⁴ Due to his father's position as an academic, L'Enfant was educated at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. In 1757, Pierre L'Enfant "was transferred to assist with the decoration of the Hôtel de la Guerre, the offices of the French War Ministry newly under construction in the town of Versailles."²⁸⁵ The parks and gardens of Versailles had been constructed a century earlier, with the palace shortly after. The Palace of Versailles became a significant political space near the end of the 17th century through the late 18th century. Berg notes that "how Versailles first imprinted itself on the eyes and mind of the future designer of Washington, D.C., can never be known."²⁸⁶ However, comparing the features and layout of Washington, D.C., there are considerable similarities to the gardens of Versailles. One could argue that his experience there had a lasting impact on him and on his later work.

The American colonies sought out allies to help them in their pursuit of independence from England, and France filled this role. Shortly after the Declaration of Independence was completed, it was translated into French, and the Continental Congress requested recruits, primarily artillerymen and engineers. L'Enfant volunteered under the leadership of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. In 1777, L'Enfant traveled to the colonies to help in their quest for independence. L'Enfant would later serve under

²⁸⁴ Scott Berg. *Grand Avenues: The Story of the French Visionary Who Designed Washington, D.C.* 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. 22.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 26

George Washington during the Revolution, building the relationship that would later allow L'Enfant to become the first designer of the Capital.

Thomas Jefferson also had input into the design of the new Capital. Jefferson gave L'Enfant maps of “twelve European cities that he had collected while minister to France”²⁸⁷ to model Washington after; L'Enfant drew inspiration from these and combined different aspects but did not copy anyone in particular. Meyer suggests that “for Jefferson, the important thing was to adopt styles with classical precedents, and ‘classical’ meant the purity of Greek and Roman forms, not the more elaborate elegance of the baroque period or even the Georgian style then popular in England.”²⁸⁸ Jefferson’s insistence on Greco-Roman forms derives from both the new government connecting itself to the political philosophy of ancient democracy and also the neoclassical movement of the time, which was developing and creating architecture inspired by classical styles.

L'Enfant was very much influenced by his upbringing and experiences in France. Including sweeping vistas and gardens of the National Mall in his original design provides a grandiose outlook for the new city. Ingrid Schroder notes that “public celebration in the late eighteenth century America mainly took the form of popular festivals and parades, but L'Enfant’s descriptive notes for the 1791 plan make no mention of popular activity.”²⁸⁹ Instead, Schroder suggests that “it would appear that in his distribution of public squares and ceremonial spaces, L'Enfant envisioned a more

²⁸⁷ Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 27.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸⁹ Ingrid Schroder. “L'Enfant’s Washington: The Figure of the President in the Capital of the Republic.” *Planning Perspectives* 36, no. 4 (2021): 645.

permanent and monumental celebration of nationhood.”²⁹⁰ These spaces have been developed over time to create memorials dedicated to figures and events that have shaped American history.

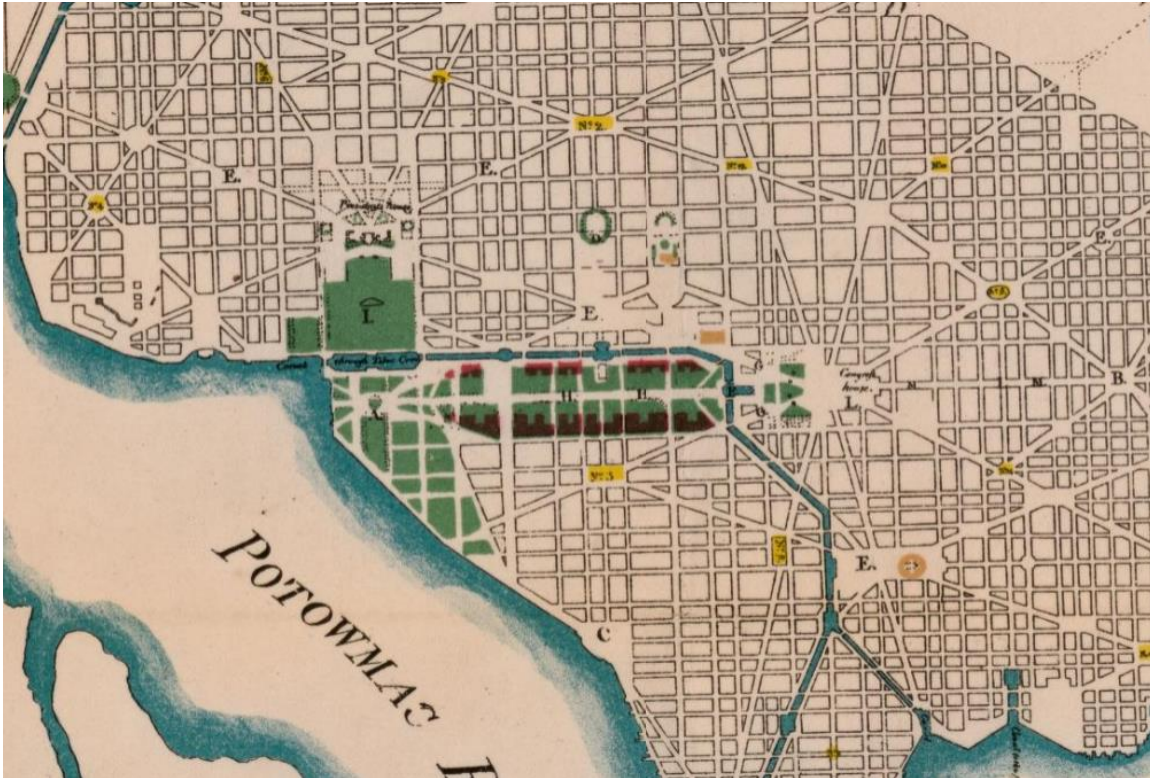


Figure 10 Pierre L'Enfant's plan for the city of Washington. Library of Congress.²⁹¹

A bird's eye view of Washington, DC provides a fuller appreciation of the city. The city streets are mapped out with numbered streets running from north to south and lettered streets from east to west. The wide diagonal avenues, named after states, provide connections to prominent locations throughout the city. Pennsylvania Avenue provides a link from the White House to the Capitol. Pennsylvania Avenue has been a part of the

²⁹⁰ Schroder. "L'Enfant's Washington." 645.

²⁹¹ More information on L'Enfant's plan can be found at:
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3850.ct008601/?r=0.222,0.224,0.448,0.219,0>

Presidential Inaugural ceremony, with the newly elected President parading down it following their oath of office. Meyer states that “the diagonal streets are like rays of light, the more important the site, the more streets radiate out from it.”²⁹² This radiating street concept can be seen in many other large cities; the Arc de Triomphe in Paris is an excellent example of this radiating design. The use of radial-style city planning in Washington DC also creates the feel of a baroque garden,

L’Enfant would submit his plans to Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Washington’s appointed surveyors. As others combed over L’Enfant’s plan for Washington, DC, critiquing and altering his work, L’Enfant was not receptive to these changes. Washington ultimately ended up dismissing L’Enfant due to his stubbornness. Kenneth Fletcher states that after the takeover of the capital plan by Ellicott, L’Enfant did not receive credit or even compensation for his work.²⁹³

Despite being dismissed and others taking over revising and editing his plans for Washington, much of L’Enfant’s influence can still be seen today. Meyer notes that from “the location of the Capitol and the president’s house, the grand vistas, the diagonals impose upon a gridwork of streets, sunburst intersections with streets radiating outward, and a parklike quality – all these current features of the city are derived from L’Enfant’s original ideas.”²⁹⁴

The Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 introduced the concept of the City Beautiful movement. Advocates of this architectural City Beautiful movement believed that the

²⁹² Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 42.

²⁹³ Kenneth R. Fletcher. 2008. “A Brief History of Pierre L’Enfant and Washington, D.C.” *Smithsonian Magazine*. April 30, 2008. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-brief-history-of-pierre-lenfant-and-washington-dc-39487784/>.

²⁹⁴ Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 23

beatification of landscapes could be used to promote moral virtue and social order. Daniel H. Burnham, an architect and proponent of the City Beautiful movement, “suggests that the fair itself converted American philistines to a vision of urban art and beauty.”²⁹⁵ This movement is associated with cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and Washington, DC. Daniel Bluestone notes that “civic grandeur, dignity, unity, and harmony formed the keystone to these plans.”²⁹⁶ In 1902, Senator James McMillan, through the Senate Park Commission, submitted his plan to revamp the monumental core of Washington, utilizing the City Beautiful concepts and attempting to realize some of L’Enfant’s plans that had not come to fruition.

The 1930s brought more development into Washington, DC, both in terms of governmental infrastructure as well as civic memorialization. Meyer notes that “while the fascists and Soviets were erecting their own monumental buildings, Washington saw the construction of the massive Federal Triangle, the National Archives, the Supreme Court, the National Gallery, and the Jefferson Memorial.” The implementation of these buildings and memorials “were calculated to present political ideas, glorify patriotic heroes, and inculcate prevalent national myths.”²⁹⁷

The founders of the U.S. looked back at history for inspiration for their political experiment. Carl Richard notes that “the framers widely share such a classically inspired understanding of the Constitution they create, and they actively promoted the ideal of mixed government as found in ancient political theory.”²⁹⁸ The notion of the founders

²⁹⁵ Daniel M. Bluestone. “Detroit’s City Beautiful and the Problem of Commerce.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47, no. 3 (September 1988): 245.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁹⁷ Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 60.

²⁹⁸ Carl J. Richard. In *Classical Antiquity and the Politics of America: From George Washington to George W. Bush*. 29.

using Greco-Roman influences is generally shared among scholars. Meyer notes, “Jefferson chose republican Rome as a model for the American experiment in democracy. Besides being a political model, Rome’s urban plan and architecture, with their strong emphasis on centrality, became models for the new capital.”²⁹⁹

Architectural historian William Allen states that Jefferson “crossed out every reference to ‘Congress house’ and wrote the word ‘Capitol’ in its place”³⁰⁰ on L’Enfant’s plans. Allen argues that Jefferson wanted “a place of national purposes, a place with symbolic roots in the Roman Republic and steeped in its virtues of citizenship and ancient examples of self-government.”³⁰¹ Additionally, the Capitol “was derived from the Latin *Capitolium*, literally a city on a hill,” and named after the Capitoline Hill, one of 7 hills in Rome that once had the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. From its very inception, the Capitol was inspired by religious language and architecture.

In 1793, George Washington participated in a Masonic ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone of the Capitol. The location of the original cornerstone is unknown, and some speculate that the metal plate that was placed on it could have even been stolen. There is, however, a commemorative plaque and stone in the Capitol above where the original is believed to be.

²⁹⁹ Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 42

³⁰⁰ William C. Allen. *History of the United States Capitol: A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics*. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2001. 10.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

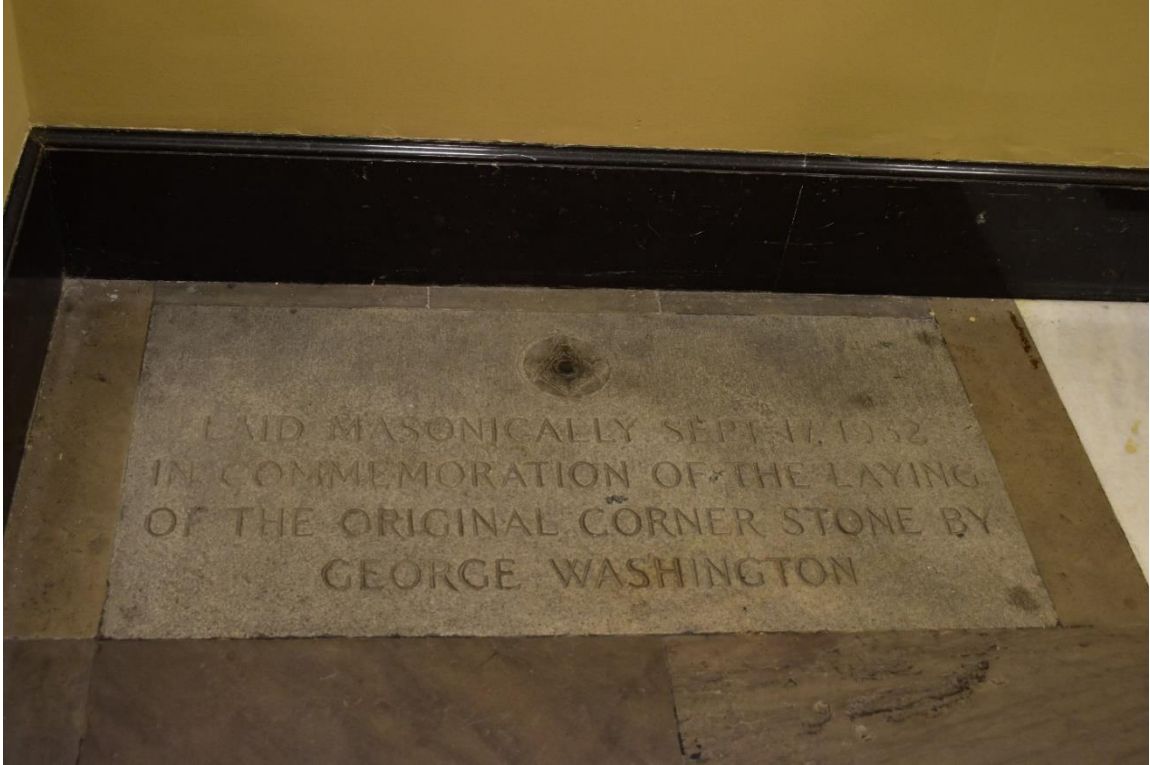


Figure 11 Commemorative cornerstone inside the Capitol. Photo by Author.

During the laying of the cornerstone ceremony, the stone is first examined to make sure that it is perfectly square on all sides. Sacrifices of corn, wine, and oil are then presented, which represent nourishment, refreshment, and joy.³⁰² These Masonic ceremonies are still performed to this day when requested; however, they have become purely symbolic and no longer place the stone themselves.

Construction of the Capitol dome in 1859 began almost 60 years after the building had been in use. Peter Gardella notes that the “proportions follow those of the domes of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, the Church of Sainte

³⁰² James H. Ferguson. “Memorial Tour.” George Washington Masonic Memorial. Alexandria, VA, May 29, 2022.

Genevieve [...] in Paris, and the domes of St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg.”³⁰³ It is clear that the dome was meant to be seen from a distance, and its design emulates prominent religious structures from Europe. On the inside of the dome is the Rotunda. This space, as the center point of the building, serves as a passage for members of Congress. The room contains statues of presidents from the National Statuary Hall Collection and also features a bust of MLK Jr.

Gardella notes that “even without a body, however, the Rotunda became to some degree a temple to Washington because of the fresco.”³⁰⁴ The ceiling of the Rotunda features a painting titled *The Apotheosis of Washington*, painted by Constantino Brumidi.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Gardella, Peter. *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. Oxford University Press, 2013. 135.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁰⁵ Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 39.

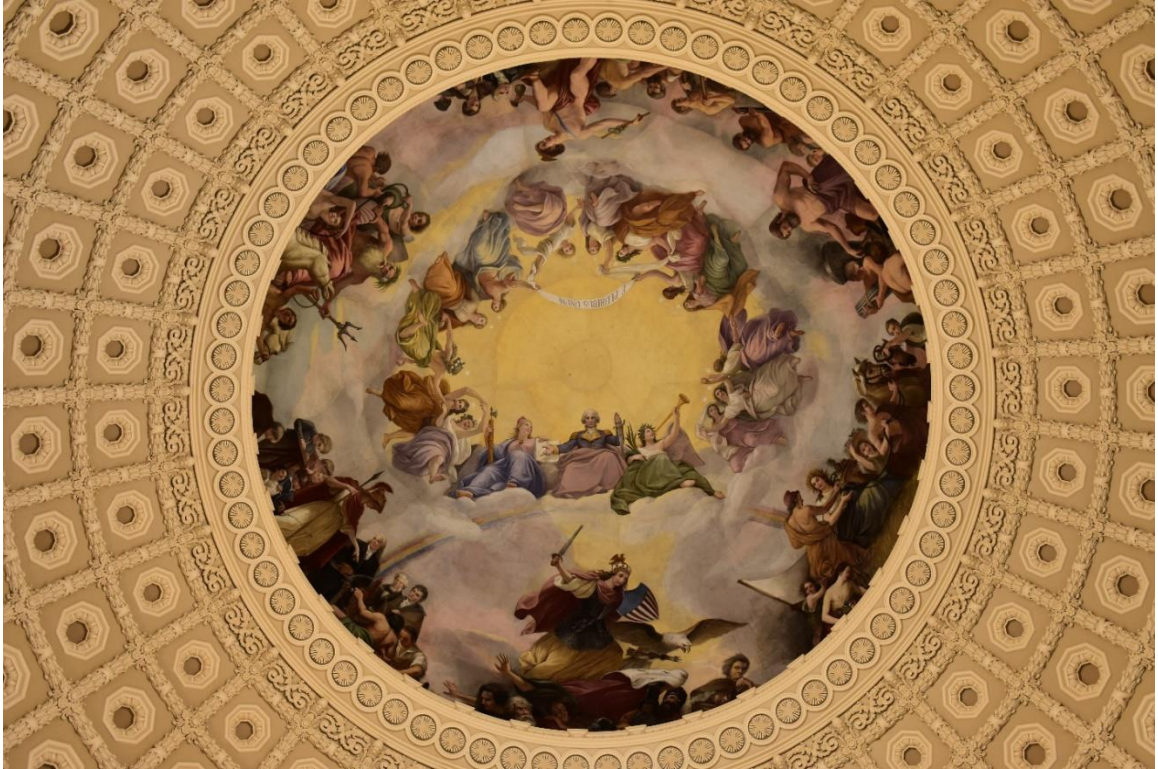


Figure 12 *The Apotheosis of Washington* inside the Capitol Rotunda. Photo by author.

This painting depicts George Washington seated on a throne surrounded by 13 women with stars above their heads, representing the 13 colonies. Around the outside of the image are six scenes depicting the figure Columbia and Roman gods and goddesses who symbolize different aspects of American innovation and achievement. Gardella lists these deities,

Ceres, goddess of grain; Neptune, god of the sea; Venus, goddess of love; Minerva, goddess of wisdom; Vulcan, god of the forge; and Mercury, god of commerce interact with famous Americans like Robert Fulton, inventor of the steam boat, and Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 137.

This depiction of George Washington being elevated to the ranks of a god reinforces the notion of an American cult that venerates specific individuals as symbolic representations of national identity.

The Rotunda and the National Statuary Hall serve as commemorative spaces. Prominent American figures can be lain in state or lain in honor. The distinction depends on whether the person in question was a government official or military officer, who can lay in state, or a private citizen who can only lay in honor. The Architect of the Capitol notes that this is a way to “pay final tribute to its most eminent citizens”³⁰⁷

Just off the Rotunda to the South is Statuary Hall, which contains many of the National Statuary Hall Collection statues. The collection includes sculptures submitted by all the states, with each state having two statues designed to represent their state in the Capitol, voted on by their state legislature. A notable change, in 2020, made by the state of Virginia voted to remove Robert E. Lee and replace him with civil rights activist Barbara Johns. Statuary Hall also includes former Confederate president Jefferson Davis, representing Mississippi, and sitting across from him, almost as if staring him down, is a Rosa Parks statue put in place by the U.S. Congress to protest Davis’ statue. This shows that although these pieces are static, their placement and meaning create a dynamic environment.

To this day, religious rhetoric is still used to talk about and describe the Capitol Building. This language has become more pronounced following the attack on January 6, 2021. Comments on the Capitol frequently use terms such as “sacred,” “temple,” and

³⁰⁷ “Lying in State or in Honor.” n.d. Aoc.gov. <https://www.aoc.gov/what-we-do/programs-ceremonies/lying-in-state-honor>.

“desecrate.” During her speech during the 2021 inauguration, Senator Amy Klobuchar described the Capitol as a “temple of our democracy.”³⁰⁸ Speaking of Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stated, “each day, when members enter the Capitol, this temple of democracy, we will remember his sacrifice.”³⁰⁹ Senator Dick Durbin commented that the Capitol is

sacred because it was built to be a symbol of this great nation. It was during the administration of a man from Illinois named Lincoln who completed the Capitol dome in the midst of the Civil War so that this building would always be a symbol of the unity of our nation and the promise of our nation. That symbol was desecrated on January 6.³¹⁰

Stretching to the West of the Capitol building is the National Mall. Along the sides of the National Mall are various museums dedicated to the history and development of the United States. These museums house artifacts and historical records of the United States; among them is the National Archives, where the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are all housed. Meyers states, “In 1922, when the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were first taken to the LOC, officials of the library wanted to create a display location that would function ‘as a sort of ‘shrine’” which visitors to Washington could tell about on their return home.”³¹¹ Francis H. Bacon

³⁰⁸ Amy Klobuchar. “Senator Klobuchar Delivers Remarks at Inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.” January 20, 2021. U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar. <https://www.klobuchar.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2021/1/senator-klobuchar-delivers-remarks-at-inauguration-of-president-joseph-r-biden-and-vice-president-kamala-harris>.

³⁰⁹ Megan Goldman-Petri. 2021. “Is the US Capitol a ‘Temple of Democracy’? Its Authoritarian Architecture Suggests Otherwise.” *The Conversation*, February 8, 2021. <http://theconversation.com/is-the-us-capitol-a-temple-of-democracy-its-authoritarian-architecture-suggests-otherwise-154144>.

³¹⁰ “Durbin Speaks on the Senate Floor One Year after January 6 Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.” 2022. Senate.gov January 6, 2022. <https://www.durbin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/durbin-speaks-on-the-senate-floor-one-year-after-january-6-insurrection-at-the-us-capitol>.

³¹¹ Meyer. *Myths in Stone*. 96.

was hired to design the display case for these documents, and his brother Henry Bacon designed the Lincoln Memorial.

Referring to the national archives, particularly the areas housing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, Meyer writes, “the atmosphere is hushed and reverent, reminiscent of a mausoleum, or at least some structure of religious worship. The interior perhaps resembles a synagogue more than a church, with the two documents enshrined like a Torah in its ‘arc.’”³¹² Meyer argues that “the religious, almost ecclesiastical, atmosphere created is deliberate.”³¹³ Before entering the chamber where the documents are housed, signs and security guards warn you not to take any photos or videos while there. The room is often crowded and dimly lit, a precaution taken to preserve the documents further but also suggests a reverent quality.

Throughout Washington, DC, different monuments and memorials with varying styles can be found. L’Enfant’s original plan marked out spaces for the later addition of monuments and memorials throughout the city; however, he did clearly mark a spot for the Washington Monument. The differentiation between monuments and memorials stems from when they were proposed. If the person the statue or structure seeks to honor is still alive during its inception, it is considered a monument; however, if the person is deceased, it is regarded as a memorial. The Washington Monument was proposed before George Washington’s death, so it is a monument, not a memorial.

As early as 1783, the Continental Congress approved an equestrian-style monument to honor George Washington. The Washington Monument differs from how

³¹² Ibid., 96.

³¹³ Ibid., 96.

L'Enfant had imagined it, both in terms of its form and position on the national mall. In L'Enfant's plan for the city, he included a notation for the location of the Washington Monument and the style, as Congress had determined, an equestrian statue. In 1845, the Washington National Monument Society developed a design competition and picked Robert Mills' design. The design that Mills came up with had a central obelisk surrounded by a Greek-inspired temple with a statue of a toga-clad George Washington riding a chariot.³¹⁴ Construction began in 1848 with a Masonic cornerstone-laying ritual. Throughout the 1850s, the Society sought funding and stones from all the States in the Union; however, Kirk Savage notes that "construction of the monument stalled"³¹⁵ during this period.

In 1876, the monument stood at 178 feet high, less than a third of the proposed completed height, and with the United States' centennial, the monument gained some renewed interest in wanting to see it completed. With the nation recovering from the Civil War, the monument shifted its focus from a monument to Washington and became a symbol of "a new nation that had split apart violently, reunified forcibly, and now stood poised to become an international power on the world stage."³¹⁶ The monument's design also changed from an elaborate Greek structure to a simple, unadorned obelisk.

³¹⁴ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 161.

³¹⁵ Kirk Savage. *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 112.

³¹⁶ Savage. *Monument Wars*. 117.



Figure 13 Washington Monument. Photo by author.

The placement of the Washington Monument was originally intended to be directly south of the White House and west of the Capitol building, creating a 90-degree angle. The Potomac River during the late 18th and early 19th century, before the expansion of the National Mall and the addition of the Tidal Basin, ran too close to the original location, and the architects felt the ground would not be able to support such a massive structure. Due to this, the monument sits slightly off-center from L'Enfant's original 1791 plans for the Capital; in its place is the Jefferson Pier Marker. At 555 feet, the Washington Monument is the world's tallest stone building.

Between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial are four memorials dedicated to the veterans of wars from the mid-twentieth century, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. These four memorials have vastly different styles in how they chose to honor the soldiers who fought and died in these wars. Three were built as national memorials, and two used Greco-Roman design influences.

The first of these memorials to be built was the DC War Memorial, dedicated on November 11, 1931, to the people of Washington, DC who served and those who died in WWI. Nestled in a grove of trees on the southern side of the reflecting pool, this monument is a circular Greco-Roman Doric-style building. The names of the 26,000 soldiers from Washington, DC, are located within the cornerstone. Carved into the base of the structure are the 499 names of the soldiers from Washington, DC who died. This memorial tends to be less visited than the other memorials on the National Mall. This could be due to its location, or WWI generally does not hold as prominent a place in Americans' consciousness as wars and conflicts.

While the majority of memorials in Washington, DC are focused on honoring service men and women at a national level, this memorial was built with the intention of honoring the residents of Washington, DC. In 2011, however, a bill was put forward to make the DC War Memorial a national memorial. A second World War I memorial is currently being built at Pershing Park along Pennsylvania Avenue, close to the White House.

The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial was built in 1982. Much like the Vietnam War, the memorial dedicated to the soldiers who died was also controversial, not for its connection to the war but rather for its form and design. Many memorials use grand themes and imagery for their commemoration; however, Maya Lin's design is minimalistic in nature. The use of religious images and symbols or depictions of soldiers is frequent in these types of memorials. The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, however, does not use any images or symbols; instead, it is a wall that sinks into the earth with the names of all the American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War in chronological order moving from the eastern side of the wall to the west. The memorial is oriented so that one wall points toward the Washington Monument and the other to the Lincoln Memorial. Due to its design, some Vietnam veterans felt it did not properly honor the sacrifice of their fellow soldiers. At the memorial's dedication, Maya Lin and landscape architect Grady Clay were approached by a veteran, who, according to James Reston, "accosted her aggressively. 'Why did you do such a thing?' he shrieked. 'this memorial is to you, not to us! He towered over her, his mere physical presence overwhelming and

intimidating. ‘why didn’t you put in a flag?’ He snarled close in her face. ‘Why did you try to bury us?’”³¹⁷

The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial was also a turning point for how national memorials commemorated their soldiers by adding the names of those who died. Some memorials were built without this feature and have been changed to incorporate adding the names of soldiers. The Korean memorial initially did not contain the names of the soldiers but has recently been changed to accommodate this design aspect. Additionally, the World War II Memorial has added a kiosk where a database can be used to search the names of soldiers.

Maya Lin’s simple design has resonated with people over the years. Before entering the memorial, visitors can find the names of the deceased in directories with their locations on the wall. As they walk down the path viewing the names of those who died on black granite panels, visitors go deeper into the ground before rising out on the other side. Around Memorial Day, visitors often leave flowers, pictures, flags, and other items at the memorial. The memorial is reminiscent of a scar left on the earth that the country carries to remember those who gave their lives in the conflict.

³¹⁷ James Reston. *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017. 136.



Figure 14 Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Photo by author.



Figure 15 Items left at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Photo by author.

Korean War Veteran's Memorial, dedicated in 1995, contains 19 statues of soldiers with their uniforms and equipment representing all of the U.S. military branches. The reflection of the wall beside them brings the total to 38 soldiers. The Number 38 is repeated for the Korean Memorial since the war was fought on the 38th parallel, and the U.S. involvement lasted 38 months. Alongside the soldiers on the black reflective panels are the engraved faces of the support troops who served during the war. This memorial differs from the others by including statues of soldiers as well as putting faces of support troop veterans into the memorial itself. Visitors approach the memorial from behind the soldiers and walk past them toward a circular reflection pool and read an inscription: "Freedom Is Not Free." The atmosphere of this memorial also changes throughout the day; as the sun sets, lights illuminate the figures as they march tirelessly on their patrol.

World War II Memorial, dedicated in 2004, is one of the largest memorials on the National Mall and is full of symbolism and different design elements. The Rainbow Pool was originally located on this site which initially caused some controversy over erecting this memorial, although the memorial incorporated the Rainbow Pool into its design. The Roman Forum was the inspiration for the memorial's design, with the water fountain in the middle as a banquet table. The 56 pillars around the outside of the memorial are labeled with the names of states, D.C., and U.S. territories. The pillars are arranged in such a way that honor is bestowed upon each state or territory in relation to when it ratified the Constitution and became a part of the United States. There are two triumphal arches, one on the north side of the memorial with the label Atlantic and one on the south side labeled Pacific. On the western side of the memorial is a wall with 4048 stars, each representing 100 soldiers who died during the war. Of the war memorial on the National Mall, the WWII memorial had the largest crowd. This could be due to the size of the memorial and its ability to accommodate more people, the place WWII holds in the consciousness of the American people, or some combination of the two.



Figure 16 World War II Memorial. Photo by author.

The Jefferson Memorial is modeled in the style of the Roman Pantheon. The memorial's design was inspired by two of Jefferson's designs, the Rotunda of the University of Virginia and Jefferson's home, Monticello. This is directly south of the White House by the design of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. With its sheer size, the Jefferson memorial can easily be seen from the White House. Design elements, like many other neo-classical memorials throughout DC, the Jefferson Memorial uses Ionic columns but on both the interior and exterior. Many memorials use Doric columns on the outside; these types of columns are simpler than their Ionic and Corinthian counterparts. At the top of the entrance to the memorial, there is a carving of the five members of the Declaration committee, with Jefferson seated in the middle.

On the inside of the memorial stands a 19-foot-tall statue of Jefferson; due to the memorial's construction during WWII, the first statue to stand in this place was the plaster mold, which was painted bronze and later replaced with a bronze statue following the war. Surrounding Jefferson on four walls is inscriptions from Jefferson's writings, including two letters, an excerpt from a bill for religious freedom, and a passage from the Declaration of Independence. This memorial tends to be less busy than the Lincoln memorial, with people quietly milling around reading the text on the walls, admiring the architecture of the structure, and sitting on the front steps to the north overlooking the tidal basin with the Washington Monument towering above the trees with a glimpse of the White House in the distance.

One of the most prominent landmarks on the National Mall is the Lincoln Memorial. This memorial holds a desirable position on the National Mall and has been used as a site for protests and demonstrations through the years. Its design is arguably more ostentatious than Lincoln himself would have wanted. Gardella argues that "of all the monuments in the United States, the Lincoln Memorial comes closest to functioning as a temple, a place where a god lives and receives worship."³¹⁸

The Lincoln Memorial contains two layers of state names; the bottom layer, the frieze, includes 36 states, the number of states that made up the Union during Lincoln's presidency. Each of the 36 states also has a column underneath supporting the top of the building. The top layer lists 48 states, the total number of states that the U.S. had when building the Lincoln Memorial; this feature is an architectural design called an attic frieze. The building is modeled after the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, symbolizing

³¹⁸ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 225.

wisdom, while Lincoln himself is modeled after Zeus representing his strength and status as leader of the gods.³¹⁹ Lincoln is facing the Capitol, which on its western steps is the Ulysses S Grant Memorial, with an equestrian statue of Grant that is looking back at him.

Dedication of the memorial occurred on May 30, 1922, with the President and many high-ranking political officials attending. Prominent members of the African American community were also invited to attend; however, their seats were placed much farther back and their section was guarded by military personnel.³²⁰ Dr. Robert Moton's address at the dedication originally included criticism of the U.S. government for its failures to protect the rights of African Americans; however, William Howard Taft, after reviewing the speech, requested Moton to change parts that Taft found too radical.³²¹ Many lines and even paragraphs were changed to accommodate Taft's request.³²² One of Moton's original lines stated, "any race that could produce a Frederick Douglas in the midst of slavery, and a Booker Washington in the aftermath of reconstruction has a just claim to the fullest opportunity for development."³²³ The first half of this statement was allowed to stay in his speech, but his request for equal opportunity was removed. While Moton was pressured away from using this platform to make his appeal for civil rights and social justice, the Lincoln Memorial would later be used for these purposes.

³¹⁹ Bob Healy. "The Lincoln Memorial the Art of Liberty, Union, and Reconciliation." National Parks Service. May 29, 2022. The Lincoln Memorial. Washington, D.C.

³²⁰ Susan Philpot. "The Lincoln Memorial's Pivotal Role in the Civil Rights Movement." National Parks Service. May 28, 2022. The Lincoln Memorial. Washington, D.C.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² A transcript of Moton's speech can be found here:
<https://www.nps.gov/linc/learn/historyculture/motonremarks.htm>

³²³ Robert Russa Moton Speech, Speech Draft and Correspondence: Address at the Dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., May 30, 1922. From the Robert Russa Moton Papers in the Moton Family Papers. Library of Congress. Loc.gov. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=amrlm&fileName=mm01page.db&recNum=1&itemLink=r?ammem/AMALL:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(amrlm+mm01\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=amrlm&fileName=mm01page.db&recNum=1&itemLink=r?ammem/AMALL:@field(NUMBER+@band(amrlm+mm01)))

African American singer Marian Anderson, in 1939, was denied permission to sing in Washington, DC's new performance center, Constitution Hall, owned and controlled by the Daughters of the American Revolution. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of DAR at the time, petitioned on the singer's behalf to no avail. The First Lady wrote an op-ed stating her dilemma and effectively withdrew her membership in the DAR. The NAACP sought an outdoor space for Anderson to perform and decided on the Lincoln Memorial. Scott Sandage notes that "permission was quickly secured from Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes – through his deputy Oscar Chapman,"³²⁴ and Marian Anderson was able to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in front of a crowd of thousands and broadcast over the radio. She sang the song "America," written by Samuel Francis Smith, and altered the words from "sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing" to "for thee we sing," which can be seen as a petition rather than an acknowledgment.³²⁵ Anderson's performance was attended by seventy-five thousand people in person as well as broadcast over the radio. A 10-year-old Martin Luther King Jr., in Atlanta, GA, heard the radio broadcast.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s utilized this space to push for reform. The National Mall and specifically the Lincoln Memorial became a significant location to organize for social reform. The March on Washington and demonstrations there have had a meaningful impact on American society. Potentially the most famous speech

³²⁴ Scott Sandage. "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory," in *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism*, edited by Reynolds Scott-Childress. (Routledge, 1999). 280.

³²⁵ Susan Philpot. "The Lincoln Memorial's Pivotal Role"

delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, the “I have a dream” speech, is memorialized on the steps below Lincoln where MLK famously spoke those words.

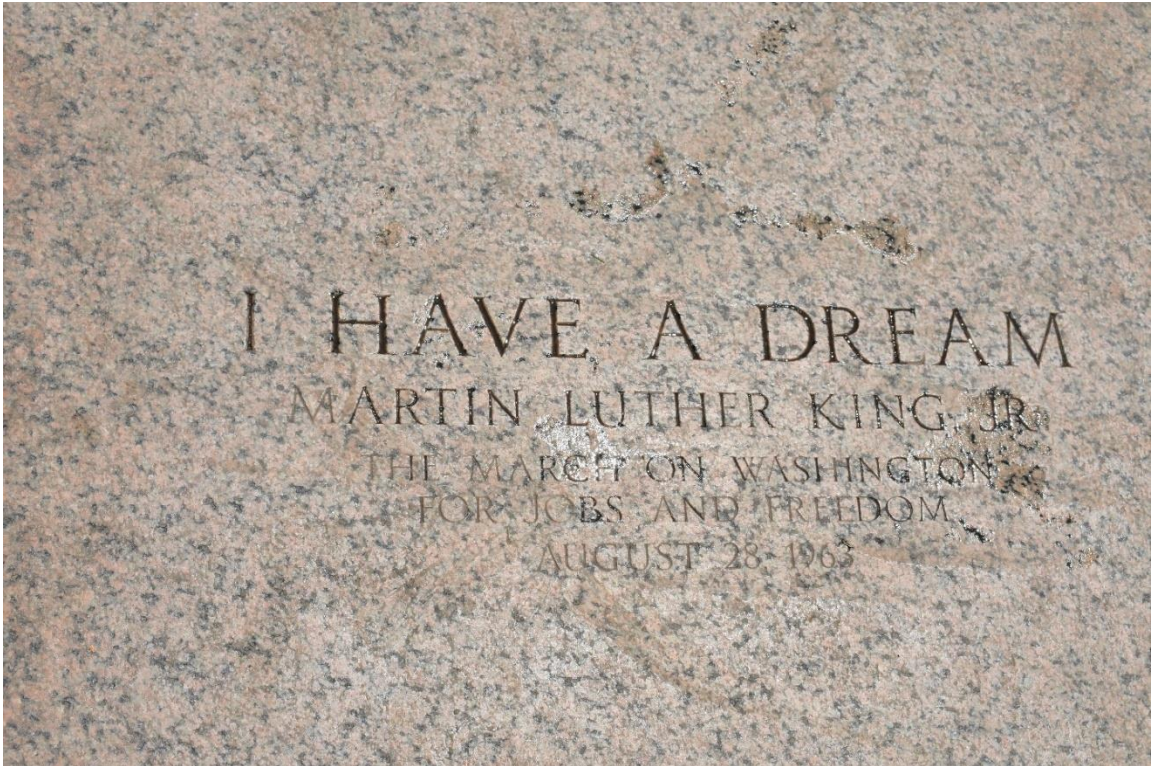


Figure 17 "I have a dream" marker on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Photo by author.

King’s speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial alludes to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address. King’s speech linked the ideas of Jefferson and the founders to Lincoln while incorporating his own religious beliefs and delivered a profoundly powerful message, accompanied by the utilization of the space on the National Mall, tying the ideas and principles that the United States embraces to physical personifications.

The focus of this chapter has been on the civic commemorative landscape in Washington, D.C., exploring the history and development of the memorial landscape and its usage. Washington, DC was originally designed as a government city, a compromise

between Northern and Southern states for a more centrally located capital. While the city today is a tourist attraction, the city was not originally a “destination spot,” or even a desirable place to go. Visitors to the capital range from domestic and international tourists and families, to organized school groups from all around the country, a common component of the 8th-grade curriculum.

The original designs for Washington, DC allowed space for the city to change and develop over time. These changes can be seen not only in the overall commemorative landscape but also changes in the way people interact with the landscape. The city continues to add shrines to the government and to military sacrifice. The intentionality with which the entire city was designed and continues to evolve sends a message about American values. Religious symbols and language used throughout the city weave together the civic and sacred ideals the government is wishing to develop in its population.

Chapter 6

Arlington National Cemetery

During a family trip to Washington, DC, in 2016, my family and I spent an afternoon at Arlington National Cemetery. We arrived by train at the Arlington station and walked down Memorial Avenue, a wide road sparse with vehicles. Fences surround Arlington; to enter the cemetery, visitors are funneled through the main gate and enter the Welcome Center. This building serves as the main entrance, where visitors pass through security and proceed through a museum with informational pictures and displays to inform visitors of the history of the cemetery and the military. This building serves as a liminal space, orienting visitors toward a particular behavior and mindset of quiet reflection and reverence.

Leaving the Welcome Center, we proceeded into the cemetery down Roosevelt Drive. This path is flanked by large trees and rows upon rows of headstones with no distinctive features unless you approach to view them closer. Precisely organized, these grave markers spread across the rolling field, white stones standing at attention, juxtaposing the life and beauty of the vibrant green landscape and the sense of the enormous cost of life that war has had. Visitors quietly wander through the cemetery's winding paths, becoming scattered and spread out, reuniting in hushed reverence at one of the hotspots of visitor activity within the cemetery. Arlington House, JFK's grave, and the Tomb of the Unknowns draw in somber crowds to observe and pay their respects.

Across the Potomac from the Lincoln Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, spans 639 acres. Arlington is dedicated to memorializing military soldiers, officers, and close relatives. Due to its proximity to the national mall and the limited space, Arlington is arguably the most prestigious military cemetery in the U.S. Guidelines have been established for who can be buried there, making it even more exclusive. According to the “Arlington National Cemetery Burial Eligibility Act,” to be eligible for burial is open to military service members who have died while on active duty, retired members who served on active duty and qualify to collect retirement pay, members who have been awarded one of the following,

- Medal of Honor
- Distinguished Service Cross, Air Force Cross, or Navy Cross
- Distinguished Service Medal
- Silver Star
- Purple Heart

and former prisoners of war who died after November 30, 1993.³²⁶

Arlington has become the premier location for burying some of America's most high-profile figures and soldiers, becoming a shrine to the principles and values they fought for and represented. Micki McElya argues that in “honoring certain deaths, individuals, and events,” Arlington defines “what constitutes honor, and how that honor is best demonstrated. It produces a tangible representation of the national citizenry, one that can be visited, walked through, and felt, by marking graves and facilitating certain forms of mourning.”³²⁷ Arlington, as a destination, creates a space for military families

³²⁶ H.R. Rep No. 105-458, (1998) <https://www.congress.gov/105/crpt/hrpt458/CRPT-105hrpt458.pdf>

³²⁷ Micki McElya. *The Politics of Mourning: Death and Honor in Arlington National Cemetery*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016. 9

and general visitors to mourn and reflect and experience first-hand the emotional weight of remembrance and memorialization through rituals associated with Arlington.

The inception of Arlington has its foundation during the Civil War. The land was initially owned by George Washington Custis, the grandson of Martha Custis Washington and step-grandson of President George Washington, who became his guardians following the early death of his father. Custis was arguably the first to imagine this landscape as a commemorative space.³²⁸ Custis built Arlington House, a Greek revival mansion that, according to McElya, was “designed to honor the first president.”³²⁹ This property, according to McElya, was to “stand as a shrine to George Washington, to broadcast [Custis’] family’s lasting significance to the nation and its leaders in the capital, and perhaps most importantly, to cement in the minds of others his own ties to the first president’s legacy.”³³⁰ Arlington House is still present on the property today. From its front steps, visitors can look across the Potomac and see the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the dome of the Capitol Building in the distance. With only one child surviving to maturity, following Custis’ death in 1857, his estate was passed to his daughter, Mary Anna Custis, who was married to Robert E. Lee.

³²⁸ Ibid., 15.

³²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³³⁰ Ibid., 15.



Figure 18 View of Washington, DC from the front steps of Arlington House. Photo by author.



Figure 19 The graves of George Washington Parke Custis and Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis.
Photo by author

Robert E. Lee is now most well-known as a Confederate General; however, he had a long career as a U.S. military officer before leaving the Union. Lee was present at two of the most significant events that led to the Civil War, Harpers Ferry and Texas, during their secession from the Union. Lee initially denounced secession from the Union and the creation of the Confederate States of America. It was not until after Virginia voted in favor of secession that Lee resigned from his U.S. military post and joined the Confederate army on April 20th, 1861.³³¹ Lee's decision to side with his state was not one he took lightly; however, his decision may be reflective of common American

³³¹ Brooks D. Simpson, et al. *The Civil War: the First Year Told by Those Who Lived It*. Library of America, 2011.

political thought, which was often leery of a federal government that might have too much power.

Mary Anna Custis Lee was forced to flee her home in May of 1861, with Union troops marching to establish control over the region and effectively seizing the property on May 24.³³² In September 1863, the Arlington estate was issued a tax bill that was required to be paid in person by the owner; Mary Lee, unable to travel in person, sent her cousin Philip Fendall whom the government officials refused. Due to Mary Lee's absence and inability to pay the tax bill in person, the United States took legal possession of the property in January 1864. The government began using the space to bury the war dead.

“What makes Arlington sacred today began as an act of desecration,”³³³ according to Peter Gardella. Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, responsible for the dead Union troops, decided to create mass graves next to Arlington House and “created a mass grave at the center of Mary Custis Lee's rose garden.”³³⁴ This grave is known as the Tomb of the Civil War Unknowns and contains the remains of 2,111 soldiers who could not be identified.

³³² Philip Bigler. *In Honored Glory: Arlington National Cemetery, the Final Post*. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Vandamere Press, 2007. 13.

³³³ Peter Gardella. *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. Oxford University Press, 2013. 191

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.



Figure 20 Civil War Tomb of the Unknowns, located near Arlington House.³³⁵ Photo by author.

Meigs, originally from Georgia, was fiercely loyal to the Union and disliked Robert E. Lee for his choice to join the Confederacy. The first military burial took place in May and “became a national cemetery on June 15, 1864, by order of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton”³³⁶ In October of 1864, following the death of John Rodgers Meigs, son of the

³³⁵ Inscription reads:

BENEATH THIS STONE
 REPOSE THE BONES OF TWO THOUSAND ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN UNKNOWN
 SOLDIERS
 GATHERED AFTER THE WAR
 FROM THE FIELDS OF BULL RUN, AND THE ROUTE TO THE RAPPAHANOCK, THEIR
 REMAINS COULD NOT BE IDENTIFIED. BUT THEIR NAMES AND DEATHS ARE RECORDED
 IN THE ARCHIVES OF THEIR COUNTRY, AND ITS GRATEFUL CITIZENS HONOR THEM AS OF
 THEIR NOBLE ARMY OF MARTYRS. MAY THEY REST IN PEACE.
 SEPTEMBER. A. D. 1866

³³⁶ “History of Arlington National Cemetery.” n.d. Arlingtoncemetery.Mil.
<https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/History-of-Arlington-National-Cemetery>

Quartermaster General, Arlington installed an elaborate tomb for him which includes a three-quarter life-size image bronze *gisant*.



Figure 21 The grave of John Rogers Meigs. Photo by author.

Meigs blamed Lee for the death of his son and made it his mission to prevent the Lee family from returning to their family home; in this, he was successful. The way that the U.S. government acquired this property was not in the most ethical manner, and the land was briefly returned to the Lee family following the Supreme Court ruling in *United States v. Lee Kaufman*; however, the Lee family never resided there again. The

government would later purchase the property back from the family in 1883 for \$150,000.³³⁷

What began as an act of retaliation against the Lee family has shifted into a commemorative space that eventually began to include Confederate soldiers. McElya notes, “Arlington’s development as a national cemetery in the later nineteenth century reflects the popular reframing of the Civil War as a struggle to save the Union rather than for black freedom.”³³⁸ With the addition of a Confederate section in 1900 and the Confederate Memorial in 1914, commissioned by the United Daughters of Confederacy, these areas serve as “narratives of white reconciliation and the reunification after Reconstruction” and reshape the “parameters of who was to be remembered as honorable American.”³³⁹

As a commemorative space, Arlington National Cemetery has drawn visitors wishing to pay tribute to those who fought and died in service of the United States. McElya argues that “millions go there every year because they want to be in the presence of heroes,”³⁴⁰ despite the fact that “the vast majority of those who journey to the cemetery do not go to mourn a friend or family member but to experience the patriotism’s more intangible connections and to feel “Our Nation’s” history by honoring its military dead.”³⁴¹ Carol Duncan argues that specific public spaces are designed “like most ritual

³³⁷ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 192.

³³⁸ McElya. *The Politics of Mourning*. 7.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

space [...] marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention.”³⁴²

Those buried at Arlington vary in religious affiliation, ethnicity, political affiliation, and occupation; what binds them is their military service to the country. As the military plays an essential role in American identity, the space at Arlington has become a sort of pilgrimage site for visitors to venerate the individuals who served in the military through various wars and conflicts over the course of U.S. history. Ebel argues that the American military “is religious both because it forges a community and thus trades in one etymological root of the word religion (*religare*: to bind) and because it imparts an orienting ethic of collectivism, order, and sacrifice for a higher good.”³⁴³

Within the U.S., support for the military has become almost compulsory, and national symbols are intimately connected to the men and women who put their lives at risk for them. So, actions seen as being disrespectful of national symbols, therefore, become disrespectful to military personnel themselves. Ebel notes that “the country could not agree on the most desirable successor to President Bill Clinton, but it could agree that soldiering for America was a virtuous enterprise.”³⁴⁴ Soldiers have assumed the role of mythical heroes that were prevalent during the 19th century, developing over time to become symbols, embodying what America stands for and the values that are considered important to culture in the U.S.

³⁴² Carol Duncan. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 10.

³⁴³ Jonathan H. Ebel. *G.I. Messiahs: Soldiering, War, and American Civil Religion*. Yale University Press, 2015. 40.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

Throughout U.S. history, the perception of soldiers has changed and adapted to various national and international conflicts. In the early and mid-20th century, military service was seen as a noble duty; World War I and World War II saw young men and women volunteer as soldiers, nurses, and other roles to help the war effort. The 1950s saw the Korean War, which became known as the “Forgotten War,” being overshadowed by WWII and the Vietnam War. Ebel notes that Americans began to question the role of soldiering during the Vietnam War and whether soldiers were the “product of voluntary acts, men who worked to embody the noble ideals of the nation? Or were they better understood as products of compulsion and coercion, otherwise peaceful men whose minds and wills were displaced or reshaped by the nation and the military.”³⁴⁵

Following the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States, there was a revival in patriotism and interest in military service. The USO notes that “181,510 Americans enlisted in the ranks of active duty service, and 72,908 joined the enlisted reserves in the year following Sept. 11.”³⁴⁶ Today, subtle cultural acknowledgments for military service can be observed in everyday settings such as airports, where military personnel in uniform are routinely invited to board planes first. It’s common for civilians to thank military personnel for their service or even pay for their meals. Many stores offer military discounts. During public occasions, like sporting events, announcements often consist of a message thanking soldiers for their service and acknowledging their

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 141.

³⁴⁶ Danielle DeSimone. 2021. “Why 9/11 Inspired These Service Members to Join the Military.” United Service Organizations. The USO. September 7, 2021. <https://www.uso.org/stories/2849-why-9-11-inspired-these-patriots-to-join-the-military#:~:text=Twenty%20years%20ago%2C%20on%20September,that%20inspired%20them%20to%20enlist.>

sacrifice. Before Memorial Day 2003, President George W. Bush released a proclamation stating that

America undertakes its solemn duty to remember the sacred list of brave Americans who have sacrificed their lives for the cause of freedom and the security of our Nation. By honoring these proud Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen lost throughout our country's history, we renew our commitment to upholding the democratic ideals they fought and died to preserve.³⁴⁷

The two main recurring themes around discussions of soldiers deal with service and sacrifice. Within the U.S., there is a prevailing sense of duty to serve one's country; in JFK's inaugural address, he famously stated, "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."³⁴⁸ This patriotic duty can often be seen more prominently during times of conflict. During the Civil War, there was more regionalism within the United States. As states began separating themselves from the Union, men of fighting age usually took up arms for the side their state was on. The first instance of the U.S. becoming recognized as a world power was During the Spanish-American War in 1898. The ensuing conflict helped establish the United States as a military power by defeating Spain. In the early 20th century, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the war in Europe began to spread. The U.S. initially did not want to join in WWI; however, some U.S. citizens joined in the effort by becoming ambulance drivers or nurses, and in some cases, pilots and soldiers. It was only after U.S. citizens were killed by a German submarine attack on a British cruise ship that the

³⁴⁷ George W. Bush. "President's Memorial Day Proclamation." 2003. Archives.gov. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030523-2.html>

³⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy "President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address (1961)." 2021. National Archives. September 29, 2021. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address>.

U.S. formally joined WWI in 1917. During WWI, posters and promotional materials were published to appeal to Americans' patriotic duty to help in the war efforts.³⁴⁹

This mindset of service and sacrifice for the greater good can be seen in the American volunteers who joined foreign armed forces before the U.S. officially entered World War II and the war efforts throughout the war. Members of what became known as the greatest generation united in this effort to pitch in by becoming soldiers, nurses, buying war bonds, or working in factories. The media has been used to shape our perception of this time period and how we understand our history. Barbara Biesecker argues that "popular cultural representation of the 'Good War' [...] constitute one of the primary means through which a renewed sense of national belonging is being persuasively packaged and delivered to U.S. audiences,"³⁵⁰ attempting to address what it means to be American.

For a brief time during the Vietnam war, soldiers were not viewed positively as a whole, largely due to the draft and its predatory nature for enlisting people from poor and minority backgrounds. This element of recruiting people was seen as coercion – eliminating the choice and free will of the individual. After Vietnam, the general public began to see the military and its personnel in particular in a more positive light, and today is viewed overwhelmingly positively within the U.S. This shifting of public sentiment could be because of the overly adverse reaction during the Vietnam War and the general public shifting its blame from soldiers to the government and leadership. Walter Hölbling's research examines soldiers' writings and their war experiences. Hölbling

³⁴⁹ Some examples can be found here: <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/promoting-the-war-effort>

³⁵⁰Barbara A. Biesecker. "Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (2002):

notes, “most of these texts praise the courage and endurance of GIs and Marines and the lower ranks, but often criticize incompetence and arrogance among the higher command.”³⁵¹ Additionally, “many of them also foreground the ‘fighting spirit of the tough U.S. soldier variety, yet they are very much aware that this is just one of many aspects of their war experience.”³⁵²

The removal of the draft also plays a role in the changing perspective of soldiers in the U.S. Without the draft, the U.S. Armed Forces became a genuinely volunteer military. The "power of choice" enacted by the volunteers to willingly put their lives on the line shifted Americans' perspective on military participation. By choosing to serve in the military, Ebel notes, "their sufferings are not coerced. The meaning of their service is legible in terms consonant with the America's civil religious mythos. 'Thank you for your service,' however sweet or saccharine the sound, makes sense again for the very first time."³⁵³

Following 9/11 Ebel states that there was a “civil religious revival. The sight of such horrific destruction – falling bodies, falling buildings – prompted Americans to gather in acts of mourning, solace seeking, and remembrance.”³⁵⁴ The attack on U.S. soil also prompted many “Americans to give themselves over to the nation as soldiers in numbers that exceeded expectations.”³⁵⁵ Those enlisting in the military ranged in age and in some cases, gave up previous professions to join the Armed Forces.

³⁵¹ Walter W. Hölbling. “‘What My Country Can Do to Me’: U.S. Soldiers in Recent American Wars.” *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 39, no. 2 (2014): 120.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁵³ Ebel. *G.I. Messiahs*. 163.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

Pat Tillman is a significant example of devotion to this patriotic duty. Tillman joined the NFL in 1998 and had a career as a football player for a few years before the events of 9/11. The terrorist attack on the United States significantly impacted the population that had not experienced such a devastating event in their lifetime. Tillman's response to 9/11, along with many other Americans, was to leave his professional career. Tillman enlisted in the United States military and successfully became a U.S. Army Ranger in 2002. During his military career, Tillman would be deployed first to Iraq and then later to Afghanistan.

Tillman's time in the military did not last long. During his deployment in Afghanistan, Tillman's unit was working to move a disabled vehicle. To accomplish this task, the unit was divided in two; Tillman was a part of Serial One, which moved to higher ground to secure the area and protect the Serial Two team as they made their way out of the canyon. Ebel notes, "Serial Two came upon Serial One members positioned above them in the canyon and, thinking they were Taliban fighters, unleashed a hailstorm of bullets."³⁵⁶ In the onslaught firefight, Tillman and another soldier were killed, and two others were wounded.

The events of Tillman's death were initially kept under wraps from the public and even Tillman's family. The events of that day were shrouded through a new narration that presented Tillman as a hero who, while fighting their enemy on the battlefield, sacrificed his own life for the lives of his fellow soldiers. Ebel states, "the army initially described the events of April 22, 2004, as a recapitulation of the sacrificial death of the

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 173

G.I. Messiah.”³⁵⁷ Leading grieving families and the public to believe this unit was besieged by enemy combatants resulting in Tillman’s death, the military, according to Ebel, gave “material expression to Tillman’s imagined heroics” by awarding him “a Silver Star for valor.”³⁵⁸

While Tillman had declared himself an atheist and nonreligious, his death was narrated in religious terms. In a widely televised memorial service to Tillman, Senator John McCain stated, “you will see him again, when a loving God reunites us all with the loved ones who preceded us in death.”³⁵⁹ At the memorial service, Richard Tillman, Pat’s younger brother, said, “Pat isn’t with God. He’s fucking dead. He wasn’t religious. So thank you for your thoughts, but he’s fucking dead.”³⁶⁰

A few years later, Richard Tillman appeared on the *Bill Maher Show*, stating his view of his brother “I think he’s fucking Jesus... and I don’t even think there’s a Jesus. He was the real Jesus.”³⁶¹ Pat Tillman is just one example of this effort to transform soldiers into an image of sacrificial protectors of freedom. Continuing this line of comparing soldiers to savior-like figures, Ebel states that “placing gleaming white crosses, uniform symbols of suffering, sacrifice, Christ-likeness, over the bodies of men whose deaths may have shared certain characteristics”³⁶² connecting dead soldiers to religious traditions of suffering and sacrifice that provides meaning and a legacy to imagine their deaths as being a part of something larger.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 174

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 174

³⁵⁹ John McCain quoted by Ebel in *G.I. Messiahs*. 180

³⁶⁰ Ebel. *G.I. Messiahs*. 180

³⁶¹ Ibid., 188

³⁶² Ibid., 174

Dying for what is seen as a just cause also brings up notions of martyrdom. This willingness to give up one's life for "freedom" and the greater good of the nation elevates soldiers and their sacrifice utilizing religious language. Soldiers' martyrdom can be interpreted through Thomas Freeman's "politicisation of the martyr" in that "the transference of the veneration and reverence given to those who suffered from religious causes to those who suffered for political causes."³⁶³ As the coffins of these martyr soldiers arrive at Arlington, they are draped in the US flag. Military funerals differ slightly based on the rank of the individual. Soldiers with a rank of E9 and military officers ranked O4 and above receive a funeral with Military Honors and escort. The escort procession includes the Commander of Troops, Guidon Flag Bearer, military band, rifle team, Chaplain, horse-drawn caisson, and casket bearers. The funeral procession marches up to 2 miles through the cemetery to the gravesite.

³⁶³ Thomas S. Freeman and Thomas F. Mayer. *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, c.1400-1700*. Studies in Modern British Religious History; v. 15. Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, NY, Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2007. 57.



Figure 22 Funeral procession in Arlington National Cemetery. Photo by author.

Arlington, as a commemorative space, functions differently based on the visitors' background and interpretation of the space. Most visitors visit a few of the important sites at the cemetery, the gravesite of John F. Kennedy and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Walking along the path to and from important areas, visitors will also notice a distinct feature of the graves along the way and instances of how others have interacted with the graves.

Throughout Arlington, there are various types of grave markers from different points in history. Some sections contain government-issued markers that are all uniform in size and shape; the differences come from the soldiers' names and ranks and often religious symbols. Arlington has about 60 religious symbols that are approved; however, family members of soldiers can also petition to add symbols as needed. Other sections

contain a mixture of government-issued and privately funded grave markers, which are unique in size and character. While walking through the cemetery, one often notices coins placed on top of some gravestones. Giving coins to the dead is not new and can be traced back to Greek and Roman civilizations. The Greek myth involves the river Styx, a boundary between the Earthly world and the Underworld, through which the dead are transported. In order to cross this boundary, the dead were required to pay a toll to Charon, the ferryman. This myth is connected to placing coins in the deceased person's mouth for Charon's payment.

While there is a long history of this practice, within the U.S., placing coins on the gravestones of military personnel had a resurgence around the time of the Vietnam War. The Department of Military Affairs states, "leaving a coin was seen as a more practical way to communicate that you had visited the grave than contacting the soldier's family, which could devolve into an uncomfortable argument over politics relating to the war."³⁶⁴ Four different denominations of coins have different meanings when placed on the gravestone. A penny for visiting, a nickel means that you trained with them at boot camp, a dime for serving with them in general, and a quarter means that you were present with them at the time of their death.³⁶⁵

The gravesite of John F. Kennedy is one area where visitors gather to pay their respects to the former president. The site has a prominent spot in the cemetery, resting below Arlington House, and is laid out in a circular design with the grave on the western side, positioned in such a way that the view from the grave looks down across the

³⁶⁴ Department of Military Affairs. <https://dma.mt.gov/MVAD/MVAD-Images/Coins-on-headstones-meaning.pdf>

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

Memorial Bridge to the sight of the Lincoln Memorial. As visitors approach the gravesite, signs are posted on the path directing them to remain silent and respectful.



Figure 23 “Silence and Respect” sign posted in Arlington National Cemetery. These signs are found at prominent locations where crowds gather, such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and John F. Kennedy's gravesite. Photo by author.

Occasionally you might see parents whispering to their young children. The gravesite contains the graves of John F. Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, and two of their children who died in infancy. Behind the grave markers is an eternal flame.

Opposite the graves is a semi-circle with quotes from some of JFK's speeches. JFK's brothers, Robert and Edward Kennedy, were buried in an adjacent plot nearby.

According to Arlington National Cemetery, “the first year after Kennedy's death, up to

3,000 people per hour visited his gravesite, and on weekends an estimated 50,000 people visited. Three years after Kennedy's death, more than 16 million people had visited."³⁶⁶



Figure 24 John F. Kennedy's gravesite with the eternal flame and Arlington House in the background. Photo by author.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is a memorial of immense importance in Arlington National Cemetery. This memorial is not unique to the U.S.; following WWI, there was a surge of interest in memorializing those who died during the conflict, and similar memorials can be found in the UK, France, Canada, and many other countries throughout the world which stand to represent all the unknown soldiers who died for their

³⁶⁶ "President John F. Kennedy Gravesite." n.d. Arlingtoncemetery.Mil. <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Monuments-and-Memorials/President-John-F-Kennedy-Gravesite>

respective countries. On November 11, 1920, Britain and France simultaneously buried their unknown soldier. The British grave of the Unknown Warrior is located in Westminster Abbey, and the French Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was interred under the Arc de Triomphe.

In late 1920, Congressman Hamilton Fish Jr., a veteran of WWI, proposed legislation that provided for the interment of one unknown American soldier at a special tomb to be built in Arlington National Cemetery. The purpose of the legislation was “to bring home the body of an unknown American warrior who in himself represents no section, creed, or race in the late war and who typifies, moreover, the soul of America and the supreme sacrifice of her heroic dead.”³⁶⁷

The following year, in 1921, the United States Congress approved the addition of a burial of an unidentified soldier near the Memorial Amphitheater. Over time additions to both the physical form of the tomb as well as the ritual devotion have been incorporated. The original structure was a simple marble-topped tomb on the steps outside the Amphitheater. A few years later, Congress authorized the construction of an immense marble sarcophagus to be placed on top of the original tomb. With the U.S. involvement in WWII, the Korean War, and Vietnam, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier added unidentified soldiers from each conflict.

³⁶⁷ Philip Bigler. 2020. *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: A Century of Honor, 1921-2021*. Apple Ridge. <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Tomb-of-the-Unknown-Soldier>



Figure 25 Tomb of the Unknown Soldier with Old Guard Sentinel marching. Photo by author.

Arlington also incorporates daily and annual rituals at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. David Chidester, who studies the ritualization of national parks, battlefields, and Indigenous sacred spaces, argues that what sets sacred spaces apart and consecrates them are the ritual acts for which they are used.³⁶⁸ The guarding of the Tomb and changing of the guard ritual have expanded over the years. Initially, the tomb was overseen by a civilian watchman, and in 1926 the military officially took over this duty. From 1926 until 1937, the military guard stood watch throughout the day but did not hold the post overnight. It was in 1937 that the Tomb guard began posting their soldiers 24

³⁶⁸ David Chidester. *American Sacred Space. Religion in North America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 15.

hours a day, year-round.³⁶⁹ Since that time, the unknown soldiers have never been left alone; the honor guard has stood watch through severe weather events and remained at their posts during the attack on September 11, 2001.

Changing of the guard ceremony occurs every hour during the winter months and every half-hour throughout the summer. Soldiers are members of the very selective 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, also known as “The Old Guard.” Because the interred soldiers’ ranks are not known, members of the Old Guard do not wear any rank insignia that would potentially outrank the unidentified soldiers. The changing of the guard involves three soldiers, a relieving Sentinel, a retiring Sentinel, and a commander. The commander inspects the weapon of the relieving Sentinel before meeting the “retiring Sentinel at the center of the black mat in front of the Tomb. All three salute the Unknown Soldiers who have symbolically been given the Medal of Honor.”³⁷⁰ After the orders have been given and acknowledged, the newly posted Sentinel “marches exactly 21 steps down the black mat behind the Tomb, turns, faces east for 21 seconds, turns and faces north for 21 seconds, and then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process.”³⁷¹

The Sentinel, while on duty, continues the ritual of marching down the 63-foot-long black mat taking the required 21 second pauses. The repetition of the number 21 within the soldier’s march symbolically connects it to the 21-gun salute performed at the funeral of each soldier.³⁷²

³⁶⁹ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 194.

³⁷⁰ “Changing of the Guard.” n.d.

Arlingtoncemetery.Mil. <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Changing-of-the-Guard>

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Bigler. *In Honored Glory*: 63.

The Tomb of the Unknowns also plays a role in the Memorial Day tradition, with a wreath-laying ceremony performed by the president. Memorial Day is celebrated on the fourth Monday of May. In the capital region, the level of commemoration and interest in this particular holiday is heightened. Just before the long weekend begins, members of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment participate in what is known as “flags in.”³⁷³ This ritual involves the placement of a small U.S. flag at the gravesite of every service member in Arlington National Cemetery.



Figure 26 Soldier's graves after "flags in" ritual. Photo by author.

³⁷³ “Flags In.” n.d. Arlingtoncemetery.Mil. <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Visit/Events-and-Ceremonies/Flags-In>

Arlington National Cemetery is open to the public throughout the weekend and hosts memorial observances on Monday. Heightened security limits visitors to certain cemetery areas, and those wishing to attend the Memorial ceremony are taken to the Amphitheater on a trolley. Throughout the ride up to the Amphitheater, people talked in hushed voices, if at all, and observed the countless graves marked with U.S. flags. With high-level ranking officials in attendance, visitors undergo a second layer of security measures with the secret service stationed outside the Amphitheater. Following the arrival of the "official party" to the cemetery, the president presents a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This ceremony is not open to the public and only attended by a select few invited officials and media.

Visitors waiting in the Amphitheater are expected to stand with the "arrival of the official party" and remain standing during the invocation and the National Anthem, performed by the United States Air Force Band and Singing Sergeants. The president or an appointed representative gives the Memorial Day Address after a welcome address and a few remarks.



Figure 27 President Joseph Biden giving the Memorial Day Address, May 30, 2022. Photo by author.

President Bidens’s speech on May 30, 2022, discusses the notion of duty by military personnel and by Americans in general. Biden states, “today, as a nation, we undertake a sacred ritual: to reflect and to remember.”³⁷⁴ Further, Biden talked about the loss of his son and all of the grieving families that remember the sacrifice their loved ones made. Biden notes that the soldiers who died “chose a life of purpose [...] and above all, they believed in duty; they believed in honor; they believed in their country.”³⁷⁵ These words give meaning to the deaths of the soldiers and suggest qualities of martyrdom and sacrifice, connecting the soldiers to a greater cause built on principles and ideas of freedom and democracy. Biden tied in the mounting conflict in Ukraine, stating, “in this moment, when a war of aggression is once more being waged by Russia to snuff out the freedom, the democracy, the very culture and identity of neighboring Ukraine, we so – we see so clearly all that’s at stake.”³⁷⁶

This chapter has presented the history of Arlington National Cemetery and shown the importance of the military in the minds of Americans. The cemetery is not just a reminder of the past and those who fought and died for the country, but a civil religious memorial landscape that embodies the values and principles that are essential to the American people. During his speech at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1921, President Harding stated that the site was “a tomb in the heart of the Nation sorrowing for

³⁷⁴ Joseph Biden. 2022. “Remarks by President Biden at the 154th National Memorial Day Observance.” The White House. May 30, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/30/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-154th-national-memorial-day-observance/>.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

its noble dead”³⁷⁷ McElya interprets president Harding’s statement as a “metaphor convey[ing] two powerful and connected meanings, making the ‘heart of the nation’ spatial and tactile within Arlington’s memorial landscape, while also imagining a vast population made into one body—sharing a heart—through the act of mourning.”³⁷⁸

Arlington National Cemetery has been described as “a living tribute to our nation’s past and how it continues to thrive through the service and sacrifice of those willing to dedicate their life to its ideals.”³⁷⁹ The importance of the military within American society and of putting one’s life on the line for the greater good venerates soldiers’ sacrifice to their country, creating a kind of American hero cult. The cemetery serves as a mode through which Americans can experience and remember their past and a symbolic representation of the effort and sacrifice people have made to preserve, sustain, and promote the values and principles for which they believe the nation stands.

³⁷⁷ Warren G. Harding. “Address at the Burial of an Unknown American Soldier at Arlington Cemetery.” November 11, 1921Ucsb.edu. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-burial-unknown-american-soldier-arlington-cemetery>.

³⁷⁸ McElya. *The Politics of Mourning*. 3.

³⁷⁹ “Plan Your Visit to Arlington over Memorial Day Weekend.” n.d. Arlington National Cemetery. <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Media/News/Post/4190/Plan-your-visit-to-Arlington-over-Memorial-Day-weekend>.

Chapter 7

Changing Landscapes

Within the United States, there has been a reawakening of how people view, understand, and interpret monuments and memorials. With the increased awareness of racial inequality and social justice, there has also been a shift in what is deemed acceptable to be displayed in public spaces, what figures and events should be honored, and what should be dismissed. Along with these debates about what should be represented in public memorials, there are also debates regarding whether Confederate statues are purely historical monuments or if they represent white supremacy and hatred. These kinds of disputes, however, are not new and occurred as early as the country's founding in its attempt to redefine itself as separate from Great Britain. Thomas Brown states, "American memory began in iconoclasm."³⁸⁰ Brown refers to the fact that one of the earliest acts of rebellion against Britain was tearing down a statue of King George III in New York in July 1776.³⁸¹

Conflict over monuments and memorials can arise at any stage of development, sparking debate over the subject matter, the design, and the location. Even when the subject matter is agreed upon, Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a

³⁸⁰ Thomas J. Brown. *Civil War Monuments and the Militarization of America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 1.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1

modern example of the disagreements that can arise over commemoration, with some opposing the memorial's minimalist design. Public spaces are ever-changing and evolving due to current events and public sentiment. James Grossman, the Executive Director of the American Historical Association, points out that what is "memorialized and that which is left to popular memory are not accidental. Choices are made about what gets built, displayed, and given plaques. Memorials are public commemorations that legitimate what comes to be called 'heritage.'"³⁸² Over time, public sentiment changes, and the reasons and values that some monuments were built to support no longer hold sway for the majority of the population. As the values and principles at the forefront of the national consciousness change, new monuments are created to develop those further.

The American Civil War has always been a contentious issue, and the war divided families, pitting brother against brother. Michael Ross notes that "as the Civil War came to a close in April 1865, over seven hundred thousand Americans lay dead. More Americans died in the Civil War than in all of the other wars the United States has fought in its history combined."³⁸³ Along with those who died in the war were those who were injured and, in many cases, unable to return to their previous level of functioning. Moreover, the Civil War impacted not just those who fought but their families, with many soldiers leaving widows and orphans behind to cope without them.

³⁸² James Grossman. "Whose Memory? Whose Monuments? History, Commemoration, and the Struggle for an Ethical Past." n.d. Historians.org. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2016/whose-memory-whose-monuments-history-commemoration-and-the-struggle-for-an-ethical-past>.

³⁸³ Michael A. Ross. "The Supreme Court, Reconstruction, and the Meaning of the Civil War." *Journal of Supreme Court History* 41, no. 3 (2016): 276.

Following the war, Congress passed legislation to ensure equality and bring the formerly secessionist states back into the Union. Ross states that “as Vice President, Johnson had talked tough about the need to punish the South. In June 1864, he said: ‘Treason must be made odious, and the traitors must be punished and impoverished, their great plantations must be seized, and divided into small farms, and sold to honest, industrious men.’”³⁸⁴ As President, Andrew Johnson, enacted a much more lenient Reconstruction policy and “offered a pardon to all Southern whites except Confederate leaders and wealthy planters (although most of these subsequently received individual pardons), restoring their political rights and all property except slaves.”³⁸⁵

Jon Tracey and Chris Mackowski note that

“the war was barely over when ex-Confederates, their wives, and/or daughters began organizing memorial associations. These groups had several aims: providing financial aid to impoverished veterans or needy widows; properly burying war dead hastily interred on battlefields; preparing monographs celebrating the heroism of local military units; and, of course, the building of public monuments honoring the soldiers who had fought so valiantly.”³⁸⁶

The focus and purpose of these monuments, according to Catherine Clinton, was “dedicated to valorizing those sacrificed, cheering returning heroes, and fashioning public spaces into elaborate and permanent reminders of heroic deeds.”³⁸⁷ In the wake of the Civil War, people tried to make sense of the loss and trauma they had endured by celebrating those who fought for their beliefs. Clinton notes that “white southerners

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 277.

³⁸⁵ Eric Foner. 2022. “Reconstruction.” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

³⁸⁶ Jon Tracey and Chris Mackowski. *Civil War Monuments and Memory: Favorite Stories and Fresh Perspectives from the Historians at Emerging Civil War*. El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2022.

³⁸⁷ Catherine Clinton, ed. *Confederate Statues and Memorialization*. History in the Headlines. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2019. 1.

banded together to form associations such as the United Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and Ladies Memorial Associations,” with the goal of “trying to rephrase the conflict into a ‘War for Southern Independence’ or more infamously the ‘War of Northern Aggression.’”³⁸⁸ The shift in the rhetoric of the Civil War from the Southern perspective became known as the “Lost Cause.”

Were these monuments designed to oppress or subjugate African American communities in the South? Erin Thompson argues, “it does not seem that intimidating Black voters was their main purpose,” however, “it is undoubtedly true that Confederate monuments helped to maintain the exclusion of Black citizens from power by insisting that the state’s political spheres, as well as its public spaces and buildings belonged to and were rightly controlled by white people.”³⁸⁹ Initially, these monuments seem somewhat innocuous since “White Southerners had much more effective techniques to keep Black citizens from voting, from voter suppression laws to lynchings and other forms of violence.”³⁹⁰ Throughout the 20th century, as the civil rights movement pushed to eliminate Jim Crow laws and segregation, allowing African Americans greater participation in U.S. society, the monuments dedicated to people who promoted slavery became symbols of the systematic and institutional oppression from which the African American communities were trying to break free.

While many Confederate monuments have received the public’s ire over the years, the Black Lives Matter movement helped bring awareness to the damaging and

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁸⁹ Erin L. Thompson. “The Social Messages of Civil War Monuments.” *History Compass* 20, no. 2 (2022). 5.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 5.

hurtful displays of Confederate monuments in the South. As the push by the public to remove many of the monuments escalated, some monuments were defaced or even brought down by demonstrators. In other cases, the local leadership took steps to remove the statues that the general public deemed unfit to be venerated. A few monuments were removed following the Charleston church shooting in June 2015, and debates about the future of Confederate statues became a more frequent subject. In July 2015, Rockville, Maryland, held a city council meeting to determine the outcome of a Confederate statue on the courthouse property. Historian, Seth Denbo discusses the debate over a Confederate soldier statue. Denbo notes that during the discussion, “the word *heritage* was hardly used, whereas barely a sentence was uttered all night that omitted ‘history.’”³⁹¹ Denbo emphasizes that the Civil War and the Confederacy are entrenched in American history, and those who oppose the removal of statues point to their historical significance as an argument for their preservation. However, the rebuttal can be made that the Civil War and Confederacy subjects will continue to be taught whether or not the statues exist and occupy positions in public spaces.

During April and May of 2017, New Orleans made a push to remove some of the Confederate statues in the city. In his book, *In the Shadow of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History*, Mitch Landrieu outlines his decision as the Mayor of New Orleans to remove various Confederate statues around the city. Landrieu highlights how statues are symbols that are interpreted differently based on one’s own background and

³⁹¹ Seth Denbo. “All History Is Local: Debating the Fate of a Confederate Soldier Statue in Maryland | Perspectives on History.” July 27, 2015. Historians.org. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/summer-2015/all-history-is-local-debating-the-fate-of-a-confederate-soldier-statue-in-maryland>.

understanding of history. Landrieu notes that growing up in New Orleans, the Confederate statues were just a part of the background and that he never paid much attention to them. While it might be easy for white people to ignore the Confederate monuments, these Confederate statues constantly remind African American communities of past generational trauma. As Landrieu considered the removal of these monuments, he began talking with friends of his who had different experiences growing up surrounded by these statues. During one conversation with Jazz trumpeter and composer Terence Blanchard, Landrieu began to understand the negative impact these monuments can have on people. Blanchard states these monuments “denied his humanity; it saluted *the war to keep us slaves*.”³⁹² The statues represented not just the people they resembled but a history and culture that enslaved, oppressed, and dehumanized Black people.

For those who think the Confederate statues should be removed, their goal is not to “erase” history; instead, they wish not to glorify those who committed heinous acts against fellow human beings and, in so doing, glorify white supremacy and racism. Civil War history is included in school curricula throughout the United States. There are numerous battlefields, museums, and historical sites to be visited to learn more about topics related to this era in U.S. history. To say that removing Confederate statues would hinder our ability to know and learn about the Civil War would be the equivalent of saying that we cannot learn about the Holocaust because there are no statues of Adolf Hitler in Germany.

³⁹² Mitch Landrieu. *In the Shadow of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History*. New York, New York: Viking, 2018. 39.

Giuliana Perrone notes that confederate statues “mobilized Lost Cause rhetoric from the late 19th century” and “commemorate the successful return to white, Southern rule, and continuously reminded black Americans of their diminished social positions.”³⁹³ Perrone argues that these statues were always rooted in hate, and the language of heritage was used as a veneer to cover their real intentions. Looking back at these monuments now, it is easy to draw the assumption that white southerners intended to use these statues as a show of dominance; however, they were likely thinking more of their own perspective and understanding than how it would impact other people and races.

Not all those who are opposed to the Confederate statues wanted to see them completely removed. A suggested alternative to the altogether removal of statues is to add plaques that provide greater historical context to the monuments. This is viewed as a compromise by keeping the statues intact but adding to the rhetoric and context of the figures, giving visitors more information on the subject of the past and its impact on the community.

Two main talking points are commonly used among those seeking to preserve Confederate monuments. The first is a “slippery slope” argument questioning how many statues will be removed and whether the removal extends beyond Confederate statues to include presidents or Founding Fathers who also enslaved people, asking “where to draw the line?” Trump notably tweeted on August 17, 2017, “Sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues

³⁹³ Giuliana Perrone. 2017. “Confederate Monuments Always Embodied a White Heritage of Hate.” Haaretz. August 17, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/confederate-monuments-always-embodied-heritage-of-hate-1.5442691>.

and monuments. You.....”³⁹⁴ Continuing in a second tweet, “...can’t change history, but you can learn from it. Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson – who’s next, Washington, Jefferson?”³⁹⁵ This argument intentionally disregards the contributions Washington and Jefferson made to establish the country in order to parallel their slave ownership to the actions of Confederate leaders who seceded from the country. The second assertion falsely equates the statues and the history they represent, arguing that the statues’ removal would be an attempt to revise or alter the country’s history. Trump and other proponents for preserving these statues argue that if we remove some statues just because we do not like the history it represents, it would open the floodgates to historical revisionism and dismantle the country's historic achievements. This is, of course, not the aim or desire of those who think these statues should be removed from public spaces.

A statement on the United Daughters of the Confederacy website declares that they “are grieved that certain hate groups have taken the Confederate flag and other symbols as their own.”³⁹⁶ Claiming that they are the rightful descendants who have spent the time since the Civil War honoring the memory of their ancestors and encouraging “all Americans to honor their ancestors’ contributions to our country.”³⁹⁷ Additionally, they request the public “join us in denouncing hate groups and affirming that Confederate memorial statues and monuments are part of our shared American history and should remain in place.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Donald Trump. Twitter post. August 17, 2017, 9:07 a.m.

³⁹⁵ Donald Trump. Twitter post. August 17, 2017, 9:15 a.m.

³⁹⁶ Jinny Widowski. “United Daughters of the Confederacy.” n.d. Hqudc.org. <https://hqudc.org/>.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

In 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives put forward a bill that would effectively remove Confederate statues from the Capitol Building. H.R. 3005 was focused on removing Roger Brooke Taney, a Supreme Court Justice who ardently opposed legislation that would expand citizenship and benefit African Americans; notably, he is responsible for writing the majority decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. This bill also included the removal of “statues of individuals who voluntarily served the Confederate States of America.”³⁹⁹ This bill was opposed by Republican members of Congress, including Representative Mo Brooks of Alabama, who said it was nothing more than “cancel culture and historical revisionism.”⁴⁰⁰

Following Reconstruction, Charlottesville, Virginia, like many Southern cities, was fraught with racial issues. The Jim Crow laws and forced segregation in public places caused hardships in African American communities. The late 19th to the mid-20th century saw an increasingly bold Ku Klux Klan and white supremacists. Across the South, including Charlottesville, lynchings and cross-burnings were used to terrorize the African American population. With the growing national support for the Black Lives Matter movement, cities, and local governments began reconsidering their monuments dedicated to Confederate figures. Charlottesville was a hot spot for this debate, with its sordid history and prominent Confederate monuments. In early 2017, the city decided to remove many Confederate statues.

³⁹⁹ Congress.gov. "H.R.3005 - 117th Congress (2021-2022)" May 24, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3005>

⁴⁰⁰ Mo Brooks, as quoted by Barbara Sprunt. Npr.org. "The House Votes to Remove Confederate Statues in the U.S. Capitol." June 29, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/29/1011303611/the-house-votes-to-remove-confederate-statues-in-the-u-s-capitol>

Throughout the summer of 2017, the country saw an increase in the number of demonstrations calling for the removal of Confederate statues. During the height of protests, as a way to prevent the vandalization and destruction of statues, Trump appealed to legislation passed in 2003 that authorized the government to arrest anyone who vandalizes or destroys monuments with up to a 10-year prison sentence. The law states that anyone who

willfully injures or destroys, or attempts to injure or destroy, any structure, plaque, statue, or other monument on public property commemorating the service of any person or persons in the armed forces of the United States shall be fined under this title, imprisoned not more than 10 years, or both.⁴⁰¹

On August 11th and 12th, 2017, Far-right groups held the “Unite the Right rally” to show their support for preserving the Confederate statues. Many who attended this rally brought with them signs and flags bearing symbols and messages of hate.⁴⁰² Among the flags carried at the rally included Nazi flags, the Confederate battle flags, the Gadsden flag⁴⁰³ often used by far-right groups, and flags incorporating Norse Pagan imagery which white supremacist groups have occasionally used.⁴⁰⁴

On the evening of August 11th, rally marchers carried tiki torches as they walked through the University of Virginia campus. The marchers chanted slogans including

⁴⁰¹ Barbara Sprunt. 2020. “Trump Threatens Prison for Attempts to Topple Statues. Here’s the Law He Cites.” *NPR*, June 23, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/23/882020026/trump-threatens-prison-for-attempts-to-topple-statues-heres-the-law-he-cites>.

⁴⁰² More information about the flags used at the rally can be found here: “Flags and Other Symbols Used by Far-Right Groups in Charlottesville.” n.d. Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/12/flags-and-other-symbols-used-far-right-groups-charlottesville>.

⁴⁰³ This flag has been in use since the American Revolution. The flag features a coiled snake on a yellow background and the words “dont tread on me.”

⁴⁰⁴ Photos of the protests and counter-protests and the violence that ensued can be found at: *Time*. n.d. “Scenes from the Deadly Unrest in Charlottesville.” <https://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>.

“white lives matter,” “Jews will not replace us,” and “blood and soil.”⁴⁰⁵ The chants and images of this group of white men with torches are eerily similar to the photographs of the KKK marches from a century ago. The following day, the Unite the Right rally was met with counter-protests with violent incidents between the two groups. Violence between the protesters and counter-protesters was a common occurrence, met with little to no intervention by the police. On August 12th, around 11 a.m., a group of white men from the Unite the Right rally attacked DeAndre Harris, a 20-year-old African American man, inside a parking garage, kicking him and beating him with various objects.⁴⁰⁶ Later that day, around 1:45 p.m. James Alex Fields Jr., a Unite, the Right rally member, rammed his car into a group of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 35 others.⁴⁰⁷

The years 2017 and 2020 saw a drastic increase in the number of Confederate monuments removed, with 36 and 94 removed, respectively.⁴⁰⁸ During the summer of 2020, following the death of George Floyd, Richmond, Virginia, along with many other Southern cities, ramped up the process of removing Confederate statues. The city did so due to the pressure of its citizens, who protested and even vandalized many of the monuments throughout the city and the United Daughters of the Confederacy

⁴⁰⁵ Richard Fausset and Alan Feuer. 2017. “Far-Right Groups Surge into National View in Charlottesville.” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/far-right-groups-blaze-into-national-view-in-charlottesville.html>.

⁴⁰⁶ Ian Shapira. *Washington Post (Washington, D.C.: 1974)*. 2018. “White Supremacist Is Guilty in Charlottesville Parking Garage Beating of Black Man,” May 1, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/white-supremacist-is-guilty-in-charlottesville-parking-garage-beating-of-black-man/2018/05/01/033396b4-4af9-11e8-8b5a-3b1697adcc2a_story.html.

⁴⁰⁷ Maggie Astor, Christina Caron, and Daniel Victor. 2017. “A Guide to the Charlottesville Aftermath.” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-virginia-overview.html>.

⁴⁰⁸ Bonnie Berkowitz and Adrian Blanco. 2021. “A Record Number of Confederate Monuments Fell in 2020, but Hundreds Still Stand. Here’s Where.” *Washington Post (Washington, D.C.: 1974)*. March 12, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/confederate-monuments/>.

headquarters. The statues of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, AP Hill, and Jefferson Davis received the majority of the vandalism. The statue of Columbus was pulled down and thrown into a lake. The city would eventually remove all of the Confederate statues; the only statue that remains on Richmond's Monument Avenue is Arthur Ashe, an African American native of the city who was a professional tennis player, becoming the "first black man to win Wimbledon, the Australian Open and the U.S. Open."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁹ Sandra E. Garcia. 2020. "Arthur Ashe Statue in Virginia Vandalized with 'White Lives Matter.'" *The New York Times*, June 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/us/arthur-ashe-statue-vandalized.html>.



Figure 28 Statue of Robert E. Lee. Photo courtesy of Steve Law.



Figure 29 Statue of Stonewall Jackson. Photo courtesy of Steve Law.

Edward Carson points out that “American citizens removed statues of their former king from public places then, without the disingenuous objection of ‘historical value’ or ‘respect for veterans’ Why is it a problem now for American citizens to remove statues of people who no longer serve the community as archetypes of our common identity?”⁴¹⁰ What has shifted in the American consciousness to create a desire or need to try and preserve these statues? We should also ask ourselves who wants to keep these statues and what are their intentions for doing so? Perrone notes that many of those fighting against the removal of “statues of Lee and other Confederate Icons isn’t about protecting history, it’s about protecting the whitewashed myths that undergird their warped worldview and sense of identity.”⁴¹¹ Reflecting on the various debates regarding preserving or removing monuments, it seems they are connected to patriotic identity, with uncritical patriots’ unwillingness to confront the past and change the commemorative landscape. For those who wish to Make America Great Again, the statues may point toward the ideal time in America’s history when America was great; this time period of American Greatness, for many, likely is not necessarily a reference to the Confederacy or Civil War but the removal of statues threatens the ability to return to any historical time of greatness. Conversely, for those who want to see America progress, the statues present a hindrance to moving forward, symbolically representing racial segregation and paying tribute to those who fought to oppress and dehumanize African Americans.

⁴¹⁰ Edward Carson. “Confederate Monuments and American Citizenship.” The Christian Century. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-03/confederate-monuments-and-american-citizenship?platform=hootsuite>

⁴¹¹ Giuliana Perrone. 2017. “Confederate Monuments Always Embodied a White Heritage of Hate.”

Another element of the more recent shifts in public sentiment on a national level includes the establishment of new monuments and memorials and the recognition of more recent historical figures or those that had been previously overlooked. Within the past couple of decades in the U.S., there have been several monuments and memorials that have been created to recognize outstanding American citizens who are seen as exemplifying American values. Some of these figures have been recognized by society for a while but have only recently received recognition as physical monuments or memorials.

There has been an expansion of monuments dedicated to Civil Rights figures, prominent African-American leaders, and others who have fought against racial injustice. This expansion includes historical figures who have been previously neglected and those who have significantly impacted U.S. society or their local areas. As mentioned earlier, the Civil War was the bloodiest conflict the U.S. has experienced in its history. According to Wynell Burroughs Schamel and Jean West, roughly 10% of the Union Army was comprised of African American soldiers.⁴¹² Located a short distance north of the National Mall, the African American Civil War Memorial honors the “over 200,000 African-American soldiers and sailors [who] served in the U.S. Army and Navy during the Civil War. Their service helped to end the war and free over four million slaves.”⁴¹³ This memorial is one of the few that acknowledges the participation of African Americans and their suffering and sacrifice during the Civil War. The memorial was

⁴¹² Wynell Burroughs Schamel and Jean West. “The Fight for Equal Rights: a Recruiting Poster for Black Soldiers in the Civil War.” *Social Education* 56, no. 2 (1992): 118.

⁴¹³ “African American Civil War Memorial (U.s. National Park Service).” n.d. Nps.gov. <https://www.nps.gov/afam/index.htm>

commissioned in 1993 by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. The memorial's centerpiece is a nine-foot-tall bronze statue designed by Ed Hamilton, featuring three infantrymen, a sailor on one side, and a soldier with his family on the other.⁴¹⁴ Surrounding the statue are two short, half-circle walls with the names of the 209,145 soldiers who served in the Civil War. The memorial was completed in 1997 and dedicated the following year "under the leadership of Dr. Frank Smith Jr. and Colin Powell."⁴¹⁵ The addition of this memorial helps to fill in the gaps in the memorial landscape by bringing attention to and paying tribute to individuals who have been previously overlooked.

⁴¹⁴ "'Spirit of Freedom': African American Civil War Memorial (Washington, D.c.)." n.d. Slaverymonuments.org. <https://slaverymonuments.org/items/show/1099>.

⁴¹⁵ "African American Civil War Memorial." Washington.org. <https://washington.org/find-dc-listings/african-american-civil-war-memorial>



Figure 30 African American Civil War Memorial. Photo by author.

Martin Luther King Jr. made immeasurable contributions to racial equality and justice in American society. Every year, politicians from all political parties around the country evoke his name and quote passages from his writing and speeches. King is an exemplary model of courage and fortitude in the face of violence and injustice. King's peaceful protests somewhat go against the standard American hero who uses his physical abilities to fight. James M. Washington notes that King's "prophetic words mirrored a twentieth-century America that had acquired global power, but one that had also sacrificed some of its most treasured values on the alter of institutional racism, economic

injustice, and international influence.”⁴¹⁶ King’s battle was more mental and spiritual to change the hearts and minds of people, an effort to save the soul of the nation while at the same time putting himself in harm’s way, offering his body as a sacrifice.

While King and other civil rights leaders promoted peaceful means of protest, they also encouraged civil disobedience by acting out against unjust laws. Much like the way early Founders of the U.S. challenged the British, King acted in defiance against the oppressive system, and his idealistic resolve for what the United States could become did not weaken. Even while imprisoned, King wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” to inspire others to continue to promote change within the country by

Standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.⁴¹⁷

Despite King’s hardships, he still believed in the Founding documents' common principles and values. On April 3, 1968, King gave his final speech before his assassination. King acknowledges the country's uncertainty and notes that there will be difficult times ahead, and in a prophetic statement, he connects his journey to that of Moses, stating that God has “allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to

⁴¹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., and James Melvin Washington. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. ix.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land.”⁴¹⁸ The following day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated outside his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial is a newer addition to the National Mall, with its completion and opening to the public in 2011; however, plans for the memorial began as early as 1982.⁴¹⁹ Congress authorized the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity to establish a memorial to King in 1996. According to the National Park Service, the “National Memorial Project Foundation held a design competition and identified the Tidal Basin site for the memorial’s location.”⁴²⁰ The design of the memorial was by the ROMA Design Group in 2000. The design pulls its imagery from King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech which describes a stone of hope carved out of the mountain of despair. The memorial is shaped like a mountain, with the slice pulled out being Dr. King’s image carved in stone, representing the stone of hope. King’s image faces the Tidal Pool and is a 30-foot-tall relief. The memorial’s location is also symbolic, placed between the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. Scott Sandage notes that “Martin Luther King Jr., proclaimed his Dream from the steps where Marian Anderson had sung,”⁴²¹ at the Lincoln Memorial, referencing the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson. King’s memorial placed between these points creates a line of leadership “to reinforce the connection between these three leaders at three important moments for civil

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 286.

⁴¹⁹ Gardella. *American Civil Religion*. 340.

⁴²⁰ “Building the Memorial - Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial (U.S. National Park Service).” n.d. Nps.gov. <https://www.nps.gov/mlkm/learn/building-the-memorial.htm>.

⁴²¹ Scott Sandage. “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory,” in *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism*, edited by Reynolds Scott-Childress. (Routledge, 1999). 274.

rights in our nation’s history; from the promise that ‘all men are created equal,’ to the freeing of the slaves, to the final push for full and equal rights.”⁴²²



Figure 31 *Stone of Hope and Mountain of Despair.* National Parks Service/ Bill Shugarts.

An even more recent addition to the commemorative landscape is The Freedom Riders National Monument, which opened in 2017. This monument is dedicated to the brave Americans who fought for racial equality by traveling across the South, defiantly opposing the Jim Crow laws still being enforced there. Beginning in May of 1961, the Freedom Riders started with a small group of individuals and, by early summer, according to Raymond Arsenault, “evolved into a broad-based movement involving hundreds of activists representing a number of allied local, regional, and national civil

⁴²² “Building the Memorial - Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial (U.S. National Park Service).” n.d. Nps.gov. <https://www.nps.gov/mlkm/learn/building-the-memorial.htm>.

rights organizations.”⁴²³ This diverse group of activists challenged the social and legal conventions of the areas they passed through, “knowing that their actions would almost certainly provoke a savage and violent response from militant white supremacists.”⁴²⁴ This group traveling through the South intentionally breaking social conventions and unjust laws brought the ire of the local population and law enforcement officers. While the Founding documents stated that everyone was free and had rights, and the 14th amendment established citizenship rights for everyone, in practice, the country did not live up to those values.

Along with the increased acknowledgment and memorialization of Civil Rights leaders, some local heroes have been celebrated for their achievements throughout their lives. Maggie Walker, a prominent businesswoman, is a local hero in Richmond, Virginia; her story is an inspiring one. Walker was born to enslaved parents in 1864. Walker worked as a teacher and was a member of “the Independent Order of St. Luke’s, an African American benevolent organization that helped the sick and elderly in Richmond.”⁴²⁵ She established the St. Luke’s Penny Savings Bank in 1903, becoming “the first woman of any race to charter a bank in the United States.”⁴²⁶ Walker grew her business in the South during segregation, and while many banks struggled during the Great Depression, St. Luke’s Penny Savings Bank remained open. In his Washington Post article, Michael Rosenwald notes, “Walker’s accomplishments in the face of racial oppression and segregation have never been honored in her hometown in the same way as

⁴²³ Raymond Arsenault. *Freedom Riders 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 2.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴²⁵ “Biography: Maggie Lena Walker,” n.d. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/maggie-lena-walker>.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

the Confederate leaders whose statues are the focal point of downtown Richmond.”⁴²⁷

This changed, however, in July of 2017, when a ten-foot-tall bronze statue of Walker was erected, designed by sculptor Antonio Mendez. The statue’s design depicts Walker standing with her glasses pinned to her lapel and a checkbook in her left hand, “ready to work,” according to Mendez. Walker’s monument is a significant recognition of her life of service and struggles through the Jim Crow era in the South, especially in Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy.

In late April 2018, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice officially opened in Montgomery, Alabama. This memorial bring attention to the “more than 4,400 African American men, women, and children [who] were hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned, and beaten to death by white mobs between 1877 and 1950.”⁴²⁸ The memorial sits on a six-acre site and features at the center “over 800 corten steel monuments, one for each county in the United States where a racial terror lynching took place. The names of the lynching victims are engraved on the columns.”⁴²⁹ The memorial focuses on darker elements of the United States’ past that are not often confronted. Grossman notes, “despite its frequency during the half century following Emancipation, despite its clear significance to the history of the United States,”⁴³⁰ this memorial is the only one

⁴²⁷ Michael Rosenwald. “The First Woman to Start a Bank — a Black Woman — Finally Gets Her Due in the Confederacy’s Capital.” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/07/14/the-first-black-woman-to-start-a-bank-finally-gets-her-due-in-the-confederacys-capital>

⁴²⁸ Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/>.

⁴²⁹ “The National Memorial for Peace and Justice.” n.d. Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>.

⁴³⁰ James Grossman. “Whose Memory?”

dedicated to lynching victims, making a clear contrast with the abundance of Confederate monuments.

This chapter addressed the changes to the memorial landscape by examining the debates and protests calling for the removal of Confederate statues, as well as counter-protests of people arguing to keep them. I argued that these debates can be interpreted through patriotic identity, examined in Chapter 4, as symbolic representations of different national perspectives. The changing landscape of commemoration encompasses more than just changes to the surface. The monuments and memorials displayed in public spaces connect to deeply held beliefs and public sentiment; they elicit emotional responses. The recent struggle to remove Confederate statues from public spaces is a continuation of the struggle that African Americans have faced in fighting against white supremacy and for equal rights as citizens.

Understanding identity's adaptive and evolving nature is essential to avoid falling into destructive uncritical patriotic tendencies. The addition of monuments and memorials dedicated to civil rights heroes and African American leaders does not erase the ideals of America's past; rather, these new monuments and memorials add to and adjust the ideals that the country strives to develop and foster within its citizens today. Furthermore, these new monuments and memorials acknowledge the hard work and fight these individuals went through to ensure their rights of citizenship enshrined in the Constitution and expanded upon with the 14th Amendment, which has been withheld from them by white supremacists through violence and by institutionalized racism throughout the U.S. While these principles have mostly stayed the same, the inclusion of

people who were previously overlooked and neglected in the commemorative landscape
brings the country closer to living up to the ideals it claims to hold for all.

Conclusion

Throughout history, the United States has utilized religious ideas, language, and imagery to construct a vision of American identity. Much of the conceptual framework for American identity and ideals is derived from Protestant Christianity. The sociological theory of American civil religion arose from an era in which the U.S. was striving to define itself and set itself apart from the perceived threat of communism.

This research has examined the historical development of thought regarding how Americans have interpreted themselves and their history. In Chapter 1, I focused on the use of language and the creation of myths about America's origins and the carryover of ideas from Europe to the "new world." The interpretation of North America as a "new Eden" and later a wilderness to be explored and conquered by the European settlers was an imaginative invention derived from biblical sources. Additionally, the rhetoric used to describe the Indigenous population was often exploitative and dehumanizing, which ultimately had devastating repercussions which continue to have a lasting impact.

As the United States separated itself from Great Britain and tried to form its own identity, the religious language and interpretation of its character grew and expanded. The foundational textual sources of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights became enshrined in the American consciousness and later in the National Archives, serving as a temple to their importance.

Throughout the 19th century, as the United States began to form an identity separate from the colonial establishment, stories, and legends played a part in creating symbols of an ideal citizen. During this time, historical figures were incorporated into legendary tales of their deeds, often embellishing details to present a moral and ethical example for society to follow. Chapter 2 focused on a few figures who came to embody the principles and beliefs the country values through their lives and later representations in prose and poetry. Elements of these stories could be read as hagiography rather than biography, with more of an emphasis on the character and meaning and less on the historical accuracy. This chapter touched on a few of these people, including Paul Revere, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and a more modern example, John F. Kennedy.

The stories of these individuals have been widely circulated through various media platforms and have become an integral part of the American consciousness. While these narratives are not always historically accurate, they convey the principles and beliefs deemed important in American society. The entrenchment of these legendary figures in American culture has contributed to the shaping of national identity and continues to impact the way in which Americans view themselves and their country. By understanding the origins and significance of these narratives, we can gain a deeper insight into the cultural and social values that reinforce American society.

Chapter 3 was dedicated to shedding light on the formation of a quasi-religion that centers around American ideals and values and how Americans have internalized it. Specifically, it examined the history and development of the theory of American civil religion, which emphasized the importance of Founding documents and national symbols.

The theory of American civil religion represents a fusion of traditional religion with a set of American ideals, such as freedom, democracy, and individualism.

Despite its popularity, the theory of American civil religion has been met with controversy. While some scholars have praised the theory for its ability to explain the role of religion in American society, others have criticized it for oversimplifying the complex relationship between religion and politics in the United States. As a result, scholars have continued to redefine the theory of American civil religion to better understand the impact of religion on American culture and politics.

Through an examination of the theory of American civil religion, Chapter 3 offered valuable insights into the ways in which Americans have internalized a set of ideals and values that have become deeply ingrained in their collective consciousness. By exploring the complex relationship between religion, politics, and American identity, this chapter provided a deeper understanding of the cultural and social forces that shape American society.

Patriotism and an outward display of devotion to the country are important to many people in the U.S. How patriotism is defined and what that looks like, however, often differs considerably based on a number of factors. Chapter 4 explored the notions of patriotism and nationalism and how these concepts manifest differently based on a person's political leanings. The growing political divide within the United States has further complicated the understanding of patriotism, with both political parties laying claim to a superior patriotism while simultaneously denouncing the other party as harmful to the "American way of life." This chapter has outlined the different modes of

patriotism and how they have been utilized in political discourse. The increasing polarization of the two parties has created an emotionally charged environment that has given rise to darker elements of patriotism, such as far-right nationalism and destructive narratives that have encouraged aggressive actions against perceived threats to the country.

The conflict between the two parties has become increasingly polarized and emotionally charged, leading to a breakdown in civil discourse and a rise in destructive actions like the events of January 6th. With more liberal interpretations of patriotism, including the striving for equality and fighting against injustice, we have seen protests by Colin Kaepernick and the Black Lives Matter movement that push back against blind patriotism and challenge the notion of symbolic patriotism. As Americans struggle to understand what it means to be patriotic and how to move forward as a nation, it is imperative to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of beliefs surrounding patriotism and work towards finding common ground despite political differences.

This thesis has also explored the significance of material elements in American civil religion and their role in memorializing and venerating American heroes. Monuments and memorials not only preserve the memories of figures and events but also utilize public space to display idealized versions of the past. Furthermore, the artistic perspective and imagery of these sites provide insight into how designers intended their audience to interpret the events and people they represent. Additionally, these sites influence observers' behaviors, evoke emotions, and provide a deeper understanding of the events and people they commemorate.

Chapter 5 delved into the civil religious memorial landscape of Washington, DC, and highlighted the importance of monuments and memorials in the nation's capital. These sites reveal what is important to the American people. The structure, design, and placement show how the people and events they depict have been transformed from historical to symbolic representations of U.S. identity. Furthermore, these sites also contain symbols and elements that are often overlooked by the general public, adding more profound meaning and depth to their representation.

Continuing with the material elements of American civil religion, chapter 6 examined the significance of the military and themes of sacrifice and service in American civil religion by looking at the history and development of Arlington National Cemetery. The cemetery serves as the shrine to America's heroes, containing the graves of prominent figures and hosting daily and annual rituals such as the changing of the guard ceremonies and Memorial Day events.

Overall, this thesis has shown that material elements play a vital role in American civil religion and the veneration of American heroes. By examining monuments and memorials in Washington D.C. and Arlington National Cemetery, we can gain insight into American ideals, beliefs, and values and how they have evolved over time. The veneration of particular people and ideals as they relate to American identity, while absent of overt worship as was seen in Greco-Roman cults, display religious significance and contribute to an American cult.

The 7th chapter explored the ever-changing civic memorial landscape with debates over Confederate statues and the implementation of new statues dedicated to more recent

national heroes. The reconsideration of what deserves to be memorialized in public spaces has sparked a heated debate in the country, particularly around the removal of divisive monuments dedicated to the Confederacy. These monuments do not exemplify the values of the majority of citizens today and the growing push to remove them is indicative of a shift in peoples' understanding of what it means to be American and how that should be presented in public space.

American civil religion is frequently presented as a unifying system of beliefs; however, it repeatedly fails to live up to these standards; too often, the limited focus on U.S. history and the overtly white Christian male perspective encourages white nationalism. This trend of nationalism, which has become increasingly problematic in the United States and worldwide, has made this topic an important one to study. This research aimed to show how religious rhetoric and influences impact the U.S. government and American citizens' understanding of their identity, particularly in the face of growing nationalist sentiment.

Taking into consideration the increasing conflicts over monuments and memorials and a growing shift towards nationalism around the world, the study of civil religion has no shortage of research potential. Future research could utilize comparative approaches toward different countries with various levels of civil religious foundations ingrained in society to better understand important themes and influences that develop ideological systems. Other avenues of inquiry could include broadening our understanding of American civil religion as it relates to diverse populations. As we have seen with recent events, including protests that have escalated to violence, such as in Charlottesville, VA,

and the attack on the U.S. Capitol, a deeper understanding of this topic is crucial to addressing the challenges posed by extreme forms of nationalism.

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Appendix A

Remarks by President Biden at the 154th National Memorial Day Observance

Arlington National Cemetery

Arlington, Virginia

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

They lie here in glory and honor — in quiet rows in Arlington, in cemeteries in Europe that I visited and many of you have, in graves across our country, in towns large and small — America’s beloved daughters and sons who dared all, risked all, and gave all to preserve and defend an idea unlike any other in human history: the idea of the United States of America.

And today, as a nation, we undertake a sacred ritual: to reflect and to remember. Because if we forget the lives that each of those silent markers represent — mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses, children — if we forget what they sacrificed, what they made so that our nation might endure strong, free, and united, then we forget who we are — who we are.

Ladies and gentlemen, our First Lady and the love of my life, Jill; Vice President Harris and the Second Gentleman; Secretary Austin; General Milley; the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Cabinet members; Gold Star families, most importantly; and survivors: Today we renew our sacred vow — it’s a simple vow: to remember. To remember.

Memorial Day is always a day where pain and pride are mixed together. We all know it, sitting here. Jill and I know it. Today is the day our son died.

And, folks, for those who have lost a loved one in the service of our country, if your loved one is missing or unaccounted for, I know the ceremonies reopen that black hole in the center of your chest that just pulls you in, suffocates you.

As I said, seven years ago today, our son, Major Beau Biden, took his last breath at Walter Reed. A major in the Delaware Army National Guard, he insisted on deploying to Iraq

with his unit for a year when he was attorney general. He came home a decorated soldier, a Bronze Star, Legion of Merit, and Delaware's Conspicuous Service Cross.

He didn't die in the line of duty. He came home from Iraq with cancer. It was a horrific cancer that stole us from him, stole — and him from us.

But still, it always feels to me on Memorial Day — I see him, not as he was the last time I held his hand, but the day I pinned his bars on him as a second lieutenant.

I see him with me down at the Delaware Memorial Bridge hugging all the Gold Star families.

Days like this bring back, before your eyes, their smile and their laugh. And the last conversation you had, each of you know it.

The hurt can be overwhelming. But for so many of you, as is with Jill and me, the hurt is wrapped around the knowledge that your loved one was part of something bigger — bigger than any of us.

They chose a life of purpose. It sounds corny, like a Memorial Day speech, but I mean it from the bottom of my heart. They chose a life of purpose.

They had a mission. And above all, they believed in duty; they believed in honor; they believed in their country.

And still today, we are free because they were brave. We live by the light of the flame of liberty that they kept burning. And so a part of them is still with us no matter how long ago we lost them.

And as hard as it is for many to believe, especially those whose loss is still raw, I promise you the day will come when the memory of your loved one, your patriot, will bring a smile to your lip before it brings a tear to your eye. That's when you know you're going to make it.

Today, America's ser- — American service members stand watch around the world, and, as many of you know, often at great personal risk.

And this Memorial Day, we know the memory is still painful of all the fallen who lost their lives during the last two decades in combat. Each of them leaving behind a family, a community. Hearts broken by their absence, and lives that will never be the same.

We see in the hundreds of graves here in Section 60, at Arlington, a reminder that there's nothing low-risk or low-cost about war for the women and men who fight it.

7,054 American military members gave their lives over 20 years of our Iraq and Afghan conflicts. Untold others died of injuries and illness connected to their service and these wars.

And the enduring grief borne by the survivors is a cost of war that we'll carry as a nation forever.

And so, to every Gold Star family, to every survivor and family member and caregiver:
This grateful nation owes you as well as that person you lost.

And we can never repay the sacrifice, but we will never stop trying. We'll never fail in
our duty to remember: With their lives, they bought our freedom.

And so, with our lives, we must always live up to their example — putting service before
self; caring for our neighbors as ourselves; working fervently to bring our union just that
much closer to fulfilling the founding creed, as the Secretary said, that all men and
women are created equal.

I've often said that, as a nation, we have many obligations. But the only one that is truly
sacred — the only truly sacred obligation we have — is to prepare and equip those
women and men we send into harm's way, and care for them and their families when
they return home and when they don't.

This is an obligation that unites Americans and brings us together — to make sure the
women and men who are willing to lay down their lives for us get the very best from us
in return.

I want to acknowledge that we're making progress in key areas like the comprehensive,
bipartisan legislation that is advancing in Congress that will deliver healthcare services
and benefits to veterans and their survivors impacted by toxic exposures.

We don't know how many Americans and service members may have died because of
what they were exposed to on the battlefield. The toxic smoke from burn pits near where
they were based — burn pits that incinerated the wastes of war, medical and hazardous
material, jet fuel, and so much more.

But we have a duty to do right by them. And I am determined to make sure that our
brave service families and members that served alongside them do not wait decades for

the care and benefits that they deserve. And that's why — that's why we're working so hard to find out what the facts are. Where we can still save lives, we have to act.

All of us also have a duty to renew our commitment to the foundational values of our nation, in their honor — for those are the values that have inspired generation after generation to service.

On Friday, I spoke at the graduation and commissioning of — ceremony of the U.S. Naval Academy. I had an opportunity to do that before as well. It was a remarkable experience again, an honor, looking out at those young men and women — newly commissioned officers — embarking on a life of service.

They hold before them the example of the heroes who have gone before them — many of you are family members — heroes who have answered duty's call at Lexington and Concord, Antietam and Gettysburg, Belleau Woods and the Battle of the Bulge, in Korea and Vietnam and Afghanistan, Iraq, and so many other places around the world — so many of whom never returned home, including the legacy of all those held prisoners of war or who are still missing in action.

To be here today, soon after that joyful celebration at the Academy, is a bracing reminder of all that we ask of our service members and their families — for it's on the strong shoulders and noble spirits of our service members that our freedom is built, our democracy sustained.

And in this moment, when a war of aggression is once more being waged by Russia to snuff out the freedom, the democracy, the very culture and identity of neighboring Ukraine, we so — we see so clearly all that's at stake.

Freedom has never been free. Democracy has always required champions.

And, today, in the perennial struggle for democracy and freedom, Ukraine and its people are on the frontlines fighting to save their nation.

But their fight is part of a larger fight that unites all people. It is a fight that so many of the patriots, whose eternal rest is here in these hallowed grounds, were part of.

A battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between appetites and ambition of a few who forever seek to dominate the lives and liberties of many.

A battle for essential democratic principles — the rule of law, free and fair elections, freedom to speak and write and to assemble, freedom to worship as one chooses, freedom of the press — principles that are essential for a free society.

You've heard this a lot. You've heard this a lot over the years, but we're now realizing how real it is around the world in so many countries as I speak. These are the foundations of our great experiment, but they are never guaranteed, even here in America.

Every generation has to defeat democracy's mortal foes. And into every generation, heroes are born, willing to shed their blood for that which they and we hold dear.

Ladies and gentlemen, today we remember and we reaffirm: Freedom is worth the sacrifice. Democracy is not perfect; it's never been good — perfect. But it's worth fighting for; if necessary, worth dying for.

It's more than just our form of government, it is part of the very soul of America. The soul of America.

Our democracy is our greatest gift as a nation, made holy by those we've lost along the way. Our democracy is how we undertake the constant work of perfecting the union — and we have not perfected it, but we've never stopped trying; of opening the doors wider of opportunity and prosperity and justice for people everywhere.

Our democracy is how we endure through every challenge, overcome every obstacle we faced through the last 246 years of self-government, and how we've come back stronger than before.

We must never walk away from that. We must never betray the lives laid down to make our nation a beacon to the world — a citadel of liberty and justice for everybody.

This is the mission of our time. Our memorial to them must not be just a day when we pause and pray, it must be a daily commitment to act, to come together, to be worthy of the price that was paid.

May God bring comfort to all those who mourn. May God bless our Gold Star families and survivors. And please, God, protect our troops.

God bless America and all of you. Thank you.⁴³¹

⁴³¹ Joseph Biden. 2022. "Remarks by President Biden at the 154th National Memorial Day Observance." The White House. May 30, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/05/30/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-154th-national-memorial-day-observance/>.