

American Citizenship in the Revolutionary and Early National Eras

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Although the conception of citizenship in the new United States rested on precedents and traditions drawn from Europe, in creating their identity, Americans often claimed to be liberated from the folly of the past and to be establishing “a new order for the ages.” As James Wilson, one of the principal drafters of the Constitution, put it, “in the six thousand years since the creation of the world,” nothing like the American republic had ever been created.¹ Based on their allegedly careful study of the past, the founders insisted that the United States was “without example in the world.” Drawing on a variety of arguments—biblical, classical, legal, Whig, and especially Enlightenment—the founders insisted that Americans had been born free and intended to remain free, supported by the republican institutions they crafted.²

The Revolutionary generation saw themselves as “a special breed of men” who created a distinctive political order. The United States, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed shortly after his election as president in 1800, was “new under the sun” because it rejected the outdated ideology, allegiances, and patterns of the Old World.³ The founders established a unique nation that had none of the traditional prerequisites for nationhood. Americans did not have a natural territory, long history, ancient folklore, common religion, or shared ethnicity. They did not share such emotional ties as ancient memories, habits, prejudices, heroes, faith, dynasties, or an attachment

¹ Quoted in Max Farrand, *The Framing of the Constitution of the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1913), 62.

² Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 57.

³ Mann, *One and Many*, 48; Jefferson as quoted in Daniel Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Henry Holt, 1948), 228.

to place. America contradicted “the conventional wisdom that no nation could survive without the historic props of king, aristocracy,” and an established church.⁴

In *Common Sense* (1776), Thomas Paine asserted that “Europe, not England, is the parent country of America.”⁵ In the midst of their extensive religious and ethnic pluralism (By 1775 the colonies had as many non-English congregations as Anglican and Congregational ones, and one-third of Americans had come from nations other than England.), Americans’ ideological commitments held them together.⁶ As French-American farmer J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur famously wrote, an American was “a new man, who acts upon new principles . . . new ideas [and] new opinions.”⁷ To be an American, the founders asserted, was to freely choose a set of rights and responsibilities. “Americans asserted, unambiguously and without qualification, that they constituted a new, distinct, indivisible nationality.” During the next two centuries, Americans’ fundamental change in self-awareness strongly influenced people in many other nations.⁸

The widespread belief of the Revolutionary generation that the United States was unique in human history was undergirded by the long standing conviction that God had chosen America to be a city set upon a hill—to serve as an example of a godly society and to spread Christianity and liberty to the world. Because of Europe’s decadent and heretical forms of Christianity, God had selected a new people to regenerate the world. As John Adams remarked, “I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and Wonder—as the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence for the Illumination of the Ignorant and Emancipation of the slavish part of

⁴ Mann, *One and Many*, 58; Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 3-8.

⁵ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, vol. 1, in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner, 19 (New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), 19.

⁶ Winthrop Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 4; Mann, *One and Many*, 48.

⁷ J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904), 54.

⁸ Mann, *One and Many*, 56-57; quotation from 57.

Mankind all over the Earth.”⁹ God had destined America to “break the grip of feudal laws and customs” and enable individuals to “free themselves from an irrational, often tyrannical past.”¹⁰ Many Americans asserted that their nation had the power to redeem other countries. By fulfilling the “universal principles of the Enlightenment,” the United States allegedly provided a splendid model for other peoples. The nation’s “just and solid republican government,” Jefferson argued, “will be a standing monument and example for the aim and imitation of the people of other countries.”¹¹ This sense of mission was reinforced by the favorable publicity the American Revolution received in liberal presses around the world. British Whig Edmund Burke wrote, for example: “A great revolution has happened . . . by the appearance of a new state, of a new species, in a new part of the globe.” Meanwhile, reformers and revolutionaries in France, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, and Latin American countries sought to varying degrees to refashion their countries according to the American paradigm.¹²

The events of the American Revolution and early national era compelled Americans to reevaluate the nature and meaning of citizenship. Although the American concept of citizenship is deeply rooted in medieval and especially later English history, Americans came to view the connection between citizens and their nation as a willfully chosen contract rather than a perpetual and natural condition. Americans saw themselves as having rights derived from God, nature, or transcendent laws. The American people, the Declaration of Independence asserted, deserved to be free. The Constitution enumerated the rights, privileges, liberties, and immunities people

⁹ Resource Library Database,

http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/80/Diary_of_John_Adams_February_21_1765_1.html.

¹⁰ Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin “Introduction,” in *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, eds. Kazin and McCartin, 2, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹¹ Boorstin, *Lost World*, 228.

¹² Edmund Burke, “Effect of Peace of 1782,” vol. 2, *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1852), 435; Mann, *One and Many*, 60.

possessed.¹³ Republican citizenship rested upon consent; it did not involve hierarchy or privilege; and it conferred equal rights. “Dukes and earls are the creatures of kings,” physician, historian, and politician David Ramsey avowed in 1789, “and may be made by them at pleasure; but citizens possess in their own right original sovereignty.”¹⁴ This essay will examine the various naturalization acts of the early national period to explain this new conception of citizenship, and it will highlight the jarring incongruity between profession and practice in the treatment of blacks, Native Americans, and women.

A New Basis for Citizenship

In his monumental study of America based on his visit in 1831-32, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville noted that while Europeans were tied together by an “instinctive patriotism” that rested on historical factors, Americans were connected by an ideologically-based “patriotism of reflection.”¹⁵ The American national identity does not rest upon an earlier folk identity; it is entirely ideological. The bond that has united Americans “is not ancestry, soil, church, soul, or folk; it is civic belief, what Crèvecoeur called *principles*; Tocqueville, called *reflections*; [James] Bryce, *self-assertions*; and [Gunnar] Myrdal, *creed*.” The new United States, Hans Kohn contended, “was the embodiment of an idea.” It was “the first nation to identify itself and to have been identified with an idea”—that people had natural rights. The American creed revolved around the ideals of representative government, equal opportunity, freedom of religion, speech and assembly, and a belief in progress. America, unlike Europe, was not “shackled by traditions and privileges, by intellectual and economic vested interests” that inhibited its development of these values. In America reformed religion, enlightened philosophy, and modern

¹³ Mann, *One and Many*, 56.

¹⁴ David Ramsay, *A Dissertation on the Manner of Acquiring the Character and Privileges of a Citizen of the United States* (Charleston, SC: n.p., 1789), 1.

¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, ed. Phillips Bradley, trans. Henry Reeve and Francis Bowen (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1945), 241-44.

science combined to promote these principles.¹⁶ Some have stressed that America is an exceptional nation because of its elevation of “individual identity over communal ties,” religious variety and vitality, “potent tradition of anti-authoritarian and anti-centralist politics,” and an extraordinary confidence that the United States has a divine mandate to help other nations emulate its principles and practices.¹⁷ Few put the case more positively than John Adams: “Our pure, virtuous, public spirited, federative republic will last forever, govern the globe and introduce the perfection of man.”¹⁸

In the United States, unlike in Great Britain, the concept of “home” has not taken root: We do not refer to home counties, the Home Office, or home rule. Nor do we have a sense of a common patrie, as many other nations do. For millions of first and second generation immigrants, one’s patrie, the “native land of one’s ancestors,” is overseas. The term “Native Americans” is used to describe the United States’ original immigrants who came centuries before Europeans arrived.¹⁹

After 1765, colonial leaders increasingly rejected the traditional British constitutional and legal position that they must perpetually remain subjects of the king. Philosophical treatises, laws, and common sense persuaded them that people only had to obey governments that safeguarded their basic natural rights. Political allegiance was contractual in nature, and people could break or cancel contracts. In the Declaration, Americans argued that they no longer owed

¹⁶ Mann, *One and Many*, 47, 68; quotation from 68; Kohn, *Idea of Nationalism*, 8-13; first quotation from 8, second from 9, third from 10-11.

¹⁷ Kazin and McCartin, “Introduction,” 10. See also Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

¹⁸ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Nov. 15, 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, vol. 2, ed. Lester Cappon, 400 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).

¹⁹ Michael Walzer, *What It Means to Be an American* (New York: Marsilio, 1992), 24-25.

allegiance to George III because he had stopped protecting them and had violated their fundamental rights.²⁰

Americans came to view citizenship as volitional; people had the right to choose whether or not they would become citizens. The United States was based on consent, not coercion. By supporting the Revolutionary cause and risking their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in the struggle against Britain, patriots qualified for republican citizenship.²¹

What must people do to become Americans? “The most persistent answer, inscribed in every naturalization law since the eighteenth century, is that one must identify with the founding ideals of the Republic.” The United States’ “unprecedented policy of unrestricted immigration” “flowed logically from the universality of the Revolutionary ideology.”²² Because “the old world is overrun with oppression,” Thomas Paine announced in 1776, America must “receive the fugitive” and prepare “an asylum for mankind.”²³ George Washington declared in 1783 that “the bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.”²⁴

The founders recognized that the success of their new republic depended not only on creating effective political institutions but also on developing an American identity consistent with the worldview and values expressed in the Constitution and the nation’s laws. Because many different ethnic groups resided in the United States, American identity was based primarily on ideology. Hans Kohn argued that America’s unique understanding of nationalism had to be based on distinctive ideas because a majority of Americans spoke the same language, read the

²⁰ James H. Kettner, *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 173, 213.

²¹ Kettner, *American Citizenship*, 208, 213.

²² Mann, *One and Many*, 72-73; quotations in that order.

²³ Paine, *Common Sense*, 1: 30-31.

²⁴ George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 27, ed. John Fitzpatrick, 252 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1938).

same books, belonged to the same Christian denominations, and shared other cultural traditions with the British against whom they rebelled. Moreover, the non-British immigrants spoke many languages, espoused many different religious views, and had diverse cultural practices. The United States, therefore, had to define itself in terms of its citizens' commitment to certain core principles, most notably liberty, equality, and the consent of the governed.²⁵

Two key elements helped shape the American national identity—the English tradition of liberty and the universal principles of the Enlightenment. The first component emphasized self-government, limits on the power of the king, and legal safeguards for those accused of crimes. Americans' acceptance of the Enlightenment philosophes' argument that people had natural, intrinsic rights enabled their new nation to become an “asylum of liberty” for people of diverse national origins. Historian Philip Gleason contends that the development of an American identity rested upon “ideas about freedom, equality, and self-government,” which combined “abstract, universalist elements with a historically grounded appreciation of the practical machinery for self-government and protection of individual liberties.”²⁶

The founders insisted that their republic would work only if citizens acted virtuously and subordinated their private interests to the public good. Americans must vigilantly guard against both political and communal corruption. The best way to accomplish this was by practicing simplicity (to escape the degrading effects of luxury) and self-reliance (to avoid being dependent on others or the state). As Washington put it in his farewell address in 1796, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports” and the “great Pillars of human happiness.” Although “refined

²⁵ Philip Gleason, “American Identity and Americanization,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Group*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 31. Cf. Frank Thistlethwaite, *The Great Experiment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 319-20.

²⁶ Gleason, “American Identity,” 32.

education” helped promote virtue, the nation could achieve a high level of morality only by espousing and practicing traditional religious principles. This republican emphasis on upright conduct intensified the nation’s political debates by encouraging Americans to view policy disagreements as battles of good and evil. Because the success of the republic depended upon very high levels of selflessness and civic commitment, the founders strove to devise a society that motivated citizens to live by the lofty principles upon which the nation was founded.²⁷

American identity, then, rested upon three principal characteristics—ideology, newness, and future orientation. To be an American, individuals did not need to have any particular national, ethnic, linguistic, or religious background. Instead, they had to affirm a political ideology that stressed liberty, equality, opportunity, and mobility. Anyone, therefore, who desired to become an American could do so.²⁸ In an oft-quoted passage, de Crevecoeur argued in *Letters from an American Farmer*:

What then is . . . this new man? . . . He is an American, who leaving behind him his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . Here individuals are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.²⁹

Although Americans had a long colonial history, the events of the American Revolution signaled a decisive break with the past and a new beginning filled with astounding possibilities. To help accentuate and celebrate the nation’s uniqueness, the Revolutionary era created new heroes and holidays, sacred places, and revered documents—the founding fathers (especially

²⁷ George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796, Yale Education Web site, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp; Gleason, “American Identity,” 32.

²⁸ Gleason, “American Identity,” 32.

²⁹ Crevecoeur, *Letters*, 54.

Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison); Independence Day; Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, and Yorktown; and the Declaration and Constitution. The amazing accomplishments of the founders were seen as a new beginning for humanity—“a new order of the ages,” as the seal of the United States proudly proclaimed. Americans had both a glorious heritage and a sacred calling—to pass on their values to other nations and to fulfill the aspirations enshrined in their founding documents.³⁰

Later spokespersons urged Americans to remember and preserve the founders’ work. Joseph Hopkinson’s song, “Hail Columbia,” composed in 1798, extolled the founders as a “heaven-born band!” and exhorted Americans to emulate their spirit. “Shall we riot in luxury, in philosophy, and faction, and forget the heroes and patriots” who had created the republic, asked lawyer Charles Paine in 1801.³¹ By the 1790s July Fourth was celebrated with feasts, parades, and fireworks. Two rituals—a public reading of the Declaration of Independence and an inspirational address—reinforced the nation’s founding principles and the Revolutionary generation’s sacrifice. These orations routinely lauded the nation’s dedication to liberty and goaded citizens to preserve and promote the national faith. As Daniel Webster told Bostonians mourning the simultaneous death of Adams and Jefferson in 1826, “this lovely land, this glorious liberty, these benign institutions, the dear purchase of our fathers” was a “sacred trust” which current Americans held for both past and future generations.³² Throughout our history, Americans have often accentuated the noble character, lofty virtue, and religious devotion required to fulfill this “sacred trust.” Employing terms rich in biblical imagery, Americans saw

³⁰ Gleason, “American Identity,” 32. See also Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: Basic, 1963), 75.

³¹ Charles Paine, “July Fourth Oration,” Boston, 1801, in *Paine Ancestry. The Family of Robert Treat Paine, Signer of the Declaration of Independence*, comp. Sarah Cushing Paine (Boston, 1912), 45.

³² Aug. 2, 1826, Dartmouth Education Web site, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~dwebster/speeches/adams-jefferson.html>.

themselves as stewards of a God-given national trust, a fruitful vineyard.³³ Washington argued that “a free, enlightened” and soon to be “great Nation” must provide humanity with “a novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.” Because Providence had “connected the permanent happiness of a Nation with its virtue,” Americans must act morally and carry out their sacred calling.³⁴

To accomplish their God-given mission, many insisted, during the early national era, Americans must practice “heroic self-denial.” Enlightened residents must advance the public welfare and eschew “petty personal or local interests.” Citizens should sublimate their desires and ambitions to the universal good. Their dedication to the nation’s advancement would enable people to transcend their baser instincts and the pursuit of selfish goals. True patriots would choose the good of the nation over their own private gain. People could do this, most Americans thought, only by God’s grace and assistance.³⁵

Immigration and Naturalization Policies

During the nation’s first century, ideological reasons combined with practical factors to encourage liberal immigration policies: More people and capital were needed to develop America’s seemingly boundless resources. Immigrants could help the United States become more populous, powerful, and affluent. Two related convictions undergirded the argument for unrestricted immigration policies—belief that America could absorb and assimilate newcomers and that human beings were very adaptable.³⁶ During the early national period, Americans worked diligently to create an “American character out of regional and generational polarities

³³ Paul Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), xi-xii.

³⁴ Washington, Farewell Address.

³⁵ Nagel, *Sacred Trust*, 13-14.

³⁶ Mann, *One and Many*, 73.

and contradictions of a nation of immigrants.”³⁷ Jefferson initially warned that the migration of many Europeans who did not espouse republicanism would make Americans “a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass” who could not govern themselves.³⁸ He soon concluded, however, that the nascent republic needed new residents to develop its Western farmland and advance its rustic republican virtues. Jefferson wanted these newcomers to be quickly assimilated into American society.³⁹

Through various means—passing laws, applying provisions in their new constitutions, or simply assuming control—the new state governments initially took jurisdiction over naturalizing newcomers and created procedures to enable aliens to become citizens. The naturalization policies individual states established rested upon several basic principles. Those applying for citizenship were required to affirm publicly their loyalty to their new home. Some applicants also had to explicitly renounce all attachments to other countries. Most states either required “certificates, references, or other proof of good character” or listed it as a general qualification for citizenship.⁴⁰

As Americans formulated immigration and naturalization policies during the 1790s, ideology continued to trump ethnicity. The founders established a policy that enabled immigrants from many nations who espoused different religions to become citizens. The federal naturalization procedure that was adopted in the 1790s and governed American policy until the early twentieth century testified to the widespread belief that the nation’s principles, institutions, and environment could quickly transform immigrants into committed, contributing citizens

³⁷ Erik Erickson, “On Leaders,” in *The Erik Erickson Reader*, ed. Robert Coles, 378 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

³⁸ Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Virginia Education Web site, Query VIII, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/jefferson/ch08.html>.

³⁹ Rogers M. Smith, “The Meaning of American Citizenship,” American Citizenship Web site, <http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/americancitizenship.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Kettner, *American Citizenship*, 214, 218.

without extensive indoctrination.⁴¹ The first federal naturalization act (1790) prescribed the achievement of citizenship to any “free white person” who had lived in the United States for two years and at least one year in the state where he sought citizenship, proved his “good character,” and took an oath to “support the Constitution of the United States.” Because of concerns about the migration of radical refugees from Great Britain and royalist emigres from post-Revolution France, the naturalization law passed in 1795 extended the waiting period to five years. The political crisis produced by the XYZ Affair and animosity toward France prompted the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, that permitted potentially dangerous aliens to be deported and anyone who made false or malicious statements against the Adams administration or Congress to be imprisoned. It also led the naturalization act of 1798 to require newcomers to live in the United States for fourteen years to become citizens. In 1801, however, Congress restored the waiting period to five years where it has remained ever since.

The founders feared that many people might migrate from despotic countries who did not possess “the principles and habits necessary for democratic citizenship,” and therefore, would be difficult to assimilate. While they limited naturalization in the early national period primarily to newcomers from northern Europe, the universal principles enshrined in the Declaration paved the way for individuals of every race, religion, and continent to eventually become citizens.⁴² Although the United States should accept immigrants from varied nations, the founders argued, the numbers and types of newcomers needed to be limited in light of the characteristics democratic citizenship required.⁴³ While Washington welcomed immigrants who were non-English and non-Protestant to American shores, he warned that those who did not have the

⁴¹ Gleason, “American Identity,” 33.

⁴² Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), xiv.

⁴³ West, *Vindicating Founders*, 149.

character, experience, or desire to promote republican principles would endanger American society and inhibit the government's quest to ensure life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁴⁴ He insisted that potential citizens should be evaluated by whether they possessed the "decency and propriety of conduct" to merit citizenship.⁴⁵ Washington wanted the United States to become "an asylum of pacific and industrious characters from all parts of Europe."⁴⁶ The new republic, he wrote, offered "greater advantages, than almost any other [nation], to persons of moderate property, who are determined to be sober, industrious, and virtuous members of society."⁴⁷

Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison all shared Washington's perspective.⁴⁸ They sought to discourage prospective immigrants who lacked a solid work ethic.⁴⁹ Those who were not likely to "increase the wealth and strength of the country," Madison declared, "were not wanted."⁵⁰ "Foreigners of merit and republican principles," by contrast, were welcome.⁵¹ During the early national years, James Kettner concludes, Americans of all political persuasions assumed that the federal government "had a legitimate interest" in using its naturalization policy to control "the character of potential citizens."⁵²

Although white men in the United States had more liberty, social mobility, religious freedom, and opportunity to participate in government than did their European counterparts in the years before 1870, Native Americans, blacks, and women did not share these benefits, and it required another century for these groups to gain them. The identification of America with a

⁴⁴ West, *Vindicating Founders*, 150.

⁴⁵ George Washington to the Volunteer Association of Ireland, Dec. 2, 1783, *Writings*, 27: 254.

⁴⁶ George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, Jan. 1, 1788, *Writings*, 29: 351.

⁴⁷ George Washington to Rev. Francis Vanderkemp, May 28, 1788, in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen, 395-96 (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988).

⁴⁸ See Benjamin Franklin, "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America" (1784), *Writings*, 978-82.

⁴⁹ West, *Vindicating Founders*, 152.

⁵⁰ Frank B. Franklin, paraphrasing Madison, in *The Legislative History of Naturalization in the United States* (New York: Arno, 1969 [1906]), 40.

⁵¹ James Madison, Aug. 13, vol. 2, in *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand, 268 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁵² Kettner, *American Citizenship*, 241.

cluster of ideas, a creed, and a dream that accentuated freedom and equal opportunity made our denial of rights to these groups more jarring and contradictory.⁵³ Sadly, during most of the United States' history millions were deprived of citizenship because of their national origin or race. The first naturalization law (1790) limited citizenship to free white persons. "Aliens of African nativity" became eligible for citizenship only in 1870. Congress did not prescribe a procedure for Native Americans to become citizens until 1924. While the children of various excluded Asian groups first became citizens in 1898, the Chinese became eligible for naturalization only in 1943, and all restrictions on naturalization were not eliminated until 1952. Although women could become naturalized citizens from 1790 on, they were not allowed to vote (one of the key prerogatives of citizenship) until 1920.

Both black and white abolitionists accentuated the blatant contradiction between America's fundamental ideals and the practice of slavery. Black abolitionist David Walker challenged whites in 1829 to compare the language of the Declaration of Independence "with your cruelties and murders inflicted" on slaves. The decade before the Civil War, Frederick Douglass asked, "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" while William Lloyd Garrison denounced the Constitution as "a covenant with death" and "an agreement with Hell."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, critics like Douglass asserted that the Declaration's "great principles" and "genius of American institutions" would someday rectify the injustice of slavery, and other reformers repeatedly highlighted the disparity between American principles and practices. Eventually, its national ideals, as promoted by female suffragists and civil rights activists, helped inspire

⁵³ Mann, *One and Many*, 68-69.

⁵⁴ *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World . . .*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 75; Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" July 5, 1852, The Nation database, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/168721/what-slave-fourth-july-frederick-douglass>; William Lloyd Garrison, Fourth of July Oration, (Framingham, MA, 1854) as reported in *The Liberator*, vol. 24, 27-29 (July 7, 14, 21, 1854).

Americans to provide full citizenship and equality for all citizens regardless of race, nationality, religion, or gender. The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (1848) broadened the language of the Declaration of Independence to include women. The document asserted: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It proclaimed that “woman is man’s equal—was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.” Its signers demanded that the United States give women equal rights in the political, vocational, educational, and family realms. Women procured the right to vote only after strenuous lobbying efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they received full legal equality only after the women’s movement advanced their cause in the 1960s and 1970s.

Conclusion

So, after surveying the original meaning of United States’ citizenship and its development in the early national period as expressed through ideology and immigration and naturalization policies, what does it mean to be an American citizen today? It means, argues Rogers M. Smith, Professor of Government at Yale University, to profess a “sense of belonging to a unique nation, with a heritage of great deeds and tragic flaws, a shining set of ideals, vast resources, and a singularly commanding and demanding position in today’s world.” U.S. citizenship entails affirming a “political and personal identity that evokes complex, powerful, and often contradictory ideas and sentiments, for Americans and non-Americans alike.” Although building upon the foundation constructed in the early national years, the United States’

citizenship laws have changed over time as a result of “often bitter contests between partisans of rival notions of American civic identity.”⁵⁵

In simplest terms, our laws have always rested on “three basic conceptions or ‘ideal types’ of American citizenship,” which scholars have labeled liberal, republican, and nativist. The liberal conception springs from the ideals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the battles of the middle classes in England and America during that era against “restrictive feudal economic and political prerogatives and . . . intolerant religious and intellectual orthodoxies.” The liberal understanding of citizenship posits that no one should have a political status, religious creed, or economic position imposed on him and that everyone should have equal opportunities to pursue what they deem most meaningful and beneficial, whether it is political engagement, private family life, spiritual advancement, or material prosperity.⁵⁶

The republican conception of citizenship was also deeply influenced by the actions of prominent revolutionaries and reformers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and America. Emulating such Roman republican heroes as Cato, Cicero, and Publius, they strove to create a “new form of government and of civic life” that promoted the common good. Republican citizens maintain that true dignity and freedom depend on active participation in the political decisions that direct their corporate life.⁵⁷

The nativist conception of citizenship did not become very visible until the mid-nineteenth century in response to increased immigration of Catholics to the United States. Numerous Americans, however, had earlier connected citizenship not with freedom to fulfill personal callings or with republican self-governance, but rather with a set of “particular cultural origins, customs, and traits”—northern European ancestry, Protestant Christianity, the white

⁵⁵ Smith, “Meaning of Citizenship.”

⁵⁶ Smith, “Meaning of Citizenship.”

⁵⁷ Smith, “Meaning of Citizenship.”

race, male hegemony and female domesticity, and free market economics. In the first Federalist paper, for example, John Jay labeled Americans a divinely guided “band of brethren,” “descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, [and] very similar in their manners and customs,”⁵⁸ thereby ignoring Americans’ substantial ethnic and religious diversity. Despite nativism’s narrow-mindedness and overlooking of the nation’s diversity, it rested on “genuine feelings of affection, belonging and loyalty” for the nation “that Americans might today express as love for their land of ‘baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet.’”⁵⁹

As archetypes, these three conceptions of citizenship are in tension. Those who espouse the liberal definition criticize the republican and nativist conceptions for not appreciating and accepting “human variety and privacy.” Proponents of the republican position protest that the liberal idea of citizenship endorses selfish egoism, while nativists do not esteem political participation highly enough. Nativists “cherish liberal ideals and republican institutions because they are American,” but they reject “‘unamerican’ trends that endanger the particular communal order they take as definitive of their very identity.” From the Revolutionary era to today, these three conceptions have battled for supremacy. From 1776 to the 1880s, the liberal view had the greatest sway. During the American Revolution, liberals, republicans, and incipient nativists worked together to defeat the British and create a republic that guaranteed inalienable human rights. As we have seen, the founders adopted generous immigration and easy naturalization policies to enable the United States to serve as an “Asylum” for the “oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions,” as George Washington frequently exhorted them to do in the 1780s.

⁵⁸ John Jay, Federalist Paper, No. 2, Historical Documents database, http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_02.html.

⁵⁹ Smith, “Meaning of Citizenship.”

Liberal policies generally prevailed during the first century of our nation's history if they took some republican concerns into consideration.⁶⁰

In conclusion, the American legacy on citizenship is mixed. We crafted a more generous policy and ideological foundation for citizenship than any other nation. We long denied, however, citizenship to individuals because of their race and sex. Thankfully, these categories no longer prevent people from becoming citizens.

⁶⁰ Smith, "Meaning of Citizenship."