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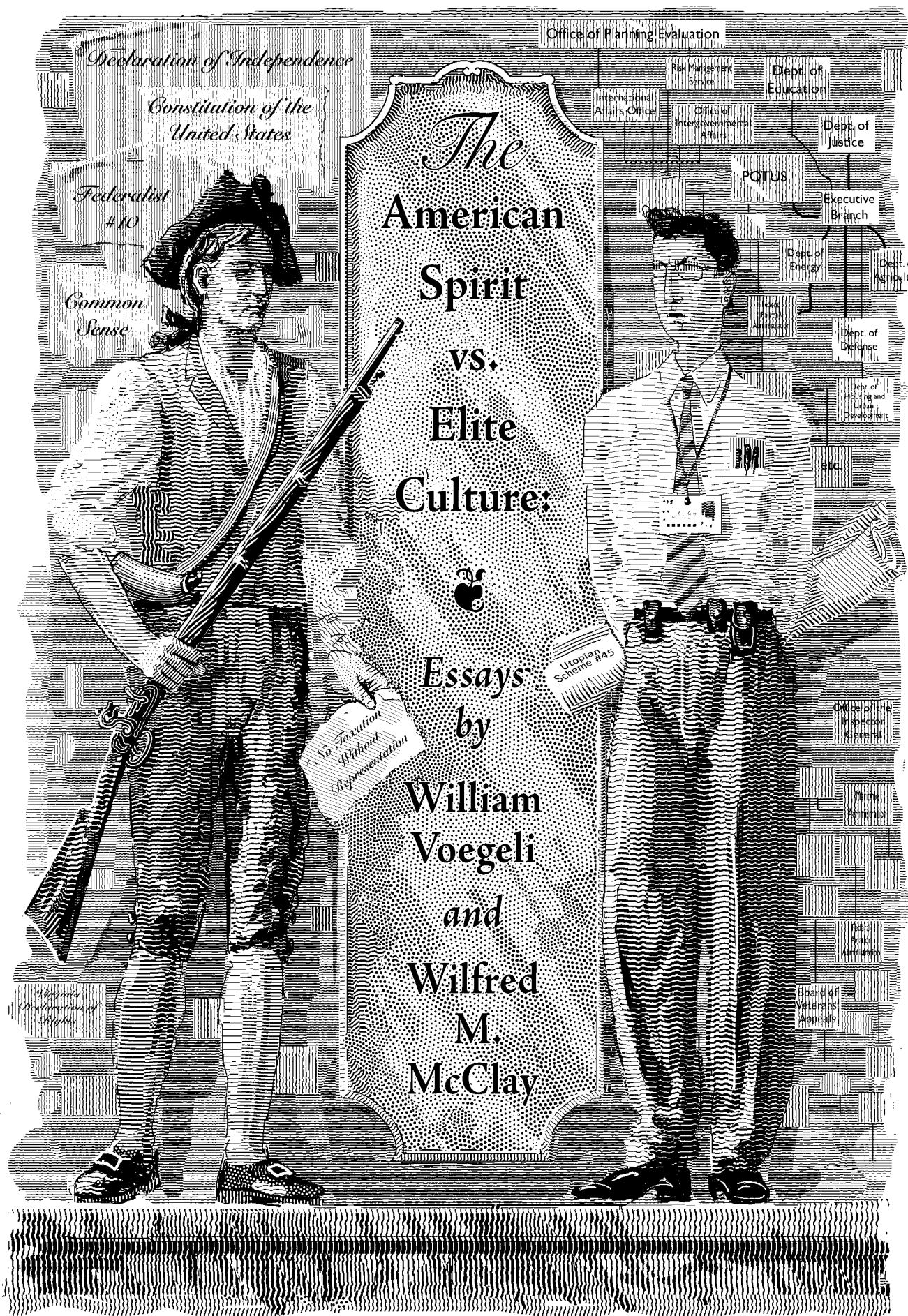
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PROCESSED HISTORY

Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815, by Gordon S. Wood.
Oxford University Press, 800 pages, \$35



A Southeast View of New Haven in 1786, from the *New Haven Chronicle* of that year

EMPIRE OF LIBERTY, GORDON WOOD'S CONTRIBUTION to the Oxford History of the United States, is in many ways an excellent work of history. No other living historian could have brought together so much material and synthesized it so intelligently and, often, elegantly. Wood seems to have read everything written in the field in his lifetime.

The volume is not, however, exactly a *book*. It is not a unified work in which every paragraph fits together into a larger whole. Instead, it is two books in one. The first describes the political history of the United States from the inauguration of President Washington to the end of the War of 1812, and does so fairly well. The second frames that story with a broad narrative of cultural and social change in the United States from 1776 to roughly 1830, often with sweeping chapters on topics like "Republican Religion" and "Between Slavery and Freedom."

For Wood, the Alva O. Way University Professor and Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University, society and culture are in the driver's seat; politics is along for the ride. After the Revolution, Wood writes, Americans ceased to think they were "primitive folk living on the edges of Western civilization": "far from remaining on the periphery of the historical process, they now saw themselves suddenly cast into its center." Wood believes that historians are, at heart, students of this "process." They describe the changing "climate of opinion," often by noting how some people, unbeknownst to themselves, were "preparing the way for the

future." History is the study of change over time. It is not the study of great statesmanship, and as Wood once said to me, history is not philosophy teaching by example.

Empire of Liberty recapitulates and expands upon the story Wood told in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992). The best parts are those dedicated to describing the great changes in society and culture that took place in the U.S. in the decades after the American Revolution. Wood focuses, in particular, on the rise and eventual victory of mass, middle-class society over the gentry-aristocracy. Though not a great storyteller, he is a good one, weaving a vast array of historical data into a coherent social narrative that reminds us of the confidence and the raw energy of the republic. Americans believed in themselves and had grand hopes for their country. They also were an anxious people. Both individuals and the republic had something to prove.

Once aristocratic markers ceased to distinguish the better sort from the rest, competition for place became intense, even as Americans denied that rank order should exist in society. That energy was harnessed by the market. Elkanah Watson, for example, "devised...what soon became the familiar American county fair, with exhibitions, music, dancing, singing, and prizes awarded for the best crops and the biggest livestock." Soon women were displaying their best "cloth, lace, hats, and other products of domestic manufacturing" in a parallel competition. Winners displayed their prizes, fostering "some tincture of envy"—which spurred everyone to harder

work and to greater feats of production. Formerly, aristocrats held that only the fear of starvation would spur poor men to action. Americans discovered that the prospect of improvement would do the job much more effectively.

But Americans of this era did not just go to work, they also got busy. Population, at a bit over five million in 1800, was doubling every 20 years. Much of it was streaming west. In 1776, Wood notes, Kentucky "contained almost no white settlers. By 1800 it had become a state (1792) and grown to over 220,000." Tennessee's population "multiplied tenfold between 1790 and 1820." Settled states with extended backcountries saw a similar transformation. In upstate New York, one traveler noted, "axes were resounding and the trees literally were falling about us as we passed." The republic's leaders, particularly Federalists like George Washington and Henry Knox, tried to stem this tide, both because they wanted to oversee an orderly, republican settlement of the West, and because they knew that running the Indians off their lands would be a stain on the republic's honor. But the government lacked the authority and the resources, and perhaps the will, to stop the flow of settlement to the West.

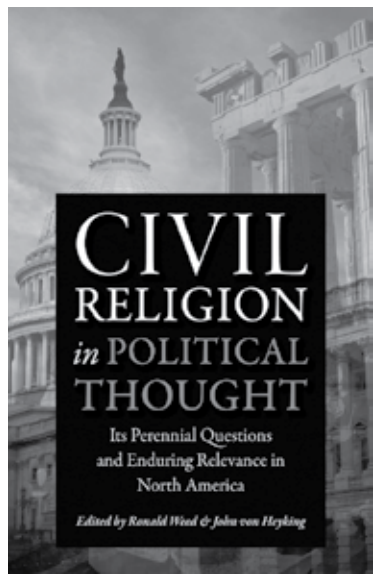
WOOD SEES A SIMILAR DYNAMIC AT WORK in society as a whole. Children were leaving their parents' homes in droves to make their own way in the world elsewhere. Colleges were beset by unruly students, "on a scale never seen before or since in American



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history." Americans were drinking more than at any other time in our history; the homicide rate increased, as did extra-marital pregnancy. Many of the old elites thought society was spinning out of control. Meanwhile, to vindicate American society against the aspersions of Europe, Americans grew to be committed to moral reform and moral causes. They flocked to see *Othello*, billed as "a Series of Moral Dialogues in Five Parts," and *Richard III*, dubbed "The Fate of Tyranny." The Second Great Awakening got underway, and the camp meeting was invented. All these reflected a popular, egalitarian morality, and all were infused with American pride.

In politics, the people demanded to be heard and to have their way. Anti-slavery became a popular cause for the first time in history and, mostly in the North, thousands of slaves were freed by their owners or by law. In high politics, common citizens had no time for either the traditional, hierarchical deference that, Wood says, the Federalists demanded, or the enlightened leadership that Jefferson represented. In the 1790s, as Wood tells the story, the Federalists made their last stand for traditional notions of statesmanship, virtue, and restraint. They failed.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's program would be more congruent with the "libertarian impulses of America's republican ideology." Whereas Alexander Hamilton wanted to create a modern fiscal-military state, with its attendant administrative apparatus and "corruption," Madison and Jefferson wanted the federal government to be virtually invisible to the average American. Jefferson's attack on the social forms of diplomacy, with his rule of "pell-mell" (seating at state dinners would be open rather than according to rules of precedence), "reflected changes that were taking place in American society." Facing invasion in the War of 1812, Madison refused to change course. "Better to allow the country to be invaded and the capital burned than to build up state power in a European monarchical manner. It was a Republican war that Madison sought to wage in a republican fashion." Wood thinks that Madison was right. Despite the burning of Washington and other defeats, the United States did not fall. In fact, the War of 1812 established "for Americans the independence and nationhood of the United States."

AS CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY, ALL this is fairly solid, but it is not so solid as political, constitutional, and intellectual history. Wood implies that Jefferson and Madison's theories of government were vindicated, even if the messy forces of pluralism, self-interest, and middle class democracy pushed aside their brand of elite leadership. In fact, the rule of pell-mell was a failure and was soon repudiated. The idea of replacing war with

embargoes failed. By 1815, Madison concluded not only that the Bank of the United States was a good thing, but also that it was constitutional. Similarly, by 1815, he and Jefferson realized that the U.S. could not remain a nation of farmers. Wood overlooks Madison's call for new national roads and canals in his annual message of 1815, although he does mention, in a separate chapter on "Republican Reforms," that Madison vetoed just such a bill—after John C. Calhoun drafted and pushed it through Congress. Did Madison change his mind on internal improvements in general, or did he, as his veto message suggested, want an amendment to legalize them? Wood doesn't ask.

Wood's desire for cultural generalization is often useful. He gives a very good account of the reasoning behind the Alien and Sedition acts, for example. His comment that the understanding of church-state separation in 1800 is very different from that of our Courts today is spot on. But the same cultural bias also causes difficulties, and leads him to cut corners or worse. He writes of "the universal and perpetual peace that every enlightened person, but especially Americans, yearned for." How many Americans yearned for perpetual peace? He does not say, but he implies that even sober republicans like John Adams were on board. Wood quotes one letter in which Adams wrote that, once nations respected neutral rights, "it would put an end forever to all maritime war." Wood cuts the next sentence: "However desirable this may be to humanity, how much soever philosophy may approve it and Christianity desire it, I am clearly convinced it will never take place." Nor does he quote Adams's statements mocking the idea of perpetual peace as philosophical folly. No matter.

For Wood, American history is about the movement of prevailing opinion in America down to one standard deviation. In this mode of history, neither individuals nor precise ideas matter. Ultimately, Wood's own belief in History gets in the way of his account of politics. He quotes Justice William Johnson's opinion in *Fletcher v. Peck* (1810), drawing upon "a general principle, on the reason and nature of things; a principle which will impose laws even on the Deity." Similarly he quotes Justice Joseph Story in *Terrett v. Taylor* (1815): "we think ourselves standing upon the principles of natural justice, upon the fundamental laws of every free government, upon the spirit and letter of the constitution." To most of America's greatest jurists, and to the founders, the U.S. Constitution was grounded, not on mere ideology, but upon truths "in the nature of things" that reason could discern. If one wishes to understand what they thought they were doing, one must describe their account of nature, even if their ideas were mistaken, or



even if, as Wood seems to think, the idea that men can discern “the nature of things” is a delusion. Confident that he understands things better than his subjects do, he attributes their ideas to “the historical process,” and in doing so necessarily simplifies or distorts history.

In *Empire of Liberty*, people are often surprised, baffled, and overwhelmed by events and changes in society. In the 1790s, “Jefferson and Madison scarcely understood the diverse social and sectional character of their followers.” College students quoting Paine faced “bewildered clerical teachers.” Repealing all laws against seditious libel left the Federalists “dumbfounded.” Etc., etc. Wood’s subjects seldom truly understand what’s going on around them, especially when they don’t like it. Ultimately, Wood’s assumptions make it harder to give people and texts a nuanced reading. According to him, “Franklin, and, in fact, most of the Founders, believed in the efficacy of prayer as well as in some sort of afterlife.” Franklin?! Surely he must be joking, as I’m nearly certain Franklin was.

NEAR THE CONCLUSION OF *EMPIRE OF LIBERTY* Wood explains his thinking:

Educated and reflective observers found it increasingly difficult to hold to the eighteenth-century conspiratorial notion that particular individuals were directly responsible for all that happened.... [W]ith

the spread of scientific thinking about society many of these sorts of conspiratorial interpretations began to seem increasingly primitive and quaint.

Is Wood correct? He might be. But perhaps he’s simply a victim of the historical process. “Historians who write in aristocratic ages,” Alexis de Tocqueville noted, “are wont to refer all occurrences to the particular will or temper of certain individuals.” By contrast, a democratic way of life “naturally prompts the mind to search for that general reason which operates upon so many men’s faculties at the same time, and turns them simultaneously in the same direction.” In that sense, Wood is a democratic historian. Ultimately, his book, like Tocqueville’s much deeper one, is an account of the influence of the general idea of equality on American society and culture and even, to a degree, its politics. In that sense, he is correct to connect the idea of sovereignty of the people with such 20th-century ideas as referendum and recall. They reflected, as did much in 19th-century America, a vulgarized notion of equality and sovereignty.

Still, by giving less attention to the constitutional idea of equality, the idea that binds 1787 with 1776 and that grounds American citizenship, Wood takes politics, in the high sense, out of the American regime. That’s why he calls America’s propensity to turn “quarrels over policy into contests over basic principles”

nothing more than a “peculiar American tendency.” It is not a direct result of the kind of revolution we had or of the kind of constitutional regime we created. Moreover, it is why his political history is not fully integrated with his social history. He is free to mention the “midnight appointments” nearly 150 pages after Jefferson’s inauguration. Similarly, he claims that by not ratifying the Constitution until after Washington’s inauguration, Rhode Island and North Carolina put themselves “outside the Union.” Actually, their constitutional status is a very fraught question. Were the Articles of Confederation repudiated, or superseded, by the Constitution? A question like that has no place in this book. Next to the sweep of history, such trivia do not matter.

By telling the political history of the early republic from the perspective of social and cultural change, Gordon Wood truncates the political world. Far better would it be to follow the master in this subject, Henry Adams, and view the developing American culture from the perspective of high politics and statesmanship. Nonetheless, despite its limitations, *Empire of Liberty* will be an essential work for all teachers of American history for years to come.

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