



In Memoriam—Irving Kristol

AEI senior fellow Irving Kristol—godfather of the neoconservative movement and one of the towering intellectual figures of the twentieth century—died peacefully on September 18 at the age of eighty-nine. Mr. Kristol's connection to AEI began long before he became a full-time scholar at the Institute in 1988. In 1973, he gave the first of AEI's Distinguished Lectures on the Bicentennial of the United States. The lectures were delivered at historic sites around the country, and Mr. Kristol's lecture, "The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution," was given at St. John's Church in Washington, where many of the nation's presidents have worshipped. We reprint excerpts from it below after a tribute to him written by Christopher DeMuth, the D. C. Searle Senior Fellow at AEI.

The Practical Liberal

By Christopher DeMuth

I first encountered Irving Kristol at the outset of my political coming-of-age as a college student in the 1960s. My youthful liberalism was bumping into what I was learning in my courses and, even more, what I was reading in the newspapers and observing around me. I confessed my confusions to one of my professors and asked for his help in finding my way to a serious political education. He handed me the first issue of *The Public Interest* (Fall 1965) and told me to get myself next to its cofounder, Irving Kristol. To my amazement, that turned out to be a very easy thing to do.

Only much later did I realize that I had entered an intellectual catchment area that was channeling hundreds of young people on a new course, a course that would come to be known as neoconservatism. We were liberals, devoted to social improvement and political reform and, on the central domestic issue of the day, emphatically pro-civil rights (we could never have thought of

ourselves as conservatives so soon after Barry Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964). But we were deeply unsettled by the angry radicalism and increasing violence of the New Left, by the mounting evidence of the failures and perversities of the Great Society programs, and by the combination of personal sacrifice and political aimlessness that was the Vietnam War.

Irving had been on a similar journey through earlier decades, and in his midforties was still journeying. He was a powerful essayist and astoundingly well read, but he wore his learning in a manner that was, to the young intellectual, sheer magic—at once acerbic and lighthearted, aphoristic and nuanced, subversive and courtly, oppositional and patriotic. And hilariously witty. On top of all that, he actually took us seriously—arguing with us as equals, attending carefully to the progress of our thinking and work, and making strategic interventions as necessary. Noticing my awakening interest in economics, he instructed me to change law schools, from Harvard to Chicago, only a few days before classes were to

Christopher DeMuth is the D. C. Searle Senior Fellow at AEI. A version of this article appeared on *The American* on September 22, 2009.

begin. I do not know of a man who changed more lives through personal example and suggestion.



Much has been made of Irving Kristol's maestros­hip—as writer, editor, mentor, and institution builder—of an intellectual movement that enlarged and transformed American conservatism and the Republican Party. Celebrating those accomplishments is appropriate and instructive. What is passed over but almost as interesting, especially at the current political moment, is that his exertions had no comparable or even discernable influence on American liberalism and the Democratic Party—his original intellectual and political homes.

Irving was a genuine liberal in the sense of being a reformer and a thorough democrat. He was critical of whatever establishment happened to be under scrutiny, comfortable with active government, and insistent on the primacy of politics—all of this antithetical to pre-1980s conservatism. But from the start his liberalism was practical and pragmatic. The socialism of his Depression-era youth was not a matter of theory, doctrine, or book learning—he once said that it arose from nothing more than observing empty factories surrounded by streets filled with unemployed men. He thought that abstract ideas were a dangerous basis for political action and, partly for this reason, was as wary of intellectual and political elites as of social and economic elites. In one of his first essays, published in 1942 when he was twenty-two, he wrote that “utopian political doctrines are to be deplored, and not only because of their unattainability; in practice they will have worse effects than those more conservative and cautious.” He went on to define democracy as “government by due process rather than by the unchecked rule of self-titled delegates of History or the Workers”—summed up as “the right of organized opposition and subversion.”

The Public Interest, Irving's most important achievement, was accordingly a journal of practical liberalism. Its very title announced its liberalism. In the editors' manifesto, Irving (and Daniel Bell) threw themselves athwart the notion that society is no more than an agglomeration of private individuals and groups pursuing their private interests. The effort to identify the public interest of the social whole was surely untheoretical—it was not even an academic discipline!—but was nonetheless vital. Indeed “a democratic society, with its particular encouragement to individual ambition, private appetite, and personal concerns has a greater need than any other to keep the idea of the public interest before it.”

The practical element was that the public interest would consist in the political arrangements free citizens would choose if they had the time and inclination to inform themselves about questions of policy. Because of the growth of interest-group government, one could no longer delegate such matters to political representatives, parties, and associations: every policy had zealous proponents and opponents who stood their ground regardless of the record, so that the public square was “chock full of Great Debates that never happened.” *The Public Interest* would supply the deficiency, devoting itself to the expansion of factual, usable knowledge about government programs and social questions. It would eschew “ideological essays” of any persuasion, which “insistently propose pre-fabricated interpretations of existing social realities that bitterly resist all sensible revision.”

Much has been made of Irving Kristol's maestros­hip—as writer, editor, mentor, and institution builder—of an intellectual movement that enlarged and transformed American conservatism and the Republican Party.

The studies and essays that appeared in *The Public Interest* in the years to come (stretching eventually to forty years) abundantly vindicated that opening manifesto. But over time they coalesced into a school of thought. First, government programs aimed at ameliorating discrete problems—from welfare to job training and education, from community action to industrial regulation, from crime control to transportation—typically had disappointing results and frequently had perverse results, making matters worse rather than better. Second, the social and economic problems the government was taking on were much more complex, subtle, and ingrained than programmatic problem-solvers had assumed. Taken together, these findings and arguments suggested serious practical limits to the possibilities of effective government action—at least through the strategies the government was pursuing, such as the categorical grant and command-and-control regulation.

What I have called a school of thought eventually came to be regarded, by many foes and a few friends, as a determined ideology of the sort the journal's founders

had initially renounced. But Irving himself insisted that it was nothing more than a “persuasion,” and it is important to recognize that he was sincere and correct. Most (not all) of the academics and activists in Irving’s circle were practical liberals like himself, concerned with reforming rather than abolishing government interventions, especially those addressed to poverty and race discrimination. Most were Democrats through 1972, when George McGovern received the party’s presidential nomination; many hung in through the end of the Jimmy Carter administration; and some remain avowed Democrats today. Moreover, the patterns of influence between Irving and his young intellectual acolytes went in both directions. I can attest that we acolytes were not seeking to vindicate “prefabricated interpretations” but simply to figure out what worked and what did not. In my own engagements in antipoverty, community action, and environmental causes, and work in government agencies devoted to those causes, I arrived eager for action and was staggered by what I discovered. The quest for power and control typically dominated the quest for understanding and results—indeed the very nobility of the causes provided broad license for the play of naked ambition. Failures led to a hardening of prior positions rather than a rethinking of them. Such experiences moved many of us to conservative or libertarian positions, but thanks in large part to Irving we remained skeptical of abstract creeds and devoted to taking on the world as we found it. The two most accomplished *Public Interest* intellectuals, James Q. Wilson and Charles Murray, supplied cornucopias of practical reform proposals, decade after decade and down to the present time, that were detailed, results-oriented, ideologically unclassifiable, and, when adopted (Murray’s welfare reforms and Wilson’s “fixing broken windows” and other crime-control measures), highly successful.

Irving and many of his compatriots came to affiliate with the conservative movement and the Republican Party, and those affiliations no doubt affected the direction of their thinking. But, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, they did not leave the Democrats until the Democrats left them. Consider Irving’s three central preoccupations in the fullness of his neoconservative career from the late 1970s through the early 2000s. In economics, that policy should aim for economic growth—a rising tide rather than redistribution—and that lower taxes were the key to both economic growth and political success. In foreign policy, that American power and ideals, exercised robustly and without apology, were essential to a healthy

international order. In culture, that family, community, and religion are essential to regulating human appetites and social behavior and must be accommodated by any sensible approach to politics and policy. Of these, the first two commanded substantial allegiance even among liberal Democrats until the 1970s and were, of course, central policies of John F. Kennedy. The third had an even older pedigree on the left. Many old-line socialists were social conservatives before the term existed: they regarded socialism as a means of protecting the family and community against the onslaughts of individualist capitalism. Irving’s ancillary concerns, such as the dysfunctions of the large bureaucratic corporation (including exorbitant executive compensation!), fit much more comfortably with the Democratic than the Republican worldview.

When Irving said that a neoconservative was “a liberal who had been mugged by reality,” he was assuming that liberalism was a practical endeavor, capable of learning and accommodation.

These propositions would certainly not have prevailed without a fight within the Democratic Party. But they did not prevail (where they did prevail) without a fight within the Republican Party, either. The GOP had strong tax-increase, multinationalist, and social-liberal wings into the 1970s (the social-liberal wing included Barry Goldwater and still exists today). But perhaps it was inevitable that Irving’s practical liberalism would be the road not taken for the Democrats before finding its way to the Republicans. The modern American liberal seems to have an unshakable belief in the efficacy of political action and the progressive triumph of “rational” secularism over inherited (he would say vestigial) social restraints—that is what “progressivism” has come to mean. On these points, Irving and *The Public Interest* were opposed from the beginning, and their opposition hardened in response to the social upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s and subsequent cultural developments. When Irving said that a neoconservative was “a liberal who had been mugged by reality,” he was assuming that liberalism was a practical endeavor, capable of learning and accommodation. When he later said that “what is wrong with liberalism is liberalism,” he meant that liberalism had proven impervious to reality, setting itself at

war with the society it had once sought merely to reform. Opposition to this form of contemporary liberalism is the glue that holds contemporary conservatism together and is the source of its political prospects.

In any event, neither side of our current partisan divide would have much interest in counterfactual history. The Democratic Party, now thoroughly leftist in outlook and operation, is politically triumphant and sees itself on the cusp of achieving historic extensions of government; to the idea that it might have taken a different path, it would say: "Thank goodness we didn't!" The Republican Party had a long run and many successes with neoconservative ideas beginning in 1980; to the idea that it might trade some of them for a more moderate Democratic Party—and a less aggressive liberalism to campaign against—it would say: "No way!"

Yet it is instructive to imagine what our politics would look like with two moderate parties committed, in real conviction and strategy, to economic growth, global leadership, measurable improvement in social well-being, redress rather than exacerbation of grievances, and a degree of tentativeness in place of current certitudes. There is nothing in American political culture to suggest that these could not be consensus issues—indeed both parties already pay lip service to all but the last of them. And there would still be plenty to argue and campaign over. One party would be more cautious and oriented to business interests and the values of tradition, competition, and liberty; the other would be more activist and oriented to labor interests and the values of reform, community, and equality. They would have different constituencies and emphases and would stand or fall on the results of their policies for observable social and economic performance. Who, other than those with immediate partisan interests, would doubt that this would be a felicitous state of affairs, and much preferable to the one we have?

Irving was criticized at some point for wanting to convert both political parties to his vision. He replied that, come to think of it, that would be an excellent idea. Many of his intellectual heirs, myself included, believe that the ambitions of the current administration and Congress for aggressive expansion of taxing, spending, regulation, and redistribution are about to be sunken on the shoals of popular resistance and public indebtedness. If we are right, and the upshot is a more practical, democratic liberalism, and in turn a more practical, competitive conservatism, that would be the ultimate vindication of Irving Kristol's career. If we are

wrong, American politics and government are headed for uncharted waters—time for another Irving Kristol to found another journal to help us find our way.



Irving was, from start to finish, a proponent of vigorous government within its proper sphere. He never passed up a chance to enter a dissent, serious or wisecracking, against libertarian-minded companions such as myself. So I note with some satisfaction that, apart from his wartime service in the U.S. Army, he spent his entire life in the private sector. Indeed his Army experience caused him to take "a solemn oath that I would never, never again work as a functionary in a large organization, and especially not for the U.S. government." Of advice to public officials and politicians he was profuse, but it would never have occurred to him to compile a résumé, submit to a background check, testify before a congressional committee, or engage in the euphemism and compromise of active politics and policymaking. As far as I know, his only ventures into the halls of government were for a passing stint on a humanities advisory council and occasional visits with presidents and legislators, culminating in his appearance at the White House to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2002. His revealed preference was for private endeavor and entrepreneurship—founding journals and foundations, writing and editing manuscripts, raising and doling out money, and setting himself up as a job-training-and-placement service for policy activists and intellectuals. And for the satisfactions of unpolitical private life—teaching, learning, socializing, and always and everywhere reading (about everything under the sun) and arguing (preferably over a good meal and wine).

Among Irving's greatest satisfactions was cigarette smoking, which he did with relish and without apology. Approaching eighty, he developed lung cancer and had surgery to remove part of one lung. It was a success, and he responded with a panache that was characteristic but startling under the circumstances. "It was a *great* procedure!" he exclaimed with a broad, mischievous smile. And it was great—modern medicine gave him an extension of nine years, during which he argued cheerfully with friends, accompanied his wife through the writing of two new books and the preparation of two essay collections, and watched with quiet pride as his two children and five grandchildren continued to grow, prosper, and move the world in their own distinctive ways.

Excerpts from “The American Revolution as a Successful Revolution”

By Irving Kristol

As we approach the bicentennial of the American Revolution, we find ourselves in a paradoxical and embarrassing situation. A celebration of some kind certainly seems to be in order, but the urge to celebrate is not exactly overwhelming. Though many will doubtless ascribe this mood to various dispiriting events of the recent past or to an acute public consciousness of present problems, I think this would be a superficial judgment. The truth is that, for several decades now, there has been a noticeable loss of popular interest in the Revolution, both as a historical event and as a political symbol. The idea and very word, “revolution,” are in good repute today; the American Revolution is not. We are willing enough, on occasion, to pick up an isolated phrase from the Declaration of Independence, or a fine declamation from a Founding Father—Jefferson, usually—and use these to point out the shortcomings of American society as it now exists. Which is to say, we seem to be prompt to declare that the Revolution was a success only when it permits us to assert glibly that we have subsequently failed it. But this easy exercise in self-indictment, though useful in some respects, is on the whole a callow affair. It does not tell us, for instance, whether there is an important connection between that successful Revolution and our subsequent delinquencies. It merely uses the Revolution for rhetorical-political purposes, making no serious effort at either understanding it or understanding ourselves. One even gets the impression that many of us regard ourselves as too sophisticated to take the Revolution seriously—that we see it as one of those naïve events of our distant childhood which we have since long outgrown but which we are dutifully reminded of, at certain moments of commemoration, by insistent relatives who are less liberated from the past than we are.

I think I can make this point most emphatically by asking the simple question: what ever happened to George Washington? He used to be a Very Important Person—indeed, *the* most important person in our history.

Our history books used to describe him, quite simply, as the “Father of his Country,” and in the popular mind he was a larger-than-life figure to whom piety and reverence were naturally due. In the past fifty years, however, this figure has been radically diminished in size and virtually emptied of substance. In part, one supposes, this is because piety is a sentiment we seem less and less capable of, most especially piety toward fathers. We are arrogant and condescending toward all ancestors because we are so convinced we understand them better than they understood themselves—whereas piety assumes that they still understand us better than we understand ourselves. Reverence, too, is a sentiment which we, in our presumption, find somewhat unnatural. Woodrow Wilson, like most Progressives of his time, complained about the “blind worship” of the Constitution by the American people. No such complaint is likely to be heard today. We debate whether or not we should obey the laws of the land, whereas for George Washington—and Lincoln too, who in his lifetime reasserted this point most eloquently—obedience to law was not enough: they thought that Americans, as citizens of a self-governing polity, ought to have *reverence* for their laws. Behind this belief, of course, was the premise that the collective wisdom incarnated in our laws, and especially in the fundamental law of the Constitution, understood us better than any one of us could ever hope to understand it. Having separated ourselves from our historic traditions and no longer recognizing the power inherent in tradition itself, we find this traditional point of view close to incomprehensible.

Equally incomprehensible to us is the idea that George Washington was the central figure in a real, honest-to-God revolution—the first significant revolution of the modern era and one which can lay claim to being the only truly successful revolution, on a large scale, in the past two centuries. In his own lifetime, no one doubted that he was the central figure of that revolution. Subsequent generations did not dispute the fact and our textbooks, until about a quarter of a century ago, took it for granted, albeit in an ever-more routine and unconvincing way. We today, in contrast, find it hard to

Irving Kristol was a senior fellow emeritus at AEI. A version of this speech was delivered at St. John’s Church in Washington, D.C., on October 12, 1973, as part of AEI’s Distinguished Lecture Series.

take George Washington seriously as a successful revolutionary. He just does not fit our conception of what a revolutionary leader is supposed to be like. It is a conception that easily encompasses Robespierre, Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, or Fidel Castro—but can one stretch it to include a gentleman (and a gentleman he most certainly was) like George Washington? And so we tend to escape from that dilemma by deciding that what we call the American Revolution was not an authentic revolution at all, but rather some kind of pseudorevolution, which is why it could be led by so unrevolutionary a character as George Washington.



It is certainly indisputable that the world, when it contemplates the events of 1776 and after, is inclined to see the American Revolution as a French Revolution that never quite came off, whereas the Founding Fathers thought they had cause to regard the French Revolution as an American Revolution that had failed. Indeed, the differing estimates of these two revolutions are definitive of one's political philosophy in the modern world: there are two conflicting conceptions of politics, in relation to the human condition, which are symbolized by these two revolutions. There is no question that the French Revolution is, in some crucial sense, the more "modern" of the two. There is a question, however, as to whether this is a good or bad thing.



All revolutions unleash tides of passion, and the American Revolution was no exception. But it *was* exceptional in the degree to which it was able to subordinate these passions to serious and nuanced thinking about fundamental problems of political philosophy. The pamphlets, sermons, and newspaper essays of the revolutionary period—only now being reprinted and carefully studied—were extraordinarily "academic," in the best sense of that term. Which is to say, they were learned and thoughtful and generally sober in tone. This was a revolution infused by *mind* to a degree never approximated since, and perhaps never approximated before. By mind, not by dogma. The most fascinating aspect of the American Revolution is the severe way it kept questioning itself about the meaning of what it was doing. Enthusiasm there certainly was—a revolution is impossible without enthusiasm—but this enthusiasm was tempered by doubt, introspection, anxiety, skepticism. This may strike us as a very strange state of mind in which to make a revolution; and yet it is

evidently the right state of mind for making a successful revolution. That we should have any difficulty in seeing this tells us something about the immaturity of our own political imagination, an immaturity not at all incompatible with what we take to be sophistication.

One of our most prominent statesmen remarked to an informal group of political scientists that he had been reading *The Federalist Papers* and he was astonished to see how candidly our Founding Fathers could talk about the frailties of human nature and the necessity for a political system to take such frailties into account. It was not possible, he went on to observe, for anyone active in American politics today to speak publicly in this way: he would be accused of an imperfect democratic faith in the common man.

What the American Revolution, once it got under way, was trying to do was no small thing. It was nothing less than the establishment, for the first time since ancient Rome, of a large republican nation, and the idea of reestablishing under modern conditions the glory that had been Rome's could hardly fail to be intoxicating.



The founders thought that self-government was a chancy and demanding enterprise and that successful government in a republic was a most difficult business. We, in contrast, believe that republican self-government is an easy affair, that it need only be instituted for it to work on its own, and that when such government falters, it must be as a consequence of personal incompetence or malfeasance by elected officials. Perhaps nothing reveals better than these different perspectives the intellectual distance we have traveled from the era of the Revolution. We like to think we have "progressed" along this distance. The approaching bicentennial is an appropriate occasion for us to contemplate the possibility that such "progress," should it continue, might yet be fatal to the American polity.



In what sense can the American Revolution be called a successful revolution? And if we agree that it was successful, why was it successful?



To begin at the beginning: the American Revolution was successful in that those who led it were able, in later years, to look back in tranquility at what they had wrought and to say that it was good. This was a revolution which, unlike all subsequent revolutions, did not devour its children: the men who made the revolution were the men who went on to create the new political order, who then held the highest elected positions in this order, and who all died in bed. Not very romantic, perhaps. Indeed positively prosaic. But it is this very prosaic quality of the American Revolution that testifies to its success.



The American Revolution was also successful in another important respect: it was a mild and relatively bloodless revolution. A war was fought, to be sure, and soldiers died in that war. But the rules of civilized warfare, as then established, were for the most part quite scrupulously observed by both sides: there was none of the butchery that we have come to accept as a natural concomitant of revolutionary warfare. More important, there was practically none of the off-battlefield savagery which we now assume to be inevitable in revolutions. . . . As Tocqueville later remarked, with only a little exaggeration, the Revolution “contracted no alliance with the turbulent passions of anarchy, but its course was marked, on the contrary, by a love of order and law.”

A law-and-order revolution? What kind of revolution is that, we ask ourselves? To which many will reply that it could not have been much of a revolution after all—at best a shadow of the real thing—which is always turbulent and bloody and shattering of body and soul. Well, the American Revolution was not that kind of revolution at all, and the possibility we have to consider is that it was successful precisely because it was not that kind of revolution—that it is we, rather than the American revolutionaries, who have an erroneous conception of what a revolution is.



The present-day student of revolutions will look in vain for any familiar kind of “revolutionary situation” in the American colonies prior to ’76. The American people at that moment were the most prosperous in the world and

lived under the freest institutions to be found anywhere in the world. They knew this well enough and boasted of it often enough. Their quarrel with the British crown was, in its origins, merely over the scope of colonial self-government, and hardly anyone saw any good reason why this quarrel should erupt into a war of independence. It was only after the war got under way that the American people decided that this was a good opportunity to make a revolution as well—that is, to establish a republican form of government.

Republican and quasi-republican traditions had always been powerful in the colonies, which were populated to such a large degree by religious dissenters who were sympathetic to the ideas incorporated in Cromwell’s Commonwealth. Moreover, American political institutions from the very beginning were close to republican, in fact, especially those of the Puritan communities of New England. Still, it is instructive to note that the word “republic” does not appear in the Declaration of Independence. Not that there was any real thought of reinstating a monarchy in the New World: no one took such a prospect seriously. It was simply that, reluctant and cautious revolutionaries as they were, the Founding Fathers saw no need to press matters further than they had to, at that particular moment. To put it bluntly: they did not want events to get out of hand and saw no good reason to provoke more popular turbulence than was absolutely necessary.

One does not want to make the American Revolution an even more prosaic affair than it was. This was a revolution—a real one—and it was infused with a spirit of excitement and innovation. After all, what the American Revolution, once it got under way, was trying to do was no small thing. It was nothing less than the establishment, for the first time since ancient Rome, of a large republican nation, and the idea of reestablishing under modern conditions the glory that had been Rome’s could hardly fail to be intoxicating. This Revolution did indeed have grand, even millennial, expectations as to the future role of this new nation in both the political imagination and political history of the human race.



It should not be surprising, therefore, that in the war of ideologies which has engulfed the twentieth century, the United States is at a disadvantage. This disadvantage does not flow from any weakness on our part. It is not, as some say, because we have forgotten our revolutionary heritage and therefore have nothing to say to a discontented and turbulent world. We have, indeed, much to say, only it is



not what our contemporaries want to hear. It is not even what we ourselves want to hear, and in *that* sense it may be correct to claim we have forgotten our revolutionary heritage. Our revolutionary message—which is a message not of the Revolution itself but of the American political tradition from the *Mayflower* to the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution—is that a self-disciplined people *can* create a political community in which an ordered liberty will promote both economic prosperity and political participation. To the teeming masses of other nations, the American political tradition says: to enjoy the fruits of self-government, you must first cease being “masses” and become a “people,” attached to a common way of life, sharing common values, and existing in a condition of mutual trust and sympathy as between individuals and even social classes. It is a distinctly odd kind of “revolutionary” message, by twentieth-century criteria—so odd that it seems not revolutionary at all, and yet so revolutionary that it seems utterly utopian.

To the teeming masses of other nations, the American political tradition says: to enjoy the fruits of self-government, you must first cease being “masses” and become a “people,” attached to a common way of life, sharing common values, and existing in a condition of mutual trust and sympathy as between individuals and even social classes.



In the end, what informs the American political tradition is a proposition and a premise. The proposition is that the best national government is, to use a phrase the Founding Fathers were fond of, “mild government.” The premise is that you can only achieve “mild government” if you have a solid bedrock of local self-government, so that the responsibilities of national government are limited in scope. And a corollary of this premise is that such a bedrock of local self-government can be achieved only by a people who—through the shaping influence of religion, education, and their own daily experience—are capable of governing themselves in those small and petty matters which are the stuff of local politics.

It would not be fair to conclude that the American political tradition is flawless, and that it is only we, its heirs, who are to blame for the many problems our society is grappling with—and so ineptly. The American Revolution was a successful revolution, but there is no such thing, either in one’s personal life or in a nation’s history, as unambiguous success. The legacy of the American Revolution and of the entire political tradition associated with it is problematic in all sorts of ways. Strangely enough, we have such an imperfect understanding of this tradition that, even as we vulgarize it or question it or disregard it, we rarely address ourselves to its problematic quality.

The major problematic aspect of this tradition has to do with the relationship of the “citizen” to the “common man.” And the difficulties we have in defining this relationship are best illustrated by the fact that, though we have been a representative democracy for two centuries now, we have never developed an adequate theory of representation. More precisely we have developed *two* contradictory theories of representation, both of which can claim legitimacy within the American political tradition and both of which were enunciated, often by the same people, during the Revolution. The one sees the public official as a “common man” who has a mandate to reflect the opinions of the majority; the other sees the public official as a somewhat uncommon man—a more-than-common man, if you will—who, because of his talents and character, is able to take a larger view of the “public interest” than the voters who elected him or the voters who failed to defeat him. One might say that the first is a “democratic” view of the legislator, the second a “republican” view. The American political tradition has always had a kind of double vision on this whole problem, which in turn makes for a bewildering moral confusion. Half the time we regard our politicians as, in the nature of things, probably corrupt and certainly untrustworthy; the other half of the time, we denounce them for failing to be models of integrity and rectitude. Indeed, we have a profession—journalism—which seems committed to both of these contradictory propositions. But politicians are pretty much like the rest of us and tend to become the kinds of people they are expected to be. The absence of clear and distinct expectations has meant that public morality in this country has never been, and is not, anything we can be proud of.

In a way, the ambiguity in our theory of representation points to a much deeper ambiguity in that system of self-government which emerged from the Revolution and the Constitutional Convention. That system has been perceptively titled, by Professor Martin Diamond, “a democratic republic.” Now, we tend to think of these terms as near-synonyms, but in fact they differ significantly in their political connotations. Just how significant the difference is becomes clear if we realize that the America which emerged from the Revolution and the Constitutional Convention was the first democratic republic in history. The political philosophers of that time could study the history of republics and they could study the history of democracies, but there was no opportunity for them to study both together. When the Founding Fathers declared that they had devised a new kind of political entity based on “a new science of politics,” they were not vainly boasting or deceiving themselves. It is we, their political descendants, who tend to be unaware of the novelty of the American political enterprise, and of the risks and ambiguities inherent in that novelty. We simplify and vulgarize and distort, because we have lost the sense of how bold and innovative the Founding Fathers were, and of how problematic—necessarily problematic—is the system of government, and the society, which they established.



What is the difference between a “democracy” and a “republic”? In a democracy, the will of the people is supreme. In a republic, it is not the will of the people but the rational consensus of the people—a rational consensus is implicit in the term “consent”—that governs the people. That is to say, in a democracy, popular passion may rule—*may*, though it need not—but in a republic, popular passion is regarded as unfit to rule, and precautions are taken to see that it is subdued rather than sovereign. In a democracy, all politicians are, to some degree, demagogues: they appeal to people’s prejudices and passions, they incite their expectations by making reckless promises; they endeavor to ingratiate themselves with the electorate in every possible way. In a republic, there are not supposed to be such politicians, only statesmen—sober, unglamorous, thoughtful men who are engaged in a kind of perpetual conversation with the citizenry. In a republic, a fair degree of equality and prosperity are

important goals, but it is liberty that is given priority as the proper end of government. In a democracy, these priorities are reversed: the status of men and women as consumers of economic goods is taken to be more significant than their status as participants in the creation of political goods. A republic is what we would call “moralistic” in its approach to both public and private affairs; a democracy is more easygoing, more “permissive” as we now say, even more cynical.

The Founding Fathers perceived that their new nation was too large, too heterogeneous, too dynamic, too mobile for it to govern itself successfully along strict republican principles. And they had no desire at all to see it governed along strict democratic principles, since they did not have that much faith in the kinds of “common men” likely to be produced by such a nation. So they created a new form of “popular government,” to use one of their favorite terms, that incorporated both republican and democratic principles, in a complicated and ingenious way. This system has lasted for two centuries, which means it has worked very well indeed. But in the course of that time, we have progressively forgotten what kind of system it is and *why* it works as well as it does. Every now and then, for instance, we furiously debate the question of whether or not the Supreme Court is meeting its obligations as a democratic institution. The question reveals a startling ignorance of our political tradition. The Supreme Court is not—and was never supposed to be—a democratic institution; it is a republican institution which counterbalances the activities of our various democratic institutions. Yet I have discovered that when you say this to college students, they do not understand the distinction and even have difficulty thinking about it.

So it would seem that today, two hundred years after the American Revolution, we are in a sense victims of its success. The political tradition out of which it issued and the political order it helped to create are imperfectly comprehended by us. What is worse, we are not fully aware of this imperfect comprehension and are frequently smug in our convenient misunderstandings. The American Revolution certainly merits celebration. But it would be reassuring if a part of that celebration were to consist, not merely of pious clichés, but of a serious and sustained effort to achieve a deeper and more widespread understanding of just what it is we are celebrating.