

WHEN DEMOCRACY MATTERED

From Union to Empire: Essays in the Jeffersonian Tradition

Clyde N. Wilson

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Reviewed by William Scott

We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.

—Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence

Do the words, deeds, and principles of our Founding Fathers matter in post-Western, multicultural America? It is a question one must consider carefully as never before. Certainly, the Founding era has been much revered throughout our history—as well it should be, for what few freedoms we still possess owe their existence largely to the Founders’ wisdom and courage.

But it often seems that the world has changed since the founding of the American republic, and much of what once mattered greatly in the minds of the people, Federalist and republican alike, seems at times scarcely to matter at all in twenty-first century America. The very words of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal”—a poetic way of asserting that all subjects of the British Crown, even colonists in North America, should possess the right to equitable treatment under English law—have been twisted by liberals and their Frankfurt School manipulators to mean that self-evidently non-equal people, readily identifiable by their group membership, should be treated as in all respects equivalent. Or worse, to adapt George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* theme, certain groups should be considered “more equal” than others.

Thus, when we encounter anew disquisitions on the Founders’ establishment of government forms for preserving personal liberties, we experience a distinctly ambivalent reaction—it all rings so true, but will it help

extricate us from our present dilemma? A case in point is Dr. Clyde Wilson's well-developed collection, *From Union to Empire: Essays in the Jeffersonian Tradition*. Readers who hold traditional conservative (i.e., Jeffersonian) views despite decades of mind-altering egalitarian, multicultural, and globalist propaganda will at once recognize in Wilson an accomplished expositor of principles that the older among us were taught as "self-evident" truths in school—the same truths that are today assiduously suppressed, or even mocked and excoriated. But is recapitulation of those truths useful? Let us see.

Dr. Wilson is professor of history at the University of South Carolina and the author of a number of books, including *Why the South Will Survive* and *The Essential Calhoun*. Prof. Wilson has devoted a considerable portion of his professional career to the study of South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, of whose multivolume official papers, published by the University of South Carolina Press, he has been the editor. His focus on Calhoun is clearly related to his evident respect for Jefferson and the populist principles of government and society espoused by the Sage of Monticello. (A case can be made that Jefferson and Calhoun are the two greatest statesmen and political thinkers America ever produced. Both held the interests of the people higher than that of the moneyed class, and both were articulate in defending that position as well as prescient in predicting the adverse consequences of abandoning it.) Wilson is also a founding board member of the League of the South as well as director of its Institute for the Study of Southern Culture and History.

Most traditionally conservative readers¹ will find much to agree with in the essays that constitute *From Union to Empire*. Prof. Wilson's thesis is that what began as a purely internal struggle between rival Federalist and republican factions within the American *union*, a conflict settled in favor of centralized power in 1865, was co-opted in the twentieth century by an ostensibly ideologically oriented coalition bent on global reach, i.e., *empire*. As usual, the Founders foresaw this possibility, though none warned against it except George Washington, in the admonitions against "foreign entanglements" in his Farewell Address. The Founders also anticipated the dangers of mass democracy, the deleterious effects of which the Constitution was intended to nullify. In "The Jeffersonian Conservative Tradition," Wilson writes that, "Conservatives are aware that the Founding Fathers feared the undermining effects of the propertyless mob on the social order." But the real danger came from men "whose basic principle (also the basic principle of twentieth century liberal politics) was to bribe part of the electorate by economic largess distributed by the government at the expense of another part of the electorate."

Illustrating an oft-ignored continuity between past and present, Prof. Wilson notes that, then as now, "The radicals were mostly alienated intellectuals who came, as do twentieth century Liberals, out of the self-appointed, privileged aristocracy of the Eastern Establishment, and who

regarded the common sense of Jacksonian Democrats of the South and West...as uncouth and contemptible obstacles to the grandiose plans of elite thinkers.” Wilson sees the party that embraced both big business and abolitionism as the early epicenter of this insidious political coalition. “The Radicals who formed one wing of the Republican Party are exact psychological and moral ancestors of today’s intolerant Liberals.”

Prof. Wilson asserts that the roots of American disunion run deep. In “Why They Hate Jefferson,” he writes, “Friends, you must have either Jefferson or Hamilton. All the fundamental conflicts in our history were adumbrated during the first decade of the General Government in the contest symbolized by these two men.” Hamilton, he asserts, “lost in the short run but won in the long run. He would find much that is agreeable in the present American regime—a plutocratic kraitarchy which we persist, by long habit of self-deception, in calling a democracy.” He adds, “[D]o-goodism was axiomatic for the New Englanders who made up the largest base of [Hamilton’s] support: people whose instinct is immediately to translate every moral prompting into governmental coercion.”

The republican viewpoint won out in the early going with Jefferson’s election in 1800, and its adherents continued their ascendancy with Andrew Jackson’s two terms as president, 1828–1836. Yet this victory proved less than permanent, and it was finally reversed with the defeat of the Confederacy in the War for Southern Independence. While that war damaged the republic severely (as well as taking the lives of 620,000 young men), however, it did not set America on the road to empire. Despite the steady erosion of the Founders’ Constitution, national goals remained focused on affairs intrinsically American, e.g. Manifest Destiny. Until the twentieth century, the view shared by all political factions was that “by its very nature republicanism called for non-intervention, not proselytization.”

In “Global Democracy and American Tradition,” Wilson traces the roots of destructive change to nineteenth and early twentieth century waves of German and Eastern and Southern European immigrants. This Old World influx remade the ethnic map of America, creating a climate receptive for imposition of a more authoritarian approach to government.

Yet seeds were planted for a later day. An influx of German refugees with universalist ideas swelled the ranks of the new Republican party in the 1850’s. In New England, the reaction to the French Revolution had a course similar to that of Germany—an adoption and transformation of the revolutionary impulse into a native form. One could see in John Adams something of the Puritan idealism that many have found to be a historical source of the peculiar abstractness and self-righteousness which they have found in American foreign policy. But when Transcendentalism had been added to the secularized remnants of the ‘City upon a Hill’ ideology that had figured in the founding of Massachusetts, the ground was being cleared to erect a new temple of universalized aggressive Americanism.²

Immigration played another role in fostering a climate of internationalism. “[T]he vast immigration of new peoples into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and imperialism reinforced each other by making America seem more international than ever before. The idea of the ‘melting pot,’ which appeared at this time, was the domestic face of the international mission.”

In this new fragmented demographic mix, Woodrow Wilson’s pious rhetoric about “making the world safe for democracy” gained vogue in the public mind. All this has since been co-opted by men whose goal is global power by any means, even if the consequence is the subjugation (and eventual destruction) of America’s founding population. As Forrest MacDonald observed, “Political scientists and historians are in agreement that federalism³ is the greatest contribution of the Founding Fathers to the science of government. It is also the only feature of the Constitution that has been successfully exported, that can be employed to protect liberty elsewhere in the world. Yet what we invented, and others imitate, no longer exists on its native shores.” As the Founders predicted, the American government has become despotic at home and aggressive abroad.

Although Prof. Wilson usually speaks of race and ethnic origins in only the most elliptical of terms, he does provide unmistakable clues to the roots of American exceptionalism. His arguments are frequently framed in terms of philosophy of government, but there is a message between the lines. In “Citizens or Subjects,” Wilson makes a point that is rarely allowed on the table for discussion today. “Nations come into existence when a unique identity is fused by history out of a particular group of people, a particular land, and a particular culture.” In “American Counter-Revolution,” Prof. Wilson reasserts the vital ethnic character of America’s founding stock: “Americans, moreover, had a task before them—civilizing a continental wilderness—that only self-confident Anglo-Celtic males could have been expected to accomplish.” In “Thomas Jefferson’s Birthday,” Wilson goes even further: “Jefferson’s discussion of the American racial dilemma in Query XIV of *Notes on the State of Virginia* says everything true that can be said about the subject.”⁴

Contrasted with the organic ethnic character of a nation, “In an empire, the genius of the people, as the American Founding Fathers called the particular native social fabric, no longer matters because an empire consists of many peoples, *or, in effect, none.*” [emphasis added] He concludes:

[An empire] consists of subjects, interchangeable persons, having no intrinsic value, to be manipulated in the interests of that abstraction, the empire. Subjects, for instance, whose neighborhoods or schools may be turned over to criminals should the rulers prefer to placate criminals rather than punish them. Subjects whose hallowed notions of family and morality may be put officially on a par with debased forms invented by diseased personalities. Or whose culture can be treated as inferior to some other that has been or is to be imported and officially recognized.

For decades, the United Nations seemed the chosen vehicle for realization of the long sought “New World Order.” As Prof. Wilson writes in “Global Democracy and American Tradition,” “The pro-UN propaganda reached every hamlet in America with an intensity that was not even matched by the world wars.” The UN has lately been de-emphasized, at least in part because of residual right-wing opposition to the specter of global government—a phenomenon realized, remarkably, almost entirely at the grass roots level. But there is another reason why the UN has lost popularity among the cognoscenti. “The glorification of the United Nations continued until it became evident that the UN was intransigently anti-Zionist....” With this turn of phrase, Prof. Wilson puts the spotlight on a force whose name is rarely spoken in discussions of the quadripartite coalition that rules post-Western America—do-gooder liberals; the moneyed class; a new proletariat composed of non-Western racial blocks, feminists, homosexuals, and other disaffected groups; and Patrick Buchanan’s no longer invisible “Amen Corner.”

Prof. Wilson’s aforementioned connection to the League of the South is, we believe, his coming out as a defender of America’s founding population. Although the focus of the LOS is Southern and almost exclusively cultural in nature, a case can be made that it is establishing a base for cultural renewal around which all like-minded people might rally. Wilson has, in his professional career as a teacher and writer, stayed largely within the confines of political correctness’s restrictions—though, at times, just barely. The association with the LOS opens a crack, albeit a small one, in that barrier.

In the final essay of the book, “Restoring the Republic,” Prof. Wilson sets out to define the conditions under which America might be saved. A worthy goal to be sure, but unfortunately much of the exposition is, we believe, unlikely to convince. Wilson appeals repeatedly to the virtues of limited government and low taxes, a line that has been thoroughly co-opted (and subsequently roundly ignored) by the Republican Party and its neoconservative puppet masters. At one point, Prof. Wilson even finds favor with the notion of a new constitutional convention, the purpose of which would be restoration of that tattered document to its original intent. The belief that the elites that hold power in America would refrain from using such an event to rewrite the Constitution as a coercive instrument of radical multiculturalism is, to put it charitably, preposterous.

But there is also a glimmer of understanding of the underlying issue in the final essay. Prof. Wilson identifies the vehicle chosen by the power elite for transforming America into a world empire and finally disposing of its founding population: Third World immigration. Writes Wilson, “To say that everyone in the world who can manage to get here is an American citizen is to say that there is no such thing as an American citizen in any meaningful sense....” He adds:

We must take away from the oligarchy the brokering of how differing groups of a pluralistic society live together. Also, in order to restore the value of republican citizenship, it will have to be restricted. That means that immigration has to be

reduced to a small number determined specifically by the future and current interest of the American people, not by any philosophical or economic consideration. We must end the system by which any respiring creature who manages to sneak under the fence becomes immediately entitled to all the rights and privileges of citizenship.

Despite the sometimes tentative nature of his forays into the perilous waters of identity politics, Prof. Wilson seems prepared to acknowledge their importance:

Democracy, as our forefathers clearly recognized, is not a group of people living under common procedures and economic exchanges. It is a social fabric of tradition, habit, and prejudice that makes self-government possible in a way that no proclaimed set of procedures or even carefully balanced interests can. A miscellaneous collection of people are not citizens of a republic but interchangeable ciphers of imperialism. The aspiration of a globalized citizenship is not the vision of republicanism but the dream of empire.

It is finally time to revisit the question posed initially: Do the words of the Founders have relevance today? History has shown that Jefferson's principles—however appropriate they may have been to the people of Virginia, the South, and the West—have proved inadequate to arrest the consolidating forces represented by 1) the fusion of New England mercantilism and Puritan moral coercion, and 2) the more recent coalition that added global imperialism and an extrinsic proletariat to the mix. Perhaps the most fitting thing we can say about the Founders is that there is still some degree of residual respect for their era among those who do not yet understand the seriousness of our present situation. That respect can at times serve as an initial foothold from which to broach discussion of contemporary problems with those who would tune out a more direct approach. Thus, the value of contributions such as Wilson's may be that they provide not only rearguard guerrilla harassment against liberalism's advance through our culture, but also a rallying point from which to launch a counterrevolution.

Nevertheless, we would contend that Jeffersonian principles are no longer adequate, in and of themselves, to unseat the ravaging horsemen of liberalism. The cancer eating away at the body politic has metastasized too far for that. Without a strong sense of cultural identity and the will to defend it, the struggle will be lost, a point with which we hope Prof. Wilson would agree. Faith in democracy, republicanism, personal liberty, and all the other civic virtues espoused by America's Founders matters little if the people who created such concepts no longer constitute a coherent entity capable of influencing the course of events. In which case, what value were those principles to their defunct creators? Shall we surrender our very existence for an abstract principle so that the rest of the world can briefly enjoy liberties they can neither create for themselves nor sustain in our absence? This is suicide, as writers from Oswald Spengler, Madison Grant, and Lothrop Stoddard to James Burnham and Patrick Buchanan have warned.

One must fight the battle that is presented. The verities of the Founding era may be useful as a means of rallying support among those who have not yet realized the true long-term threat to the West represented by Third World immigration. But ultimately, political, social, cultural, and religious beliefs are not independent of the character and temperament of the people who hold them. To defend ideas and principles, however intellectually satisfying they may be, without preserving and sustaining the people who authored them is to defend nothing.

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ENDNOTES

1. Wilson acknowledges that modern politicians have hijacked the term “conservative.” He defines traditional conservatism as composed of three virtues: republicanism, constitutionalism, and federalism. *Republicanism* is a form of government wherein power rests with the people as expressed via elected representative leaders. *Constitutionalism* is a system wherein law “protects the people from the rulers and the individual from the people.” *Federalism*, in this case, means a decentralized union wherein people are citizens of states and not of the union thereof. The reader should note that this definition of federalism is confusing since, in most cases, Wilson uses the term “Federalist” to characterize *opponents* of Jeffersonian conservatism, e.g., consolidationists such as Alexander Hamilton and John Adams.
2. Prof. Wilson’s indictment of New Englanders and their puritanical urges will not sit well with some Americans whose roots are not in the South or West but for whom the principles of Jeffersonian self-reliance and republicanism hold a strong appeal. And indeed, it is a dilemma for those who rightly wish to foster much-needed unity among the remnant of America’s habitually fragmented founding stock. But there is an element of truth in Prof. Wilson’s brief. In his book, *Albion’s Seed*, David Hackett Fischer wrote of New England’s Puritans that they were the most privately orderly and publicly violent among all early American settlers. This trait speaks to exactly the same coercive mentality Prof. Wilson identifies.
3. MacDonald’s use here corresponds to Wilson’s favorable use of federalism, not the use that implies government centralization.
4. Of Africans in servitude, Jefferson wrote: “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion have drawn indelible lines of distinction between them.” Jefferson greatly feared the prospect of not explicitly solving this problem. “If, on the contrary, it is left to force itself on, human nature must shudder at the prospect held up.”