INTRODUCTION

The American Experiment

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What have we learned? It is two centuries now since the American people commenced what even they appear to have understood as an experiment in liberty. In his essay in this volume, Martin Diamond, following the lead of Leo Strauss, observes that the men of the Declaration of Independence and of the Constitution were pursuing, were implementing what Hamilton called the "new science of politics." There had been a crucial turn in political thought away from the earlier Greek assumption that the virtue of its citizens was the foundation of the state, and that society accordingly ought to focus on the inculcation of such virtue, and, of course, its further elucidation. Civic philosophy would be the basic science of such a society, with its teachings a kind of applied science. Such was the view that persisted thereafter for two thousand years, with generally indifferent results. Then came Locke and Montesquieu and others with a quite different view. They saw the object of society as the attainment of liberty for the individual, and judged that society accordingly ought to focus on the practicable arrangements that would establish and preserve that liberty. Diamond describes the Declaration as expressing the "political science of liberty" of that age, a science subsequently, and for the first time, fully elaborated in the Constitution.

Very well, then, what have we learned? Not long ago a friend of many years back came through Cambridge, where he presented a paper on Aeschylus to the classics department at Harvard. By the standards of most disciplines, he had chosen late to become a classicist. Something wholly personal had driven him back to the Greeks, and he had stayed there many years and was only just reappearing, in a sense, among his friends. I sought him out and asked the necessary question: What had he learned? He thought a moment and replied: "I have learned that if you do not know your future, you will never understand your past."

Which may be so: It is a Greek idea, surely. And it was also the Greeks who first developed the idea of liberty, and the notion of democracy as the form of government in which liberty might reasonably prosper. (Or more accurately, as I learn, "polity"—democracy technically being a corruption of government by popular will, just
as tyranny was seen as a corruption of monarchy, and oligarchy a corruption of aristocracy.) Is it then also the case that there is a fat-
ed outcome, a destiny—residing in our stars or in ourselves—which,
hidden to us now, also conceals the meaning of the events which
have been leading to it? It is a possibility not to be dismissed. In-
deed, how would we understand 18th-century New England, were
it not for the hypothesis that those various worthies were compul-
sively at work trying to rig the auguries to persuade them of a heav-
enly destiny of which they could never be confident? But such an
understanding goes against the prevailing temper. We assume that
causality runs the other way, because chemists have produced
chemicals via that mode of operation. What then have we learned
from the experimental mode?

To read these essays without benefit of a cautionary Introduction
(and this alone justifies the reader’s brief diversion) would be to
risk gaining the impression that we have learned that the American
experiment is not going very well. Neither liberty nor democracy
would seem to be prospering—or, in any event, neither would seem
to have a future nearly as auspicious as their past. The term “auspi-
cious” is intended both as an echo of my friend’s Delphic pessimism,
and to suggest a variant on the scientists’ discovery that observed
events are affected by the act of observation. Seemingly nothing at
present brings forth more gloom than the contemplation of the fu-
ture, of which an epiphenomenon is a far too cheerful view of the
past. The present volume may have been noticeably inclined in this
direction by the request made of each contributor that he consider
his chosen topic in the light of what may be found on the subject in
James Bryce’s The American Commonwealth.

Now, several things may be said of Lord Bryce’s unquestionably
great work. The first is that it appeared not quite a century ago. In
1888, which is the date of the first Preface, things looked consider-
ably more cheerful than they had a mere dozen years earlier, when
the United States Centennial Exposition opened in Philadelphia.
The experiment was a century old then, and it didn’t look that
promising at all. A dozen years had changed a good deal. A second
point is simply that Bryce was an Englishman, and in this case
one disposed to be rather more friendly than we often are to our-
selves, and in any event concerned with long-term, as against short-
term, issues and trends. The heroic opening paragraph of Chapter I
takes us in one kaleidoscopic sweep from the fretful concern of the
average American regarding the everyday performance of the
polity to the grand perspective of the European observer of the
manifest and magnificent American destiny:

“What do you think of our institutions?” is the question addressed to
the European traveller in the United States by every chance acquaint-
ance. The traveller finds the question natural, for if he be an observ-
ant man his own mind is full of these institutions. But he asks himself
why it should be in America only that he is so interrogated. In Eng-
land one does not inquire from foreigners, nor even from Americans,
their views on the English laws and government; nor does the Englishman on the Continent find Frenchmen or Germans or Italians anxious to have his judgment on their politics. Presently the reason of the difference appears. The institutions of the United States are deemed by inhabitants and admitted by strangers to be a matter of more general interest than those of the not less famous nations of the Old World. They are, or are supposed to be, institutions of a new type. They form, or are supposed to form, a symmetrical whole, capable of being studied and judged all together more profitably than the less perfectly harmonized institutions of older countries. They represent an experiment in the rule of the multitude, tried on a scale unprecedentedly vast, and the results of which every one is concerned to watch. And yet they are something more than an experiment, for they are believed to disclose and display the type of institutions towards which, as by a law of fate, the rest of civilized mankind are forced to move, some with swifter, others with slower, but all with unresting feet.

Now obviously the most important fact about the American experiment almost a century later is that ours evidently are not the institutions "towards which, as by a law of fate, the rest of civilized mankind are forced to move. . . ." To the contrary, liberal democracy on the American model increasingly tends to the condition of monarchy in the 19th century: a holdover form of government, one which persists in isolated or peculiar places here and there, and may even serve well enough for special circumstances, but which has simply no relevance to the future. It is where the world was, not where it is going. In this respect American institutions reached their apogee in 1919, following World War I, with the extraordinary international position of Woodrow Wilson, who had an eminence no American leader had achieved before, and none since, an eminence it is difficult to imagine any American will ever achieve again under our present arrangements. Through the long unthreatening 19th century—Bryce had said that we sailed a "summer sea"—the expectation that American institutions would inherit the future had no real challengers, or rather, no self-evident ones. Socialist doctrines were forming in Europe, and the equalitarian challenge to liberalism was gathering strength and conviction, but these did not manifest themselves as forms of government, as institutional arrangements, until much later—indeed, not significantly until 1917, and the success of the Bolshevik faction in Russia. Thus the very world events—World War I and its aftermath—which had brought the seeming triumph of the American experiment, now brought into being a new form and theory of government, which promptly assumed the role of the challenger to the American model, and all too soon the American experiment commenced to acquire the fateful air of a transitional arrangement. Other forms of socialism rose to challenge the totalitarian variant. In Western Europe, especially, democratic socialism took hold, but again as a challenge to the American model. A brief restoration—I fear it will be seen as such—took place following the
Second World War, with the establishment of post-colonial regimes throughout the tropics which were almost always democratic in form. (They were modeled on European democracies, but by then democracy had become a norm for Europeans as well.) But the regimes did not prosper. In one after another the experiment failed. In 1975, to all appearances, it failed in India, incomparably the largest and most important experiment of all. Increasingly, democracy is seen as an arrangement peculiar to a handful of North Atlantic countries, plus a few of their colonies, as the Greeks would have understood that term.

There have been worse fates than to be a member of this honorable band, and worse by far than to be the American member of it. The world of the 4th century, B.C., was scarcely democratic, but its most vital culture was—and so it is again today. That was not a rich world, nor is today's, but now, as then, the democratic peoples are the most productive, and of these, Americans incomparably so. (A Royal Commission has reported that in 1975 the richest one percent of the British populace earned incomes over $13,700; the same year the median American family income was $12,965.) And yet the comparison will not do, for if the Greeks had the highest culture of their age, they knew it. If the democracies today do, or if the American democracy in particular does, we don't think it, or we don't think we ought, or we don't think we will, or something. . . . The centre has not held very well.

The year 1876 was not the best of times either. The future probably looked no better than the awful immediate past. And yet the symbols of the republic were intact. Thus the Philadelphia Exposition was awash with scientific and technological wonders, but the sensation of the event was A. M. Willard's vast romantic canvas, "The Spirit of '76." It probably would be absurd to suppose that any such response could be evoked by a patriotic painting today. Today, more likely, it would be discovered early on that the work had been commissioned by a chromo-lithography dealer who saw the commercial possibilities, as was indeed the case with Willard. In no one thing has the American civic culture declined more in recent decades than in the symbols of love of country, and of manly or womanly pride in the nation. The flag remains, but little else which is not battered or banal or both. The very effort to evoke patriotism is increasingly associated with the near pathetic bewilderment of the badly educated and poorly motivated lower-middle class confronted with the manifest intellectual and social superiority of the nonpatriotic. Even our sense of peoplehood grows uncertain, as ethnic assertions take their implacable toll on the civic assumption of unity.

And so what is left if so much is gone? Curiously, the answer hearkens more to the tradition of the Greeks whom Locke and Montesquieu displaced, than to the tradition established in their stead. For when all else is gone, virtue remains. If it has ever been present, it is present still. I venture that the reader of this volume
will find it very much present in the Public Interest writers here presented.

Ours has been a curious fate. Launched in a brief period of good feeling (I can recall suggesting Consensus as a possible name for the journal, that being a favorite term of President Johnson, in whose administration I was then serving), The Public Interest was soon sailing anything but a summer sea. It was a new ship, but it did not have a green crew. It may be we took the weather rather too well, as all about us canvas tore and cables parted. It has been only a decade, and yet it may not be too soon to say that while we have seen the opinions presented in The Public Interest more confirmed than otherwise, and frequently acquiring a general currency, in the process we also seem to have evoked a considerable annoyance and even a certain distrust.

We have even had our political labels changed for us. When we began, almost all the editors and contributors would have described themselves as "liberals." (One of the editors would have described himself as a socialist, although not all his colleagues would have done so.) But before long we began to find ourselves depicted as "conservatives." In time, a new term—"neoconservative"—was invented for us (more specifically, for myself, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Bell) by the socialist writer Michael Harrington. Later, his essay and others were collected in a volume, The New Conservatives: A Critique from the Left, edited by Lewis Coser and Irving Howe. This had something of a New York "fraction" fight about it, as many of these writers were friends, and almost all were honorable men. Although the label was given us by the "left," it seems to have been welcomed by liberals and conservatives alike, the former evidently relieved to have rid of us, the latter glad for infrequent recruits. We remain cheerful about all this for one simple reason—the guiding principle which illuminates the essays in this volume. It is, as Martin Diamond shows in his revelatory essay, that liberty was the first principle of this Republic, that it is the animating principle of the Constitution no less than of the Declaration, that it is this which makes us what we are, be we conservative or liberal or, for that matter, socialist—socialists, that is, of the synod with which we commerce. Plainly, any who espouse this principle too assertively may expect in time to have acquired a conservative air. This may be no more than a sign of the Bicentennial times. But this makes it no less the grandest and most glorious idea man has ever had: To espouse it is virtue itself; to do so with a decent competence is all we have ever aspired to. Those who find these essays depressing in their alarm for liberty may take heart in the fact that it is done with such spirit, and so well. Where else?