

THE  
VIRTUES  
OF  
LIBERALISM

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## INTRODUCTION

### Rethinking America's Liberal Tradition

America!  
Land created in common,  
Dream nourished in common,  
Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!  
If the house is not yet finished,  
Don't be discouraged, builder!  
If the fight is not yet won,  
Don't be weary, soldier!  
The plan and the pattern is here,  
Woven from the beginning  
Into the warp and woof of America:  
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

—Langston Hughes,  
“Freedom's Plow”<sup>1</sup>

This book issues the summons of Langston Hughes to American liberals: “KEEP YOUR HANDS ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!” For fifty years now the ideas and policies of American liberalism have been on the defensive, first against charges of communism or socialism, more recently against charges of moral as well as economic apostasy. The time has come to reconsider the ideals that inspired generations of Americans to see the rich potential of political engagement as well as the value of private pursuits, to acknowledge the importance of public deliberation about the meanings of our shared standards of liberty and justice for all. The time has come to proclaim again what James Madison termed the “necessary

mand of theocrats and republicans that individual citizens can find fulfillment only in, and thus must sacrifice themselves for, the good of the church or the state. They conceived of the liberal polity, however, as a legal and moral order necessary not only to protect them from each other and adjudicate their conflicts but also to enable them to achieve their goals. The liberal polity could survive only through the faithfulness of its citizens and their persistent loyalty to it—and to its procedures of resolving disputes through persuasion rather than force—regardless of the difficulties that might arise, which is the meaning of fortitude. Finally, liberals elevated the rights of every citizen over the privileges and preferences of an elite. They conceived of such rights, however, as bounded by the firm command that individuals must render to God and to their neighbors what is their due, which is the meaning of justice.

It would be possible to expand this list of inexact parallels by tracing other standard liberal commitments to those central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The liberal virtues of law abidingness, honesty, and moderation, for example, echo certain of the commandments handed down through Moses. The liberal virtues of tolerance, respect, generosity, and benevolence likewise extend St. Paul's admonition to the Colossians that they should practice forbearance, patience, kindness, and charity. One might argue that even the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which Christians understand with reference to their deity, bear more than a faint resemblance to the liberal virtues of trusting others, resolutely resisting cynicism, and attempting to find ways to help others flourish. Of course there are differences, since the desire to shield religious dissenters from persecution helped launch liberalism in the first place, and those who long for religious homogeneity will always be uneasy with the toleration of diversity that liberals champion. But notwithstanding the protests of dogmatists on both sides of the religious-secular divide, the discrepancies between their versions of virtue are no more striking than the similarities.

Given the compatibility between Christian virtue ethics and the virtues of liberalism, it is tempting to draw up a more elaborate or definitive list of liberal virtues, to follow in the footsteps of earlier champions of virtue ethics such as Aristotle and Aquinas. *Some philosophers and political theorists have done just that in recent years.*<sup>5</sup> But resisting that temptation is essential to the purpose of this book, both because this is not principally a prescriptive but a historical account and because disagreement, deliberation, and experimentation are essential to liberalism, not unfortunate accidents.

Overlooking the frequency and inevitability of discord and the importance of reaching tentative, provisional accommodations between apparently irreconcilable points of view would be false to the history as well as the theory of liberal democracy in America. The essays that follow examine and illustrate how the virtues of liberalism have evolved and how their meanings have altered because of dissent, conflict, and the changes of mind and heart that result. Conceived historically, no static portrait or definition of liberalism would be accurate for all times even in this one place. To cite just three examples, American liberals' ideas

about the desirability of religious and cultural diversity, about the rights and appropriate spheres of activity of women and members of different racial and ethnic groups, and about the role of government in regulating economic and social activity have all developed as new experiences and understandings have transformed old patterns of behavior and belief. That disposition to entertain criticism and accept change, a defining characteristic of liberalism, is itself grounded in the ancient Judeo-Christian virtue of humility.

The diverse and historically shifting virtues of American liberalism derive from various sources, religious and non-religious; they have manifested themselves in complex and changing practices of cultural expression, politics, economics, and social activity. Balancing commitments to popular sovereignty, regulated market exchange, and distinct cultural traditions, American liberals have sought to mediate their differences and maintain their equilibrium with varying degrees of success. The point of this volume is to make clear that, historically, the reconciling and balancing of competing values, which seems so elusive in the polarized culture of the United States at the end of the twentieth century, has been another defining feature of the liberal and democratic traditions in America. These traditions have not reflected the false dichotomies of our current debates but instead demonstrate the necessity and even the desirability of holding in suspension, and deliberating about the meaning and implications of, values that may seem incommensurable in theory but that inspire practices capable of sustaining and enriching our lives. The principles we need are to be found right in front of our eyes in the virtues of liberalism: in the deliberate and delicate balancing of freedom against responsibility, of the desire for individual wealth and security against the importance of social equality, and of the genuinely constitutive commitments to religious traditions or other cultural ideals against the awareness of the sometimes incompatible values of other Americans.

The desire to resolve those tensions, or to strike a permanent balance among those conflicting ideals, has been a perennial feature of American culture, but it is a desire we must learn to overcome or at least to keep under control. The yearning for resolution has often sprung from utopian reformers seeking social justice through dramatic social or political transformation. But as the last two decades have demonstrated, such yearnings can as easily emerge from free-market utopians whose dogmatic faith in capitalism leads them to distrust all public authority and to dismiss all invocations of responsibility, equality, and justice as illegitimate intrusions into the otherwise benign workings of the marketplace. The consequences of such capitalist utopian fervor can be as ruinous as the consequences of revolutionary egalitarian ideologies that have trampled individual rights, personal security, and religious faith. Liberalism and democracy go hand in hand, not because they can carry us beyond ideology or beyond history but precisely because the clear-eyed study of their connections in history can signal not only the dangers of utopianisms left and right but also the fruitfulness of compromise and the value of balance—together with the inevitable frustrations such moderation brings along with it. As England and France both have demonstrated in re-



cent years, alternatives to free-market panaceas no longer require formulaic returns to rigid forms of socialist orthodoxy. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the transformation of Eastern Europe, and the end of the cold war can make possible new forms of liberalism and social democracy attuned to the necessity of balancing commitments to liberty, equality, and fraternity with commitments to rights, security, and religious traditions. Although not always, American liberalism at its best has shown precisely those characteristics, along with the chastened realization that choices among such values always exact a price. One of America's most perceptive liberal democrats, William James, observed that whenever we must choose in practice between conflicting values, "some part of the ideal is butchered." Only through trial and error, experiment and evaluation, can our culture find ways to sustain with less butchery our commitments to different ideals. We will never escape the necessity of choosing nor the tragic cost of the choice itself.<sup>6</sup>

The virtues of liberalism in American history have been political, economic, and social, which explains both their enduring appeal and the vulnerability of contemporary liberalism to diverse forms of criticism. Liberal ideas are simultaneously attacked today by conservatives outside the university and by radicals inside it. These different critics ascribe to liberalism distinctly different meanings that often rest on misunderstandings of the complex historical dynamics that have shaped American politics and culture.

Liberalism today is under siege, assaulted by diverse enemies and abandoned by many of its friends. William Jefferson Clinton, the first Democrat reelected President since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, distanced himself from the liberal traditions of his own party. Although reelected with an overwhelming majority in the electoral college, Clinton nevertheless found himself facing a Congress under conservative control: not only did Republicans constitute a majority in the U.S. Senate, the election of 1996 marked the first time since 1930 that the Republican Party enjoyed back-to-back majorities in the House of Representatives. In the closing years of the twentieth century, fewer than 20 percent of American voters identify themselves as liberals.

More often hurled as an epithet these days than waved as a banner, liberalism attracts critics from all sides. Champions of both political parties, by contrast, enthusiastically sing the praises of virtue. From William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* to Michael Lerner's *The Politics of Meaning*, commentators from right to left are trumpeting the importance of old-fashioned standards of moral excellence and personal obligation.<sup>7</sup> With Democrats fleeing and Republicans demonizing "liberal" ideas, with Jeremiahs competing to drum up support for individual responsibility by calling for personal "virtue," it may seem perverse to speak of the "virtues of liberalism." That is why it is necessary.

I use *virtues* in the plural for three reasons. First, I want to emphasize that there is no singular standard of human excellence in liberalism; indeed, considered historically, there is no singular liberalism in America. Second, by calling attention to the virtues of liberal ideas, I mean to stress the positive value of their

diverse contributions to American culture as well as the attractiveness of virtue ethics and their compatibility with liberalism. Despite the current barrage of criticism directed against liberal ideas and political programs, they have widened the political, economic, and cultural options available to Americans. Finally, I highlight the multiple virtues of liberalism to signal the multiple dimensions of every human life: in their families, community activities, worlds of work, and places of worship no less than in their distinctly political participation, Americans have sought and even occasionally achieved forms of moral excellence facilitated by liberal institutions. Moreover, these different meanings can neither be collapsed into each other nor separated neatly from each other. The abstract ideals associated with these spheres may be analytically distinct and perhaps even incompatible, but in the lives of most persons at most times they have overlapped. The virtues of liberalism have been embodied historically in forms of life that cannot be described, let alone evaluated, on a single scale.

Such diversity makes clear why, conceived historically, the virtues of liberalism cannot be adequately understood at the level of definition or abstract theory. Only historical accounts can show how real people juggled, or balanced, or held in suspension the sometimes seemingly incommensurable virtues of liberalism, or, alternatively, how they struggled with, or were caught in the collisions between, the ideals of liberty, equality, and toleration that liberals have proclaimed. Only historical analysis can reveal whether, or to what extent, the problems identified or the solutions proposed by political theorists have connected with the lives people have led and the choices they have been forced or enabled to make. American political thought has taken shape in the practice of politics in its largest sense. America's important liberal theorists have occupied themselves with the writing of constitutions, laws, judicial decisions, and political commentaries, not with the production of great systems of political philosophy. If we separate liberal principles in America from their manifestations in American political discourse and practice, we will misunderstand their meanings and significance.

That insight is as old as the nation itself. On October 30, 1787, three days after publication of the first essay in *The Federalist*, the most often cited statement of American liberal political theory, James Madison recommended combining a historicist commitment to the particularity of all vital political discourses, a pragmatist commitment to testing the workability of political ideas in practice, and a democratic commitment to deliberation as the method of resolving political disputes. In a letter to Archibald Stuart, Madison expressed his belief that "if any Constitution is to be established by deliberation and choice, it must be examined with many allowances and must be compared, not with the theory which each individual may frame in his own mind, but with the systems which it is meant to take the place of and with any other which there might be a probability of obtaining."<sup>8</sup> Madison himself manifested the historical, pragmatist, and deliberative sensibility he described. Those are among the principal characteristics of American liberalism as theory and practice to be examined in this book.

To most Americans today, by contrast, "liberalism" carries two distinct mean-

ings. First, it refers to the New Deal— or later New Frontier— or Great Society—inspired initiatives to bring about greater social equality through reliance on the federal government. It comprises a set of programs championed in recent years by politicians such as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Edward Kennedy, and Michael Dukakis, a string of aspirants to the presidency whose candidacies are said to have foundered because the public identified them as “liberals.” Second, most Americans associate “liberalism” with calls for greater personal freedom to be secured through government intervention. These demands for greater tolerance of diversity began with campaigns for abolition and women’s rights, reemerged in the civil rights movement, and expanded into a broader agenda encompassing challenges to the obstacles associated not only with race but also with gender, sexuality, age, and physical or mental disability. Since the word *liberal* has long meant both generosity and tolerance, the former since the fourteenth century, the latter since the eighteenth, this common understanding of the dual meanings of “liberalism” has a solid foundation.

Within the academy, “liberalism” usually has a different range of meanings with an equally long lineage. These meanings derive from the tradition of political theory originating with John Locke in the late seventeenth century; extending through the Enlightenment to our own day thanks to the efforts of thinkers such as James Madison, John Stuart Mill, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.; and culminating in the influential work of the contemporary American philosopher John Rawls. For most academics who write on social and political theory, “liberalism” is this rarefied discourse with its emphasis on individual rights, specifically property rights, and its focus on protecting individuals from political schemes that would limit their freedom, considered to be the value most prized by liberals. Academics who are cultural radicals dismiss the pleas for toleration that most Americans associate with liberals as a transparent rationalization of liberals’ deeper preference for a narrow ideal of rationality descended from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Beneath liberals’ gestures toward tolerating diversity, according to this critique, lie their abiding desires to preserve the prerogatives of Eurocentric, white, male elites. Paradoxically, this way of understanding these concepts emphasizes liberals’ purported efforts to shield the economic freedom of individuals from the intrusiveness of state authority and their efforts to preserve Western standards of order and rationality. Not only is this view of liberalism distinct from, it is almost exactly opposite, that of most Americans outside universities who excoriate liberals.

For the last thirty years at least, liberalism has thus been under attack simultaneously from the political Right and the academic Left. Republican Party loyalists accuse liberals of being overly interested in using government to achieve equality and insufficiently sensitive to individual property rights. Academic radicals accuse liberals of being insufficiently sensitive to egalitarian aspirations and overly interested in protecting individual property rights. Conservative critics charge liberals with glorifying diversity by celebrating toleration; critics in the academy fault liberals for trivializing difference by pretending to tolerate forms

of cultural diversity that they secretly wish to silence. Perhaps it is not surprising that with enemies like these, liberalism at the end of the twentieth century seems to have few friends.

That is unfortunate. The essays collected in this volume—essays written for a variety of purposes—establish why the critiques of both the Republican Party and the academic Left rest on misunderstandings of the multiple roles played by liberal ideas in American history. American liberals have been guilty of the sins of omission and commission that enrage contemporary critics. As dissidents from the left have made clear, centuries passed before the ranks of decision makers expanded to include nonwhites, women, and the poor. As conservatives have made equally clear, some champions of liberalism have exaggerated the capacity of reason, which can be thin and brittle, and the ability of self-righteous reformers, who can be blind and deaf, to solve social problems by empowering themselves. But the resources for responding to those critiques are to be found within liberalism itself. Liberalism is neither essentially exclusionary nor essentially naive. When critics have challenged liberals’ broad-mindedness and hard-headedness, they have invoked virtues that liberals themselves should cherish; expanding the reach of democracy and evaluating the effectiveness of government policies should be obsessions of American liberals. Only when radicals or conservatives claim that liberalism lacks the depth to answer their charges do legitimate critiques become caricatures, exaggerated portraits of liberalism that conveniently overlook crucial aspects of the ideas being targeted for scorn.

These essays recover the multidimensional nature of the political ideals and programs often described as “liberal,” which stretch back into colonial America and continue into the present. The multiple theories and practices of liberalism have been inspired and informed by, and carry forward, too-seldom understood conceptions of virtue that are less distant from the current concerns of either Republican Party loyalists or cultural radicals in the academy than the rhetoric of either group would suggest. American history, in short, reveals dimensions of American political thought and activity that have been conveniently forgotten, ignored, or misrepresented by conservative and radical critics: the virtues of liberalism.

These essays emphatically do *not* attempt to rehabilitate, or refine, the account of American history advanced by Louis Hartz in *The American Liberal Tradition* (1955), an exceedingly influential book that was mistaken in its general argument about American consensus and in almost every one of its particular arguments as well.<sup>9</sup> Hartz claimed, with impressive energy and dazzling allusive brilliance, that because America lacked a feudal tradition, and because Americans had the good fortune to enjoy a large measure of equality, their shared commitment to the primacy of individual freedom kept them from worrying about the questions of equality and social justice that have convulsed European nations since the eighteenth century. Hartz’s account, despite its appeal to champions and critics of American politics from the Right and the Left, misses almost everything important about the social and political conflicts that have racked American history. It helped spawn mirror-image mythological misunderstandings of America that

have inspired both conservatives' and radicals' equally overstated critiques of liberal ideas and politics in America. Those who seek heroes (or villains) in the American past among those who cherished property and scorned government, and those who seek villains (or heroes) among those who cherished a narrowly ethnocentric ideal and suppressed diversity, will continue to find in Hartz's narrative a comforting morality play that satisfies their thirst for melodrama. American history, like liberal discourse itself, is more complicated.

This volume represents a preliminary report of a work in progress, a larger comparative study of European and American democracy that will endeavor to replace Hartz's conception of property rights as the central value in American politics with a broader treatment of the emergence and transformation of autonomy and popular sovereignty—the complex ideals that underlie the changing practice of democracy on both sides of the Atlantic. In that story some of the particular issues discussed in these essays will receive less detailed treatment; others will come more sharply into focus. My goal in bringing together these essays at this moment is to indicate the reasons why the critiques of American conservatives and American radicals, of commentators within and outside the academic community, too often miss their mark because they fail to acknowledge the complicated, multidimensional history of American ideas and political activity, a history that reveals the diverse and dynamic virtues of liberalism. But if liberalism has been so often misunderstood, readers may wonder, why worry about preserving it? If responding to criticism from the left requires invoking democratic principles of equality and inclusion, and responding to criticism from the right requires invoking ancient virtues such as prudence and fortitude, why not abandon the term “liberalism” altogether? Why not concede its weaknesses and start over with something less vulnerable to attacks from left and right? This is a serious and legitimate question. There are good reasons why liberals might want to change our focus to democracy, and to the gradual evolution from political democracy to social democracy. I intend to explore those reasons in another book. But there are equally good reasons for illuminating the resources of liberalism itself: without an adequate appreciation of those resources, we have an impoverished and inaccurate understanding of the rich mixture of democratic and liberal virtues that have helped shape our history and can help guide us into the future.

Democracy is distinguishable from liberalism. Unless the principle of majoritarianism is tempered with principles such as autonomy and toleration, democracy can become tyranny, as political theorists ancient and modern have acknowledged. Nor is the multifaceted liberalism of American history merely a version of conservatism. Liberalism includes not only a legitimate concern with rights, or respect for the virtues of prudence and temperance as brakes on the hubris of reason, but an equally important thirst for justice. Almost fifty years ago, at a meeting of the State Department Policy Planning Staff, Reinhold Niebuhr, a quintessential liberal, observed that the problem with American conservatives and the business community “is that they do not really deal with the problem of freedom in the community, freedom and justice, because they believe that justice flows au-

tomatically from freedom.” To the contrary, liberty itself, although a precious condition, is not a virtue. As Niebuhr pointed out, justice should be the aim of free persons and free nations: “There is no such thing as freedom as the sole end of life.”<sup>10</sup> If liberalism meant nothing more than celebrating freedom, it would indeed be inadequate. If democracy always meant something more than simple majoritarianism, and if champions of America's religious traditions always tolerated diversity and embraced difference, democracy and religiosity might have provided Americans everything we need. But instead it has been an imperfect and changing amalgamation of liberal virtues, democratic procedures, and religious ideals that has inspired Americans in our still unfinished quest for justice.

From John Winthrop's shipboard address to the band of Puritans bound for the New World in 1630 through Bill Clinton's acceptance speech at the Democratic Party's national convention in the summer of 1996, Americans in public life have sought to balance deep commitments to liberty and to community. As the distance separating Winthrop's austere Calvinism from Clinton's rather less stringent standard of propriety makes clear, however, the meanings associated with both terms have changed even as public proclamations of their importance have persisted. Americans have long understood that efforts to balance freedom and fraternity have required trying to reconcile in practice ideals that seemed contradictory. Winthrop identified the problem in his address aboard the *Arabella* in 1630. He began by noting the divinely ordained and irremediable “Condicion of mankinde,” in which “some must be rich and some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjection.” Despite the resentment such inequality might engender, however, the community required a sustaining “Bond of brotherly affection.” Tempering the fact of hierarchy was a commitment to justice; tempering the fact of misfortune was a commitment to mercy; tempering the fact of indolence was a commitment to prudence.<sup>11</sup> Yet Winthrop acknowledged that members of the community would be tempted to magnify the importance of their own well-being and distrust their neighbors. Although hardly a liberal—for him social hierarchy was fixed and religious truth known, ideas of equality and dissent intolerable—Winthrop nevertheless did identify the balancing act that his heirs have been required to perform. Americans' yearning for harmony has been frustrated by the realization, which dawned throughout the colonies as early as the middle of the seventeenth century, that freedom makes diversity and disagreement the inevitable features of liberal community.

In the abstract, tradeoffs between freedom and equality may appear inescapable, but in practice they are connected. Individuals cannot exercise freedom unless they are afforded equal protection under law from others who would restrict their choices. Likewise, no significant political thinker in the American tradition has valued equality without valuing freedom, if only because freedom has always been considered one of the most important goods to be made available equally among citizens.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that “liberalism,” because of its emphasis on rights, prohibits government from intervening to regulate individual freedom in order to achieve greater

equality has no historical foundation. Liberal theorists from Locke to Rawls have acknowledged that the idea of unrestricted freedom is chimerical and that government has a legitimate role to play in regulating the ownership and use of property. Although Isaiah Berlin is one of this century's most accomplished historians of ideas, his familiar distinction between negative and positive freedom—between freedom “from” government intrusion and freedom “to” take steps that Berlin worried might slide smoothly into oppressing others—has done much mischief in recent political thought. Freedom from state power (negative freedom) makes no difference unless individuals are thereby freed to achieve their desired goals (positive freedom). Berlin's leap from suspicion of efforts to ensure individuals' capacity to act (which the state might facilitate in various ways ranging from providing schools to providing roads) to his conclusions regarding the lurking danger of authoritarianism reflects the power that fears of totalitarianism exerted over Berlin's generation rather than the necessary conceptual— or historical—limits of liberalism.<sup>13</sup>

Participating in the marketplace, enjoying the fruits of one's enterprising activity, and nevertheless not only worrying about inequality but acting to regulate the conditions of economic life have long been American preoccupations. Puritans fled England for the New World because they refused to surrender their religious principles, but their dedication to righteous living translated into material success that made them uneasy. Winthrop cited biblical injunctions when he counseled “liberality” toward the least fortunate members of the community; despite their emphasis on hard work and their acceptance of hierarchy as a natural part of God's plan, the Puritans nevertheless acknowledged from the outset the need to care for the poor and check the appetites of the rich.<sup>14</sup>

During the eighteenth century, as chapters 2, 3, and 4 make clear, Christian ideas of charity, bolstered by the English common law tradition, the idea of natural law, and ideas of duty drawn from Scottish moral philosophy combined with liberal and republican ideas to legitimate public regulation of individuals' economic activity on behalf of the common good. Although Americans fought a war to establish their independence from England, and although they disagreed about the shape their own institutions should take, they did not dispute the legitimacy of government intervention in social and economic activity. In the new nation, courts at the state and local level did not hesitate to regulate the economy on behalf of “the people's welfare,” a maxim regularly invoked to justify circumscribing the rights of property holders. When uses of property threatened public safety, public access to roads, ports, or waterways, public morality, public health, or the legitimate interests of consumers, American courts asserted their authority to protect the common good.<sup>15</sup>

American democracy worked, Alexis de Tocqueville understood, because Americans neither inherited nor constructed walls dividing their private lives from public authority in the way that liberalism, at least as some commentators conceive of it, is sometimes said to require. Instead, as I indicate in chapter 5, Tocqueville understood that the roughly equal conditions Americans enjoyed,

within which individuals were able to pursue their richly textured associational and religious lives, made possible the emergence of “self interest properly understood.” This was a uniquely democratic virtue, which Tocqueville distinguished sharply from the vice of egoism that simple individualism might otherwise mirror. Its preservation required not only the indispensable community and religious institutions that political scientists now treasure as “civil society” but also a degree of social and economic equality that existed nowhere else in the world in the 1830s. That equality sprang not from the mythical magic of the market but instead from specific legal and political decisions rooted in the quintessentially American—and liberal—cultural ideal of a well regulated society.

Slavery, the most obvious contradiction to that ideal, mocked Americans' claims to cherish freedom or equality. But effective challenges to slavery eventually matured in the 1850s. Their power derived from the religious, republican, and liberal ideas that pervaded northern political culture, which reformers transformed by infusing Christian universalism with the “heightened emotional style” of Evangelical Protestantism and the idea of sympathy drawn from Scottish philosophers such as Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson. These ideas found expression in various reform organizations until they coalesced in the Republican Party, which nominated Abraham Lincoln to oppose a system that degraded free and enslaved Americans alike. Lincoln's authority rested on his ability to extend the biblical ideals of individual freedom and equality to African Americans and to amalgamate those values with his devotion to a newly sanctified American national ideal. Although the scars left by slavery endure, Lincoln began the still unfinished healing process by redefining the national purpose and reestablishing the boundaries of tolerance.<sup>16</sup>

Much of nineteenth-century American political discourse demonstrates the folly of counterposing liberal “rights talk” against egalitarian ideals as if they were incompatible. From writers in the Jeffersonian tradition such as Ethan Allen, William Manning, and John Taylor to champions of natural rights republicanism such as Tom Paine, Joel Barlow, and Robert Coram, through Jacksonians such as Thomas Skidmore to the many late nineteenth-century land reformers entranced by Henry George, influential American political commentators simultaneously challenged the legitimacy of existing distributions of property and wholeheartedly endorsed the legitimacy, even the sanctity, of every individual's right to land ownership. This loose American tradition of natural rights republicanism—or liberal egalitarianism—shows how supple the ideas of freedom and equality were in practice; its long-term vitality indicates that claims for government intervention need hardly originate from somewhere outside the conceptual limits of liberalism.<sup>17</sup>

Viewed historically, the boundaries between religious, ethical, and political ideals, and those between liberal, republican, socialist, and social democratic ideas, have proved considerably more permeable in practice than some contemporary political theorists might suppose. Biblical injunctions against selfishness, greed, and cruelty have undergirded civic invocations of the ideals of freedom,



equality, and justice, and Americans' failure to measure up to the standards of the Judeo-Christian tradition has provided ammunition not only for preachers but also for political activists, and not without results. In the wake of systematic campaigns of violence against blacks and unprecedentedly harsh codes of racial segregation imposed in the South in the 1890s, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "Deeply religious and democratic as are the mass of the whites, they feel acutely the false position in which the Negro problems place them. Such an essentially honest-hearted and generous people cannot cite the caste-leveling precepts of Christianity, or believe in equality of opportunity for all men, without coming to feel more with each generation that the present drawing of the color-line is a flat contradiction to their beliefs and professions." Although Du Bois himself came to doubt the potency of religious precepts against the hard fact of racism, a later generation of civil rights activists led by Martin Luther King Jr. fueled their crusade with precisely the biblical principles Du Bois invoked. Combining shared religious and political ideals, they eventually succeeded in persuading white Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to join them; that alliance changed the nation's laws if not always its citizens' behavior. Although the ecumenical commitment to racial justice across religious lines, to which even Malcolm X committed himself before his assassination, remains fragile, and the racial divisions between Americans remain the nation's most serious problem, the absolutely crucial part played by religious communities in forging fragile coalitions across the color line is now beyond doubt.<sup>18</sup>

The writings of most of the influential American political thinkers in the last hundred years likewise illustrate the flexibility of liberals facing the unprecedented challenges of an urban industrial nation. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 explore the ideas of thinkers who challenged the brief, late nineteenth-century identification of liberalism with *laissez-faire*. Although the reign of *laissez-faire* endured only a short time, that moment enshrined in the imagination of twentieth-century conservatives an Edenic myth of a stateless America that has inspired a flood of anti-government rhetoric ever since. Liberals quickly exposed the mythic quality of *laissez-faire* fantasies by pointing out the continuous engagement of government with American business, which flourished in the nineteenth century thanks to government subsidies, charters, and laws that restricted the freedoms of some inhabitants of the nation so that others could prosper. Insisting on the interdependence of American society and the incoherence of the concept of atomistic individuals, American philosophers and social theorists, notably John Dewey, whose ideas are examined in chapter 6, launched a new crusade to extend equality to all citizens.

Twentieth-century American reformers followed these thinkers' lead. Progressives established the principle of graduated taxation and experimented with the idea of government regulation through independent commissions. Premised on the ideas of scientific inquiry and pragmatic truth testing, such flexible institutions showed initial promise but were quickly captured by the forces they were designed to control. The New Deal, initially a hastily conceived potpourri of pro-

grams designed to counter the effects of a devastating economic depression, developed into a more comprehensive program of social security that now protects most Americans from slipping into poverty in old age. Moreover, Roosevelt tried, as I explain in chapter 7, to introduce an extensive safety net by framing it in familiar language as a "second bill of rights." Although his effort failed, the programs made available to World War II veterans, especially expanded educational funding, launched the nation into a twenty-five-year era of decreasing inequality by helping to lift millions of white- and blue-collar workers and their families into the middle class.

Those years of intoxicating growth ended in the mid-1970s, when U.S. domination of the world economy skidded to a halt. That economic crisis, ominously, coincided with an ignominious defeat in Vietnam, a series of scandals that discredited and finally brought down Richard Nixon's presidency, and an uneasy truce in the stormy, decade-long cultural trench warfare waged over contested issues of race, gender, and personal expression.

Only at that point, and for a combination of reasons, did suspicion of government activity itself move from the margins of political discourse to the center of the Republican Party. The Great Society programs of the 1960s, although they had established the crucial egalitarian principle of government-funded health care through the Medicare and Medicaid programs, sparked a backlash. Their gestures toward providing racial justice through economic reforms, understandable at a time when the limited effects of civil rights legislation were becoming clear, backfired in explosive ways. Great Society programs interfered with the preferences of lower middle-class white home owners, who felt threatened by integration of their neighborhoods and their schools. Affirmative action guidelines challenged the hard-won control of job-training programs by white trade unions. Such threats provoked a volatile mix of resentment and anger that occasionally boiled over into violence but more often simmered until hardening into racial hatred.

The initiatives designed to achieve racial integration were conceived by idealists and implemented by social engineers whose commitments to political activity set them apart from the counterculture of the 1960s. Nevertheless, many Americans interpreted such programs as sharp departures from the Democratic Party's bread and butter, its New Deal heritage, and symbols of a new orientation. This new agenda seemed to signal a politics of liberation, and it provoked a deep cultural and political struggle. It appeared to align the federal government with forms of cultural subversion that did not originate in the black community, where cultural conservatism fed by various forms of religious devotion remained strong, but that nevertheless came to be associated with African Americans by conservatives who automatically associated drugs, sexual promiscuity, and rock music with a longstanding distrust of blacks and other marginalized groups. Hollywood and Madison Avenue contributed far more to glamorizing cultural radicalism than did those who suffered the consequences of the backlash it provoked.<sup>19</sup>

From that polarization arose the futile culture wars we inherit at the end of the twentieth century, in which rightwing talk-show hosts and academic radicals fling

at each other increasingly stylized and pointless attacks and the public turns away in disgust from everyday electoral politics. Political discourse descends toward the level of the thirty-second attack ads that alienate voters from their targets without inspiring them to vote for their sponsors. Dispirited citizens confront a set of false choices about symbolic issues that are tangential to their genuine concerns. Opinion polls indicate that the public is far more willing to compromise on such issues as abortion, welfare, gun control, and crime than are politicians, with the result that the public's common sense finds little outlet in managed elections controlled by rival elites who respond only to the highly organized, well funded, and frequently dogmatic fringes of their parties.<sup>20</sup>

The puerile cynicism of American political commentary is fine for satirists, but it also infects the supposedly sophisticated commentary of major television and newspaper pundits. The assumption that all public servants—especially those in Washington—are fools or knaves erodes even the possibility that either party will succeed in mobilizing support for positive initiatives. Tax cutting and government bashing are the leitmotifs of Republicans such as Newt Gingrich, who take their inspiration from Ronald Reagan at his most Manichean: one evil empire down, one to go. Democrats are reduced to bashing Republicans for wanting to cut government programs slightly faster than they do—except for the most expensive (defense, Social Security, and Medicare), which benefit members of the middle class. Neither party will concede that government provides indispensable services that cost money. An infantile escapism seems to be seeping into public life. Although it would be folly to deny the presence of corruption, ineptitude, and good old chicanery in American politics past or present, our current disdain for politics is anomalous. Earlier generations of Americans acknowledged not only the potential corruption of government but also, more than occasionally, its potential as a force for good. A simple-minded optimism would be no improvement over the simple-minded cynicism liberals now wear as a shield against accusations of cornball sincerity. Detached from the stereoscopic vision that clarifies both the limits of what can be achieved through politics and the necessity of iron-willed determination in the face of those limits, liberalism can shrivel into sentimental whimpering or bland admonitions that Americans should be nicer to each other in shops and on sidewalks. Despite such risks, unhip reminders that earlier Americans occasionally found in public life sources of inspiration rather than comic relief might nevertheless be worthwhile.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years American political discourse has displayed a debilitating extremism. Too often, in popular commentary and in academic political theory, we contrast, soap-opera style, saints and sinners. The history of American political thought and activity suggests that we should take another tack. As these essays should make clear, most of our predecessors drew on multiple traditions to balance competing values in a genuinely conflict-ridden polity marked by disagreements over policy rooted in genuine differences of conviction. Those differences persist in the compromises that have been worked out because of the shared commitment to democratic procedures. From the Constitution and the Bill of Rights

onward, we Americans have committed ourselves to the provisionality of our principles as well as our policies. Our fundamental laws enable and require us to reconsider our current course in light of our experience, just as Madison believed we should do. The government of the United States was thus committed to a kind of pragmatism and historical sensibility more than a century before Dewey, along with Charles Peirce, William James, and George Herbert Mead, counseled trading in dogmas for democratic experimentation. At no point—even, tragically, at the end of the Civil War—have the victories in American politics been complete, but neither have the defeats. Unsatisfying as that observation is, it testifies not only to the power of those with privilege but also to the continuing struggles waged by those committed to the ideals of equality and freedom for all citizens—those who have manifested in their writing and other forms of economic, political, and cultural activity the virtues of liberalism.

Many of us who came of age in America during the war in Vietnam urged our elders to stop seeing the world through a World War II-induced reflexive pro-Americanism. Can we now stop seeing our past through an equally distorting Vietnam-induced reflexive anti-Americanism? Can we acknowledge that indignation and cynicism too can obstruct critical understanding? In addition to facing the frequent sobering moments when power trumped justice, we should recover the signs of promise in our past. Historical analysis reveals not only the hard lessons of persistent inequality, and the evidence that undercuts one-dimensional characterizations of the limits or dogmas ascribed to liberals, but also the potential for instruction and even inspiration. For all of those reasons, as I argue in chapter 9, history matters to political theory.

"I find that the best virtue I have has in it some tincture of vice," wrote Michel de Montaigne in his *Essays*, and that perspective serves us well as we reflect on American politics. For the very reason that liberal and democratic ideas and institutions make possible the development of individual virtues, they also provide fertile conditions for the development of vices such as indifference and despair. "Moral absolutism," the Polish dissident Adam Michnik observes, "is a great strength for individuals and groups struggling against dictatorship," and so it has been for Americans struggling to forge a nation, fight a Civil War, and end systems of discrimination based on ascribed characteristics such as race, gender, sexuality, and disability. But, Michnik continues, "it is a weakness for individuals and groups" struggling to build democracies, because a democratic world is "eternal imperfection, a mixture of sinfulness, saintliness, and monkey business. That is why seekers of a moral state and of a perfectly just society do not like democracy." Against the vivid purity of moral absolutism, democracy, like liberalism, seems a muddy gray. "Yet only gray democracy, with its human rights, with institutions of civil society, can replace weapons with arguments."<sup>22</sup> Early nineteenth-century European visitors to the United States, not only but surely including Tocqueville, remarked repeatedly on the chaos and disorderliness of the American experiment in liberal democracy, where no voice was ever silent and no question was ever finally resolved. That messiness of course has made possible more

than a few of the tinctures of vice Montaigne admitted, but it has also made possible the nurturing of virtues. If we think we can enjoy the latter without risking the former, we display the moral absolutism of dissidents without the maturity of shrewd liberal democrats such as Madison, Tocqueville, Lincoln, or King.

There is in the American record no better spokesman for the virtues of liberalism than the wise and wily grandfather of the protagonist in Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Notwithstanding the indisputable evidence of injustice, betrayal, and evil facing us as we examine the American cultural tradition, we should nevertheless heed his advice to "affirm the principle."<sup>23</sup> Like Langston Hughes's admonition to "KEEP YOUR HANDS ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!" that is not the counsel of resignation but of resolution to persist despite obstacles. Such fortitude, requiring moral convictions without the luxury of moral absolutism, and such faith, requiring trust in the plan and pattern of democracy without the certainty that justice will result, are among the principal virtues of liberalism.