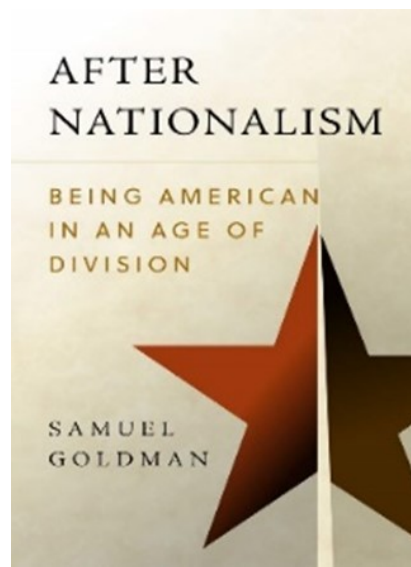


*Book Notes #69*

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

*After Nationalism*



[1]

Are Americans going through an “identity crisis”?

It is commonplace of current political analysis to say that American politics has become a conflict over identities. More precisely, a conflict over which definition of American identity is the legitimate American identity. According to the American Psychological Association’s *Dictionary of Psychology*, an identity crisis is “a phase of life marked by experimentation; changing, conflicting, or newly emerging values; and a lack of commitment to one’s usual roles in society (especially in work and family relationships).” [2]

Well, admittedly stretching a bit, that definition seems to capture a great deal of what has been occurring in American society these past, oh, 30, 40, even 50 years. Americans have been experimenting with new identities, creating new values or modifying old values resulting in decreasing commitment to society's old and established norms. The societal result – conflict between those pushing forward towards new ways of being and those seeking to preserve old customs – has been not unlike the inner turmoil an individual experiences negotiating a period of rapid and disorienting change.

Or, do Americans suffer from multiple personality disorder? Technically called dissociative identity disorder (DID), the term refers to “a mental disorder where a person has two or more distinct personalities. The thoughts, actions, and behaviors of each personality may be completely different”. [3] These personalities “often have their own distinct name, age, gender, moods, memories, and vocabulary.” [4]

Again, a bit of a stretch, but not much, the description when applied to American society captures some of our current trauma as Americans argue about who they are, how old they are (the current historical debate about “when did America start” – cf. *The 1619 Project* and *The 1776 Project*), even some gender confusion, not to mention conflicting moods and memories. Especially memories as American history has become contested terrain.

Putting amateur psychologizing aside, the question remains “how do people construct an identity?” Well, as we have explored in numerous **Book Notes** and elsewhere, humans are storytellers. They make sense of their experience by telling themselves stories about themselves, by weaving those stories together to create a coherent world view, to create an understanding of where they came from, how they got to know, how that journey defines the now of their current reality, and where they might be going.

They are their story; we are our story.

In short, regardless of the efficacy of applying psychological concepts to society as a whole, **the** question of our time remains the same question Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked in 1782: “What is an American?”

Which begs us to also ask: Where did we come from? How did we get to now? How does that journey define our current reality, and where might we be going?

Or, paraphrasing Samuel Goldman's sub-title, “how does one **be** American in an age of division”? Which leads to a series of other questions:

1. Is there one American national identity, one way of being American, or are there many identities and ways to be American?
2. What is the American nation? And what is the meaning of the American nation?
3. Does it even make sense to ask what is **the** meaning of a **nation**?

Regarding the last question, the answer is yes, for a nation is the sum of the stories *disparate* people tell one another about themselves uniting them into **a** people – into a nation, a people with a shared identity.

For, if a nation, as St. Augustine said, is a group of people “united by the common

objects of their love,” then it is important to understand what those objects are and how they are united. For the shared unity of those common objects creates the people’s identity; creates **a** people.

It is the definition of the nation and national identity.

Which raises two more questions:

1. What are the common objects that Americans’ love
2. How do they share that love with one another?

The answer to the first ranges from the banal (to eat at a *Chick-fil-A* or not) to the profound (what are the definitions of *liberty* and *equality* – which might actually contradict one another). The answer to the second involves the stories Americans tell one another about the objects of their love, where they came from, how they got to now, and where they might be going.

Lately, Americans have been telling each other different stories and arguing about which *one* is correct. Actually, Americans have been doing that from the beginning of American history regardless of which date one says that history began, but it boiled over in 1968 – the year **Smithsonian** magazine said: “America shattered”. [5] Although it is vastly more complicated, with roots stretching deep into American history, what “shattered” in 1968 was the mid-20th century consensus about the “meaning” of America and the shape of American identity.

What shattered was the consensus about which story was the defining American story.

As frequent readers of these **Notes**, listeners to my WQLN NPR1 program **The American Tapestry Project**, and viewers of my **America in 1968**, **The American Tapestry Project** and **American Holidays** series at the Jefferson Educational Society know, for the past three years I have been exploring the American story, whether or not there is such a thing, and if there is what it might be. So, when I came upon Samuel Goldman’s superb book-length essay **After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division**, I was an eager reader. At times I thought I was reading my own notes.

Goldman is an Associate Professor of Political Science at George Washington University and Executive Director of the John L. Loeb Institute for Religious Freedom. The Loeb Institute “fosters dialogue on religious understanding and the separation of church and state, and serves as a center for academic collaboration in religion, peace studies, history, political science, and other programs for scholars, students, educators, and the public.” [6]

Goldman is also a prolific writer, serving as literary editor of **Modern Age: A Conservative Quarterly** and contributing to **The American Conservative**, **The New York Times**, **The Wall Street Journal**, and other publications both popular and academic. His first book was **God’s Country: Christian Zionism in America**. [7] Politically, he is center-right, more right than center; philosophically, he has a strong libertarian streak, but I’d characterize him as a “recovering libertarian.”

In his short book – including *End Notes* and *Index*, **After Nationalism** numbers only 148 pages – Goldman engages with some complex and important

topics: the difference between patriotism and nationalism; the dangers of national myth-making; and three of the major story threads Americans have told themselves to make sense of their experience. He concludes with a chapter on “Memory, Nostalgia, Narrative” and a somewhat prescriptive final chapter, “After Nationalism,” describing an America conceived of as a “community of communities.”

Whether “blood and soil” notions of a people rooted in ethnicity and place, or a people bound together by shared ideas, Goldman is wary of nationalism. Without ever explicitly defining it as such, he sees nationalism as the reductionist attempt to lessen a people’s experience to one thread at the expense of all others. He views nationalism as an attempt to impose a single, homogeneous narrative line upon complex and heterogeneous experiences.

In American history, those “complexities” involve mingling our polyglot peoples and the nature of the government necessary to bring some order to that mingling. If our national motto is *E pluribus unum*, he points out “our history is characterized by bitter debate about the proper relation between diversity and unity. . . (and) we also disagree about what kind of *unum* we should become.” [8] The pole points of that “mingling” are John Jay’s *Federalist* No. 2, which advocates a homogeneous, Anglo-centric America, and Frederick Douglass’s “composite nation” speech that argues that America’s great strength is its plurality composed of all the peoples of the world. [9]

Given that America is now, in 2021, vastly more plural than it was in Douglass’s time, Goldman is skeptical “that we can restore a coherent and enduring sense of shared identity and purpose.” [10] As a result, he is suspicious of mythmaking, what Plato in *The Republic* called “the noble lie” – the telling of one story only partially rooted in facts binding all stories together. That “partially rooted” implies the omission of certain “memories” and the exclusion of certain “peoples” who do not fit the myth’s, the narrative’s, storyline.

Yet, Goldman points out it is possible, in the absence of such a story, to be a patriot, to love America, without subscribing to any one reductionist definition of what America might mean. [11] How? By recognizing America as Douglass’s “community of communities;” in such a conception, America, both as a society and as a governmental entity, is the frame within which those communities can coexist.

Goldman’s great strength is his short-yet-thorough description and analysis of three major ideas, three major storylines, that have attempted to define American history: the *Covenant*, the *Crucible*, and the *Creed*. The *Covenant*, which my colleague at the Jefferson Educational Society Charles Brock has spent decades studying and writing about, grows out of New England Puritan culture which saw America as an Anglo-Protestant country. When the *Covenant* broke down under the pressure of early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century immigration, primarily Irish and German Catholics, it was succeeded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the *Crucible* – or melting pot. Which, in turn, evolved in early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America to a common culture united around the American *Creed*, that web of socio-political beliefs including the Declaration of Independence’s “We hold these truths” and the U.S. Constitution’s guarantee of individual rights and limited government.

The *Covenant* conceived of America as one people – white, English, and

Protestant. As Timothy Dwight, President of Yale, wrote in his *Greenfield Hill*, an epic poem dedicated to John Adams:

“One blood, one kindred, reach from sea to sea;  
One language spread; one tide of manners run;  
. . . One faith extend, one worship, and one praise”. [12]

The Covenant, rooted in New England, consisted of several foundational concepts. First “was a conception of the whole United States as a covenantal nation comparable to the biblical Hebrews.” [13] America was a chosen land for a chosen people.

Second was “an affirmation of the religious guidance of national conduct.” Without getting too deep into the particularities of it, that religion, while Protestant, was narrow and exclusionary. It was Congregational with a strict Calvinist creed.

Third, “the New England vision of a well-ordered nation revolved around shared prosperity.” [14] And “for reasons of both morality and political economy, finally, Yankee nationalists tended to oppose slavery”. [15]

The Covenant was a powerful unifying force in New England history, for New England was homogeneous in a way the rest of the country was not. It was English, it was white, and it was dissenting Protestant.

The rest of the country was already more diverse. There were Catholics in Maryland. New York had a Dutch heritage and the middle-states had a large and growing Scandinavian and German population. Although it already had a substantial slave African American population, Virginia and the south, while English, was aristocratic and Anglican. Or mostly, aristocratic and Anglican, for by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century the Virginia and Carolina back country was rapidly filling with Scotch-Irish immigrants who were neither aristocratic nor Anglican. In fact, they loathed with a special vehemence both of those.

The covenant cast a long shadow coloring all of American history. In particular, its merging with Creedal nationalism in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to the notion of America as exemplar to the world and American exceptionalism. But first it succumbed to the Crucible. As immigration bloomed in the middle-19<sup>th</sup> century with Irish and German Catholics, the notion of America as an “English” nation for “English Protestants” came under pressure.

Although it thwarted Asian immigration on the West Coast until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Covenant finally gave way after the Civil War under the pressure first of increased immigration from central Europe and then, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to waves of immigration from southern and Eastern Europe. From 1870 to 1900 approximately “12 million immigrants entered the United States”. [16] As Goldman notes, in a nation of “only about 35 million people at the conclusion of the Civil War, it was an extraordinary demographic transformation.” [17]

Anti-immigrationists and jingoistic nativists combined to oppose immigration while others sought some new and unifying metaphor for the changing nation. The metaphor was Israel Zwingli’s the “*melting pot*” in which, in the Crucible of American life, all of these people would be transmuted into a new people – the

American people.

Theodore Roosevelt was all for it, as long as the “new people” were essentially *Anglo* in culture. Hot as the crucible might have been, not all melted, or wanted to “melt,” into a new people. And not all Anglo Americans wanted to be a part of it. With the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924, mass immigration slowed to a trickle and the melting pot metaphor gave way to assimilation. The period between, to pick a date, 1920 and the mid-1960s was a period of intense assimilation as the children and grandchildren of those 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants were absorbed into American culture. It was assimilation’s high-water mark.

The Crucible, in turn, gave way under the unifying pressure of two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War to the American Creed, or the Creedal narrative. If neither the Covenant, describing a homogeneous white, English, Protestant America that never actually existed nor the Crucible with its metaphor of the melting pot could unite Americans, then another story needed to be told. Although its roots stretch back through Wilson to Lincoln and before Lincoln to DeTocqueville, the American Creed became the unifying metaphor tying Americans together as one people during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Goldman has an excellent and succinct explanation of the phrase’s origins. In 1916, William Tyler Page coined the phrase in his entry to a national contest seeking “the best short statement of ‘American political faith’.” [18] Page’s summary of American political values based on the *Declaration of Independence*, Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, and the *U.S. Constitution* even served as alternative Pledge of Allegiance, which in a bit of historical trivia was written in 1892 by socialist Francis Bellamy. [19] Gunnar Myrdal, in his ***American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*** employed it as a precis on American values. [20] Writers both “ancient” – DeTocqueville, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt – and modern – Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* – have expatiated upon it.

So, what is The American Creed? It is not so much a statement of philosophical values as it is a set of American ideals (dogmas?) defining what it means to be an American. If American ethnicity is not simply being white – the definition of which has been contested repeatedly in American history – nor being of English ancestry nor of being a Protestant Christian, then what is it?

The Covenant broke down under the pressure of those questions, and the Crucible could not melt (meld) a polyglot people into ersatz Anglo-Americans, leaving the question of American “ethnicity” open. If that ethnicity could neither be defined by who or what you are (your origins, “racial,” and cultural status) nor by your religious faith, maybe it could be defined by what you believed. In short, to be an American was to accept as foundational a set of values or ideas – to accept a *creed*.

What is this *creed*? It is an amalgam of the second paragraph of The Declaration of Independence – “We hold these truths...”, the Bill of Rights, Lincoln’s reaffirmation of these truths and rights at Gettysburg, Wilson’s revival of them as universal rights during World War I, and Franklin Roosevelt’s proclaiming them as the underpinning of his *Four Freedoms* – freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

What are these truths? That all people are created equal; that they possess liberty,

and the freedom to pursue their own “happiness.” That they accept both the rights and responsibilities implicit in the Bill of Rights – religious freedom, freedom of speech, etc. That they believe in individual rights and popular sovereignty (i.e. democracy). That they have a preference for free expression, voluntary associations (the right to join organizations supporting their rights and needs) and a more or less nonhierarchical social structure (the practical social consequence of accepting the equality of all).

So, to be American was not a nationalism of blood and soil, but the acceptance and adherence to a *creed* – to a set of values, chief of which are the truths that all are created equal and endowed with certain rights the expression of which can be found in the Bill of Rights. America was not something you were born into; it was/is a set of ideals to which you pledged fealty. Make the pledge and you are in – that’s it. In fact, the current citizenship naturalization pledge is just that simple.

There are three aspects to The American Creed’s impact upon American culture and politics: a positive aspect, an ambivalent aspect, and, not a negative aspect, but an unintended exposure of a critical fault line in American society. The positive aspect rests in the Creed’s ability to supplant the Crucible as the path to assimilation. Whereas the Crucible and melting pot metaphors imply one had to lose one’s culture and become something else, something new to become an American, the Creed eased the path to assimilation by providing an alternative. You did not have to reject your ancestry to become American. All you had to do was to pledge your fealty to the “idea of America.” It gave rise to the hyphenated American – you could still be Hungarian but also American – a Hungarian-American. The immigrant themselves might always think of themselves in hyphenated terms, but their children and, certainly, their grandchildren, not to mention their great-grandchildren, did not. They became Americans. The Creed was the lubricant that smoothed assimilation’s journey.

The ambivalent aspect, beginning with Wilson’s use of The Creed as the rationale for entering World War I to make the world safe for democracy, which, in turn fed off of older notions of manifest destiny and America as beacon to the world, was The Creed’s morphing into the justification for the notion of American exceptionalism – America as the model for what the world should be: democratic (small “d”), egalitarian, and the defender of universal human rights. This mixture of values fueled World War II patriotism and anti-Nazi, anti-Fascist fervor.

Then, beginning in the late 1940s through 1989, during the Cold War with the Soviet Union about whose national world view and values would triumph, the Creed was the *causus belli*. It underpinned Truman’s policy of containment. Its great triumph was the global increase in freedom and democracy.

It’s great – hmmm, loss, disadvantage, weakness? – was two-fold. On the one hand, it led America to support any government that opposed the Soviet Union – ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ philosophy. The result was American support for dictators and other authoritarians from Nicaragua to the Shah of Iran. Its byproduct was military adventurism ending in stalemate in Korea and defeat in Viet Nam.

The negative aspect of The Creed might, in fact, not be negative, but its result was unintended. For using The Creed to proclaim the equality of all people, to champion universal human rights across the globe, exposed America’s original sin, as James Madison called it – racism and the brutal discrimination against

Americans of African ancestry and Native Americans – the indigenous people. For those excluded at home from the benefits of America’s glittering ideals appealed directly to those ideals to demand their inclusion in American society and their participation in those rights at home. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his last speech, “Just be true to what you said on paper.” In fact, the greatest articulation of The Creed’s emotional resonance was King’s justly famous “I Have a Dream” speech in which he appealed directly to The Creed.

As Goldman points out, The Creed ran aground in the ‘60s under the twin pressures of the civil rights movement and the War in Viet Nam. The civil rights movement exposed to the world the fact that America was tinged with more than a bit of hypocrisy. It did not practice what it preached. The War in Viet Nam exposed the limits of The Creed’s ability to inspire sacrifice in far-off lands for ill-understood gains. It’s one thing to ask one’s citizens to lay down their lives in defense of the homeland; it’s quite another to die for a short-term tactical advantage. Watergate cracked The Creed by exposing that those at the highest levels of government could be corrupt and commit crimes to further their own personal agendas.

Although President Reagan breathed life back into The Creed in the ‘80s, with the fall of communism in the ‘90s and the absence of a common foe, The Creed was unable to bank the culture war fires. With no serious enemy abroad, with The Creed weakened by the inconsistencies already noted, Americans began to once again chew on one another about differing values, about differing notions of what it meant to be an American, and who was entitled to that status. As Goldman points out, while the specifics of our current culture wars might be new – contraception, abortion, gay rights, etc., etc. – many are not. Race, religion, and ethnicity are all ancient sources of American division.

And now they’re back.

What to do?

Tell a new story? Goldman does an excellent job analyzing the dangers of mythmaking – telling one story to the exclusion of all others – and to the dangers of nitpicking every detail of American history and in the process losing, to use a cliché, the forest for the trees. He is particularly good on the history wars.

I said earlier that I think Goldman is a “recovering libertarian.” He rejects the notion that no government is necessary while also rejecting the notion that any one story should be *the* story. His not-entirely-satisfactory last chapter on America’s future as a “community of communities” that accepts differences between groups but who nonetheless work together on issues of common concerns is a very interesting idea. He, however, is short on specifics.

His idea is similar to one we explored in two previous **Book Notes** on *Heroic Centrism*, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

In those two **Notes**, we explored William Weston and the Niskanen Society’s notion of American culture as a circle of competing interests. The circle metaphor avoids the bi-polarity of a linear model by recognizing that there are more than two competing points of view. The center of the circle, its locus, so to speak, are society’s major institutions that embody and champion society’s core values. If we substitute Goldman’s competing communities for core institutions, then we have



the beginning of a model for moving forward. Those competing communities “engage” – argue, disagree, compete, perhaps even “fight” – with one another on their margins over competing interests within the circle.

I would add to Goldman’s metaphor that their engagement must be defined by their adherence to The Creed’s core values. That American’s did not always live up to The Creed they preached does not invalidate The Creed. The hypocrisy is on the people, not the values.

So, as we continue to try to sort out America’s identity crisis and its plethora of personalities, I’ll conclude this **Note** by saying that Samuel Goldman’s **After Democracy** is an excellent primer on three key threads in *The American Story*, in *The American Tapestry* and that his notion of a “community of communities” is a very valuable starting point for exploring how a heroic center might be constructed on the foundation of America’s creedal values.

For if we reject The Creed, then we’re no longer Americans. We’ve become something else.

I recommend Samuel Goldman’s **After Democracy** without hesitation and look forward to hearing him present at the Jefferson Educational Society.

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## WHAT IS THE AMERICAN STORY? A DISCUSSION

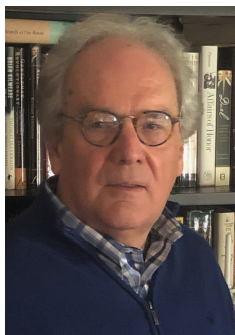
AUGUST 11TH, 2021 | 4:00 PM - 5:00 PM

Phillip Payne, PH.D. and Andrew Roth, Ph.D.

The United States is often described in lofty terms, an aspirational ideal that We the People strive towards. But is it a democracy? Or a republic? Why can't we seem to agree on a common, universally shared American story? And when did the Story of America begin? Was it 1619? Or 1776? Or earlier? Why is this important?

Join history professor Dr. Phillip Payne and JES Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth as they examine and discuss foundational and transformational moments in American history in search of answers to these answers in exploring The American Story.

This event will be live-streamed on our [Facebook](#) page and later posted to our [Youtube Channel](#) and [Website](#).



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### End Notes

1. **Photo Credit:** Jacket cover of *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division* from

University of Pennsylvania Press available at <https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15975.html> accessed July 23, 2021.

2. "identity crisis" in **APA Dictionary of Psychology** available at <https://dictionary.apa.org/identity-crisis> accessed July 25, 2021.

3. "Split personality disorder: Signs, symptoms, causes, diagnosis, and more" in **Medical News Today** available at <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/split-personality> accessed July 25, 2021.

4. Ibid.

5. "1968 – The Year that Shattered America", in **Smithsonian Magazine** available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/1968-year-shattered-america-180967684/> accessed July 25, 2021.

6. "Loeb Institute for Religious Freedom" at **George Washington University** available at <https://loeb.columbian.gwu.edu/> accessed July 26, 2021.

7. "Samuel Goldman", **George Washington University Faculty Page** available at <https://politicalscience.columbian.gwu.edu/samuel-goldman> accessed July 26, 2021.

8. Goldman, Samuel. **After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division**. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), p.1.

9. Ibid., pp. 2-3. For an analysis of Douglass' *The Composite Nation* speech, see **Book Notes** (April 16, 2020) available at [https://www.jeserie.org/uploads/Andy%20Book%20Notes--Douglass\\_1.pdf](https://www.jeserie.org/uploads/Andy%20Book%20Notes--Douglass_1.pdf)

10. Ibid., p. 12.

11. Ibid., p. 5.

12. Ibid., p. 21.

13. Ibid., p. 25.

14. Ibid., p. 26.

15. Ibid., p. 27.

16. Ibid., p. 52.

17. Ibid., p. 53.

18. Ibid., p. 64.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 63.

21. Ibid., pp. 65-68 for Goldman's discussion of the American Creed.

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