

A New Americanism

Why a Nation Needs a National Story

By Jill Lepore

In 1986, the Pulitzer Prize–winning, bowtie-wearing Stanford historian Carl Degler delivered something other than the usual pipe-smoking, scotch-on-the-rocks, after-dinner disquisition that had plagued the evening program of the annual meeting of the American Historical Association for nearly all of its centurylong history. Instead, Degler, a gentle and quietly heroic man, accused his colleagues of nothing short of dereliction of duty: appalled by nationalism, they had abandoned the study of the nation.

“We can write history that implicitly denies or ignores the nation-state, but it would be a history that flew in the face of what people who live in a nation-state require and demand,” Degler said that night in Chicago. He issued a warning: “If we historians fail to provide a nationally defined history, others less critical and less informed will take over the job for us.”

The nation-state was in decline, said the wise men of the time. The world had grown global. Why bother to study the nation? [Nationalism](#), an infant in the nineteenth century, had become, in the first half of the twentieth, a monster. But in the second half, it was nearly dead—a stumbling, ghastly wraith, at least outside postcolonial

states. And historians seemed to believe that if they stopped studying it, it would die sooner: starved, neglected, and abandoned.

Francis Fukuyama is a political scientist, not a historian. But his 1989 essay “The End of History?” illustrated Degler’s point. Fascism and communism were dead, Fukuyama announced at the end of the Cold War. Nationalism, the greatest remaining threat to [liberalism](#), had been “defanged” in the West, and in other parts of the world where it was still kicking, well, that wasn’t quite nationalism. “The vast majority of the world’s nationalist movements do not have a political program beyond the negative desire of independence from some other group or people, and do not offer anything like a comprehensive agenda for socio-economic organization,” Fukuyama wrote. (Needless to say, he has since had to walk a lot of this back, writing in his most recent book about the “unexpected” populist nationalism of Russia’s [Vladimir Putin](#), Poland’s Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Hungary’s Viktor Orban, Turkey’s [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), the Philippines’ [Rodrigo Duterte](#), and the United States’ [Donald Trump](#).)

Fukuyama was hardly alone in pronouncing nationalism all but dead. A lot of other people had, too. That’s what worried Degler.

Nation-states, when they form, imagine a past. That, at least in part, accounts for why modern historical writing arose with the nation-state. For more than a century, the nation-state was the central object of historical inquiry. From George Bancroft in the 1830s through, say, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., or Richard Hofstadter, studying American history meant studying the American nation.

As the historian John Higham put it, “From the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1960s, the nation was the grand subject of American history.” Over that same stretch of time, the United States experienced a civil war, emancipation, reconstruction, segregation, two world wars, and unprecedented immigration—making the task even more essential. “A history in common is fundamental to sustaining the affiliation that constitutes national subjects,” the historian Thomas Bender once observed. “Nations are, among other things, a collective agreement, partly coerced, to affirm a common history as the basis for a shared future.”

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Officers of the American Historical Association at their annual meeting in Washington, D.C., December 1889

But in the 1970s, studying the nation fell out of favor in the American historical profession. Most historians started looking at either smaller or bigger things, investigating the experiences and cultures of social groups or taking the broad vantage promised by global history. This turn produced excellent scholarship. But meanwhile, who was doing the work of providing a legible past and a plausible future—a nation—to the people who lived in the United States? Charlatans, stooges, and tyrants. The endurance of nationalism proves that there’s never any shortage of blackguards willing to prop up people’s sense of themselves and their destiny with a tissue of myths and prophecies, prejudices and hatreds, or to empty out old rubbish bags full of festering resentments and calls to violence. When historians abandon the study of the nation, when

scholars stop trying to write a common history for a people, nationalism doesn't die. Instead, it eats liberalism.

Maybe it's too late to restore a common history, too late for historians to make a difference. But is there any option other than to try to craft a new American history—one that could foster a new Americanism?

THE NATION AND THE STATE

The United States is different from other nations—every nation is different from every other—and its nationalism is different, too. To review: a nation is a people with common origins, and a state is a political community governed by laws. A nation-state is a political community governed by laws that unites a people with a supposedly common ancestry. When nation-states arose out of city-states and kingdoms and empires, they explained themselves by telling stories about their origins—stories meant to suggest that everyone in, say, “the French nation” had common ancestors, when they of course did not. As I wrote in my book *These Truths*, “Very often, histories of nation-states are little more than myths that hide the seams that stitch the nation to the state.”

But in the American case, the origins of the nation can be found in those seams. When the United States declared its independence, in 1776, it became a state, but what made it a nation? The fiction that its people shared a common ancestry was absurd on its face; they came from all over, and, after having waged a war against Great Britain, just about the last thing they wanted to celebrate was their Britishness. Long after independence, most Americans saw the United States not as a nation but, true

to the name, as a confederation of states. That's what made arguing for ratification of the Constitution an uphill battle; it's also why the Constitution's advocates called themselves "Federalists," when they were in fact nationalists, in the sense that they were proposing to replace a federal system, under the Articles of Confederation, with a national system. When John Jay insisted, in *The Federalist Papers*, no. 2, "that Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs," he was whistling in the dark.

One way to turn a state into a nation is to write its history.

It was the lack of these similarities that led Federalists such as Noah Webster to attempt to manufacture a national character by urging Americans to adopt distinctive spelling. "Language, as well as government should be national," Webster wrote in 1789. "America should have her own distinct from all the world." That got the United States "favor" instead of "favour." It did not, however, make the United States a nation. And by 1828, when Webster published his monumental *American Dictionary of the English Language*, he did not include the word "nationalism," which had no meaning or currency in the United States in the 1820s. Not until the 1840s, when European nations were swept up in what has been called "the age of

nationalities,” did Americans come to think of themselves as belonging to a nation, with a destiny.

This course of events is so unusual, in the matter of nation building, that the historian David Armitage has suggested that the United States is something other than a nation-state. “What we mean by nationalism is the desire of nations (however defined) to possess states to create the peculiar hybrid we call the nation-state,” Armitage writes, but “there’s also a beast we might call the state-nation, which arises when the state is formed before the development of any sense of national consciousness. The United States might be seen as a, perhaps the only, spectacular example of the latter”—not a nation-state but a state-nation.

One way to turn a state into a nation is to write its history. The first substantial history of the American nation, Bancroft’s ten-volume *History of the United States, From the Discovery of the American Continent*, was published between 1834 and 1874. Bancroft wasn’t only a historian; he was also a politician who served in the administrations of three U.S. presidents, including as secretary of war in the age of American continental expansion. An architect of manifest destiny, Bancroft wrote his history in an attempt to make the United States’ founding appear inevitable, its growth inexorable, and its history ancient. De-emphasizing its British inheritance, he celebrated the United States as a pluralistic and cosmopolitan nation, with ancestors all over the world:

The origin of the language we speak carries us to India; our religion is from Palestine; of the hymns sung in our churches, some were first heard in Italy, some in the

deserts of Arabia, some on the banks of the Euphrates; our arts come from Greece; our jurisprudence from Rome.

Nineteenth-century nationalism was liberal, a product of the Enlightenment. It rested on an analogy between the individual and the collective. As the American theorist of nationalism Hans Kohn once wrote, “The concept of national self-determination—transferring the ideal of liberty from the individual to the organic collectivity—was raised as the banner of liberalism.”

Liberal nationalism, as an idea, is fundamentally historical. Nineteenth-century Americans understood the nation-state within the context of an emerging set of ideas about human rights: namely, that the power of the state guaranteed everyone eligible for citizenship the same set of irrevocable political rights. The future Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner offered this interpretation in 1849:

Here is the Great Charter of every human being drawing vital breath upon this soil, whatever may be his condition, and whoever may be his parents. He may be poor, weak, humble, or black,—he may be of Caucasian, Jewish, Indian, or Ethiopian race,—he may be of French, German, English, or Irish extraction; but before the Constitution of Massachusetts all these distinctions disappear. . . . He is a MAN, the equal of all his fellow-men. He is one of the children of the State, which, like an impartial parent, regards all of its offspring with an equal care.

Or as the Prussian-born American political philosopher Francis Lieber, a great influence on Sumner, wrote, “Without a national character, states cannot obtain that

longevity and continuity of political society which is necessary for our progress.” Lieber’s most influential essay, “Nationalism: A Fragment of Political Science,” appeared in 1860, on the very eve of the Civil War.

THE UNION AND THE CONFEDERACY

The American Civil War was a struggle over two competing ideas of the nation-state. This struggle has never ended; it has just moved around.

In the antebellum United States, Northerners, and especially northern abolitionists, drew a contrast between (northern) nationalism and (southern) sectionalism. “We must cultivate a national, instead of a sectional patriotism” urged one Michigan congressman in 1850. But Southerners were nationalists, too. It’s just that their nationalism was what would now be termed “illiberal” or “ethnic,” as opposed to the Northerners’ liberal or civic nationalism. This distinction has been subjected to much criticism, on the grounds that it’s nothing more than a way of calling one kind of nationalism good and another bad. But the nationalism of the North and that of the South were in fact different, and much of U.S. history has been a battle between them.

“Ours is the government of the white man,” the American statesman John C. Calhoun declared in 1848, arguing against admitting Mexicans as citizens of the United States. “This Government was made by our fathers on the white basis,” the American politician Stephen Douglas said in 1858. “It was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever.”

Abraham Lincoln, building on arguments made by black abolitionists, exposed Douglas' history as fiction. "I believe the entire records of the world, from the date of the Declaration of Independence up to within three years ago, may be searched in vain for one single affirmation, from one single man, that the negro was not included in the Declaration of Independence," Lincoln said during a debate with Douglas in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1858. He continued:

I think I may defy Judge Douglas to show that he ever said so, that Washington ever said so, that any President ever said so, that any member of Congress ever said so, or that any living man upon the whole earth ever said so, until the necessities of the present policy of the Democratic party, in regard to slavery, had to invent that affirmation.

No matter, the founders of the Confederacy answered: we will craft a new constitution, based on [white supremacy](#). In 1861, the Confederacy's newly elected vice president, Alexander Stephens, delivered a speech in Savannah in which he explained that the ideas that lay behind the U.S. Constitution "rested upon the assumption of the equality of races"—here ceding Lincoln's argument—but that "our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite ideas; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery is his natural and moral condition."

The North won the war. But the battle between liberal and illiberal nationalism raged on, especially during the debates over the 14th and 15th Amendments, which marked a second founding of the United States on terms set by liberal ideas about the rights of citizens and the

powers of nation-states—namely, birthright citizenship, equal rights, universal (male) suffrage, and legal protections for noncitizens. These Reconstruction-era amendments also led to debates over immigration, racial and gender equality, and the limits of citizenship. Under the terms of the 14th Amendment, children of Chinese immigrants born in the United States would be U.S. citizens. Few major political figures talked about Chinese immigrants in favorable terms. Typical was the virulent prejudice expressed by William Higby, a one-time miner and Republican congressman from California. “The Chinese are nothing but a pagan race,” Higby said in 1866. “You cannot make good citizens of them.” And opponents of the 15th Amendment found both African American voting and Chinese citizenship scandalous. Fumed Garrett Davis, a Democratic senator from Kentucky: “I want no negro government; I want no Mongolian government; I want the government of the white man which our fathers incorporated.”

The most significant statement in this debate was made by a man born into slavery who had sought his own freedom and fought for decades for emancipation, citizenship, and equal rights. In 1869, in front of audiences across the country, Frederick Douglass delivered one of the most important and least read speeches in American political history, urging the ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendments in the spirit of establishing a “composite nation.” He spoke, he said, “to the question of whether we are the better or the worse for being composed of different races of men.” If nations, which are essential for progress, form from similarity, what of nations like the United States, which are formed out of difference, Native American, African, European,

Asian, and every possible mixture, “the most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world”?

JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS

A statue of Frederick Douglass pictured behind U.S. President Barack Obama at a ceremony commemorating the 150th anniversary of the 13th Amendment in Washington, D.C., December 2015

To Republicans like Higby, who objected to Chinese immigration and to birthright citizenship, and to Democrats like Davis, who objected to citizenship and voting rights for anyone other than white men, Douglass offered an impassioned reply. As for the Chinese: “Do you ask, if I would favor such immigration? I answer, I would. Would you have them naturalized, and have them invested with all the rights of American citizenship? I would. Would you allow them to vote? I would.” As for future generations, and future immigrants to the United States, Douglass said, “I want a home here not only for the negro, the mulatto and the Latin races; but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and for ours.” For Douglass, progress could only come in this new form of a nation, the composite nation. “We shall spread the network of our science and civilization over all who seek their shelter, whether from Asia, Africa, or the Isles of the sea,” he said, and “all shall here bow to the same law, speak the same language, support the same Government, enjoy the same liberty, vibrate with the same national enthusiasm, and seek the same national ends.” That was Douglass’ new Americanism. It did not prevail.

Emancipation and Reconstruction, the historian and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois would write in 1935, was “the finest effort to achieve democracy . . . this world had ever seen.” But that effort had been betrayed by white Northerners and white Southerners who patched the United States back together by inventing a myth that the war was not a fight over slavery at all but merely a struggle between the nation and the states. “We fell under the leadership of those who would compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present,” Du Bois wrote bitterly. Douglass’ new Americanism was thus forgotten. So was Du Bois’ reckoning with American history.

NATIONAL HISTORIES

The American Historical Association was founded in 1884—two years after the French philosopher Ernest Renan wrote his signal essay, “What Is a Nation?” Nationalism was taking a turn, away from liberalism and toward illiberalism, including in Germany, beginning with the “blood and iron” of Bismarck. A driver of this change was the emergence of mass politics, under whose terms nation-states “depended on the participation of the ordinary citizen to an extent not previously envisaged,” as the historian Eric Hobsbawm once wrote. That “placed the question of the ‘nation,’ and the citizen’s feelings towards whatever he regarded as his ‘nation,’ ‘nationality’ or other centre of loyalty, at the top of the political agenda.”

This transformation began in the United States in the 1880s, with the rise of Jim Crow laws, and with a regime of immigration restriction, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first federal law restricting

immigration, which was passed in 1882. Both betrayed the promises and constitutional guarantees made by the 14th and 15th Amendments. Fighting to realize that promise would be the work of standard-bearers who included Ida B. Wells, who led a campaign against lynching, and Wong Chin Foo, who founded the Chinese Equal Rights League in 1892, insisting, “We claim a common manhood with all other nationalities.”

The uglier and more illiberal nationalism got, the more liberals became convinced of the impossibility of liberal nationalism.

But the white men who delivered speeches at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association during those years had little interest in discussing racial segregation, the disenfranchisement of black men, or immigration restriction. Frederick Jackson Turner drew historians’ attention to the frontier. Others contemplated the challenges of populism and socialism. Progressive-era historians explained the American nation as a product of conflict “between democracy and privilege, the poor versus the rich, the farmers against the monopolists, the workers against the corporations, and, at times, the Free-Soilers against the slaveholders,” as Degler observed. And a great many association presidents, notably Woodrow Wilson, mourned what had come to be called “the Lost Cause of the Confederacy.” All offered national histories that left out the origins and endurance of racial inequality.

Meanwhile, nationalism changed, beginning in the 1910s and especially in the 1930s. And the uglier and more illiberal nationalism got, the more liberals became convinced of the impossibility of [liberal nationalism](#). In the United States, nationalism largely took the form of economic protectionism and isolationism. In 1917, the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, opposing U.S. involvement in World War I, began calling for “America first,” and he took the same position in 1938, insisting that “Americans should maintain the traditional policy of our great and independent nation—great largely because it is independent.”

In the years before the United States entered World War II, a fringe even supported Hitler; Charles Coughlin—a priest, near presidential candidate, and wildly popular broadcaster—took to the radio to preach anti-Semitism and admiration for Hitler and the Nazi Party and called on his audience to form a new political party, the Christian Front. In 1939, about 20,000 Americans, some dressed in Nazi uniforms, gathered in Madison Square Garden, decorated with swastikas and American flags, with posters declaring a [“Mass Demonstration for True Americanism,”](#) where they denounced the New Deal as the “Jew Deal.” Hitler, for his part, expressed admiration for the Confederacy and regret that “the beginnings of a great new social order based on the principle of slavery and inequality were destroyed by the war.” As one arm of a campaign to widen divisions in the United States and weaken American resolve, Nazi propaganda distributed in the Jim Crow South called for the repeal of the 14th and 15th Amendments.

The “America first” supporter Charles Lindbergh, who, not irrelevantly, had become famous by flying across the Atlantic alone, based his nationalism on geography. “One need only glance at a map to see where our true frontiers lie,” he said in 1939. “What more could we ask than the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Pacific on the west?” (This President Franklin Roosevelt answered in 1940, declaring the dream that the United States was “a lone island,” to be, in fact, a nightmare, “the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitiful masters of other continents.”)

In the wake of World War II, American historians wrote the history of the United States as a story of consensus, an unvarying “liberal tradition in America,” according to the political scientist Louis Hartz, that appeared to stretch forward in time into an unvarying liberal future. Schlesinger, writing in 1949, argued that liberals occupied “the vital center” of American politics. These historians had plenty of blind spots—they were especially blind to the forces of conservatism and fundamentalism—but they nevertheless offered an expansive, liberal account of the history of the American nation and the American people.

The last, best single-volume popular history of the United States written in the twentieth century was Degler’s 1959 book, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America*: a stunning, sweeping account that, greatly influenced by Du Bois, placed race, slavery, segregation, and civil rights at the center of the story, alongside liberty, rights, revolution, freedom, and equality.

Astonishingly, it was Degler's first book. It was also the last of its kind.

THE DECLINE OF NATIONAL HISTORY

If love of the nation is what drove American historians to the study of the past in the nineteenth century, hatred for nationalism drove American historians away from it in the second half of the twentieth century.

It had long been clear that nationalism was a contrivance, an artifice, a fiction. After World War II, while Roosevelt was helping establish what came to be called [“the liberal international order,”](#) internationalists began predicting the end of the nation-state, with the Harvard political scientist Rupert Emerson declaring that “the nation and the nation-state are anachronisms in the atomic age.” By the 1960s, nationalism looked rather worse than an anachronism. Meanwhile, with the coming of the Vietnam War, American historians stopped studying the nation-state in part out of a fear of complicity with atrocities of U.S. foreign policy and regimes of political oppression at home. “The professional practice of history writing and teaching flourished as the handmaiden of nation-making; the nation provided both support and an appreciative audience,” Bender observed in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* in 2002. “Only recently,” he continued, “and because of the uncertain status of the nation-state has it been recognized that history as a professional discipline is part of its own substantive narrative and not at all sufficiently self-conscious about the implications of that circularity.” Since then, historians have only become more self-conscious, to the point of paralysis. If nationalism was a pathology, the thinking went, the writing of national

histories was one of its symptoms, just another form of mythmaking.

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Something else was going on, too. Beginning in the 1960s, women and people of color entered the historical profession and wrote new, rich, revolutionary histories, asking different questions and drawing different conclusions. Historical scholarship exploded, and got immeasurably richer and more sophisticated. In a there-goes-the-neighborhood moment, many older historians questioned the value of this scholarship. Degler did not; instead, he contributed to it. Most historians who wrote about race were not white and most historians who wrote about women were not men, but [Degler](#), a white man, was one of two male co-founders of the National Organization for Women and won a Pulitzer in 1972 for a book called *Neither Black nor White*. Still, he shared the concern expressed by Higham that most new American historical scholarship was “not about the United States but merely in the United States.”

By 1986, when Degler rose from his chair to deliver his address before the American Historical Association, a lot of historians in the United States had begun advocating a kind of historical cosmopolitanism, writing global rather

than national history. Degler didn't have much patience for this. A few years later, after the onset of civil war in Bosnia, the political philosopher Michael Walzer grimly announced that "the tribes have returned." They had never left. They'd only become harder for historians to see, because they weren't really looking anymore.

A NEW AMERICAN HISTORY

Writing national history creates plenty of problems. But not writing national history creates more problems, and these problems are worse.

What would a new Americanism and a new American history look like? They might look rather a lot like the composite nationalism imagined by Douglass and the clear-eyed histories written by Du Bois. They might take as their starting point the description of the American experiment and its challenges offered by Douglass in 1869:

A Government founded upon justice, and recognizing the equal rights of all men; claiming no higher authority for existence, or sanction for its laws, than nature, reason, and the regularly ascertained will of the people; steadily refusing to put its sword and purse in the service of any religious creed or family, is a standing offense to most of the Governments of the world, and to some narrow and bigoted people among ourselves.

At the close of the Cold War, some commentators concluded that the American experiment had ended in triumph, that the United States had become all the world. But the American experiment had not in fact ended. A nation founded on revolution and universal rights will forever struggle against chaos and the forces of

particularism. A nation born in contradiction will forever fight over the meaning of its history. But that doesn't mean history is meaningless, or that anyone can afford to sit out the fight.

“The history of the United States at the present time does not seek to answer any significant questions,” Degler told his audience some three decades ago. If American historians don't start asking and answering those sorts of questions, other people will, he warned. They'll echo Calhoun and Douglas and Father Coughlin. They'll lament “American carnage.” They'll call immigrants “animals” and other states “shithole countries.” They'll adopt the slogan “America first.” They'll say they can “make America great again.” They'll call themselves “nationalists.” Their history will be a fiction. They will say that they alone love this country. They will be wrong.