



## DISCOVERING THE AMERICAN DREAM: The Colonial Foundations of American Identity

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*We Americans have yet to really learn our own antecedents...Thus far, impress'd by New England writers and schoolmasters, we tacitly abandon ourselves to the notion that our United States have been fashion'd from the British Islands only...which is a very great mistake.*

Walt Whitman, 1883

As the great American philosopher, Horace Kallen, once noted, most countries are named for or by the peoples who inhabit them; Americans, however, are named for the land they inhabit.<sup>1</sup> They do not define their country, it is their country that defines them. It is, to some extent, intuitive, to understand how a people might define a land - we can see it in their art and architecture, in their dress and manners; we can hear it in their language and their music; we can taste it in their food; and we can feel it in cobbled stones beneath our feet. But how does a land define a people? How did America take people from diverse places, with different languages and a multitude of beliefs and customs, and make them its own? How does a place not only provide those people with a dream, but ultimately give its name to one?<sup>2</sup>

Despite the diverse, multi-ethnic nature of contemporary American society, the story of American history has, for the most part, been woven from the colonial heritage of the original thirteen colonies, and the American past has been understood very much as the story of those first British colonies. In truth, however, the multi-faceted, multi-ethnic tapestry of the modern United States is very much a reflection of the diverse cultures that define its national heritage and that have done so from the outset. In the global world of today, where ethnic identity and diversity is far more often the source of discord than harmony, the United States is an anomaly - simultaneously one of the most heterogeneous nations on earth, while also one of the wealthiest, most powerful and most stable countries on the globe. Understanding how this has been possible requires us to examine not so much what distinguishes Americans from each other, as much as understanding what unites them together. The purpose here is to explore this question in the context of the colonial settlement of *La Florida*; more particularly, to argue that the unity of the contemporary United States can be explained to some extent, through a common American identity. From the moment the Old World arrived on Floridian shores, it might be argued, the seeds of the American Dream were sown. The Spanish, the British and the French came to

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<sup>1</sup> Horace M. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924). 51.

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*. (New York: Viking, 1950), 251.

Florida with diverse motivations; once here, their strategies varied as did their levels of success and failure. Their treatment of and interaction with the natives they encountered here differed according to their own histories and ambitions. And yet, together, these Old World explorers planted the common seeds that set men and women in motion in a common quest for longevity, wealth, and ultimately, of course, for freedom. Over the past 500 years, five flags have successively flown over the state we now call Florida - the Spanish, the French, the English, the Confederate and, ultimately the flag of the United States of America. There is then, perhaps no better place to examine the foundations of American identity - an identity created through a process in which culture and place became inextricably intertwined, in all their glory and tragedy, to create a New World.

### The American Dream: From Many, One



*That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.*

James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (1931).

If there is in fact any good place to start in attempting to understand American identity, it is perhaps the “American Dream.” Of course, there is no question that the American Dream is complex - a dream that means many things to many people. For some (frequently non-Americans) the Dream is something of a parody - a symbol of American arrogance and chauvinism. For others, more optimistic, it represents self-determination, success and wealth - it is everything from Wall Street to Madison Avenue and West to Hollywood Boulevard. For those neither disdainful nor whimsical, however, it is, at its most basic, a unique set of social and political ideals.

We can trace the foundations of the Dream to 1776 and Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Later, this uniquely American vision was expanded upon to create the dream of a nation in which man could abandon “all his ancient prejudices and manners,” and “act upon new principles,” and be “rewarded by ample subsistence.”<sup>3</sup> When James Truslow Adams promoted the term ‘American Dream’ in *The Epic of America* (1931), he merely articulated what many before him had implied - that America was not just the home of the Dream - it was the Dream itself.

While, however, the American Dream embodies many defining principles of American identity - freedom, equality, opportunity - its most pertinacious characteristic may be the belief in *new beginnings* - the idea that the past does not define us determinately, that the future is limitless, that tomorrow can always be better. Historically, this conception of new beginnings is inseparable from the

<sup>3</sup> Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* [1782]. (New York: Doubleday), 47-50.

image of America as the New World - a promising new paradise in the West. For the Spanish *conquistadors*, driven by religious fervor, this new Eden promised gold, silver, perpetual youth, perhaps even the New Jerusalem; for the British settlers it represented hope for a new life and freedom from religious oppression. Both, however, were ultimately in search of new beginnings - of opportunities to succeed that had eluded them in the Old World.

### New Beginnings:



*He shall endeavor, in every way possible to carry out the said discovery in all peace, friendship and Christianity ...He must be given the title of adelantado [of Florida], for himself and for his heirs in perpetuity.*

Agreement between Felipe II and Pedro Menendez,  
March 15, 1565

While the Dream may be stamped with the brand of “American,” the vision of new beginnings clearly did not begin in America - it was in fact contrived even before the continent was discovered. While we most frequently characterize Columbus’s voyage as part of the search for a western passage to Asia - as an Old World endeavor to seek out the riches of the East - his own personal vision was arguably more idealistic, imagining a new kingdom of God, a terrestrial paradise that might be established in this New World. And Columbus was not alone in his fantasy - whether it was the Fountain of Youth, the New Atlantis, or El Dorado - the Old World was full of dreamers who sought out their dream in a brave New World where men and women could begin again.

From these new beginnings, of course, the contradictions and incongruities inherent in the American Dream would become evident. With disease, starvation and violence pervading the new ‘land of plenty’, the disparity between dream and reality was all too evident as individual aspirations collided with attempts to create communal cooperation and then, as now, the promise of opportunity frequently went unrealized.

Among the first dreamers to reach American shores were the Spanish and the French and it is rumored, in popular legend, that when Juan Ponce de Leon ‘discovered’ *La Florida* in 1513, he was in search of the elusive Fountain of Perpetual Youth. Regardless of their motives, there is little question that it was bold Spanish *conquistadors*, like Ponce de Leon, that led the way for a century of European discovery and exploration and, while eternal longevity may have beckoned, it seems likely that Ponce de Leon was first and foremost in search of wealth and new territory to claim for the Spanish crown. It is believed that, in 1521, Ponce de Leon made one of the first of many efforts to settle Florida; his expedition, like many to follow, ended disastrously, but he nonetheless set in motion some forty years of Spanish attempts to colonize and conquer the peninsular - from Pedro de Quexos (1523) to Ferdinando de Soto (1539) and Don Tristan de Luna (1559). Driven by the discovery of gold and silver to the South, the Spanish were relentless in their efforts to tame the wilds of Florida and yet, on each successive attempt, wealth eluded them and they discovered only the graves of those who had preceded them. As Louis Mendelis notes:

The Spanish cavaliers...carried slaughter and devastation in their march through the wilds of Florida...they saw in Florida a land so devoid of wealth, so utterly unsuited for colonization, that all further attempts to settle it were regarded as visionary...The various expeditions had borne no fruits, no permanent settlements had been established, and Spain had not yet gained a foothold.<sup>4</sup>

As the Spanish seemed defeated in their attempt at new beginnings in *La Florida*, the French Huguenots arrived under the leadership of Jean Ribault in 1562 and returned to settle at Fort Caroline in North Eastern Florida in 1564. Like the British who would follow them, the French Protestants were seeking refuge from religious persecution in their homeland. Unfortunately, hopes for a French Florida were dashed when Pedro Menendez de Aviles took possession of Florida on September 8 1565 in the name of king Felipe II.<sup>5</sup> By September 20<sup>th</sup> the Spanish Catholics and French Protestants collided and, surprised by Menendez's men, the Huguenots quickly capitulated; the Spanish showed the 'heretics' no mercy:

Menendez had spared women and children, but he reported with pride to his Catholic king that over 130 members of the "evil Lutheran sect" had vanished from the earth. Menendez's efforts that morning, his chaplain believed, had been guided by the "Holy Spirit."<sup>6</sup> It was, apparently, the Old World yet.

While it is frequently argued that the Spanish came to the New World for conquest and plunder, while the British and French were more intent on settlement and trade, many scholars have disputed this simplification, pointing out that the Spanish crown, like that of Britain and France, saw exploration, conquest and settlement as somewhat inseparable. Furthermore, individual British explorers, like many of their Spanish counterparts, were frequently known to demonstrate a preference for treasure over fertile soil.<sup>7</sup> The other common factor evident among all the colonial dreamers was their religious fervor. When Menendez slaughtered a further 150 or so French Fort Caroline settlers at Mantanzas on the pretext that they were pirates, he nonetheless reported to his King that, "it seemed to me, that to chastise them in this way would serve God our Lord, as well as Your Majesty, and that we should thus be left more free from this wicked sect."<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that the Catholicism of early Spanish explorers left its mark on American life. While it might appear that Catholicism is incompatible with the American identity - its hierarchical nature disregarding individual autonomy, threatening individual rights, dismissing material prosperity and discouraging intellectual progress - that perspective relies heavily on viewing Catholic doctrine in the context of the Old World. In the New World, Spanish Catholicism, like the Protestantism of the English Puritans, was about new beginnings. As Tzvetan Todorov notes:

It is in fact the conquest of America that heralds and establishes our present identity...We are all direct descendants of Columbus, it is with him that our genealogy begins, insofar as the word *beginning* has a meaning. Since 1492 we are, as Las Casas has said, "in that time so new and like no other."<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, George Fairbank's *History of Florida*, sought very much to establish the connection between the Spanish past and the American present, portraying Americans as the heirs of a common tradition that could be dated back to the explorations and conquests of Hernando de Soto:

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<sup>4</sup> Louis J. Mendelis, "Colonial Florida". *Publications of the Florida Historical Society*, 3:2 (Oct 1924), 7.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*; 61.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Lyon, "Spain's Sixteenth Century North American Attempts: A Neglected Aspect." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 59 (Jan 1981), 275-291.

<sup>8</sup> Menendez to Felipe II, St. Augustine, Oct 15, 1565, Weber, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 5.

The iron horse of an advancing civilization is startling those same pine forests with its shrill scream, indicating that fulfillment of that manifest destiny which was to strike forever from the land...the last remains of the aboriginal races.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, when they set foot on North American soil, neither the British or the Spanish encountered anything akin to an earthly paradise - what they found was a howling wilderness. Nonetheless, the British saw it as a place where they could practice their religion as they saw fit, unimpeded by pressure to either tolerate or conform to Old World beliefs; in North America the Puritans could restore Christianity to its former glory. Meanwhile, for the Spanish it provided an opportunity to expand the power and influence of the Catholic faith, to construct an earthly paradise and secure a spiritual conquest:

At the moment when I undertook to discover the Indies, it was with the intention of beseeching the King and the Queen, our Sovereigns, that they might determine to spend the revenues possibly accruing to them from the Indies for the conquest of Jerusalem; and it is indeed this thing which I have asked of them ["Deed of Entail," 22/2/1498].<sup>11</sup>

While then, the Spanish may have envisioned the conquest of the Americas as an opportunity to restore the Holy See to the Holy Church, the British Puritans were also convinced that, in this New World, the human race had a divinely sanctioned second chance at redemption, that the "glorious work of God, so often foretold in scripture, which, in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind...will begin in America."<sup>12</sup> The vision of the Puritans to "combine our selves together into a civil body politick" was, like Winthrop's determination to establish a "city upon a hill," a vision that sought to set an example for mankind - to influence human destiny - aspirations that remain central to the American character in the twenty-first century.<sup>13</sup>

While the Catholic Spanish may have differed in their doctrine, their fervor was no less significant in their interaction with the New World - their dreams had set in motion their new beginnings in the New World even before the journey had begun:

When we say that Columbus is a believer, the object is less important than the action: his faith is Christian, but we have the impression that, were it Muslim or Jewish, he would not have acted differently; what matters is the force of the belief itself...Columbus believes not only in Christian dogma, but also...in Cyclopes and mermaids, in Amazons and men with tails, and his belief, as strong as Saint Peter's, therefore permits him to find them.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, while both Winthrop and Columbus may have envisioned that their new worlds would remain rooted in biblical consensus and spiritual renewal, as it transpired, many if not most of their countrymen sought primarily the individual economic success that had eluded them in the Old World. If the colonists, both Spanish and British, had one aim in common - one hope - it was simply the hope that America would provide them with a new beginning.

Despite their recurrent attempts to maintain, or later, reinforce the Christian vision - through Jesuits, Franciscans or Great Awakenings - the dreams of new beginnings for both British and Spanish were intermingled with more secular hopes of social, political and economic rebirth. While God and virtue may have persisted as explicit communal goals, individual prosperity was more frequently the objective - and this type of success was not contingent upon God's grace but on the determination of each individual to help himself:

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<sup>10</sup> George Fairbanks, *History of Florida: From its Discovery by Ponce De Leon in 1512, to the Close of the Florida War in 1842*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co. 1871), 71-72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards in Conrad Cherry, (ed). *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971), 55.

<sup>13</sup> Perry Miller, (ed). *The American Puritans*. (NY: Doubleday, 1956), 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> Todorov, 15.

The Spanish conquistadors belong, historically, to that transitional period between a Middle Ages dominated by religion and a modern period that places material goods at the top of its scale of values. In practice, too, the conquest will have these two essential aspects: the Christians are generous with their religion, which they bring to the New World, from it they take, in exchange, gold and wealth.<sup>15</sup>

It was the colonists then - both British and Spanish - that engendered, from the beginning, the notion that America had re-created the world. Whether their objectives were religious, material, or more frequently, both, the Old World dreamers that came to America's shores dwelt in possibility - and the millions that have since followed them have maintained that faith that the "true myth of America" is a "sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth."<sup>16</sup>

### Culture and Place:



American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.<sup>17</sup>

In his influential essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner reinforced the belief that "America has been another name for opportunity"<sup>18</sup>; that the existence of a boundless western frontier had had an enormous impact on the development of the American Dream. In fact, Turner's analysis of the importance of the frontier in shaping American character is as applicable to the first Europeans to touch American soil as it was to the immigrants who followed them centuries later. For the Spanish and British explorers, the westward frontier was the Atlantic Ocean, beyond which they could discover an "escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society."<sup>19</sup> While the British, the Spanish and the French may have arrived with their own particular histories, languages, customs and religions, the New World that they encountered fostered in them the very characteristics that Turner argues are the product of 'new frontiers' - individualism, self-reliance, self-determination, a desire for discovery, and the courage to break new ground. If the great wilderness of North America at first overwhelmed the Old World colonists, they ultimately mastered it and, in doing so, were transformed by it - redefining themselves into a new American culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>16</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. (NY: Doubleday, 1953), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Turner, reprinted in Ray A. Billington (ed). *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*. (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; p.62.

This intertwining of culture and place - a process, which it is suggested here, was vital in laying the foundations for American identity - is well illustrated in St. Augustine, the oldest city in the United States. And, as Louis Mendelis points out, once Menendez founds St. Augustine in 1565, "the history of St. Augustine now becomes the history of Florida."<sup>20</sup>

The cultural fabric of St. Augustine was woven from many diverse strands - the Spanish who established it as a military outpost; the British whose intentions were more focused on settlement and agriculture in the new territory; the Minorcans seeking opportunity; and freed slaves seeking refuge. James Cusick describes North Eastern Florida, with St. Augustine as its population center, as a "borderland" and notes of its culture that:

...identities were subject to constant reinvention. The recreation of self was sometimes unconscious and sometimes accomplished with deliberate cynicism...broader social identities, such as affiliation with a particular social status or ethnic group, were also extremely fluid. Assimilation into the elite was possible for those who were willing to make the necessary compromises.<sup>21</sup>

While settlers in this new world undoubtedly brought with them their old world customs and beliefs, they also adapted them to their new environment; as Cusick notes, "manipulation of identity stemmed in part from a local willingness to bend, stretch, and break various rules and restrictions and in part from the daily face-to-face contact among settlers of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds"<sup>22</sup>

St. Augustine then, provides a microcosm of the process by which many people come together from many different places and utilize their pasts to forge a common future. For the Spanish, much of their early success in Florida can be attributed to their ability to utilize the Catholic Church as a unifying force - not only for Spanish settlers, but also for freed slaves and indigenous peoples. The need to create some level of unity and stability in this remote outpost somewhat restrained the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church and instead planted the seeds of a civic society - a fact well reflected in the creation of the nation's first legally-sanctioned free community of ex-slaves in 1738 at Fort Mose. Walt Whitman acknowledges the contribution of Spanish culture to the American identity when he asserts that:

To that composite American identity of the future, Spanish character will supply some of the most needed parts. No stock shows grander historic retrospect - grander in religiousness and loyalty, or for patriotism, courage, decorum, gravity and honor.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, by the time the English arrived in St. Augustine in the late eighteenth century, Britain was moving closed to a more democratic and inclusive society; similarly, the dominance of Protestantism in Britain was beginning to foster a more egalitarian society with broader levels of civic participation - all aspects of British culture that fed into the new world settlement:

Under English rule...Florida, infused with a more vigorous life, prospered rapidly. Immigration was invited, liberal grants of land were made...Commerce developed, and, for the first time, something like a representative government was established.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, to the North of Florida, the American colonists were building an even more egalitarian society that emphasized individual achievement and, like the St. Augustine "borderlands", shunned the class distinctions and restrictions of the Old World. And, while St. Augustine remained loyal to the British during the revolutionary war - burning an effigy of John Hancock in the town square and imprisoning three of the signers of the Declaration of Independence - to her North, artisans,

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<sup>20</sup> Mendelis, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Cusick, James G. "Creolization and the Borderlands." *Historical Archaeology*, 34:3 (2000). P.50.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid; p. 53

<sup>23</sup> Walt Whitman, "Spanish Character" Camden, New Jersey, July 20, 1883. In Christopher Ricks & William L. Vance (eds), *The Faber Book of America*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 247.

<sup>24</sup> Mendelis, 13.

laborers, shopkeepers and small farmers were all mobilizing to participate in a fight for independence; a fight that they ultimately won.

There is also no doubt that African-Americans - frequently free blacks, or those who had fled south from the slave states to the north - played a significant role in shaping the identity of St. Augustine. Like their old world counterparts, they too were seeking out new beginnings, liberty and opportunity. This was evident in their settlement of Fort Mose under Spanish rule and their instrumental role in the 1740 Battle of Fort Mose, where Britain's General Oglethorpe was defeated. From the settlement of the African-American community of Lincolnville following the Civil War to the pivotal role played by St. Augustine residents like Dr. Robert Hayling in the Civil Rights movement one hundred years later, St. Augustine's black population consistently demonstrated all the determination and resilience of the colonists that had preceded them.

The Minorcans that arrived in Florida in 1768 as indentured servants under the command of Dr. Andrew Turnbull provide us with yet another example of the potential for new beginnings. Arriving in New Smyrna Florida after a harrowing journey, the Minorcans faced untenable conditions that more closely resembled slavery than servitude - surrounded by mangrove swamps and malaria the settlers were denied the opportunity to hunt or fish and were unable to move any distance from Turnbull's plantation. In 1777, after rebelling against Turnbull, the Minorcans fled north to St. Augustine and the protection of the British Governor. The Minorcan community remained strong and resilient, flourishing under all the subsequent flags that flew over the city:

Some Minorcans became craftsmen, often plying the trades they had known in their homelands or on the plantation. Others opened taverns or small wineshops...still others shipped out as mariners, and some had even become shipowners before the Spanish returned to claim East Florida.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, the history of St. Augustine, and of Florida more broadly, is a multi-faceted one and the purpose here is not so much to re-tell the story of the many cultures that constituted that mosaic, but rather to regard them in the broader story of American identity. As Michael Walzer points out:

There is no country called America. We live in the United States of America, and we appropriated the adjective "American" even though we can claim no exclusive title to it. Canadians, and Mexicans are also Americans, but they have adjectives more obviously their own, and we have none...The United States has a peculiar anonymity. It is a name that doesn't even pretend to tell us who lives here.<sup>26</sup>

It is the diversity of the United States - a diversity that long pre-dates the birth of the nation - that gave rise to an American identity that draws not on the past but on the future, on an idealized future that envisioned a land where anything was possible; "America is West...A shining thing in the mind."<sup>27</sup>

### **We the People:**

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<sup>25</sup>Patricia C. Griffin, *Mullet on the Beach: The Minorcans of Florida, 1768-1788*. (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1991), 109.

<sup>26</sup>Michael Walzer, Michael. "What Does it Mean to be an American?" *Social Research*, 57 (Fall, 1990), 591.

<sup>27</sup>Archibald MacLeish, "American Letter." In *Collected Poems, 1917-1952*. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1952), 63.





Image courtesy of National Archives of the United States

It never happened that a group of people called Americans came together to form a political society called America. The people are Americans only by virtue of having come together...Americans are allowed to remember who they were and to insist, also, *on what else they are.*<sup>28</sup>

If a central element of the American Dream is a presumption that Americans can meet any challenge, the experiences of the early colonists of North East Florida, and the tumultuous history of St. Augustine itself, lay testament to the fact that, even in the 'land of plenty' the future is not guaranteed. Undoubtedly, the Old World colonists experienced innumerable failures as they struggled to find their fortune in the New World; disease, starvation, and wars both with the natives and with each other, hounded their progress. And yet, the colonists persisted in their quest for freedom and opportunity - two principles that lie at the heart of American identity. In fact, as Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* suggests, freedom for Americans is simply another word for opportunity, but for contemporary Americans, as for the early colonists, the ways in which freedom is utilized, the opportunities that we choose to embrace and, ultimately, the results any one individual achieves, are all inimitably varied. The American Dream is not, and never was, a guarantee of success, but now, as it did five centuries ago, it represents the possibilities inherent in new beginnings.

Ultimately, the diversity of early colonial America - a diversity accentuated in the nation's oldest city - created an American identity not defined by the past, for there was no common history, but by the possibilities for the future; an identity that was born from determination, individualism and self-reliance - the necessary pre-requisites to survive in the unforgiving wilderness of the New World. As many have recognized, to be an American implies some degree of anonymity; despite repeated efforts by many, American identity is not defined by any explicit culture or national origin, it suggests no particular religion and it privileges no race, ethnicity or even language. Instead, it is an identity shaped around the abstract principles of freedom, equality and self-government:

The most marked characteristic of the American nation is Love of Freedom; of man's natural rights...We have a genius for liberty; the American idea is freedom, natural rights. Accordingly, the work providentially laid out for us to do seems this - to organize the rights of man.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, it was an intertwining of people and place that shaped American identity and created a very unique American culture, one that is simultaneously anonymous and yet defining. The *invented* symbols and ceremonies of "Americanism" themselves are illustrative of this - the Flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, the Fourth of July, the Constitution and Declaration of Independence - and it is significant

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<sup>28</sup> Walzer, 595.

<sup>29</sup>Theodore Parker, "The Political Destination of America and the Sign of the Times" (1848). In Perry Miller (ed). *The American Transcendentalists*. (NY: Doubleday, 1957), 350.

that they are all political rather than cultural in nature.<sup>30</sup> Consider the McCarthyism of the 1950's and the House Committee on "Un-American Activities" - what does it mean to be "Un-American?" To be a Communist is considered "un-American" because American identity is not defined by who you are or where you came from, instead it is defined by *what you believe*.

And, herein may lie the secret to America's success. There is no doubt that some 500 years after the Spanish laid foot on North American shores, the Old World remains patronizing. Europeans are easily amused by American displays of patriotism; the Stars and Stripes hanging from the back porch, the plethora of "God Bless America" songs and the shrine that is the nation's capital. What the Old World may fail to realize, however, is that what on the surface appear to be superficial and largely meaningless displays of nationalism may also be the key to America's longevity as a powerful, stable and, most importantly, free liberal democracy. American identity is a political identity just as American culture is a political culture. The only defining characteristic of all Americans, however they may be hyphenated, is their beliefs - their trust in the Constitution, their persistent conviction that opportunities still exist for happiness and material prosperity, their confidence that their nation can meet any challenge, and their faith in an ideology dedicated to human freedom. To be an American is to dream and if, five hundred years after their dream took root, Americans are no longer confident that new beginnings are realizable, they may need re-examine the Dream they so diligently worship and recognize that, as Michael Walzer suggests, they can "look inward only by looking backward."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Walzer, 610.

<sup>31</sup> Walzer (1990). P. 593.

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