

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

President Biden's Inaugural Address And What We Share

Tune in at 4 p.m. today (January 28), to see Dr. Andrew Roth take part in a conversation with fellow Jeffersonians Rev. Charles Brock and Ben Spегgen with our latest digital program ["Examining The Biden Inauguration Address: What He Said And What It Means When It Comes To The American Story"](#).

Well, how did Joe do?

I call him "Joe" because President Biden seems to be a down-to-earth guy to the extent anyone with sufficient ego to seek the presidency of the United States can be "down-to-earth".

Regardless, he seems to understand it's not all about him.

He seems to understand it's about *us*.

If, as said at some length in last week's [Book Notes](#), humans are storytellers who tell themselves stories to make sense of their experience, which stories when woven together create cultures, then [The American Tapestry Project](#) is the heart of our American Experience – our American Story – our American Culture.

When I listen to civic, religious, educational, and political leaders – all those occupying critical roles in America's central institutions, I listen to hear if they understand the American story as a commitment to all of *us* or only some of *us*.

I listen to hear if they understand their primary job is to tell *us* a story unifying *us* around a common purpose, unifying *us* around a common understanding of America's creedal values.

Last Wednesday, listening to President Biden, I didn't listen for his positions on

specific policy issues – whether this tax should be raised or lowered, whether DACA should provide a path to citizenship, or whether we should rejoin the World Health Organization – issues about which honorable people can honorably agree or disagree. As William Weston pointed out in *Heroic Centrism in a Time of Polarization*, any society's central institutions and its people will clash over specific issues for they have partisan wants and parochial interests. If society is to survive, however, they must both agree about and evangelize for its core values.

I listened to hear President Biden articulate a vision of America reminding Americans of the core values we hold in common – our belief in liberty – freedom – equality – and opportunity; I listened to hear him remind Americans of our belief in self-government; I listened to hear him remind Americans of their belief in the democratic process; I listened to hear him remind Americans of our belief in the rule of law and that those who betray it must be held accountable; and I listened to hear him remind Americans of their belief in the great task of ever expanding the American “*We the People*.”

So, how did he do?

While lacking the drama and drive of Pericles' justly famous speech from Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, “*Pericles Reminds the Athenians Who They Are*,” Biden's call for unity succeeded in reminding Americans of their core values. As centrist columnist David Brooks said in *The New York Times*, “Just by who he is, Biden sets the stage for a moral revival. ... Biden is a genius at separating politics from the culture wars ... the salient divisions in the Biden era won't just be left versus right. They will be between the performers, the people who run for office to get on TV, and the builders, the people who want to achieve something.” [1]

James Fallows in *The Atlantic* said Biden's Inaugural Address possessed the three key ingredients in effective political rhetoric: he was authentic; he was realistic; and he told us he who he is and reminded us who we are. His authenticity shown through. He didn't pretend to be anyone but “the best version of himself.” He realistically outlined the challenges before us, but with empathy for those who have suffered, with confidence the challenges can be overcome and with a plan to achieve that goal. [2]

Not everyone was positive. In a blog post at *Buchanan.org*, Pat Buchanan, perhaps reflecting his own intellectual and moral confusion, seemed to condemn Biden for rejecting white supremacy and right-wing domestic terrorists without also condemning those on the left and not condemning either with sufficient pugnacity. It should be quickly noted, Biden did not modify his domestic terrorism comment with the adjective right-wing. He said “domestic terrorism,” an inclusive category combining both right- and left-wing variants. Buchanan, tone deaf as usual, heard only what he wanted to hear.

Regardless, it was an odd reaction from the person who can be said to have declared the culture wars a religious war for the soul of America in his infamous speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention. It seems Buchanan contemplating the fruit of what he sowed – right-wing thugs storming the Capitol and leaving five dead – can only splutter. One can only wonder, would a more pugnacious Biden be to his liking? [3]

More temperate, David Graham in *The Atlantic* caught the spirit of the moment.

Graham wrote:

“Biden’s speech was well wrought, but it offered nothing unusual, nothing surprising, nothing especially memorable. Paradoxically, that was the source of its power. As Biden took the bully pulpit of the presidency, he delivered a sermon in the tradition of America’s civic religion.

The basic foundation of American political rhetoric has long been a seamless, platitudinous blend of Christianity, rose-tinted history, and pop culture. Donald Trump discarded this, explicitly courting division and rancor. After four years of Trump, Biden’s bromides sounded newly fresh and relevant. [4]

Bromides? An interesting word, bromide means “a platitude or trite saying” or, less often, “a person who is platitudinous and boring.” [5] A “platitude” is “a flat, dull, or trite remark, especially uttered as if it were fresh or profound.” [6]

After four years of the former president’s “American Carnage,” lies, violence, and contempt for American values, what were these bromides, these platitudes Biden made sound newly fresh and relevant?

They are America’s core, America’s foundational values. They are the ideas, the values, the norms Americans once professed to love. For a *people*, as in “We the People” are, as Biden quoted St. Augustine, “a multitude defined by the common objects of their love.” [7] Bill McCormick, S.J. pointed out in *America* magazine, Augustine’s meaning is subtler than Biden’s, for the objects of one’s love could be selfish, could be sensual, could be materialistic and antithetical to God’s salvific grace or to a sustainable civic union. [8]

President Biden, however, was working a less ethereal ground. He pointed to those values Americans hold in common, those values Americans profess to love.

Which are?

According to President Biden, asking and answering his own question, they are:

“What are the common objects we love that define us as Americans?

I think I know.

Opportunity.

Security.

Liberty.

Dignity.

Respect.

Honor.

And, yes, the truth.” [9]

These, of course, are the core tenets of *The American Tapestry Project*: liberty – freedom – equality – opportunity. If we are true and faithful to them, they will enable *us*, working together, in President Biden’s words, to:

“... write an American story of hope, not fear.

Of unity, not division.
Of light, not darkness.
An American story of decency and dignity.
Of love and of healing.
Of greatness and of goodness.” [10]

Making this possible is the American commitment to democracy and representative government – government, as Lincoln said, “of the people, by the people, for the people.” President Biden said the day’s Inaugural ceremonies were a celebration of a “triumph not of a candidate, but of a cause, the cause of democracy.” [11] For, as he said, “And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed.” [12] Not wanting to spoil the moment, he did not add “just barely” with enemies still afoot inside and outside government itself while others in various nooks and crannies of the media have begun to obfuscate January the Sixth’s Insurrection as just a demonstration that got out of hand.

President Biden did not specifically use the phrase “the rule of law,” but he implied it when he said “we will defeat” this “rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront.” [13] How? By each citizen, “just days after a riotous mob thought they could use violence to silence the will of the people, to stop the work of our democracy,” by each citizen accepting their “duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders – leaders who have pledged to honor our Constitution and protect our nation – to defend truth and to defeat lies.” [14]

Chief among the lies that must be defeated and the truth that must be defended is white supremacy’s pernicious notion that America is only for some of *us* and not for all of *us*. As President Biden said, “the American story depends not on any one of us, not on some of us, but on all of us.” [15] *The American Tapestry* is the story of many things, but its most conflicted yet glorious thread is the story of the ever-expanding definition, the ever-expanding inclusiveness of the “*We*” of the *us* in our founding documents “*We the People*,” the “*We*” who hold these truths to be self-evident.

As I said in a [previous Book Notes](#), in vast understatement, it has been a bumpy ride. No, it has at times been a fraught, violent ride, for, as President Biden stated, “Our history has been a constant struggle between the American ideal that we are all created equal and the harsh, ugly reality that racism, nativism, fear, and demonization have long torn us apart.” [16]

But those forces have failed and continue to fail.

If the quest for inclusion is the most conflicted thread in *The American Tapestry*, in American history, its success is its most glorious.

For the American story is not some one-note, some finite tale written once and done, inerrant with nothing more to be said. No, America is the story, as Walt Whitman knew, of a nation, of a people “out of the cradle endlessly rocking” on a journey of becoming, which, while true to its and their foundational values, continually repairs and reinvents itself as it endlessly expands the meaning of “*We*.”

As Amanda Gorman said in her Inaugural poem *The Hill We Climb*,

“It’s because being American is more than a pride we inherit, it’s the past we step into and how we repair it.”

For America is:

“... a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished.” [17]

The work and the progress continue, as President Biden said:

Here we stand looking out to the great Mall where Dr. King spoke of his dream.
Here we stand, where 108 years ago at another inaugural, thousands of protestors tried to block brave women from marching for the right to vote.
Today, we mark the swearing-in of the first woman in American history elected to national office – Vice President Kamala Harris. Don’t tell me things can’t change. [18]

The meaning of “**We**” continues to expand in ways that unnerve some while inspiring many as America continues to seek, as President Biden said, “that most elusive of things in a democracy: Unity. Unity.” [19] Born during World War II, a child of “The Greatest Generation,” Biden, as do I, recalls that generation’s stories of unity and common cause. As he invited us to join him in writing “the next chapter in the American story” he evoked that unity, that sense of shared community by quoting from a song he said he loved – “*American Anthem*.” Written by Gene Scheer, it was used by Ken Burns in his World War II documentary *The War*.

Seeking to inspire Americans to join him writing “an American story of hope, not fear. Of unity, not division. Of light, not darkness. An American story of decency and dignity” [20], President Biden quoted the song:

“The work and prayers
of centuries have brought us to this day
What shall be our legacy?
What will our children say?...
Let me know in my heart
When my days are through
America
America
I gave my best to you.” [21]

The ellipsis in Biden’s quote is interesting, for in the song itself the phrases he omitted say “Let them say of me/I was one who believed/in sharing the blessings/I received. ...” [22] Less self-centered than his predecessor, I assume he sought to deflect attention from himself to us. Fair enough, but the idea of sharing is foundational and for those obsessed with protecting their tax cuts at the expense of the public good a necessary message.

Norah Jones’ version of *American Anthem* from the Ken Burns documentary *War* can be found [here](#).

So, how did Biden do?

Bromides or not, President Biden did what all leaders, great and small, must do. He told us a story “unifying *us* around a common purpose, unifying *us* around a common understanding of America’s creedal values.” He reminded us that “the American story is not dividing *us* into us and them, but a commitment to all of *us*.”

And, perhaps not with Periclean eloquence, he reminded us of the core values we hold in common – our belief in liberty – freedom – equality – and opportunity; he reminded us of our belief in self-government; he reminded us of our belief in the democratic process; he reminded us of our belief in the rule of law and that those who betray it must be held accountable; and, most importantly, he reminded us of the great task of ever expanding the American “*We the People*.”

So, as far as he went, he did OK. Maybe better than OK, for Biden reminded us of the core values at the center of American society. In doing so, he also reminded us that those values can’t be taken for granted. They need to be celebrated and defended, as the presidential oath states, “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” The first line of defense is to identify what we have in common, to identify the objects of our common love.

And that can only be done through unity of spirit and unity of purpose.

Unity of purpose is not a simple glossing of differences masking deep discord in order to find an unstable peace. No, it is continuing the unfinished work of building America. It is entering into that history Amanda Gorman reminds us we “inherit in order to repair it.” It is joining with all Americans in Whitman’s “out of the cradle endlessly rocking” continuing development of the American spirit of “*We the People ... who hold these Truths...*” That requires, while acknowledging our differences, seeking those things we hold in common, those things Augustine meant when he said a multitude becomes *a people* by the common objects of their love.

That, in turn, requires a unity of spirit, the spirit resulting from discovering the common objects of our love. The common objects of American culture that define us as Americans, the common objects that are, in fact, America. While they include our foundational ideals, abstract intellectual concepts ultimately are slender threads with which to hold a people together. They need to be buttressed with the tangible stuff of daily life. The common material needs of a people, the bread and blood of life itself, the spiritual yearnings of a people longing to belong, the songs they sing, the things they celebrate, and even the banalities of the games they play.

If Americans are to find any unity, if they are to transcend the culture wars bedeviling us since at least the 1960s, then they need to discover the things they have in common.

What are the common objects of our love?

Two recent essays in *The Hedgehog Review* steer us in the direction to which Biden and Amanda Gorman point. They are Richard Hughes Gibson’s “*More Than Just a Word*” and Johann N. Neem’s “*Unbecoming American*.”

In the first, Gibson explores why national unity is so important and why that unity is not just a word, but a vital necessity. As he says, “the best unity messages consist of more than just calls to pull together or assertions of some vague latent harmony. The best ones advance *arguments*, many subtle, about our national life and character.” [23] He continues, “The trouble with most unity messages today is that they stall at exhortation, as if simply uttering the word *unity* is enough.” [24]

To a certain extent, one could make that criticism of Biden’s Inaugural Address. It exhorted, but it did not specify. Gibson asks, “On what could one found a case for it (unity)? What do we share? Whence unity?” [25]

Or, as I have been asking, what are the common objects of our love?

Gibson goes back to the beginning, or I might say to the end of the beginning, by examining George Washington’s *Farewell Address*. Actually written by Alexander Hamilton, most people, if they remember it at all from junior or senior high school reading lists, vaguely recall something about avoiding entangling foreign alliances. Gibson works another vein. He says “the address is in so many ways the distillation of the original American ‘unity argument.’” [26] In short, that original unity argument restated in modern American-English vernacular boils down to “we’re here, we’re all in this together, we live or die together, so snap to it.”

Washington was a man who believed in self-interest. If you wanted to know what a nation (or a person) would do, ask yourself what is in their interest to do. That is what they will do. In his *Farewell Address* he makes two pleas for unity. One is based on interest; the other on sympathy. Washington asserts that “The unity of government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you ... for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your independence; the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize. It is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness ... (and that you should) indignantly frown upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of the country from the rest.” [27]

Or, in simple English, “We’re here, we’re all in this together, we live or die together, so snap to it.”

His other argument from “sympathy” is much more intangible. In the 18th century, “sympathy,” when used in a political context, meant “the ability of citizens, especially elected ones, to understand their fellow citizens’ “sentiments,” meaning thoughts and feelings.” [28] In short, the ability to empathetically understand their attitudes, mores, values, thoughts, and beliefs; in short, to empathize with their cultural values. What Washington meant is that Americans shared a common culture. Whether or not that was absolutely correct in the 18th century is open to debate. There was already a north-south split, an east-west split (think of the Whiskey Rebellion) and other cultural fault lines. Still, 18th century American culture was far more homogeneous than 21st century American culture.

Or was it? Phrased another way, are we 21st century Americans that much more heterogeneous than our 18th century ancestors?

No and yes; no, we share the same foundational values, although we might

understand them much more expansively.

Yes, although majority Christian, we are no longer only Christian. Even our Christian denominations, inspired by the First Amendment prohibition against an established religion, have proliferated. We are no longer monolingual, if we ever were. Although not yet bilingual, we speak a variety of languages. We have always been multiracial, only now we acknowledge it. And the list goes on.

So, what is a 21st century unity argument based on *sympathy* – i.e. shared culture?

Well, that is the question of the moment, for it is the question buried inside America's culture wars, for it implicitly asks, "What is the American story?" "Whose story is the American story?" It is what *The American Tapestry Project* is all about.

Maybe a better way to phrase the question is: "Which American story cuts across all other American stories to reveal our common values – the common objects of our love – to weave together all of our stories into the American story?"

In the second *The Hedgehog Review* essay, Johann N. Neem makes a powerful argument for a shared American culture open to all. [29] In my analysis, that culture shares at least three macro-facets: the *profound*, the *banal*, and America's *civil religion*. The *profound* is our shared core, our foundational values. We've already covered that in detail.

The *banal* is our shared love of sports, music, film, video, food, and all the other seemingly inconsequential yet critical "gluey" parts of our shared social life that fasten us together as a people in a cultural mosaic. You may be pro-choice, I may be uncertain; you may support fracking, yet while I appreciate its economic benefits, I worry about groundwater contamination; you oppose immigration, while I am in favor of a high wall with a big door; and a plethora of other issues. But, we are both Cleveland Browns fans (or Pittsburgh Steeler or Buffalo Bills fans), we both like spicy foods, and we both love Presque Isle.

Banalities! Yes, but working from the bottom up, they are the sticky things that bring us together. We forget them at our peril.

America's civil religion combines the two into a belief in America best expressed in the holidays it celebrates. From a Christmas that is at once both a Christian feast day and a communal celebration of life amidst the winter gloom; from Thanksgiving, which began as a Christian holiday and evolved into both a Christian day of thanksgiving and a communal sharing of gratitude; from the Fourth of July, which celebrates our love of freedom, to Memorial Day and Veterans Day, honoring those deceased and alive, who gave the last full measure of devotion that we might share this space, this now, this America in peace and harmony.

So, in thinking about President Biden's Inaugural Address, he hit all the right notes, but if it is to be more than a string of bromides, more than a mere exhortation that we are all in this together (we are), then we are going to have to do the hard work of identifying and sharing the common objects of our love.

Amanda Gorman got it right. America "isn't broken, but simply unfinished." It is the

job of all of us to unite in continuing to write the inclusive, freedom-loving American story.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Roth discusses *The American Tapestry Project* on WQLN NPR1, which can be found [here](#), and *The American Holiday* series, which continues next Tuesday, February 2, 2021 at 4 p.m. on the Jefferson Educational Society's Facebook page, and later today (January 28) will take part in a conversation with fellow Jeffersonians Rev. Charles Brock and Ben Spегgen on all of these issues.



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End Notes

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