

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #202

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### Reminding Americans Who We Are



*Erie County World War II Memorial on Glenwood Park Avenue*

Amid the swirl of executive orders, retractions of executive orders, DOGE's (Department of Governmental Efficiency) budgetary slashing and employee layoffs only to be followed by retractions and reinstatements, identifying Canada – *Canada???* – as not an enemy but an unfriendly foreign neighbor taking advantage of the U.S. economically, abandoning traditional allies while embracing foreign despots, amid that “flooding of the zone,” current events can seem hallucinatory.

But none of the above and any of its iterations – the new anti-vaxxer head of America’s Health and Human Services agencies, for example, advocating vitamin A as a measles preventative [1] – matches the specter of the vice president of the United States meeting with the head of the far-right German party Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD) in Munich on Valentine’s Day declaring them a political partner. [2]

Although their leader, Alice Weidel, is a gay woman married to a Sri Lankan woman [3] and the men sport better-tailored, more expensive suits, better haircuts, and no stupid-looking mustaches, make no mistake: the AfD is the heir of the National Socialist Party. “The Central Council of Jews in Germany ...describes them as an ‘extremist’ party that ‘embodies Nazi ideals.’” [4] Even other European far-right political parties find them hard to swallow. When public statements by one of the AfD’s leaders, Maximilian Krah, minimized the crimes of the Nazi SS, “the European Union Parliament’s far-right Identity and Democracy Group ousted the AfD from its coalition.” [5]

The sight of an American vice president courting Adolf Hitler’s heirs made me wonder what the 727 men and women whose names grace the Erie County World War II Memorial might make of all of this?

It made me wonder what my father might make of all this. Born in New Castle, Pennsylvania, he was raised in the village of Neudorf in the Transylvanian Alps and repatriated to America because he was an American citizen by birthright, flew multiple bombing missions in the American 8th Air Force during World War II, and after the war, interrogated for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) former Nazi scientists (one of whom was Wernher von Braun) seeking refuge in America?

It made me wonder if we, or at least some of our leaders, have forgotten what it means to be an American.

Although this might seem like a leap, it’s not. Thinking about all of this reminded me of two of Pericles’ greatest speeches. In the 5th century BCE, Pericles was the great Athenian leader who led Athens in its war with Sparta – the Peloponnesian War. At a moment in the war when fortune turned against Athens, in two speeches, one the famous “Funeral Oration” and the other several weeks later, Pericles reminded the Athenians who they were.

In the second speech, Pericles told the Athenians that, “I am of the opinion that national greatness is more for the advantage of private citizens, than any individual well-being ... a man may be personally ever so well off, and yet if his country be ruined he must be ruined with it. ...” [6]

And what was the nature of this country that afforded greatness to its citizens?

In the Funeral Oration, Pericles said it is a free country handed down to the present generation by the valor of their ancestors. [115]

What was it the Athenians' ancestors handed down to them?

It was their constitution, which “does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy.” [115] He continues, “If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences. ... the freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes. ... we throw open our city to the world ... instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action ... and we acquire our friends by conferring, not by receiving favors.” [117-118]

What does Pericles say made this possible? Like those 727 Erie County heroes whose names dignify Erie's World War II Monument, it is the honor, character, and courage of those who defended and, even more so, those who died defending Athens, for Pericles said, “the Athens that I have celebrated is only what the heroism of these and their like have made her. ...” [119]

What is that Americans seem to have forgotten?

I have written and spoken about all of this many times in these **Book Notes**, in my **The American Tapestry Project**, and elsewhere. In closing this 202nd **Book Note** before taking a hiatus to write a book, knowing that many of my readers do not need to be reminded, but in the spirit of sharing with them some words to use in reminding others, I am taking the liberty of quoting generously from **Book Note #28**, which first appeared in September 2020. It can be found [here](#).

Since I am quoting myself, to avoid clutter I will do away with quotation marks unless needed to identify a quotation. With some updates and insertions, four and a half years ago I said:

Americans seem to have forgotten or have given up trying to understand that we are all in this together.

They seem to have forgotten that what makes America exceptional is its commitment to an ever-expanding definition, to an ever-expanding inclusiveness of the “**We**” in our founding documents.

The genius of America has always been its understanding – contentious as it might have been, as challenged as it frequently was and is – that we are all in this together.

That almost from the beginning, America expanded and continued to expand its definition of “**We.**”

As in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, “**We** the People in order to form a more perfect Union ...”

Even if Thomas Jefferson didn’t exactly mean what we have come to understand he said in the Declaration of Independence we celebrate with picnics, music, and fireworks: “**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.”

As Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg, “... a new nation conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

In that “all” Lincoln meant “**We ...**”

As Emma Lazarus’s poem on the Statue of Liberty “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to be breathe free...send these... to me.”

Lazarus meant “**We...**”

As Martin Luther King, Jr. exhorted “When we allow freedom to ring... when all God’s children will be able to join hands and sing ‘Free at last, Free at last...’”

King meant “**We...**”

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After these entreaties, in that earlier **Book Note** I pivoted and said:

What might truly inspire us to put aside our tribal squabbles, what might inspire us to a renewed commitment to our shared ideals just might be to listen to John Winthrop – he who first said, “wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.”

In many ways, if one goes all the way back to the 17th century, Winthrop has some claim to be an American founder. The leader of the great Puritan migration that settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, Winthrop died long before there ever was such a thing as the United States of America. But in an often quoted but rarely read sermon, he enunciated values that resound down to the 21st century.

Now I'm not naïve.

I don't think re-reading an almost 400-year-old sermon is going to magically heal our political divisions. But it just might help begin the process of remembering who we are and what is meant by "the better angels of our nature."

Winthrop is frequently quoted, misquoted, and paraphrased, but it would be more accurate to say he is very, very rarely, if ever, actually read.

Winthrop made his famous assertion in his sermon "A Modell of Christian Charitie," which he wrote aboard the ship Arbella in 1630 on Massachusetts Bay before addressing his fellow Puritans as they prepared to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

He understood that his people faced an extreme challenge – the forest primeval before them, the howling North Atlantic behind them. He understood that if they were to survive, they must bond together one to another and all to all.

What did Winthrop say the Puritans must do to survive? What did Winthrop say that Americans in 2025 need to recall?

And, by extension, what must 21st century Americans do if the great American experiment is to survive?

What did Winthrop say his fellow Puritans had to do to be a "modell of Christian charitie," to be "as a city upon a Hill"?

Winthrop said "wee must brotherly love without dissimulation, wee must love one another with a pure heart ... wee must beare one another's burthens, wee must not looke only on our owne things, but allsoe on the things of our brethren. ..."

Or, in sum, quoting Matthew 7:22, Winthrop exhorts "Whatsoever Ye would that men should doe to you do yee the same to them allsoe."

If they did that, then they shall be as a city upon a hill, a light for all.

But if they failed to do this, if they failed to be true to their creed, if they failed to be true to their values they would still be as a city upon a hill.

Winthrop and his fellow Puritans saw themselves as entering into a new covenant with God. A covenant they were morally (and mortally) obligated to honor.

As a covenanted people, they would be like a city on a hill exposed to God's eyes, exposed to the eyes of all others who would know whether or not they were faithful to their creed.

In Winthrop's vision, they would not be some bright shining thing for others to envy and emulate.

No, as a city on a hill they would be exposed, incapable of hiding from the eyes of God who would know their virtue, or their lack of virtue. As a covenanted people to whom much had been given, they were bound by trust to be true to their creed.

If they were not, if they betrayed their creed, as Winthrop continued in the part that is never quoted, they would be "an evil story in the mouths of our enemies ... we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses and we be consumed out of the land."

In short, if America is to continue its experiment in freedom, equality, and opportunity, if America is to improve, then America and Americans need to understand **We** are all in this together.

If America is to survive, Americans need to join one to another and one to all and all to all; if America is to be a "shining" city upon a Hill, if America is to be a model of Christian charity, if America is to be Lincoln's "last best hope of earth," then American's must love and care for one another.

Although John Winthrop had no vision of a United States – he died over a hundred years before the American Revolution – he exhorted his proto-Americans to reaffirm their common ground, to renew their commitment to the commonwealth. Like Pericles reminding the Athenians that together they flourish and apart they perish, Winthrop beseeched his followers to renew their commitment to one another, for together they prosper; apart they will "be consumed out of the land."

So, what does a 400-year-old sermon almost no one has ever read but many misquote tell us about 21<sup>st</sup>-century America?

It tells us that we need a renewed commitment to the idea of America; that we need a renewed commitment to an ever more inclusive understanding of the "**We...**" at the heart of the American experience.

Like the 727 names on Erie’s World War II Monument, a wonderful mix of the world’s ethnicities, Americans need to remember that “**We** the people” are truly “e pluribus unum” – out of many one.

In so remembering, 21st-century Americans honor the sacrifice of their 20th-century fathers, grandfathers, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins who through their sacrifice, bequeathed us this great land.

Because whether one likes it or not, reading their names on that and all the war memorials, we are reminded that united we stand; apart we become the prey and plunder of oligarchs.

Winthrop reminds us that, like Pericles’ Athenians, we are all in this together!



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### End Notes

1. Walrath-Holdridge and Eduardo Cuevas, “*RFK Jr. touts vitamin A for measles prevention. Doctors disagree*” in **USA Today** available at [RFK Jr. touts vitamin A for measles prevention. Doctors disagree.](#) accessed March 9, 2025.
2. “*Vance meets German far-right AfD leader amid election interference criticism*” at **Reuters** available at [Vance meets German far-right AfD leader amid election interference criticism | Reuters](#) accessed March 9, 2025.
3. Schuetze, Christopher F., “*Meet Germany’s Far-Right Leader, a Study in Contradictions*” in **The New York Times** (Feb. 19, 2025) available at [Meet Germany’s Far-Right Leader, a Study in Contradictions - The New York Times](#) accessed March 9, 2025.

4. Matthias, Meg, “*Alternative for Germany political party, Germany*” in **Encyclopedia Britannica** available at [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\) | Beliefs, Platform, Election Results, & Scandals | Britannica](#) accessed March 9, 2025.
5. Ibid.
6. All quotes from Pericles are from Thucydides, **The History of the Peloponnesian War**, Tr. Richard Crawley and Rev. by Donald Lateiner. (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2006), p. 128. To avoid littering these End Notes with a string of Ibids, in the body of the text I will simply cite the page number.
7. All quotations here are from my **Book Note #22** “Winthrop’s Lesson: Americans must love and care for one another” available at [Roth Book Notes--Winthrop.pdf](#); all quotations from Winthrop’s sermon “A Modell of Christian Charitie” are from John Winthrop. “*A Modell of Christian Charity*,” in **American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.**, Ed. Michael Warner. (New York: The Library of America, 1999), p. 42.

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