



# Myths and symbols of the american nation (1776-1809)

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# MYTHS AND SYMBOLS OF THE AMERICAN NATION (1776-1809)<sup>1</sup>

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I shall define nationalism as an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential “nation”.

Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Penguin, 1991, p. 73

More than any modern nation born in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the American nation and what appears to be its natural corollary American nationalism, display several features that tend to run counter to the definitions of nation and nationalism developed in recent scholarship. To the exception of John Breuilly<sup>2</sup> whose "nationalist ideology" concept will be discussed in the course of this article, most prominent modernist theoreticians like Ernst Gellner<sup>3</sup> or Eric Hobsbawm<sup>4</sup> believe that nations and nationalisms are/were born out of patriotic demands, from a people whose common interests, common language and/or common values led them to seek cultural independence and/or political independence from a larger country or empire whose values or principles did not agree with the community's aspirations (the birth of nations such as Belgium, Serbia, Italy, Germany, Norway, Poland, Ireland...all seem to confirm this analysis). Clearly, Gellner and Hobsbawm posit that modern nation-states were born out of strong feelings of nationalism that had been running strongly within a given community prior to the formation of the nation, suggesting that a form of national consciousness pre-existed the moment of separation, independence and/or statehood, in an essentialist view of nationalism.

The making of the American nation, which Gellner and Hobsbawm carefully leave out of their study of nationalisms developed at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>1</sup> in *Myths and Symbols of the Nation* (vol.1), Françoise Le Jeune and Paul Lees eds, Nantes, édition du CRINI, 2007, p. 81-162, ISBN 2-916424-07-5

<sup>2</sup> BREUILLY John, *Nationalism and the State*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> GELLNER Ernst, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> HOBBSBAWM Eric, *Nation and Nationalism since 1780, Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, Canto, CUP, 1990.

seems to shatter this theoretical framework. In fact, the American nation was founded at the same time as it reached independence and statehood. Henry Steele Commager notes that the United States "started as a national state", with the "political structure that came first and the rest had to be added."<sup>5</sup> In other words the political project of the nation that of a union of free independent states based on Republican principles was concomitant and constituent of the national project.

From the year 1774 onwards, for anyone interested in the study and observation of "nation-making" and nationalism set in action, the United States of America represent an open laboratory. For the sake of this article, it is best maybe to limit our scope to the moment when the nation was invented, when prominent political leaders foresaw the manner in which national ideals could be devised and "propagated" among the people residing in the thirteen states. Their purpose was to reach the mind and heart of the former British colonists, as well as to reach out the most recent immigrants and the waves of immigrants they imagined would adhere to the principles of the American Republic and its political ideal of "unalienable rights".

We will examine "the nation's crucible", an image borrowed from Peter Kastor's most recent book<sup>6</sup>, i.e. this intensive period that ran from 1774, at the time of the first Continental Congress to 1805 when after the purchase of Louisiana, Jefferson officially launched the Lewis and Clark expedition in charge of mapping the national territory westward. During this comparatively short time-period a nation was dreamed of, imagined and forged by a small group of intellectuals who invented myths and symbols of the American nation to support their "nationalist" ideology. We will see that if a nation was created on paper in the pledge of honour, which the thirteen states had promised in the Declaration of Independence, national cohesion and a common national project were completely lacking in America.

In a second part, we will pay attention to the manner in which Jefferson and a few American representatives, conscious of the necessity to foster a national cohesion, designed and invented a political programme for the whole nation, then for the nation-state, as well as symbols and myths to support it, from 1776 on. Similarly, in the same effort to produce a national project, American manners and virtues, as well as an American language, were identified, recorded and established through various official or non-official texts forming the basis of a distinguishable American identity and a "standard national culture".

Finally, we will note that with the passing of the Constitution in 1787, which founded the nation-state, further symbols were invented to keep up the myths of the Declaration of Independence and the American spirit alive. The figurehead

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<sup>5</sup> COMMAGER Henry Steele, *Jefferson, Nationalism and the Enlightenment*, New York, George Brazillier inc., 1975, p. 166.

<sup>6</sup> KASTOR Peter J., *The Nation's Crucible, The Louisiana Purchase*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2004.

of the President acted as the myth-bearer. In the presidential inaugural addresses delivered in the decisive time frame for the nation, between 1787 and 1805, presidents, each of them national heroes, “founding fathers”, echoed the values and principles for which the nation stood for. We will study how these “bards” of the nation, to quote Gellner, designed a set of traditions, values and heroes that would foster a national consciousness, while myths and symbols played a role in preserving intact the integrity of the American nation, creating a strong sentiment of attachment to the nation among older settlers and new comers. More generally speaking, we will bear in mind that the American nationalist ideology started in the mind of a few prominent intellectuals shortly before the American Revolution. The observation of the various processes this handful of politicians with a vision for their new “nation”, used to foster nationalist feelings is a case in point for students of nationalism who can here examine the various mechanisms of a definitely “modern” nationalism set in motion.

## **I: The Nation's Crucible**

On July 4, 1776, British colonists declared their political independence from the British crown, but what was to become of this loose aggregate of colonists living in thirteen provinces was yet unclear. What did these people have in common beside their political status of former British colonists? The Declaration of Independence clearly stated the central reason the colonists had for separating from the mother country. Independence meant not fulfilling the dream of a people united by a national consciousness but quite the contrary it was presented as a political gesture. The ex-British colonists were dissolving "the political bonds" that had held one people to another. On this principle, the thirteen United States of America, represented by their delegates assembled in a Congress, had been "unanimous". In the first lines of the Declaration, in the name of the people, the drafters also put forward the political reasons that had led them to dissolve their connection with the British monarchy. In order to protect their civil liberties, their “unalienable rights” which had been under a constant train of attack and abuses since 1763, the colonists had prompted their separation from the British Empire in which they believed they had been considered and treated as second-class subjects. Political dissention did not spring out of national consciousness. The universal message of the Declaration of Independence is well known. References to "the course of human events", "one people" or "mankind" abound in the text, which take away the "Americanness" of the Declaration.

The only direct reference to a form of collective reaction in America to the oppression that they suffered on the part of British rule is mentioned briefly on two occasions. Before tackling the list of grievances that Americans have suffered under "the present King of Great Britain", Jefferson refers to "the

patient sufferance of these Colonies" and "the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these states." At the end of the declaration, after having exposed their collective grievances to "a candid world", the drafters underlined the first step that the former colonies should take: "these united colonies, are, and of right ought to be free and independent states...". The Declaration of Independence was a political act, which necessarily fostered the union of thirteen states behind a common cause, building their future together against their common enemy. The only sign of unity among the thirteen states can be found in the final paragraph drafted in the immediate war circumstances. "For the support of this Declaration", the delegates of the united states of America in Congress, "mutually" pledged to each other their "lives, fortunes and sacred honour." In other words the first step towards unity or a common project was prompted by the circumstances of the war against Great Britain.

### **I – A: Fostering patriotic feelings<sup>7</sup>.**

A few enlightened individuals had initiated a movement towards this union for political purposes with the setting up of a Continental Congress, which was the first step towards a collective action against unjust and unfair imperial rules. The first Congress which was held in Philadelphia in August 1774, had been prompted by a few individuals, Virginians essentially, who eventually sought to wake up the settlers in each colony in order to have them react against Britain's unwanted authority. In his *Autobiography*, Jefferson, one of the main architects of this pre-revolution agitation, recalls the manner in which the first steps towards reasonable cooperation between the colonies had been slow and had required a lot of incentive on the part of a few men, mainly from Virginia and Massachusetts. As early as May 1769, the assembly of Virginia supported the petitions of the assembly of Massachusetts by sending a joint resolution to the House of Lords and to the Commons in Westminster denouncing the illegal commercial proceedings of the British Admiralty - representing the Board of Trade - in Massachusetts. Jefferson notes that the Virginians supported "the cause of Massachusetts as a common one."<sup>8</sup> In 1770, in Virginia, the necessity of a political union was first clearly discussed as the only possible line of action. Jefferson who had been appointed a member of the province's legislature the

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this section, "patriotism" will refer to attachment or love for the "patria", which needs to be identified as the immediate land and vicinity where an individual was born and raised, a village, a county, a colony, in order to defend it against the assault of British tyranny. As for "nationalism", it will be fostered at the same time as the Revolution when one people had to come together in one Union. Nationalism, in the American context, seems to be composed of a natural blend of local attachment and national attachment.

<sup>8</sup> JEFFERSON Thomas, *Autobiography*, in *Thomas Jefferson, Writings, (Autobiography, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, Letters)* edited by Merrill D. Peterson, New York, The Library of America, 1984, p.6. (further references to Jefferson's *Autobiography* have page number indicated after each quote.)

year before, stated: "We were all sensible that the most urgent of all measures was that of coming to an understanding with all the other colonies to consider the British claims as a common cause to all, and to produce a unity of action." (6) Jefferson was aware of the mechanics of a popular gathering and the months preceding the first Congress were used by Jefferson and his friends "to produce" this unity of action. Jefferson describes a form of apathy among the American settlers among whom resilience and some absence of feelings characterized their so-called attachment to the mother country, practiced out of duty rather than out of love:

Our minds were circumscribed within narrow limits by a habitual belief that it was our duty to be subordinate to the mother country in all matters of government, to direct all our labours in subservience for her interests, and even to observe a bigoted intolerance for all religions but hers. (5)

If emotions or sentiments did not seem to count yet in the pragmatic gathering of forces envisioned by the Virginia delegate at this stage, Jefferson believed that "patriotic" sentiments however would have to be awakened among the people when the insurgents would begin producing action. During the following four years, Jefferson employed himself in crafting or awakening these "patriotic" sentiments.

Jefferson indeed noted that his fellow country men were not prompt to act when no exterior incentive propelled them to react, since between 1769 and December 1773 "nothing of particular excitement occurring for a considerable time, our countrymen seemed to fall into a state of insensibility to our situation." The «Boston Tea Party», which occurred in December 1773, followed by the decision by the British admiralty to close the harbour, provided the first moment of excitement. Reactions to what had happened to the people of Massachusetts, not yet seen as a collective retaliation upon the community of colonists, created a sentiment of "sympathies for Massachusetts" among the Virginia representatives.

After the decision to shut up Boston port was taken by the imperial authority on June 1, 1774, an instance of those "Intolerable Acts" which the Tea Party had triggered, Jefferson then recalls that a further step towards union had been discussed with the creation of a Congress to which deputies from each colony could be sent. Such a Congress would "direct measures required by the general interest" and deputies would discuss measures to be taken to collectively protest against the British decision to close Boston harbour. Jefferson's patriotism and that of the Virginian delegates, which was not yet shared by all colonies is clear when he notes: "we declared that an attack on any one colony, should be considered as an attack on the whole." (8) In order to produce action, i.e. to popularise the idea of a collective reaction against the authority, Jefferson underlined the fact that the delegates "were under conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen as to passing

events.” (8) According to him, a “new generation” of Americans “had grown up”. For these men and women, attachment to Britain was not a sentimental issue any more as the “mother country” was too remote for them in time and space to signify or recall any family connection. Virginian delegates, during one of their illegal meetings in taverns, were already aware that in order to awaken consciousness and to gather together the people in the colonies, some symbolic meaning or some ritual would have to be associated or appointed to the first collective action against the British decision to close Boston harbour. They chose to declare their resentment against British rule by “the appointment of a day of general fasting and prayer” which according to Jefferson “would be most likely to call up and alarm their (the people’s) attention.” (8) The delegates then appointed the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, “on which the port bill commenced”, as “a day of fasting, humiliation and prayers.” In order to reach the people in their diverse occupations and remote settlements, Jefferson thought of resorting to the clergy. Jefferson and his fellow public men then orchestrated this first call to the population intended «to inspire us with firmness in support of our rights and to turn the hearts of the King and parliament to moderation and justice», as follows. Here one can already note the craftsmanship of Jefferson in staging the importance of the day thanks to symbols and words:

We returned home and in our several counties [of Virginia] invited the clergy to meet assemblies of the people on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, to perform the ceremonies of the day and to address to them discourses suited to the occasion. (9)

In the discourses, which Jefferson intended for the people of Virginia, the clergy also had to announce to them the creation of a general Congress to which would be sent local delegates in charge of defending “the general interest” of the colonies. The response of the people to the solemnity of the day, with its ceremonies and speeches, corresponded to Jefferson’s expectations:

The people met generally, with anxiety and alarm in their countenances, and the effect of the day through the whole colony was like a shock of electricity, arousing every man and placing him erect and solidly at the centre. They chose universally delegates for the convention. (9)

In this particular episode, Jefferson was walking the thin line between patriotism and nationalism. Indeed nationalist leaders, according to John Breuilly, politicians or intellectuals, tend to “forge links with large parts of the population hitherto uninvolved in politics.”<sup>9</sup> This process described as “mobilization” of a large number of people remains one of the essential early steps taken by nationalists to spread their ideology.

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<sup>9</sup> BREUILLY J., *Nationalism and the State*, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

## **I – B: American settlers and the myth of ex-patriation.**

For the first meeting of the Congress, Jefferson, unable to attend, proposed a visionary plan for the new nation entitled “A Summary View of the Rights of British America”, which he placed into the hands of the Virginians present, as he could not deliver his plan himself. The text went unnoticed in America but it found its way in England where it was read in Parliament. In this draft, Jefferson deliberately compared the relationship between America and England to that of England and Scotland after the accession of James I and before the Act of Union, stating that one common Executive Chief did not necessarily mean that they had to have a political connection. More specifically, Jefferson used a patriotic argument, the first of the kind in 1774, stating “our emigration from England to this country gave her no more rights over us than the emigrations of the Danes and Saxons gave to the present authorities of their mother country over England. (105-106)<sup>10</sup>” Jefferson believed in the Romantic notion that early Saxons had governed themselves according to democratic principles until William, the monarchist conqueror, submitted them to his tyranny. At this stage however, Jefferson was aware that his doctrine was too radical for any member among the delegates to agree with him, not even among those whom he described as patriots, particularly when he stated: “there was no foundation in compact in any acknowledged principles of colonization, nor in reason: expatriation being a natural right, and acted on as such by all nations, in all ages.”(9) His perennialist argument was based on empirical observations of the law of nations throughout history; a rhetorical argument often resorted to by patriots in the course of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Jefferson suggested that Americans had consciously left one nation, England, because free men had the right to choose the country where they wished to live, “departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them”, “going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.” (105) This powerful first narrative of the American nation as told by Jefferson was meant to be a foundational narrative about how British America and its community had been formed and how British Americans had shaped a new identity as individuals away from England. I believe this “story” is the first myth circulated by Jefferson on the foundation of British America. This process also belongs to the spreading of Jefferson’s nationalist ideology based here on the myth that American colonists have some “distinguishing characteristics<sup>11</sup>” which mark them off from Britain or European countries.

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<sup>10</sup> JEFFERSON, T., *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, [1774] in Jefferson, *Writings*, op.cit., p. 105-122

<sup>11</sup> BREUILLY, J., *Nationalism and the State*, op.cit., p. 22.



The purpose of the Congress, which met in September 1774 in Philadelphia, was to consider for the first time “what was the political relation between us and England” according to the Virginia statesman. Some conciliatory propositions had been voted but refused by the King. Then in May 1775, when a Second Congress convened, radical delegates considered action necessary and a declaration of the causes of taking up arms was drafted. Some suggested they should draft a declaration “of rights and plans of government” in which the former colonies would simply state their separation from the mother country and discuss the subsequent constitution of independent institutions for the new governments. As we know, other delegates were still reluctant to part from the mother country and they still believed in a form of reconciliation at the end of this “civil war.” In the meantime, King George III declared his subjects had entered “a state of rebellion.”

In the first months of 1776, the delegates for Virginia having read and agreed on Jefferson’s first draft of a declaration of independence (*The Virginia Bill of Rights*) which stated “that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain ought to be totally dissolved”, evoked the necessity of forming a Confederation of the former colonies, but no national project nor the creation of a new nation (“British America”) was debated at that stage. If a Union was formed, it would be in order to fight off a common enemy, and to attract the support of foreign nations, “measures should be immediately taken for procuring the assistance of foreign powers, and a confederation be formed to bind the colonies more closely together.” (13) In the first version of Jefferson’s draft debated in Congress on June 2, 1776, the concept of “state” mentioned in the text referred to the British state or alternatively to the government of Virginia, not to a confederation of colonies yet.

The delegates, who resisted the idea of the political separation from the mother country, mostly came from “the middle colonies”, i.e. Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, the Jerseys and New York. Their resistance to the creation of a Confederation displayed the colonies’ still “perfect independence of each other” in June 1776 and the lack of dynamics towards unity or a national project. There was no ready patriotic support in favour of separation from the British monarchy as many still felt drawn or attached sentimentally to the mother country. According to Jefferson, if those delegates “were not yet ripe for bidding adieu to British connection”, they would necessarily come to reason when and if “the voice of the people drove [them] into it.” Here again, during this crucial moment Jefferson was well aware of the power of the people in decision-making, which he described as “the general voice of America” (13). Patriotism had first to be fostered among the people in order for their reluctant Tory delegates to change their mind. Such was also Thomas Paine understanding of the “common sense” of American people whom he placed at the centre of the promotion of a movement towards independence. Paine’s pamphlet *Common Sense* published in January 1776 quickly found its way in the hands of many literate men as its

circulation figures were impressive - 120,000 copies were printed - for the time. Resorting to “natural” arguments which were designed to appeal to the common sense of any reader, Paine tried to “offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense”, asking any man “to divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for himself” the fate and future of “America.”<sup>12</sup> His plain arguments led his reader to come to the conclusion that as in any family relationship, the child that America used to be was now old enough to stand on its own and to separate from its parent. Similarly, the so-called allegiance or affection, which some colonists might still feel for England, had been more than injured by her tyrannical attitude. Furthermore, distance had naturally placed America away from England “as a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other, was never the design of heaven.” Paine resorted to powerful patriotic overtones when he prompted “all men” to unite, as “in unity our great strength lies.” Thomas Paine can be seen as a “bard” of the nation who by putting to paper his aspiration or vision for the new nation, - “the present time is that peculiar time which never happens to a nation but once, viz., the time of forming itself into a government.” – inspired patriotic feelings among the most reluctant colonists by suggesting that:

Our present union is marked with both these characters: we are young, and we have been distressed; but our concord hath withstood our troubles, and fixes a memorable era for posterity to glory in<sup>13</sup>.

Central to Paine’s vision for America was “the Almighty” whom he truly saw as governing the fate of Americans above the King of England or any governor. His Calvinistic approach to government appealed to preachers whose number already superseded British bishops in most colonies. *Common Sense* was said to be read from the pulpits in congregations, thus reaching out to the people, in the same way as Jefferson and his colleagues had “awakened” their fellow Virginians in July 1774.

Contemporary observers of nationalism would describe this promotion of the nation among the people as an attempt at creating or triggering some “civic attachment” to the national project. In Paine and Jefferson’s days, placing the Deity at the centre of the nation was seen as a form of “civil religion.” Rousseau had developed this concept of a Divine Power, which a people looked up to to preserve society’s morality and civic order. Enthusiasm and worship in the nation’s moral ideal thus placed in the hands of Divine Providence seemed to intermingle with the nation’s political ideal. Belief in the founding myth of America as a land for the Elect or as a New Israel, here developed in Paine and

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<sup>12</sup> PAINE, Thomas, *Common Sense*, (1776), *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. by Mark Philips, Oxford, OUP, 1995, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> PAINE, T., *ibid*, p.36.

Jefferson's texts as a support to their political discourse of universal principles of liberty and democracy, could only appeal to a people whose bibliolatriy had always been strong. Both Jefferson and Paine played the part of nationalist intellectuals who by resorting to "print-capitalism" and the churches' apparatus reached out to the people among whom they spread their nationalist ideology by presenting it "in simplified forms". John Breuilly notes that simplified forms also need to be supported by symbols and ceremonials<sup>14</sup>.

The Congress delegates who resisted the idea of a firm separation from the mother country had argued that no "capital step" should be taken "till the voice of the people drove us into it." Jefferson considered this moment during which the delegates were divided to assess the potential of a Union by gauging the level of their sentiment. From a collection of individual colonies, the architect of the nation, Jefferson, hoped to now form a string of colonies, supported by "a general voice." Jefferson's argument then consisted in leading the reluctant delegates to believe in a common project, a Union, which he suggested, was already there prior to the war. In May 1776, a resolution was voted asking each colony to revise their Constitution if they needed to do so, in order to meet their specific needs or affairs. Consequently new bodies were elected which returned delegates who were representing the *vox populi*, placing the fate of the Union between the hands of Congress for the time being<sup>15</sup>.

Under these circumstances, having assessed the potential of Americans for "community-building" and even for "state-building" (at least in each colony) Jefferson was clearly putting forward a new communal ideology, that of (American) "nationalism" prompted by "a general voice", which Anthony Smith defines in *National Identity* as "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential "nation".<sup>16</sup>

Besides, Jefferson punctually developed an essentialist argument to convince the Maryland and Pennsylvania representatives that they already belonged to a common nation, by resorting to his myth of "ex-patriation" or "e-migration": "That the question was not whether, by a declaration of independence, we should make ourselves what we are not, but whether we should declare a fact which already exists." (15) Jefferson was thus transforming the motley and disparate crowds which emigrated to America over the past half-century into a people having come together out of a powerful common motivation, willingly abandoning their former mother country for a new world. Jefferson fostered the myth of common descent - evoked in his *Views on British America* -, further conferring upon "downtrodden populations a sense of their (former) dignity and

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<sup>14</sup> BREUILLY J., *Nationalism and the State*, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> BROGAN Hugh, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, Harmondsworth, New York, 1985, p. 179.

<sup>16</sup> SMITH A., *National Identity*, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

antiquity”, the power of having brought together “disparate groups and classes into a solidarity unit<sup>17</sup>”, into one people. Having no mythical heroes or past at his disposal to the exception of a few Saxon ancestors, the myth of common motivation and common expatriation from European mother-countries served the same purpose as the myth of a common glorious past in 1774-1776 which would be resorted to by American presidents after 1787. This myth further reiterated and amplified in the recounting of the British sufferings under British rule in the final Declaration, formed Jefferson’s popular and foundational narrative of the American nation -, that of a people having emigrated to form a new nation under God’s guidance. Besides, if one refers to John Breuilly’s nationalist processes, one could note that Jefferson also achieved the “tour de force” of rallying reluctant representatives to his nationalist views, by enunciating a common cause shared by those “who have been brought up with similar intellectual assumptions and values.<sup>18</sup>”

### **I – C: The Declaration of Independence as a set of further symbolic promises to one people.**

Early in June 1776, a committee was chosen to accomplish one of Thomas Paine’s proposals, i.e. “an open and determined DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE” which he saw as an essential step for a nation. Paine envisaged it as:

A manifesto to be published and despatched to foreign courts, setting forth the miseries we have endured and the peaceful methods which we have ineffectually used for redress; declaring at the same time that, not being able any longer to live happily or safely under the cruel disposition of the British court, we have been driven to the necessity of breaking off all connections with her<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, Paine suggested that the colonists should clearly abandon “their present denomination of British subjects”. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert L. Livingston and Thomas Jefferson were appointed, with Jefferson as the main drafter thanks to his law training and outstanding prose. The first draft was submitted to Congress by the end of June, approved on July 2, and promulgated on July 4, 1776 after Jefferson had had to edit “passages which conveyed censures on the people of England [...] lest they should give them offence. (18)”, in order to obtain a consensus on the Declaration.

At the time, all the affirmations and grievances listed by Jefferson in the Declaration, were “self-evident” to each and every American, as the list of

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<sup>17</sup> SMITH A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1988, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> BREUILLY J., *Nationalism and the State*, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> PAINE T., *Common Sense*, *op.cit.*, p. 45.

constitutional misdeeds enacted by George III against them and their properties, was specific enough to be seen as an attack against American property as a whole. We could say that Jefferson “nationalized” his case against the British monarchy, underlining the common enemy of the new American citizens. However the Declaration did not create yet a state out of the 13 states gathered in a Union. What Jefferson’s draft fostered however was a strong commitment to values and principles found in the short preamble, i.e. the belief in the promises of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness for each individual if Americans held together. These promises were written down in a document, which was soon seen and celebrated as a “sacred” text, a founding text for the new nation.

The creation of a state for “one people”, which would thus be born out of the separation, was not mentioned in the preamble of the Declaration. However the idea of establishing a government for the Union, for the American nation, was discussed on July 12, 1776. A committee was appointed which was in charge of drafting the articles of Confederation. Independent “states” were created where there had been thirteen colonies, as “governments” were essential “to secure the rights of the governed.” However the principles of a single supra state were not laid down. If a confederation was set up, delegates would have to list a set of articles, which could accommodate the thirteen constitutions, revised in May 1776.

The Articles of Confederation would have to agree with the set of principles that the American delegates drafted in the Declaration, - the written word guaranteeing to the people that their rights would be established and preserved free of interpretation or customs unlike the unwritten statutes of the English Constitution. The sacred document defined the political ideology of the new American states, democracy which would preside over the “future security” of “the good people of the colonies” residing in the now thirteen states. As for any specific form that democracy should take, the Declaration provided no guidelines. One must note however the use of the singular in the reference to “the people.”<sup>20</sup> The set of political commitments in the Declaration organically founded the national principles to which the people and their institutions should conform as the thirteen states developed.

In other words, this set of political commitments to a people, or at least the recognition that men were “created equal”, that they were “endowed with certain unalienable rights” and that to “secure these rights governments are instituted among men”, deriving their “just powers” from their consent, laid down the lofty democratic principles along which political institutions would be built. In July 1776, the delegates speaking in the name of the “good people” had hardly

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<sup>20</sup> In 1865, while drafting the *British North America Act*, the Canadian fathers of the Confederation were referring to “five peoples” to refer to the British colonists residing in the five colonies that composed British North America.

anything in common beside the political ideal of thirteen united states, in which people would be "justly governed" and individual liberties protected, that a few enlightened upper-class delegates had imagined for them.

The concept of "nation" which seemed to have been called up by Jefferson in his *Summary*, was not mentioned in the Declaration or in the Articles of Confederation, but it can be surmised in Jefferson's use of "one people" in the Declaration, one people which shared the same territory and the same former King; some among them did not adhere to the principles of independent states. However, it was difficult not to adhere to the ideological promises of "liberty and pursuit of happiness" made to the "good people" of the colonies. If states were to be independent from each other, at least common values or commitment spelled out in the Declaration could foster a common sentiment among them. How could any colonist refuse to be part of such a civic project thus imagined?

Some British colonists preferred not to join the new United States however as they refused independence from the British Crown. Around 4.000 Loyalists left the former British colonies and settled in Quebec. Jefferson in his notes on Professor Ebeling's letter explained that "those who did not come over to this opinion either left us, and were called Refugees, or staid with us under the name of Tories [...].<sup>21</sup>" Loyalists who settled in Quebec joined the French *Canadiens* who had recently become British subjects under the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The latter against all odds refused to share the new political ideals presented to them by the American delegates when American patriots reached Montreal in the summer of 1776. Therefore, one can speak neither of a patriotic movement nor of a nationalist awakening across British America, as many people sharing the same language, territory, and colonial past did not join the movement towards independence. Besides the reluctance of many delegates at the first Continental Congress in September 1774 to address their grievances to the British monarch, as well as the lengthy debates over the Articles of Confederation in the summer of 1776 when the creation of an American assembly was brought up, also point to the fact that common values or a common consciousness among a people did not exist prior to the Declaration and was slow to take form after its promulgation.

## **I – D: How to foster civic attachment to the values of the Declaration of Independence?**

Civic attachment to the political project had to be fostered in order for the state, which a Confederation would necessarily create, to hold, and particularly to oppose a united front to the British enemy. A nation, if this sentiment was inspired among the people, would help the political project – a few enlightened individuals had imagined for "one people" – to survive and stand. The purpose

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<sup>21</sup> "Jefferson's notes on professor Ebeling's letter", July 30, 1795, in *Writings, op.cit.*, p.698.

should be to create a sentiment of nationalistic pride among the people of the kind James Monroe praised in his 1823 inaugural speech when he stated that "to the defence of our own [government] this whole nation is devoted."<sup>22</sup>

Practically, what most theoreticians have empirically observed about nation-state formation in the course of the past centuries, when they refer to necessary prerequisites for nationalism to grow: i.e. the spreading of nationalist ideas among a people, perceptions of a common nationality, the upsurge of nationalism concomitant with a form of national consciousness, all of these eventually leading to an outbreak, through independence and/or statehood, can also be observed in America but *a posteriori*. Besides, this eventual nationalistic pride in the nation only came after much effort on the part of Federalist politicians and the use of symbols to celebrate the myths created by the sacred Declaration of Independence.

Henry Steele Commager underlined the daunting task that lay ahead of the people after the declaration of their independence. Institutions, a system of government, common purposes remained to be invented. He described the elaboration of this nationalist programme as a rare occurrence in world history and its spreading among the people as a "*tour de force*". Such a comment also underlay the specificity of the American nation and nationalism.

For a nation [sic] of some three millions (which meant a body politic of perhaps three-quarters of a million), divided into thirteen independent states, scattered over an immense territory without any system of roads or of communications, with no common organs of government, no common centres of economy, no common church, no common ruling class, and as yet no common loyalties – for such a nation to win independence, create a national government, invent the constitutional convention and write state and national constitutions which still endure, perfect a federal system, solve the ancient problem of colonialism, fix effective limits on government, separate church and state, establish genuine freedom of religion and of the press, impose order on a disorderly economy, deal with threats from Indians, the Spanish and the British on every frontier, and develop the first working democracy, all in one generation, was without precedent in history and, we might add, without sequel too.<sup>23</sup>

The development of nationalist ideas, the creation of a nationalist programme, as well as the fostering of a form of national consciousness through the invention of a national identity, of common traditions, of common symbols and the worship of myths, came after the creation of the state apparatus however. In other words, the political ideology that created the American Republic in the Declaration, did not foster nationalism among the "new" people that lived on this "national" territory which still had to be defined and bounded, before the

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<sup>22</sup> A sentiment clearly achieved fifty years later or so, on December 2, 1823, as such were the words of President Monroe in his doctrine.

<sup>23</sup> COMMAGER Henry Steele, *Jefferson, Nationalism and the Enlightenment*, op.cit., p. xiii.

thirteen states agreed to commit themselves to the establishment of a central federal government.

Inventing a nation was the programme conceived by a few intellectuals and political leaders in July 1776, but to establish their programme they needed the support of a people whose mind should be geared towards the same ideal. Historian Henry Steele Commager attributed the invention of this national programme to the "creative intelligence" and the "constructive genius" of a few American "*philosophes*": Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson and Paine<sup>24</sup>. According to him, these men were not mere "closet philosophers", they were dreamers but also "master craftsmen"<sup>25</sup>, which suggested a form of manipulation of the people of the kind Jefferson and Paine had already resorted to prior to the Revolution to "awaken" minds and sentiments.

In 18<sup>th</sup>-century America, the authority of the ruling group was not only maintained by economic and physical power, but it was also located in cultural hegemony, which Eric Hobsbawm describes as "the images of power and authority." Clearly, the new ruling elite, who Jefferson saw as superseding the old gentry, had to establish or maintain the consent of the governed to the rulers' legitimacy if they wanted their national programme to be furthered and sustained. Consequently, according to Hobsbawm, the social and cultural identities of the citizens of a given nation must be constructed in such a manner that the beliefs and presuppositions of the ruling elite and the strategies of the authority (the master-crafters) are accepted as normal, natural, unquestionable as it is designed for their own sake. Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm suggest in *The Invention of Tradition* that symbols, rituals and traditions (quite often vague or with general connotations) were promoted to foster patriotism, loyalty and duty to the nation<sup>26</sup>. As such they need to be generated and regularly rekindled.

We are going to observe how Jefferson, Adams and Franklin knew of the necessity of creating national symbols, which would represent the myths developed in the Declaration, in order for the people to recognize them in a collective worship, "a kind of compendium of national mythology writ small."<sup>27</sup>

Congress also believed this task as essential when in the afternoon immediately following the promulgation of the Declaration; they appointed the three above-mentioned delegates, their most prominent thinkers and the fathers of the Declaration, "to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> COMMAGER H., *ibid*, p. xiii.

<sup>25</sup> COMMAGER H., *ibid*, p. xvii.

<sup>26</sup> HOBBSBAWM E. and T. RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>27</sup> MEYER Jeffrey F., *Myths in Stone, Religious Dimensions of Washington D.C.*, Berkeley, London, University of California Press, 2001, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> PATTERSON Richard S. and Dougall RICHARDSON, *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States*, Washington D.C., Department of State Publications, 1976, introduction.



John Breuilly notes that this phase could be described as the “popularisation of nationalist ideology.” Indeed in order to work effectively as a popular political ideology, the abstract principles or the set of promises delineated in the Declaration of Independence needed some “simplification, some concreteness and repetition”, later enacted in symbols and ceremonials<sup>29</sup>.

### **Creating a national mythology around the Declaration of Independence.**

Fostering civic attachment or “civil religious” attachment to the Declaration and its principles meant creating some celebrations around the text by, for instance, appointing a specific day every year when its promulgation would be remembered and would re-enact the moment of the birth of a Union against tyranny. This anniversary would become a symbolic day of remembrance of Americans’ freedom. In the same symbolic way, devising a Great Seal which would bear the emblem of the thirteen United States of America on all official documents, domestic and foreign, meant fixing in stone or copper or gold or paper the values and principles which had brought the states together in a Republic. In order to endow the nation’s seal with such power, its devisers would need to imagine symbols, which would evoke the mythical moment when the Union was sealed, as well as the promises contained in the Declaration. The Great Seal, the Independence Day celebrations were meant to act upon the minds of the American people, thus gathered into a nation around these powerful symbols or moments.

Symbols are, according to Clifford Geertz, “marvellous syntheses” of ideas that can reduced “a complexity of factors”, including experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values” “into a single word, act or work.”<sup>30</sup> Symbols have the ability to encode and establish the parameters of a group identity, values, motivations and actions, especially when manipulated in ritualised performances.

Quite symptomatically if the first committee appointed in July 1776 easily found many symbols, it took three committees to eventually agree on the details of each symbol thus showing the difficulty of the task at a time when confidence in a common national project was still at low ebb. It seems that the creation of the Great Seal finally approved by Congress in 1782, was as slow a process as the foundation of a working constitution.

Anthony Smith in *National Identity* examines the creation of territorial political communities out of former empires and colonies, and the way in which intelligentsias help to create “civic nations” by design. How did the “founding fathers” develop the emotional response that creating a nation required from the people? What sort of mental construction did they project to which each and every one (white male American) would willingly identify to? According to A.

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<sup>29</sup> BREUILLY J., *Nationalism and the State*, op.cit., p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> GEERTZ Clifford, *Myth, Symbol, and Culture*, New York, Norton, 1971, introduction.

Smith, slogans, ideas as well as symbols and ceremonies have the power to create a momentum towards a national project:

A nationalist language and symbolism is broader than an ideology or ideological movement; it often connects that ideology with the "mass sentiments" of wider segments of the designated population, notably through slogans, ideas, symbols and ceremonies<sup>31</sup>.

For the Revolution to be anything more than a war for Independence by 13 temporarily confederated colonies, the minds of the people as well as their hearts, would have to recognize a pre-eminent national momentum of which they had not previously been aware. Some members of Congress, among whom Jefferson, Adams and Franklin, had well understood the necessity of designing and devising the symbols, which would promote civic attachment to the nation. Inventing a celebration around the Declaration, supported by religious images and symbols to which the American people were used to, was part of the scheme of the first Great Seal committee in which these men sat.

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in *The Invention of Tradition*, posit, "The term invented tradition is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both "traditions" actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period and establishing themselves with great rapidity."<sup>32</sup> They add that:

"Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

Referring to the need of "inventing traditions", the two historians explain, "It occurs more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social (or political) patterns for which "old" traditions had been designed."<sup>33</sup> In the case of America, it is easily understood that all the "old" traditions belonged to the ancient fatherland from which the new country has separated. Therefore celebrating the nation recently forged by the Declaration required a set of new traditions and ceremonies at time when "a rapid transformation of society", as well as a possible return to old "provincial" traditions in each state, required the invention of new trans-continental values.

### **Selecting a national day for celebration**

The political culture of the United States of America from these early days on has been following a distinctly symbolic process. By symbolic process, Clifford

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<sup>31</sup> SMITH Anthony D., *National Identity*, Penguin, 1991, p. 73

<sup>32</sup> HOBSBAWM and RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Canto, 1983, p. 1

<sup>33</sup> HOBSBAWM and RANGER, *ibid*, p. 4.

Geertz understands: "a chimera of traditions, rituals and ceremonies that create and energize fundamental national symbols."

For instance, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1776 was a "pivotal moment" in time for the nation. Celebrating this moment every year was seen by some members of Congress, particularly Jefferson, as renewing or rekindling the people's faith in its principles, as well as symbolically and collectively praising what for Jefferson represented the "birth of the nation." Instituting an official celebration on the 4<sup>th</sup> was a way of reconnecting each American to this "glorious moment". Jefferson perceived that it would give it a "collective dimension" to the event and the text, during which they could reflect on the past, as well as on their own or their national achievement. It proclaimed an "essential unity" and some "collective destiny" born out of an overwhelming shared experience: the separation from a tyrannical mother nation. It is very interesting that this day was chosen as the day of celebration and that the voting of the Constitution or the end of the war was not picked as other "national" moments. In fact, the necessity to celebrate this "community" moment came very early during the war of independence and it stayed that way. Choosing the date of the actual public promulgation of the Declaration as Independence Day brought dissension among the delegates. While Jefferson believed it should be concomitant with the actual reading of the Declaration of Independence to the people, John Adams thought July 2 when Congress had ratified the "sacred" text should be chosen, suggesting a form of religious ritual should be performed as a "thanksgiving". However each of them knew some solemn ritual should be established surrounding this pivotal moment for the nation.

John Adams in a letter to his wife Abigail dating back to July 3, 1776 wrote about his project:

I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeded generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forward, forevermore.<sup>34</sup>

Celebrations then meant music, bonfires, flag waving and religious services. It appears that "civil religion" which Paine or Jefferson felt should be the basis of American nationalism needed rituals. Clearly ritual is a term traditionally laden with religious associations, but social scientists and anthropologists accept the applicability of the term in relation to secular, non-mystical transactions as well. According to anthropologist Van Gennep: "Collective ritual is an especially

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<sup>34</sup> quoted in TRAVERS Len, *Celebrating the Fourth, Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic*, 2004, introduction.

dramatic attempt to bring order and control to some potentially chaotic aspect of life... and useful in response to stress by disruptive forces.<sup>35</sup>

The Founding Fathers were right about appointing a national day of festive celebrations, as according to Len Travers, from 1776, Independence Day was by far the noisiest, most popular and most important public ritual to emerge in the early American republic<sup>36</sup>. After a decade of fitful starts, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July succeeded in becoming "the American Jubilee", a truly "American festival" overshadowing and sometimes eclipsing local or regional patriotic observances. In 1815, the "National birthday" gathered 8 million people - the entire nation<sup>37</sup>.

### **Inventing a national motto and a national seal.**

The necessity of creating a **Great Seal** was already brought up in the afternoon of July 4, 1776 when a committee composed of the drafters of the Declaration, met to design the symbols of the nation. For the Revolution to be anything more than a war for Independence for 13 temporarily confederated colonies, the minds of the people would have to recognize a pre-eminent national identity of which they had not previously been aware. Creating a national community - where none had existed before - was quite the challenge for those among the delegates who believed in its necessity. Indeed in the event, most Americans, still deeply attached to their provinces and provincial affairs never quite realized that Independence meant the complete transferral of traditional loyalties to the English constitution and values, to the Republic invented by their delegates who counted a few nationalists among them. The Republican project and its set of promises to the people had to be sufficiently viable to bring people residing in the different states, at least to a grudging acceptance of their relatedness or to the realization that they now shared a common destiny. This was Congress's task, the delegates' "political cultural project" to use a more modern expression.

Anthony Smith describes such a "political cultural project" as an ever-active interpretative process concerning the "values, expectations, and implicit rules" that express and shape the collective intentions and actions of a people<sup>38</sup>. In the particular and unusual case of the thirteen American states, the so-called people had no collective intentions and actions. Therefore nationalist delegates had to devise, shape and express these intentions and then to set them in motion for the

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<sup>35</sup> VAN GENNEP Arnold, *Rights of Passage*, (1908), translated from the French, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

<sup>36</sup> TRAVERS L., *Celebrating the Fourth*, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Independence Day celebrations have also been used by sociologists and historians as a barometer to measure the level of American nationalism as well as national cohesion over the years. For instance, in the course of the decades preceeding and following the Civil War, American anthropologists noticed some dwindling away of the "national" reunion overshadowed for a while by more "local" or regional celebrations.

<sup>38</sup> SMITH A., *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.9.

people to rally around them. I believe the Great Seal which now sits in a glass shrine in the Exhibit Hall of the State Department in Washington D.C. “for all to see”, was the first step towards this dynamic process. The word "seal" was rich with underlying symbolic meaning. It referred to the idea of a stamp bearing the arms of the American nation on parchments or treaties. But it also symbolized the idea of commitment, of engagement between the nation and its people, as well as between the thirteen states, i.e. a form of civic contract thus sealed.

Adams, Franklin and Jefferson first selected religious and political symbols, a combination of images evoking ancient Republics and the Old Testament. Franklin suggested the depiction of Moses calling the Red Sea to engulf Pharaoh and his armies along with the motto “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God<sup>39</sup>”. Jefferson wanted to add two mythical Saxon heroes illustrate his own narrative of the American nation on the reverse, as well as children of Israel in the wilderness on the obverse. Pierre Eugène du Simitière, the artistic designer and craftsman of the Seal, tried to encapsulate these images on the shield by emphasizing two units. On the one hand, he represented the people of America, in fact six northern European peoples by their emblems (English, Scottish, Irish, French, Germans and Dutch) coming to America as colonists. On the other hand, he inscribed the coming together of the thirteen states into a union with the motto “*E pluribus Unum*” (out of many one). The idea of Divine Providence guiding the people was also retained in the crest, representing a Masonic pyramid with one eye, in fact “the Eye of Providence in a radiant Triangle whose Glory extends over the Shield and beyond the Figures.” The Figures were, in the original drawing, the Goddess of Justice and the Goddess of Liberty dressed in Roman attire.

After three committees, Charles Thomson, the secretary of the United States in Congress, to whom the several reports of the three committees had been referred, presented the design of the Great Seal, which was eventually approved in June 1782. Circumstances were pressing as the Peace Treaty whose talks had begun in April 1782, would soon need to be ratified and to bear the United States’ official sign of sovereignty and coat of arms, for the Americans to stand among the independent nations. Charles Thomson took the final decision to select the most appropriate symbols of the nation with his committee, appointing William Barton as the artist. The Seal bore the blazon of the nation as well as its coat of arms, representing the “sovereign nation’s authority”<sup>40</sup>.

On the obverse, the delegates could see an American bald eagle, his head in a constellation of stars, clutching in his right claw the olive branch of peace and in his left claw a bundle of thirteen arrows of war. The text, which accompanied the Great Seal design, specified, “the olive branch and the thirteen arrows denote

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<sup>39</sup> PATTERSON and RICHARDSON, *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States*, op.cit., p. 17-28.

<sup>40</sup> See Charles Thomson’s “Remarks and Explanations”, presented before Congress on June 20, 1782, full text online at [www.greatseal.com](http://www.greatseal.com).

the power of peace and war which is exclusively vested in Congress.” On the eagle’s breast, an escutcheon or a shield was displayed bearing thirteen stripes. In the eagle’s beak the artist had placed a scroll with the first committee’s motto: “*E Pluribus Unum*.” Thomson wished to see the illustration of the motto in the shield, pointing to “preservation of the Union through Congress”, while the constellation denoted “a new State taking its place and rank among other sovereign powers.”

On the reverse, the delegates saw an unfinished pyramid bearing in its apex or “zenith”, an eye in a triangle (similar to the one already chosen by Jefferson and Franklin) surrounded with light described as “a glory” by Thomson<sup>41</sup>. Over the Masonic Eye and pyramid one read “*Annuit Coeptis*” (“Providence has favoured our undertakings”) from Virgil’s *Georgics*, while on the base of the pyramid of thirteen steps, the artist had inscribed the numerical letters MDCCLXXVI (1776) under which spread the motto “*novus ordo seclorum*” (“the beginning of a new era” from Virgil’s *Eclogue IV*) indicating that “the new American *Aera*” had commenced from that date. The pyramid according to Charles Thomson’s “Remarks and Explanations” signified “Strength and Duration” while the Eye alluded to “the many signal interpositions of Providence in favour of the American Cause.”<sup>42</sup>

Through potent symbols invented by the Congress delegates, the Great Seal tried to evoke the mythical beginnings of the nation and to seal its great destiny for the future, favouring renewed values and longing for happiness and prosperity. Besides the presence of the eagle, a lofty native bird echoed the elevation given to the sacred text of the Declaration, whose momentous was reminded to the people on the reverse where 1776 was enshrined in a Palladian building whose roof was of course shaped as an unfinished small pyramid which visually reminded the people of the Mighty Providence. The final agreement of Congress over the Great Seal design might show a gradual coming to realization of its delegates that to the rest of the world they needed to represent a sovereign nation. How much of this nationalist sentiment was pervading their minds and that of their people in their respective states was not clear yet.

**A flag** was also designed in the weeks following the Declaration of Independence, which was accepted by Congress on June 14, 1777. This first flag simply bore thirteen stars and thirteen stripes, side by side. It had been designed by one of the founding fathers. It remained in this basic form until January 1794 when the federal Congress added two new stars for the states of Vermont and Kentucky. The flag eventually achieved the status of “star-spangled banner” at the end of the war of 1812 when by a third Flag Act, Congress finalized its design in thirteen stars and thirteen stripes.

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Thomson’s “Remarks and Explanations”, *ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> The reverse side of the Great Seal first appeared on the back of the one-dollar bill in 1935, at the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The annual observance of the celebrations of Independence Day as well as the use of the various symbolic elements created by Congress such as the flag which was waved that day, or the symbols displayed in the Great Seal which now encapsulated a form of American mythology, served two important functions in the young nation which did not speak its name yet. It was a performative act for the people of the United States. It fixed a specific pivotal moment in the past from which they could date a national existence and against which they could assess the Republic's progress. The idea behind this national day of feast was to regularly reconnect Americans to their "legendary" past. It endorsed and cultivated a myth of national identity and national interest that transcended local and regional concerns, stressing historical and moral origins, which Americans *assumedly* held in common. The celebration of July 4<sup>th</sup>, was a way for Americans to proclaim and perform at the same time an essential unity and collective destiny born of an overwhelming, shared experience: secession from a great Empire in the name of liberty. If a national flag and a national anthem were only voted in 1814, thereby showing the fact that celebrating the nation was not yet a reality in 1776 or in the following two decades, at least the celebration of the Declaration of Independence ritualised the founding set of principles along which Americans were building their common destiny<sup>43</sup>.

Symbols and national moments had to be forged as a form of "centripetal" forces to embody the idea of "one people" and "one Union" leading eventually to the spreading of the concept of "one nation". The Seal would impress the national emblem on all official papers issued in the name of the Union. It is interesting to note that in most correspondence exchanged between delegates between 1776 and 1787, the word "Union" is often used as a metaphor for "nation". One can only come to the conclusion that those two words however are not synonymous. "Union" represents a political agreement between thirteen states, while a "nation" stands as a compact whole brought forward by the will of a large majority of people. Jefferson and Madison were the only two politicians who clearly used the word "nation" in their prose, while others remained unconcerned or prudent before the design of these two nationalists. Now that a nationalist programme had been completed and symbols invented, there remained a major task for the early nationalists in Congress, i.e. designing a nation-state which would take the thirteen colonies beyond their pledge of honour onto the next plane of one nation, one people under one government.

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<sup>43</sup> As the Republic began to take shape, Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans tried to link the principles of American independence to a worldwide republican mission, turning their celebration of Independence Day into a republican May Day.

## **II – Inventing an American Nation-State: the failure of the Articles of Confederation v. the rise of Americanness – Political union v. political culture.**

In this section, we will first analyse the first system of government, which the Congress composed of delegates from thirteen independent states devised in 1777 to enact their Republican ideals. Our interest will reside in the analysis of the lack of commitment or enthusiasm, which the delegates showed towards the formation of a single nation-state. Their refusal or fear to commit themselves to a united state with one single government and one single head, could be read as a clear statement that the idea of “one people”, brought together by the desire to forge one nation, i.e. one national community, was still at low ebb among the states’ representatives after the Declaration of Independence.

However a small group of nationalists among whom were Jefferson, Adams and Madison as well as some intellectuals who saw themselves as American, tackled the necessary promotion of national values, in order to transform a nationalist political programme promoted by the drafters of the Declaration, into a proper “political cultural programme”. Indeed by resorting to print-culture, by constant reiteration of American national virtues and principles in private correspondence and in published documents, these philosophers kept alive the need for a national community, gathering the Americans, which was only lacking a strong national government to be launched. While the logic of it would gradually come to Americans after the failure of the Articles of Confederation in 1787, after they were prompted to their termination by a rebellion in Massachusetts, intellectuals kept the nationalist assumptions high in their texts (with Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Noah Webster and Crèvecoeur). Their contribution supported Jefferson’s first task in the days following the Declaration, i.e. the eradication of British traditions and uses in American law, in American manners and institutions, in order to invent new traditions and to uphold a national culture for America.

In the Declaration, Jefferson had made sure that he used terms “so plain and firm as to command their [the people's] assent.” In his autobiography and private correspondence, Jefferson referred to ideas and ideals that were not new but well understood by individuals. In his drafting, he had tried to express what he described as “the expression of the American mind”: “neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing.”<sup>44</sup> Though universal, Jefferson, the Virginian had drafted a message which had to forge the spirit of a nation coming forth into the world, in order to encourage some “national trends” among the people, which would

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<sup>44</sup> JEFFERSON, *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, *op.cit.*, p. 18.



transcend their attachment to their small “nations”, i.e. their colony. In fact, the Declaration might have been too universal in his message, and not American enough to break the parochial cultures and attachments of Americans in 1776.

John Adams, writing to his friend Hezekiah Niles in 1818 admitted the specificity and the uniqueness of the experiment in nation making that Americans had undergone in 1776. Listing the numerous differences that divided the American states on several planes either political (they had different constitutions) or cultural (due to the composition of their state societies), between which “intercourse had been so rare”, Adams emphasized how difficult the enterprise had been “to unite them in the same principles in theory and the same system of action” and underlined proudly that “the complete accomplishment of it in so short a time, and by such simple means, was perhaps *a singular example in the history of mankind*.”<sup>45</sup>

Foreign observers however, had underlined that such a forceful union would not hold. The political and cultural diversity of the thirteen colonies, the natural expansion westward, the coming of emigrants, the competition coming from the new Loyalist country, Upper Canada, would all break the political union, which was then bound to be short-lived. In one of his letters to Abigail Adams, written shortly after the drafting of the Declaration, John Adams told his wife that he was scared and slightly frightened by the daunting task that they had laid before them. During the war, Jefferson retired to Virginia after some dissensions with delegates, “a shock on which he had not calculated”. But the lack of national vision of the delegates prompted him to regularly correspond with some of his prominent friends in Congress urging them to work for the best of the Union while tensions appeared in the Confederation shortly after 1777. Writing to John Adams on May 16, 1777, Jefferson insisted on working towards a union:

I learn from our delegates that the Confederation is again on the carpet. A great and necessary work, but I fear almost desperate. The point of representation is what most alarms me, as I fear the great and small colonies are bitterly determined not to cede. Will you be so good as to recollect the proposition I formerly made you in private and try if you can work it into some good to save our union?

After 1781, Jefferson felt he had to leave his retreat to resume his national duty for his country, prompted by his “passion” for his country<sup>46</sup>. From his correspondents in France and England, he was also aware that foreign observers were wondering what the odds were that such an unnatural union would survive its internal dissensions after the American troops had defeated the British.

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted by COMMAGER H., *Jefferson, Nationalism and the Enlightenment*, op.cit., p. 159. (my italics)

<sup>46</sup> Jefferson to James Monroe, May 20, 1782, in *Writings*, p. 777.

What steps did Americans follow in order to foster this will to work together to build a nation? How in the words of Henry Steele Commager did they achieve "a stable and enduring national character with an ease that confounded not only the expectations of critics, but of history as well?" (164)

Creating a nation on paper, in fact a simple union for most non-nationalist delegates, also meant forging the political instrument, i.e. institutions, to support this union. In modern cases of successful nationalist uprisings, Hobsbawm, Gellner and Breuilly note the immediate creation of a centralized government placed in the hands of the nationalist leaders in charge of spreading the values and virtues of a nation-state thus created, to the people. In the case of American delegates, the necessity of governing themselves as a united front was important in wartime. They had to present themselves that one army before the enemy. When other nations at war would have voted in favour of a strong centralized state, speaking up for the nation as a whole, American distrust in monarchies and tyrants, led the delegates to compose some Articles of Confederation which kept each state separate from the other in all matters, except war-related issues. Clearly from 1777 when the first set of Articles were voted until 1787 when they were eventually repealed in favour of the federal Constitution founding a national state supervising thirteen state-sovereignties, America had been composed of almost thirteen small nation-states loosely connected by a so-called national Congress and a weak figure-head in charge of convening Congress yearly in war time. David Brian Robertson in *The Constitution and America's Destiny* analysed the Articles of Confederation as a "mere league of friendship" as each state had very strong incentive to resist policies that sacrificed their constituents' interests for the nation's good. Their representatives believed that they could gain more in the short term from acting independently than by cooperating for the common good<sup>47</sup>.

In this section, we will see how Jefferson laboured to promote a common identity and a common project among the states of the Union before he left for France to hold the position of American ambassador, to represent the nation as a whole. However, Jefferson could only witness how unsuccessful the Articles of Confederation were for the Union as the individual states that had "made a bargain with each other (29)", retained their own individuality refusing to commit to any national policy or project. With the failure of the Articles, the nation-state, the only formula with which the thirteen nations would be able to stand among other nations, Americans had to revisit their national commitment, and national ideology would have to be fostered among their people.

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<sup>47</sup> ROBERTSON David Brian, *The Constitution and America's Destiny*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 45.

## **II- A: Jefferson's labouring for a national project: distinguishing American values from "alien" British manners.**

Jefferson still shared with ancient Republics and Western monarchies, the ideal that social and political leaders could fashion and impart on the lower orders manners and views, which would then foster a common cultural background out of imitation.

Gellner explains that a common cultural background is an essential prerequisite to the growth of nationalism, as well as "bards" to uphold these common values or to impart them:

When general social conditions make for standardized, homogenous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire population and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit with which men willingly and often ardently identify. The cultures now seem to be the natural repositories of political legitimacy. Only then does it come to appear that any defiance of their boundaries by political units constitutes a scandal.<sup>48</sup>

This would suggest that a form of American culture represented not only by the enlightened elite but also found among the people, already pre-existed the political tyranny in which the British Crown held the British colonists living in America. Jefferson mostly based his impression that a native culture existed side by side with English manners and traditions, on his own experience as a Virginian. In fact, the construction, the digging of or the invention of this "common American culture" only began when a new political unit was formed after the separation from the mother country. Jefferson identified or promoted Virginian manners, customs and practices with American cultural traits.

To begin with, Jefferson tackled the task of "demarcating"<sup>49</sup> what really belonged to authentic American political manners or social modes from British ones. Jefferson challenged what appeared to him as the foundations or pillars of a British supremacy over the settlers, during the drafting of a new set of laws for the Union. Among those British political or social traditions, Jefferson identified primogeniture, which was mainly observed in the southern states where English aristocrats had settled during the Civil Wars. Similarly, Jefferson identified the lingering leadership of the Anglican Church in Virginia as an unbearable presence of English supremacy over the people's freedom of worship. Jefferson obtained a bill, which "annulled the privilege" of primogeniture, which had enabled a Patrician, order to establish in America, maintaining on foreign ground a British social hierarchy. By forbidding primogeniture, he believed that estates could then be divided in smaller portions thus creating "an enlargement of aristocracy." (32) By that, Jefferson suggested that a new form of native

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<sup>48</sup> GELLNER E., *op.cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>49</sup> SMITH A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, *op.cit.*, p. 202.

aristocrats should emerge in America, who would act as role models to citizens. “The aristocracy of virtue and talent” would then replace “the aristocracy of wealth”, by providing “for the direction of the interests of society” in a “well-ordered Republic.” (32)

Second, he agreed with a majority in Congress in July 1776 that their code of laws, i.e. as used in each province, should be reviewed, revised or at least “adapted to [their] republican form of government”, now that they had the entire freedom to do so without submitting their new laws to the approval of the British King. Jefferson went as far as suggesting that the code “should be corrected, in all its parts with a single eye to reason, and the good of those for whose government it was framed. (37)” Tackling the task for the state of Virginia, Jefferson eventually preserved the old Blackstone code while instituting new laws for the land.

Away from Congress, Jefferson also prompted Adams to act as his representative among the delegates in order to rescue the “national project” the Founding Fathers had imparted in 1776. Among his recommendations to Congress, from which “our salvation can proceed”, the development of national infrastructures formed the basic dynamic of a national community. For instance, Jefferson indicated the necessity of establishing a national system of post-office as “the speedy and frequent communication of intelligence is really of great consequence [...] Our people merely for want of intelligence which they may rely on are become lethargick [sic] and insensible of the state they are in.”<sup>50</sup>

## **II – B: The Articles of Confederation (1777-1785), defining a system of government, a compromise not a national project.**

Many Americans, perhaps most, saw the Continental Congress and the Articles of Confederation that they produced, as mere expedients, temporary measures that could be discarded once the crisis of separation had passed. In 1776-1778, as they were debated by the new states, Jefferson recalls in his *Autobiography* that the purpose of Confederation was clear in most minds: “Our importance, our interests, our peace required that we should confederate, and that mutual sacrifices should be made to effect a compromise of this difficult question [states' representation in the new assembly]”<sup>51</sup>. In fact, Jefferson had invented the myth of consensus, which from then on had to be upheld for the rest of the world.

Who would be the “one people” described by Jefferson in the Declaration? Such was the first question debated in the first days following independence. How should the number of representatives sent to the new Assembly be calculated? Should each state count its “white people” or should slave-holding states include

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<sup>50</sup> Jefferson to Adams, May 16, 1777, in *Writings*, op.cit., p. 759.

<sup>51</sup> JEFFERSON, *The Autobiography*, in *Writings*, , op.cit., p. 28

their slaves? The first draft of Article XI referring to the charges of war and expenses incurred for the common defence or general welfare, led the principles of who "the people" were: "the number of inhabitants of every age, sex and quality, except Indians not paying taxes, in each colony, a true account of which, distinguishing the white inhabitants, shall be triennially taken and transmitted to the Assembly of the United States."<sup>52</sup> Thomas Paine suggested, "to proportion the quotas of the states to the number of souls" to solve the problem. Another delegate, Doctor Witherspoon also suggested that by adding that figures on the values of lands and houses in each colony would provide "the best estimate of the wealth of a nation."<sup>53</sup>

In May 1776, Congress had urged the separate states to replace the British political system with governments based on republican principles. Each colony, now state, had had to confront the question of political forms within the context of its own political tradition. The governing principles of the new Congress separated power within the government, reducing executive authority and making power directly responsible to the people and their representatives. Mob rule had to be restricted by limited franchise (to be set by each state when devising its own voting rights) and higher qualification should be maintained for office holding. Clearly, American delegates spent far more time and energy hammering out the States's constitutions than they did debating an overall federal authority. Jefferson himself resigned his seat in Congress preferring working at the level of his state: Virginia. He eventually returned to Congress in 1782, a few months after the triumphant American victory at Yorktown, only to note that it had now become a very small body of hardly any significance. Most shocking to him was the lack of "a visible head of the government during the vacation of Congress." Jefferson meant that the Confederation had not provided for someone who would "superintend the executive business, receive and communicate with foreign ministers and nations", when Congress was in recess. Clearly, this was the obvious sign that there was no proper collective project for the nation, not to mention a proper State, or a State representative able to debate and discuss with other nations on the same stand. Jefferson knew that sooner or later a figurehead would have to be appointed, while the states should develop some checks in order to preserve them from the rise of another monarch. While in Paris, Jefferson and Franklin debated over the continual split that occurred in Congress in America, suggesting that "a single Arbiter for ultimate decisions" had to be appointed<sup>54</sup>.

Ideologically, the Articles were far from showing a united front. If Republican principles were followed in most state constitutions, the commitment to equality and liberty were soon forgotten. "The people" were left out from the Articles and limited by voting franchise and barred from higher offices by property

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<sup>52</sup> JEFFERSON, *The Autobiography*, in *Writings*, , *op.cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> JEFFERSON, *The Autobiography*, in *Writings*, *op.cit.* p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> JEFFERSON, *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

qualifications. The older habit of "elitist politics" prevailed. Slavery for instance was maintained in the Southern States. In the Northern States, the defence of political liberty soon led many to question the validity of the "peculiar" institution. Besides, the rapid ideological metamorphosis brought about by the promises of the Declaration (materialism, self-centeredness, "*laissez-faire*" echoed in the pursuit of happiness) brought some tensions within the elite and between the people and the elite, who so far had kept the creation of the new country, the birth of the nation in their hands.

After the lengthy debates over how many states should ratify the Treaty of Peace in 1783, Jefferson and Franklin were asked to negotiate commercial treaties with foreign nations as Congress "deemed it necessary to get their commerce placed with every nation on a footing as favourable, as that of other nations." Before leaving for Paris in July 1784, Jefferson made a point of passing through several states to enquire into the state of commerce in each of them. This indicates that no general survey of the wealth or trade of the "nation" had been carried out contrary to what had been proposed by him in 1776, as part of a national survey scheme. Congress had simply been an expediency used during war times. Jefferson himself when asked by Mr de Marbois for statistical accounts on the different states of the Union, offered him his *Notes on Virginia*, which he presented as his "country", for lack of any continental survey.

The institutional conservatism demonstrated by states' delegates contrasted markedly with the intellectual revolution that underlay the spirit of 1776. Besides the so-called pledge of the Declaration of Independence that created an "intercolonial union" on paper was soon forgotten as states' governments remained pre-eminent in the minds of the new citizens.

The ratification of the Peace Treaty in 1783 only displayed the mock national government that the Confederation Congress was supposed to represent. The episode left a mark on Jefferson's American pride if one can judge from the bitterness of his tone when recalling it in his *Autobiography*. When the Treaty, signed on September 3, 1783 by the British and French Kings, arrived from Paris to Annapolis where Congress was convened to ratify it, Jefferson recalled that many delegates had not made the journey. To be ratified, 9 states had to sign it while 7 states only were represented in Annapolis. In December, letters were sent to all the governors mentioning the urgent situation for the nation, as the Treaty had to be returned by boat to France. Confronted to the difficulty of gathering the number of delegates, one group thought they could pretend 9 states had ratified the Treaty while Jefferson and his followers refused to lie considering that England would then "be surprised and cheated" while for Americans "it would be a dishonourable prostitution of our seal. (52)"

The Articles failed to envisage a durable working constitution for the future of the nation, and only worked during the time of the war as the states needed to be several into one "e pluribus unum". Jefferson humbly concluded that:

Our first essay in America to establish a federative government had fallen, on trial, very short of its object. During the war of Independence, while the pressure of an external enemy hooped us together, and their enterprises kept us necessarily on the alert, the spirit of the people, excited by danger, was a supplement to the Confederation and urged them to zealous exertions. But when peace and safety were restored, and every man became engaged in useful and profitable occupation, less attention was paid to the calls of Congress. (71)

Ironically in 1783, by the Treaty of Paris, the United States were recognized as a nation "de jure" instead of "de facto", by the outside world and foreign nations, while its delegates and its people did not see themselves as one yet. Writing to Samuel Adams in May 1784, John Adams who was at The Hague warned that the new nation was not yet a "nation" as such if one considered the thirteen United States struggling under their Articles of Confederation.

Our Country, My Friend, is not yet out of danger. There are great difficulties in our Constitution and Situation to reconcile Government, Finance, Commerce, and foreign affairs, with our Liberties.

The Prospect before Us is joyful, but there are Intricacies in it, which will perplex the wisest Heads and wound the most honest hearts and disturb the coolest and firmest Tempers<sup>55</sup>.

However, in spite of the alarming state of the Union, or its synecdoche the nation, the nationalist founding fathers could only egg their friends or relatives to influence Congress while it seems that a large majority of the delegates had lost interest in a common government, preferring to focus on the reconstruction of their own state where they could pursue their own private interests in local business and politics. It seemed that the national myth of consensus was definitely shattered.

## **II- C: Mapping the new nation: Expansion westward as a national project?**

In January 1784, while Jefferson was preparing himself to fill his position as Minister plenipotentiary in Paris, he could not help but note how weak the American nation must now appear to its European counterparts with its constant constitutional bickering and lack of agreement on foreign and domestic politics: "Our transactions on this side of the water must now have become uninteresting to the rest of the world." Writing to his French friend Chastellux, Jefferson added "We are busy however among ourselves endeavouring to get our new governments into regular and concerted motion. For this purpose I believe we shall find some additions requisite to our Confederation." It appears therefore that delegates were not yet envisaging the creation of a nation-state with a single government though Jefferson underlined that being now clearly separated from

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<sup>55</sup> John Adams to Samuel Adams, *Samuel Adams Papers*, The Hague, May 1784.

the mother country, he hoped that Americans were free from the threats of “anarchy and opposition to government in America<sup>56</sup>”, which had so far prevented a stronger central government from emerging. Referring to the post-war petty squabbles between the states over tax collection for the sake of the Confederation, while most states were depleted of any agriculture or means of raising money, Jefferson suggested that Americans should set to work at a collective level “to avail ourselves of the productions of the earth”, instead of sinking back to the pre-war competition between southern and northern states. In the meantime, Jefferson wrote to George Washington that “the crippled state of Congress” led the delegates to waste “our time and labour in vain efforts to do business.” The lack of equal representation or of representation from each state at Congress, which showed a lack of commitment to the communal fate between the different states after 1783, was leading the Union to its doom. However under the Articles some federal decisions had to be taken such as the question of westward expansion. The new empty territory lying West of the Ohio Valley now belonged to all Americans and not to a foreign state, or to one state, according to Jefferson. Therefore the Congress of the "Confederation" had to decide on its development. Such was the purpose of the message that Jefferson sent to George Washington in which he evoked the necessity of expanding westward to benefit from what he described as “Western commerce”, i.e. fur trade, with a view towards improving national interest:

This is the moment however for seizing it if ever we mean to have it. All the world is becoming commercial. Was it practicable to keep our new empire separated from them we might indulge ourselves in speculating whether commerce contributes to the happiness of mankind? But we cannot separate ourselves from them. Our citizens have had to full a taste of the comforts furnished by the arts and manufactures to be debarred the use of them. We must then in our defence endeavour to share as large a portion as we can of this modern source of wealth and power. [...] It behoves us then to open our doors to it.<sup>57</sup>

Considering the dead end in which their political institutions had placed them, Jefferson could only tactically recommend that the extension westward should fall under the command and state-rule of Virginia, thus placing the state which already had a large population in an even more powerful place within the Confederation in terms of future representation. By putting forward this selfish view, Jefferson was hoping to infuriate even further the delegates who had refused to consider expansion westward as an urgent business for the Union, on the basis that developing the river ways and clearing the land for the sake of transportation and commerce would require national taxes to be collected in each state.

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<sup>56</sup> Jefferson to Chastellux, January 16, 1784, in *Writings*, p. 777.

<sup>57</sup> Jefferson to Washington, March 15, 1784, in *Writings*, p. 787.



Once again, Jefferson from behind the scene tried to prompt like-minded politicians like Washington, who shared his nationalist views, to act in the name of the country as a whole. By writing to Washington, Jefferson hoped to mobilize and prompt the founding fathers that like him had retired from public life, back to action:

If it would be only a dignified amusement to you, what a monument of your retirement would it be! It is one which would follow that of your public life and bespeak it the work of some great hand. I am confident that you would either alone or jointly with any persons you think proper be willing to direct this business, it would remove the only objection the weight of which I apprehend.

Jefferson assured Washington that he had no intention of owning any part of this land and that his “zeal in this business [was] public and pure.” In fact, this local dispute over navigation rights to the Potomac and trade expansion westward prompted former friends to act. In March 1784, James Madison approached Thomas Jefferson and proposed the appointment of delegates from Virginia and his own state Maryland to work out an amicable compromise of their states’ competing claims thus showing the way for further agreements on matters of land expansion. However, agreement and compromise on land expansion were short-lived as Jefferson could but admit when from Paris he wrote to James Madison in June 1785 after Congress had just voted a new plan designed to divide new land among each state, which would be sold “at vendue.” Jefferson could only complain to his friend about the step back Congress was taking towards the national goal him and Madison had in mind:

It separates still more the interests of the states which ought to be made joint in every possible instance in order to cultivate the idea of our being one nation, and to multiply the instances in which the people shall look up to Congress as their head<sup>58</sup>.

Thanks to the selfless exertion of Jefferson, Franklin and John Adams, all too remote from Congress either physically or politically to be of any direct influence on decision-making, some powerful figures and delegates began to put down their heads together by exchanging notes and letters on the state of the nation. From 1784, men such as James Madison, George Washington, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton began forming a sort of interstate networks of correspondence. They had all shared a useful experience of sitting in the Continental Congress, or commanding the Continental Army, or working in the diplomatic corps during the war. In other words, from working at a national level instead of being involved in local politics, they had a national vision for their infant nation, which they all could see waning away.

Besides if the threat of war with Britain had been stopped for now, commercial war was only beginning between successful Britain whose manufactures

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<sup>58</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, June 17, 1785, in *Writings*, p. 804.

required cheap raw materials and American states who had to reconstruct their own economy by selling or manufacturing their own resources. The likelihood that Britain, as well as other foreign powers, would seek to take advantage of the well-known disunion among the states, alarmed the nationalist founding fathers<sup>59</sup>. In a powerful note whose tone reminds us of Jefferson's when in 1783 he complained about the fact that Congress was defacing and belying the "Great Seal" when it was unable to sign the Peace Treaty collectively, Washington wrote to Madison in late in November 1785:

We are either a United people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support. If we are not, let us no longer act as a farce by pretending to it. For whilst we are playing a double game, or playing a game between the two we shall never be consistent or respectable – but may become the dupes of some powers and most assuredly, the contempt of all<sup>60</sup>.

Washington's nationalist pride in America was as hurt as Jefferson's powerlessness before the apathy of Congress to move forward in the name of a united nation. Once again, the impulse towards the re-enactment or repetition of the nationalist ideology came from a handful of leaders committed to the national project in spite of a lack of adhesion on the part of the people who seem to be left out of the political equation, at least at Confederation level.

The same people reacted violently in one symbolic state in 1786. In Massachusetts, one of the oldest states with a very liberal constitution, a farmers' rebellion under the leadership of a farmer called Daniel Shays rebelled against the Massachusetts militia over high taxes and penalties collected by their legislature and by merchants in the neighbouring states with whom they traded. For almost a year, the rebels stood up for their rights before the tensions dwindled away when government leaders eventually woke up to the real roots of this rebellion. If Massachusetts, the second oldest political community in the United States, governed by a moderate constitution, could be torn by a rebellion, why would rebellions not spread to other states, and did it portend for the nation as a whole? The Shays rebellion became an element of nationalist propaganda for the proponents of a new federal Constitution.

Finally, after numerous small and local committees met and signed petitions promoted by James Madison, Congress finally adopted a resolution in February 1787 calling for a national convention to be held in the spring in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. Madison came to the convention, which

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<sup>59</sup> Such were also the conclusion of Richard Price, *Observations on the American Revolution*, which Jefferson and Americans read in 1785. Though a friend of the Republic, Price underlined the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.

<sup>60</sup> Washington to Madison, 30 November 1785, in *The Papers of James Madison*, edited by M.E. Rachal and Robert Rutland, Chicago, University Press of Chicago, 1975, vol. VIII, p. 429

opened in May, with a list of proposals and a memorandum entitled "Vices of the Political System of the United States."

Other "political nationalists" like Alexander Hamilton, advocated at the same time the necessity of a strong national government. The political climate had changed, inter-state trade needed to be facilitated, most citizens agreed who were tired by the limitation of "parochial interests". Besides the question of what to do with new immigrants and new comers was decisive for the nation as a whole. All these questions also began to be regularly tackled by local newspapers and gazettes whose number had started to grow in the wake of the Revolution. According to David Waldstreicher who studied the spread of print-culture in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in America, citizens were hankering for information that went beyond their state boundaries and journalists began to demand reform of the national Constitution too, as well as a better involvement of their citizens in the process<sup>61</sup>.

A new convention was convened in Philadelphia in 1787 to "realize" the Union. The question of the lack of a "common or unified culture" was evoked. Cultural identity could only be achieved if a central government imparted some centripetal forces, i.e. some federalist dynamics. The representatives at the National Convention were strongly divided between federalists and anti-federalists, but they all convened to "devise" a political system capable of protecting the interests of property without endangering the "liberties of the citizens". Achieving a balance was a delicate task as two extremes had to be avoided: on the one hand tyranny or elected monarchy (the fear that too much centralized powers in the hands of the executive would enable one man or a group to grab hold of the powers) and on the other hand the fear of the mob (could the so-called "virtuous people" be trusted to select wise and good leaders?). The elite was divided between the "Federalists" (John Jay, Alexander Hamilton) who favoured a strong central government, an Enlightenment concept, and the "anti-Federalists", (or "liberals" or "Democratic-Republicans") favouring a more "populist stand". While the American delegates were trying to recapture the spirit of 1776, other groups were at work in the public to remind the people of the fact that they had come together and fought the British for a reason.

## **II – D: Injecting pride in the American national achievement. Imitation and Praise of a much-admired Revolution. America in the eye of the Western world.**

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<sup>61</sup> WALDSTREICHER David, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina, 1997, p. 53

From Paris, Jefferson measuring the failures of Americans to establish a federative government blamed the weak Congress that had been formed in 1776. No sentiment of cohesion or patriotism had been fostered by it. If, as he recognized, in the first years of the war, “the spirit of the people, excited by danger, was a supplement to the Confederation and urged them to zealous exertions”, in times of peace, there was no sentiment on the part of the people to support the “national” government. Jefferson suggested that the main cause was to be found among the central deficient article that stated that Congress “was not authorized to act immediately on the people.” Each decision was then mediated and weighed by states’ assemblies. On May 25<sup>th</sup> 1787, when the National Convention was to meet Jefferson happily noted that “the people” aware of the inefficiency of such a weak Confederation at international level, decided to right its wrongs:

The good sense and good dispositions of the people as soon as they perceived the incompetence of their first compact [...] agreed with one voice to elect deputies to a general convention, who should peacefully meet and agree on such a constitution “as would ensure peace, justice, liberty, the common defence and general welfare.”<sup>62</sup>

While the National Convention was eventually set up in Philadelphia, Jefferson, away in Paris, could still act behind the scenes to promote his political ideas. His main contribution seemed to have been the injection of a national pride for Americans’ achievement, which was visible in France, if not visible in America yet. His letters were partly private, partly public as on some occasions he advised Madison to let his opinion be known to Congress but also to the press. It seems that Jefferson’s first travel abroad, to Old Europe, awakened his own pride in his American fellows. Seen from afar, the exceptional speed in which the American nation had been born and the uniqueness and peculiarities of its native manners and usage, led him to advise James Madison to visit him in France, in order to gain the same perspective on this particular identity and on the blessings that Providence had brought Americans:

My God! How little do my country men know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy. I confess I had no idea of it myself.

While we shall see multiplied instances of Europeans going to live in America, I will venture to say no man now living will ever see an instance of an American removing to settle in Europe.

Come then and see the proofs of this, and on your return add your testimony to that of every thinking American, in order to satisfy our countrymen how much it is their interest to preserve uninfected by contagion those peculiarities in their government and manners to which they are indebted for these blessings<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> JEFFERSON, *The Autobiography*, in *Writings*, p. 71.

<sup>63</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, June 17, 1785, in *Writings*, p. 808.

If he could feel his national pride and attachment for his country heightened by the comparison with France and French manners, so could his fellow Americans gain a sense of patriotic pride if Jefferson let them know how much admired they were in Europe.

Jefferson who was then ambassador in France described the National Convention from afar as "an assembly of Demigods", as if he could already declare them heroes of the nation under the glorious nickname of "the Founding fathers". Jefferson had already placed them in a context of exceptionalism.

Besides, Jefferson was also able to observe the political tensions which had been mounting in France since 1783 and told his American correspondents about the inspiration that many French radicals had found in their Revolution. Jefferson witnessed the growth of dissensions within the nation, caused by the amounting debts incurred by the Royal couple and the general atmosphere of "despotism". However, he also noted that the formation of a "Patriotic" party had been initiated by young men who had just returned from America.

Celebrated writers of France and England had already sketched good principles on the subject of government. Yet the American Revolution seems first to have awakened the thinking part of the French nation in general from the sleep of despotism in which they were sunk. The officers too who had been to America, were mostly young men, less shackled by habit and prejudice, and more ready to assent to the suggestions of common sense, and feeling of common rights. They came back with new ideas and impressions [...] Politics became the theme of all societies, male and female, and a very extensive and zealous party was formed which acquired the appellation of the Patriotic party, who sensible of the abusive government under which they lived, sighed for occasions of reforming it.<sup>64</sup>

In order to recapture the spirit and the enthusiasm of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson conveyed the impression to his correspondents and to the American press, that American ideas were so influential and universal that even French people followed their path and eventually overturned the French monarchy. Such a confidence in America's own principles should also be rekindled among American patriots as the eyes of the western world were turned upon them and their National Convention. In 1789, Jefferson mentioned his conferences with the "leading patriots" of the French assembly, "being from a country which had successfully passed through a similar reformation, they were disposed to my acquaintance and had some confidence in me. I urged more strenuously an immediate compromise." But Jefferson adds, "they thought otherwise" and a bloody revolution occurred. Though the wisdom of Americans had not prevailed, at least they seemed to have provided the answer to free France and the rest of Europe, suggests Jefferson, "from the abuses of the

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<sup>64</sup> JEFFERSON , *The Autobiography*, in *Writings*, p. 63. (see his account of Paris in 1788-89 p. 80-81)

governing powers<sup>65</sup>". Instead of opting for regicide, Jefferson thought the revolutionaries could have achieved a parliamentary monarchy, which would have satisfied the people of France. Jefferson insisted on his neutrality and disinclined any invitation to join the French debate.

The conclusion he draws for his readers of the whole episode reinforces the exceptionalism of the American experiment between 1776 and 1787, during which according to Jefferson's nationalist narrative, "our government was then passing from its Chrysalid to its Organic form." Jefferson insists on the fact that they were "in the first chapter" of French history. The appeal to the rights of man that echoed in the French assembly "had been made in the US", then taken up by France, among the first of the European nations. His own experience abroad also fostered in him a feeling of nostalgia and pride for his own country. "So ask the travelled inhabitant of any nation, in which country on earth would you rather live? Certainly in my own, where are all my friends, my relations, and the earliest and sweetest affections and recollections of my life."<sup>66</sup>

## **II – E: Enlisting the help of various “bards” in imagining an American nation and an American character.**

The 1780s were a time of uncertainty for Americans. The country was torn off by regional tensions, political factions and commercial strife. To save the Union, some nationalist thinkers and politicians believed that Americans needed to be reminded that they belonged of right to the same community, with a distinctive national identity, i.e. a distinctive and unique culture. Promoting this unique American character, which was not clear even to Jefferson in the 1780s, was the task of some philosophers who designed on paper the common traits of the new American man. Jefferson defined the ideal American citizen as a hard-working farmer to John Jay:

We have now lands enough to employ an infinite number of people in their cultivation. Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independant, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds<sup>67</sup>.

Besides, commenting on Chastellux's records of a visit to America, Jefferson complimented his French friend for the perceptive eye with which he had seized the main traits of his compatriots. He added that he himself had "studied that character with attention." He concluded about Americans that they were "aristocratical, pompous, clannish, indolent, hospitable." In fact, Chastellux's remarks triggered a series of remarks on the part of Jefferson on the

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<sup>65</sup> JEFFERSON, *The Autobiography, Writings*, p. 85

<sup>66</sup> JEFFERSON, *The Autobiography, Writings*, p. 98.

<sup>67</sup> Jefferson to John Jay, Paris, August 2, 1785, in *Writings*, op.cit., p. 818.

distinctiveness of Americans living in the South and the North which seen from a distance might also explain the present political dissensions. According to Jefferson who for the first time pondered on Americanness,

In the North, they are cool, sober, laborious, persevering, independent, jealous of their own liberties, just to those of others, superstitious and hypocritical in their religion. In the South they are fiery, voluptuary, indolent, unsteady, independent, zealous for their own liberties but trampling on those of others, without attachment or pretension to any religion but that of the heart<sup>68</sup>.

Clearly according to him, what seemed to bring them together were their attachment to liberties as well as their independence. To any one visiting America, Jefferson recommended to begin by Pennsylvania, half way between the two regional extremes where “the two characters seem to meet and blend and form a people free from the extremes both of vice and virtue.”<sup>69</sup> Jefferson asked Chastellux to publish his notes on America and Americans for the sake of Congress and “the general mass of citizens.” The following month, Jefferson was remarking to another correspondent that his interest in European culture had passed, as he recognized the necessity of forming true American men thanks to an American education which would forge distinctive traits in the new generation of college men, the American aristocracy of virtue:

It appears to me that an American coming to Europe for education loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits and in his happiness. [...] Cast your eye over America, who are the men of most learning, of most eloquence, most beloved by their countrymen and most trusted and promoted by them? They are those who have been educated among them and whose manners, morals and habits, are perfectly homogenous with those of the country<sup>70</sup>.

As we noted earlier, in 1776, Jefferson had begun a process of affirmation of a form of Americanness over Britishness, the most common culture colonists had had to share over the past 150 years prior to the Revolution, by revising the inherited systems of laws, by eradicating the supremacy of the British aristocracy who should be replaced by an American aristocracy of virtue, by disestablishment of the Church of England in America. The first step towards the creation of a new identity, a proper American character, was to distinguish Americans from their British inherited connection, and to list the “native” virtues and strength citizens shared. Indeed, American nationalism required the recognition of an “old community of allegiance” found in the provinces but also the expansion of that “community of allegiance” (beyond state and regional cultures) to the several millions, across the vast geographic expanse, which the

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<sup>68</sup> Jefferson to Chastellux, Paris, September 2, 1785, p. 826.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Jefferson to John Banister, October 15, 1785, p. 839.

founding fathers already envisaged they would attract. How did politicians and thinkers and writers create a "national community", "one people" with common interests beyond parochial interests, i.e. a unique American identity? John Breuilly in *Nationalism and the State* notes about the role of culture in supporting nationalism that: "Cultural appeals add to that political legitimacy and also help provide the basis of support for a nationalist movement which gives its particular claim to state power credibility. The claim to uniqueness is ultimately used to justify the claim to have a state just like any other."<sup>71</sup>

Politicians like Jefferson, Washington, Madison and Jay, as well as intellectuals like Paine, Crèvecoeur, Franklin or Webster felt the need to imagine a community, in order to back up the rather fragile loyalty towards the institutions, to further the myth of national homogeneity and to affirm the end of English values and usage which had been the main cultural and political pull over a century and a half. The affirmation of an American unity, which had begun with the Declaration of Independence, did not necessarily affirm a new identity. The Declaration still referred to the British as "brethren". Citizens themselves now celebrated the political separation from the mother country, which founded the nation, on July 4th. But the nation needed to be defined otherwise through other symbols, but also through texts, which brought texture and substance to the political consensus. In other words, cultural sameness had to be underlined or invented in order to be celebrated. Clifford Geertz in *Myth, Symbol and Culture* states that "the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves *ensembles*, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they more properly belong."<sup>72</sup> What America needed, was a national (cultural) project defined (*a posteriori*) which could stir a sense of national belonging and national communal project - along with a national sentiment which already cropped up on July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations. American nationalists realized such American texts were needed, as a number of prominent texts were already circulating in America and in Europe whose authors, foreign to America, tried to define the new citizen of the New World, now *endowed* with unalienable rights. In typical European mode of thinking, these writers (Richard Price, Edmund Burke<sup>73</sup>, Monsieur de Chastellux...) could not suppose that the Revolution had happened without a major thrust of true American nationalists whose character opposed the British one. Confronted to the unseizable American character, American intellectuals took up the task themselves of defining what the American character was like, be it real or mythical.

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<sup>71</sup> BREUILLY J., *Nationalism and the State*, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> GEERTZ C., *Myth, Symbol, and Culture*, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>73</sup> Burke resorted to the same stereotypical "national character" explanation when he tried to explain the revolutionary thrust in France. He saw the French revolutionaries as an unruly, uneducated mob following bourgeois demagogues.



Anthony Smith in *National Identity* emphasizes the role played by the intelligentsia and intellectuals in the fashioning of "civic nationalisms". However, if symbols and myths were forged to sustain this national programme, character traits and manners could not really be invented overnight. National traits or at least common American traits had to be listed and praised in order to underline the manners, which already distinguished Americans from their British ascendants for instance or from Europeans at large.

Benjamin Franklin and Hector de Crèvecoeur would show that the colonists had already developed different habits such as self-reliance, independence, social and physical mobility, a strong connection to the soil and the wilderness, as well as a strict moral conduct particularly in New England, in the case of Franklin, inspired by a Puritan code of ethics. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Hector de Crèvecoeur and Thomas Paine had had ample opportunities to compare British, French and American characters while visiting Europe for Franklin and Adams, or after leaving England or France for America in the case of Paine and Crèvecoeur. It was not so much the colonial lifestyle and the remoteness of the American colonies at a distance from British or French lights that had created those differences in traits, but the actual context of settlement and the pragmatic necessity of having to live and survive in America. Franklin publicized these American values in his writings, more particularly in his *Autobiography* and his *Almanack*. To publicize a set of "national" traits over a set of common or regional traits, some vindication was needed in a printed form, which heralded the "new" American values. American character traits, combined with the commitment to symbolic principles, such as freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness, had to be celebrated and promoted.

### **Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)**

Thomas Paine can be described as the first "universal" citizen. He was the living proof that a foreigner with political commitment to a design and an idea, the Republic and the Rights of Man, could settle in a community and become part of it simply by adhering to its civic design.

A dissenter in England, both in the political and religious sense of the term, he immigrated to America in order to find refuge in a welcoming land while he was prosecuted for his pamphlets in Britain. Paine became a great contributor to the American Revolution with the central narrative of *Common Sense*. Like Crèvecoeur he had come from abroad but he immediately adhered to the civic and religious virtues which had already developed during the "salutary neglect" time-period. With *Common Sense*, Paine also proposed for the first time an alternative to the fate of colonies in general. He was the first one to publicly suggest a new future for the new country; by underlining that the people of America had now grown into adulthood and outgrown the patronizing mother country. He put forward the idea that the Americans were now forming a family

of their own. He revisited the century-old "family metaphor" which had kept the first British Empire together and maintained the colonists in the impression they were part of a larger transatlantic community: "Every day wears out the little remains of kindred between us and them; and can there be any reason to hope that as the relationship expires the affection will increase, or that we shall agree better when we have ten times more and greater concerns to quarrel over than ever?"

He reinvented the family metaphor into the myth of a natural new "destiny" for the masses of people living in America: "It is not in numbers but in unity that our great strength lies; yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world. [...] Our present union is marked with both these characters: we are young and we have been distressed." By depicting Britain, the former fatherland, patria, as a land of despots, he forced the American readers to consider their "home" land as their new patria and to consider their own virtues. In short his narrative based on a simple rhetoric and on a metaphorical interpretation of the history of nation-formation, "the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART", prompted Americans to look to their own values and virtues<sup>74</sup>. Paine also put forward the "Noah's Ark" image of a land where refugees and discarded populations could find shelter and regain their unalienable rights.

In a letter to Thomas Jefferson written in February 1788 written in the wake of a conversation, Paine had with the American minister in Paris, the philosopher complained about how the Confederation had led Americans to drift day by day away from the original American ideal of consensus and Union, based on "the rights of compact" which every member living in the country must accept. According to him, the lack of commitment to the national community of the delegates was at the core of America on the verge of dissolution: "I consider the individual sovereignty of the states retained under the Act of Confederation. [...] It answers the pride and purpose of a few men in each state – but the State collectively is injured by it."<sup>75</sup>

### **Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) – *The Autobiography and Pamphlets* (1785)**

Franklin was already a prominent character in colonial America before he became a national hero as one of the Founding Fathers of the Republic. He was a genuine self-made man who had risen himself from printer-apprentice in England to successful entrepreneur/ businessman/ inventor/journalist/intellectual /politician in America. Before the revolution, Franklin already represented

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<sup>74</sup> PAINE, Thomas, *Common Sense*, (1776), from "Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs", p.24 and "Of the Present Ability of America, with some Miscellaneous Reflections", p. 36, in *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. by Mark Philips, Oxford, OUP, 1995,

<sup>75</sup> PAINE, T., Letter to Jefferson, Feb. 1788, *ibid*, p. 79.

“national” genius at its best. Besides, thanks to the spread of his printing business, he was able to bring literacy to families in provincial towns in New England. He also designed an almanac, *Poor Richard's Almanack* that was launched in 1731 with maxims for every day of the year. Thanks to its large circulation, mainly throughout New England and Carolina, Franklin preached the gospel of self-help to British colonists before they became American citizens. It annually sold up to 10,000 copies and his maxims were quoted and translated in several languages well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

His main contribution to the forging of a common identity took several forms. First came the Almanack, which he published, yearly from 1731 until 1757. When he terminated the Almanack, Franklin gathered several essential maxims, those of “Poor Richard”, into a pamphlet entitled “The Way to Wealth” whose content already put forward a clear materialistic frame of mind, which one could describe, as American<sup>76</sup>. His almanac was then reproduced by numerous printers, some of whom had been trained by him, and sold throughout the colonies<sup>77</sup>, furthering the use of typical maxims, including native maxims. During the Revolution, Franklin wrote one famous patriotic pamphlet “An Edict by the King of Prussia” (1773) against the tyranny of monarchical despots, though he had remained a strong monarchist up to that point. Finally, his *Autobiography* was released in 1785 which offered to his readers an overview of Franklin’s career from his humble beginning as an apprentice, followed by the day-to-day practical steps readers should follow to become a successful businessman like him, thanks to hard work and moral values. He connected his rise in society to the actual “opportunities” he found in America. Franklin also added a strong religious perspective, not to mention a clear sectarian approach, to his tale of moral and material progress. He was clear that Anglicanism and Catholicism were not leading men to progress or to the accumulation of wealth, which any man deserved if he worked hard. On the other hand, religious communities in America, Quakers of Pennsylvania for instance, provided great freedom of action and respect to industrious citizens. He defined a practical self-help grid, typical of sectarian religion, and spelled out the “gospel” of wealth and hard work. Franklin had grown up in the Puritan congregation of Boston, where his father was converted to stern Puritanism, and then he moved his business and family to Philadelphia to live and work among Quakers. For them he wrote pamphlets such as *Necessary Hints to those who would become rich* or *Advice to a young tradesman*. He combined “religious piety” and “practical

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<sup>76</sup> Mark Twain later deplored the fact that Franklin had presented such a prissy and materialistic frame of mind to the European public and to fellow Americans.

<sup>77</sup> FRANKLIN, Benjamin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Kenneth Silverman, London, Penguin, 1986, see *The Autobiography* (1785), p.121. “The partnership in Carolina having succeeded, I was encouraged to engage in others, and to promote several of my workmen who had behaved well, by establishing them with printing houses in different colonies, on the same terms with that in Carolina.”

business” to write his tale of American success. However, Franklin was a firm “regional” man and his patriotism was naturally connected to New England. However, his almanac and maxims circulated throughout the colonies and one can say Franklin was a great pedagogue contributing to the moral improvement of the “native” community as a whole through his tales pamphlets that appealed to his fellow citizens’ «common sense” and through his maxims and illustrations borrowed from everyday living in America. He firmly believed that everyone had first to improve himself in order to become virtuous, before turning to the community to improve it and to bring some virtues to it. Franklin was a great contributor to the development of Philadelphia where he spent most of his life and to Boston where he had also lived and where his parents had moved at the beginning of the century. He spelled out to American citizens the necessity of relying on one’s community, either local, regional or national to which one owed great service in return.

Franklin was one of the architects of the American Dream by spelling out its ingredients: material success, moral regeneration and social progress. Through well-known maxims publicized in his *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, Franklin’s pragmatic philosophy reached citizens across America, who all knew about the legendary inventor and philosopher. Franklin was a typical self-made man having risen from rags to riches by the dint of his own effort, acquiring habits of moderation, good sense, industry and probity<sup>78</sup>, while as a selfless civic man he was offering his genius to improve society. Franklin also became a public legend from his participation to the drafting of the Declaration as well as to the National Convention<sup>79</sup>.

In 1782, Franklin participated to the representation of American myths abroad when in an attempt to dispel the various “wild Imaginations about America” he had heard in France and England; he published a pamphlet entitled “Information to Those who would remove to America (1782).” By attempting to cast away the idea that Americans were actually paying their emigrants and granting them free land, Franklin put forward what he saw as the advantages, which emigrants could reap from emigrating. His warning was clear that not everyone was welcome to America, as they would have to comply with American values and manners before benefiting from any advantage. Franklin sounded very protective, not to say protectionist, of American values and standard of morals. Franklin’s counter image was very brutal “America is the land of labour” and “a general happy Mediocrity prevails here.” He warned would-be emigrants that those who were “most likely to prosper were labourers, farmers, artisans” and some middle-class families with a strong sense of industry. In a classic

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<sup>78</sup> FRANKLIN Benjamin, *The Autobiography* [1785], *op.cit.*, p.91-93.

<sup>79</sup> Marquis de Condorcet, *Eloge de Franklin*, *mie des Sciences* le 13 novembre 1790, Benjamin Franklin, premier savant américain : "En un mot, sa politique était celle d'un homme qui croit au pouvoir de la raison et à la réalité de la vertu, et qui avait voulu se rendre l'instituteur de ses concitoyens avant d'être appelé à en devenir le législateur."

formulation of true national character, Franklin warned British emigrants that birth did not open doors in America as “people do not inquire concerning a stranger, what is he? but what can he do?” Citizenship which meant being granted American liberties and equality after two years in the country, also came with a price as emigrants would have to obey the rules, putting forward the motto “good laws and liberty.”<sup>80</sup> Franklin concluded his list of advantages which deserving emigrants would find in America if they accepted the explicit rules by summing them up in two mottoes, which could serve as reminders for the people at home and abroad. Those mottoes were of the kind that made popular maxims: “Industry and constant employment are great preservatives of the morals and virtues of a nation” and “Approbation of the mutual forbearance and kindness with which the different sects treat each other, by the remarkable prosperity with which He has been pleased to favour the whole country.”

### **Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782).**

A former French soldier who had stood with Moncalm on the heights of Quebec in 1759, Hector St Jean de Crèvecoeur had settled as a farmer in New York after the defeat of French troops. Crèvecoeur somehow spelled out the dream of the El Dorado for the hard-working emigrants in America but also in France and Britain where his *Letters from an American Farmer* were published and translated. Through his own example as a self-made farmer, he pointed out America as the Promised Land for many immigrants, “the poor of Europe” who have “by some means met together”, in this “great asylum”. Illustrating the promises of the American Declaration of Independence by his own tale of success, he furthered the myth of “Noah’s ark” and “New Israel” which the founding fathers and Thomas Paine had developed in 1776. Like Benjamin Franklin at the same time, Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* publicized the real attractiveness of America, dwelling at length on the opportunities presented to hard-working settlers to pursue their happiness, which masses struggling as “servants” in European countries had been so long deprived of.

His attempt at defining the American character remains a central theme in his work. Americans are “a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen.” Illustrating here the symbol of the six peoples coming together to America to form a new nation, represented on the Great Seal, Crèvecoeur spelled out the principles of civic attachment to the new nation, practiced by these various peoples who above their nationalities and native attachments were forging a new race. “To what purpose should they ask one another what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of them had no country.”

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<sup>80</sup> FRANKLIN Benjamin, “Information to Those who would Remove to America” (1782), in *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, op.cit., p.237.

Crèvecoeur described American identity as being assumed willingly by any emigrant who sought it for political, social or religious reasons. Most Americans, he implied, came from regions and countries where despotism and poverty were denying them their basic civil liberties and dignity. America, with its Republican government and the unalienable rights, which the Declaration protected, offered “asylum” to all “*apatrides*” regardless of their origins, either social, political, “racial” or religious. Crèvecoeur was spreading the myth of the Promised Land to European masses.

Furthermore, Crèvecoeur notes the regenerative values of the New World on all emigrants who by coming to America had begun to share in the riches of the world, which had been reserved to the elite in European countries. The “New Order” suggesting that the last ones would become the first ones and the most deserving in America, which one also found in Franklin’s rhetoric of meritocracy and in the “*novus ordo seclorum*” motto on the reverse of the Great Seal, was spelled out to the masses by Crèvecoeur:

Everything has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men [...] Formerly they were not numbered in any civil lists of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as citizens.<sup>81</sup>

Crèvecoeur actually gives the example of Englishmen who became much improved once in America, once they assumed this new “civic” identity, leaving behind their old world values and adopting American virtues. So, contrary to nationalist movements in Europe, which arose at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, no common identity or common language brought the people of America together before the Declaration of Independence. Crèvecoeur makes clear that ideology is what keeps them together, in a form of a strong belief in the universal promises made by the new American government and a desire to work together for the furthering of the community in exchange for the civil rights and liberties given to them.

Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* spelled out the propaganda that the nationalists needed to establish valuable inroads in the making of a nation and in creating a form of popular enthusiasm for the American national project. By setting forward the great prospect of happiness before the eyes of the wretched of the western world, Crèvecoeur was sure to promote the American dream among them. However, Crèvecoeur also spelled out the reason beyond the dream. He makes clear that what he describes as “this surprising metamorphosis” which was performed on emigrants, was understood as being the end result of a new system of government. Happiness was effected “by the power of the laws and that of industry.” Emigrants who came to America were warned about hard work and individual participation to their happiness and

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<sup>81</sup> CREVECOEUR, J. Hector St John, *Letters from an American Farmer*, London, 1782 [and Paris, 1783]

bounty but they also had to understand that "the laws, the indulgent laws" which protected them as they arrived was also "stamping on them the symbol of adoption." However to the question from "whence proceed these laws", Crèvecoeur explained to the people that it came from "our government", which was itself derived from the people. In other words, in 1782, this important text, which was translated in French and German, also provided a form of contract between the new citizens who would be readily adopted as Americans if they accepted that they entered a civil contract with the new nation. Which emigrant would have resisted the sirens of American nationalism, which Crèvecoeur rang to their ears: "What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? [...] His country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence: UBI PANIS IBI PATRIA, is the motto of all emigrants [...] He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great ALMA MATER." At the heart of this process of assimilation, policy was also creating speedy naturalization.

Crèvecoeur in 1782 was already setting himself the task of writing the narrative of the nation, in the most successful and enthusiastic tones. Crèvecoeur's text, which could be described as a form of propaganda, rang true to the ears of European masses as he was himself an emigrant and working as a plain farmer, though Crèvecoeur was more an intellectual than a farmer. The author's nationalism was clearly put forward, and his rhetoric supported the incentive to emigrate he was sending to unhappy Europeans. Across the Atlantic, thanks to a new system of democratic Republican government, "the American is a new man", said Crèvecoeur, "who acts upon new principles, he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions."

The former French soldier also popularised the idea that new manners and customs had been invented by this new "family composed of members of different nations". Powerful assimilation was also put forward by the writer, as Crèvecoeur tried to express what these new manners were, what this new identity meant for these European nationals who could shed behind their own national identities to assume a new stronger one. Where in old world countries, violation of national identity or forceful assimilation led to ethnic conflicts and rebellions, in America, Crèvecoeur was underlining the exceptional peaceful and willing assimilation of these men and women to the national ideology in exchange for the promise of happiness.

If we revert to Ernst Gellner's definition of the nation evoked in the introduction, it seems obvious that the "cultural" definition he suggested according to which "two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture", i.e. a "system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating"<sup>82</sup> did not hold prior to 1776, but in 1782, the set of political promises established by the Declaration already worked powerfully towards

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<sup>82</sup> GELLNER E., *Nations and Nationalism*, op.cit., p. 7.

creating a common national project, from which manners (liberty and the pursuit of happiness) as well as policies (equality, just government) derived. However, the American nation also seemed "to maketh the man", to refer to the second category of nation evoked by Gellner. Emigrants and residents in the American states "voluntaristically" adopted the national values propounded by the American Republic and its intellectuals: "Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation [...] nations are the artefacts of men's convictions and loyalties and solidarities." Such a civic attachment to a nation, reinforced by a series of symbols and myths, propagated by nationalist writer, like Crèvecoeur, could only develop into a form of strong nationalism.

### **Noah Webster, *American Speller* (1783), *Grammar* (1784), *Reader* (1785)<sup>83</sup>**

Last but not least, Noah Webster the American lexicographer and "spelling reformer" also contributed to establish a common American identity by identifying American English as a specific language, a "native tongue" which as an American patriot he tried to rescue from English pedantic style and spelling. Webster started to write and to collect typical American expressions in order to "inspire Americans with the pride of national character", using language as a medium or a vessel of a new ethnicity<sup>84</sup>. He wished that Americans did not follow "a blind imitation of the British manners."<sup>85</sup> Noah Webster was politically involved in the promotion of American nationalism as editor of the *Federalist Papers*, as well as in educationist works as he worked towards the reform of teaching methods in American schools. His patriotic fervour was conveyed in his language books and particularly in his *Reader* designed for American children, which placed side-by-side texts, by ancient philosophers as well as famous American speeches.

Webster proposed a new orthography, by ridding American English from English spelling. He preferred using *c* instead of *s* and changed the *re* into *er*. His works promoted a "national language", an "American tongue", in order "to strengthen the band of national union." To follow Benedict Anderson's analysis of linguistic nationalism, this revamping or linguistic recreation of the American language – where it had been considered as a "vernacular" language by British visitors in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century - officially established American English as the official language of the national community, providing it with a sort of fixity. The native tongue of Americans reached the status of "language-of-power" through which Webster, a strong federalist, hoped to achieve a form

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<sup>83</sup> WEBSTER Noah, *Speller* (1783), quoted in MICKLETHWAIT David, *Noah Webster and the American Dictionary*, 2005, ch. 2

<sup>84</sup> SMITH A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, *op.cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>85</sup> WEBSTER, Noah, "Oration", *Spelling Book*, in MICKLETHWAIT D., *Noah Webster*, *op.cit.* p. 167.



of “linguistic unification” over regional variations.<sup>86</sup> Noah Webster prompted the urge of cultural homogeneity through a shared but “pure” language, while using this vehicle to spread the nationalist mythology promoted in 1776, that of Republicanism and popular sovereignty:

Republican principles applied in American civil and ecclesiastical constitutions meant that the people-at-large must control the language; popular sovereignty in government must be accompanied by popular usage in language<sup>87</sup>.

Indeed, language once reformed was the proper vehicle to spread patriotic and nationalist ideas in printed form, as well as so-called American values. For instance, the third part of his *Grammar* (or *Grammatical Institute*) published in 1785 also doubled as a reader, which Webster designed to “diffuse” among American pupils, the “principles of virtue and patriotism.”

Men such as Jefferson, but also Franklin, Paine, Crèvecoeur and Webster, rallied later in the 1830s by American literary men such as Emerson, Thoreau or Twaine, played an essential role in the promotion of a national character and a national identity at home but also in Europe where their texts were circulated. According to John Breuilly, those intellectuals, those scholars, are of great importance in the spreading of national ideologies and in the case of America, national mythology, “insofar as they are able to mobilize, co-ordinate, and legitimise the various sub-elites”, and I would add the people in general. Anthony Smith adds that the task of the intellectual in nationalism is “to fit the many pieces of this jigsaw together into a clear and harmonious pattern which will do justice to all the often conflicting motifs and myths in the community’s records.”<sup>88</sup> Here in the series of texts on the greatness of America, the intellectuals managed to smooth over the political dissensions, which overtly displayed to the foreign world that the so-called original consensus was not holding as strongly as American politicians wanted the world to believe. Instead they redirected the beliefs of the people towards a visionary goal, that of a fruitful American nation welcoming the wretched of the earth. What they did, according to Smith, was to supply a history or metaphysics of the community, locating it in time and space among the other communities of the earth. Their “drama-mythology” must “explain” the trajectory of growth, decline and rebirth<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> ANDERSON B., *Imagined Communities*, op.cit., p. 42

<sup>87</sup> WEBSTER, Noah, “Oration”, *Spelling Book*, in MICLETHWAIT D., *Noah Webster*, op.cit. p. 170.

<sup>88</sup> SMITH A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, op.cit., p. 180.

<sup>89</sup> SMITH A., *ibid*, p. 182.

Clearly, in that time-period following 1776 during which the Act of Confederation fragilized the Union which had brought the original states together into a political community, emigrants came rushing to America convinced by the ideal promised by the Declaration and under the spell of the various news and texts they could read about the New World. In other words, if the actual political consensus of 1776 seemed to have been a myth by 1787, when parochialism still supplanted nationalism in the heart of many Americans, at least the national mythology based on the pursuit of happiness, that of a new order, in a new world where opportunities were plentiful for a new man, had appealed to foreigners who without any specific attachment to one of the regions or one of the states, adopted the new nation and its values unconditionally. Noah Webster in “Oration” noted in 1798 that their role as American scholars was to convince the four millions who now formed the nation as well as those millions who in Europe were looking to America to provide an alternative to their own miseries and to answer their high expectations<sup>90</sup>.

However, for the time-being the various symbols that expressed the nationalist rhetoric of the enlightened Republican and federalist elite had not yet reached those who were at the core of the national project, the people. Such would be the goal of the Federalists in 1787 when the Articles of Confederation, that had come to represent parochial bourgeois vested interests, would eventually be repealed and replaced by the federal Constitution. From then on, as we are going to see in the last section, the people of the United States would have to play a central role in the working of the nation. In order to do so, they would have to be convinced they belong to it by the re-enacting of the post-revolutionary symbols and rituals designed by intellectuals and political leaders in the wake of 1776.

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<sup>90</sup> WEBSTER N. “Oration”, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

### **III - The Constitution: a celebration of the nation-state followed by mass-mediated American nationalism.**

Contrary to the habit of open democracy, the delegates at the National Convention met behind closed doors, and “kept all its proceedings secret until its dissolution on September 17, 1787, when the results of their labours were published altogether.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, newspapers as well as local politicians who were excluded from the debates, joined together to guess what would be the outcome of this mysterious and grand convention out of which a new constitution would be proclaimed for the United States. Jefferson, like any intellectual at the time, was speculating about the work of the Convention regretting that he was not able to attend. In his correspondence, Jefferson agreed that the results of the proceedings were not entirely satisfactory to every citizen of the Union but that if the new constitutional articles were perfectible at least they fostered what America had been in need of since 1776: “this happy combination of National powers in the General government for matters of National concern.” In other words, the Convention results brought a national government, to the nation, which could at last become a true nation-state.

However, the Constitution was not imposed over the thirteen states at once, since each state had first to consult its people about its ratification. In other words, the “state” would have to be built out of the adhesion of “we the people of America” who had to accept the terms of the new national government in a truly democratic rallying. To St John de Crèvecoeur, Jefferson admitted that the ratification of the Constitution by the thirteen states, which was a very slow rallying process to the nation-state taking almost two years, was a national momentum, which he symbolically called “our second revolution is just brought to a happy end.”<sup>92</sup> However, in order for the people to rally behind this new national constitution, they would have to be enlisted in and taught about the new national project. Myths, symbols and rituals, along with the by now traditional political rhetoric of nationalism, would have to be displayed to gain the support of the people of America. We are going to see how the new constitution was presented to the people by nationalists using the mass media. Then, we will examine how the constitution ratification in each state was accompanied by parades and democratic rituals recalling the myths and symbols already elaborated since 1776. Finally we will examine the manner in which nationalist feelings will be furthered over the years by various re-enactments of the birth of the nation, through speeches delivered by the President, now a central national figure.

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<sup>91</sup> JEFFERSON T., *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, op.cit., p. 71 et p. 73.

<sup>92</sup> Jefferson to St John de Crèvecoeur, Paris, August, 9, 1788, “Dear Sir – While our second revolution is just brought to a happy end with you, yours here, is but clearly underway.”

### III-A: The Constitution (1787-1789): a national political project.

As in the earliest Continental Congresses of 1775 and 1776, it took the vision of a handful of men to veer the proceedings towards a nationalist programme for the nation. Alexander Hamilton was one of these central characters during the National Convention. With Madison, he painstakingly, point by point, defended the urgent need for a national government for America. Madison and Hamilton furthered the nationalist dream of Jefferson, Adams and Washington. Hamilton stated on many occasions "a NATION, without a NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, is in my view, an awful spectacle." He added in the conclusion to *The Federalist* that "the establishment of a Constitution in time of profound peace, by the voluntary consent of a whole people, is a PRODIGY, to the completion of which I look forward with trembling anxiety."<sup>93</sup> With a Constitution, the federalists advocated that the government should be designed to guard against the dangers to liberty and to republican government that were inherent in human nature.

The preparation and the long debates that preceded the final drafting of the American Constitution can be described, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, as a long road to the achievement of an "ideological consensus" and a "workable" government from which should follow "cooperation" from the "people". The "national project" was devised like a cooperation project in fact, which could satisfy the largest number of the white majority ("the people"). Compromises had to be found among the states to maintain the doctrines of balanced government and separation of powers necessary to Republican governments, while keeping a balance of powers between states' sovereignty and the national government.

The fathers of the nation devised a system of government which they institutionalised into the three bodies represented by the legislative, judiciary and executive. They also paradoxically protected the independence of each body by a system of checks and balances whereby each body controls the other two, while their powers are separated. The principles and philosophy of the Republic were written down as a further protection against misdemeanour or tyranny. The system was flexible enough as to allow judicial review and amendments to be added for instance, without challenging or imperilling the federalist principles which have remained stable over the centuries, while allowing the nation to grow and expand without difficulties after but a few adjustments. Henry Steele

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<sup>93</sup> HAMILTON Alexander, *The Federalist*, n°85, p. 527. *The Federalist* first started as a series of pamphlets published in New York newspapers shortly after the end of the National Convention in the fall of 1787. *The Federalist's* main writers were Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay.

Commager quoted James Wilson who wrote about the ratifying of the Constitution:

Governments in general have been the result of force, of fraud and of accident. After a period of six thousand years has elapsed since the Creation, the United States exhibit to the world the first instance of...a nation [...] assembling voluntarily, deliberating fully, and deciding calmly concerning the system of government under which they would wish that they and their posterity should live.<sup>94</sup>

In this quote, Wilson, a member of the National Convention underlined the exceptionality of the American nation which by resorting to Republican principles, morally placed itself above the Western governments displaying sinful flaws. In the mind of many delegates the new Constitution furthered the rhetoric of “civil religion” already used by Jefferson and Paine to rally religious-minded colonists.

The Constitution mainly stated the delegates’ commitment to work together for the future of the nation providing an impulse towards a common destiny, after having established their "common background", their short-lived English past as British colonists and their common denominator, the Protestant faith. At least Americans were now attached "to the same principles of government" and to the same Christian principles. Their attachment to the principles of the nation could be described as a secular faith in the national government, considering that Providence ("Nature and Nature's God") had led them to combine and to establish the nation-state.

What was stressed in the Constitution, and restated in *The Federalist* for instance, was the will of the people to work together, forging the convergence to a political ideal (based on democratic and republican principles) of a people speaking the same language and sharing the same values. However, if the Constitution embodied a collective national action, individual liberties were left out deplored Jefferson in September 1787. Individual liberties were then acted on by the writing of the Bill of Rights, listing the rights and liberties of each individual in 1791. The question divided the Federalist movement. *The Federalists* Jay, Madison and Hamilton believed in a strong national government as the bulwark against the caprice of populous politics, while the Democratic-Republicans represented by Jefferson or Adams did not mind some "laissez-faire" and rugged individualism as a further balance against party politics and vested interests. Jefferson when asked what his political position was on the question of the federation, admitted that he was “not a federalist”, at least while the federalist delegates did not include a Bill of Rights as he thought that individuals should never submit the “whole system” of their individual opinions to “the creed of any party of men whatever in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else” when they were capable of thinking for

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<sup>94</sup> COMMAGER H., *op.cit.* p. 184.

themselves. In other words, though Jefferson had deployed a strong nationalist ideology, the preservation of national unity could not be compromised over individual liberties. During the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, one must note that “the people” who had been at the core of the Declaration of 1776 had been forgotten in the 1780s. After 1787, major politicians came to realize that a nation could not be invented without the people to whom the national principles would have to be explained or demonstrated.

### **III – B: The myth of national homogeneity and consensus implemented in the National Convention.**

Like the Jews who found their promised land after a long collective walk through the desert, the Americans too had to traverse and wander through a long political desert before finding their perfect reformed government. The American constitution was another pivotal moment in the American nationalist ideology that had to be celebrated. Jefferson resorting to one of his powerful symbolic images borrowed from nature, underlined the importance of this national consensus on paper in his *Autobiography*, by presenting the passing of the Constitution as “the metamorphosis through which our government was then passing from its chrysalid to its organic form.”<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless, when the Convention opened on May 1787, only seven states were present. Jefferson saw the delegates as an “assembly of demi-gods”, regretting that the debates were held in secrecy, which could be interpreted as “ignoring the value of public discussions”<sup>96</sup> Jefferson was nonetheless reassured by the presence of a real demi-god, the great wise American hero George Washington sitting for the Virginia delegation, whom he had egged to leave his retirement for the sake of the nation. In 1785, Jefferson had already ordered from French sculptor Houdon, an equestrian statue of George Washington to be placed before the new Capitol in Virginia. For Jefferson, Washington was the symbol of disinterested or unpartisan nationalism and for the delegates he was the ideal statesman whose virtues and dedication to the nation would place him about party feuds or vested interests. For all these virtues, he was nominated for the presidency of the Convention.

The other demi-god attending the debates ensuring that the spirit of ’76 was still blowing over the nation, was Benjamin Franklin whose popularity among his fellow Americans was already impressive through his contribution to defining the American character and genius.

Rapidly, the original purpose of the Convention which was to revise the Articles of Confederation resulted in their entire scrapping when without much reservation the delegates decided to frame a completely new instrument of

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<sup>95</sup> Jefferson to John Adams, 30 August 1787.

<sup>96</sup> Jefferson to John Adams, 30 August 1787.

government for the United States, which would have the authority to act directly in the name and for the American people rather than having to rely on the cooperation of the state governments<sup>97</sup>. Consequently, the national government ought “to be established consisting of a supreme Legislative, Executive and Judiciary”, i.e. separate powers. Congress would receive the authority to legislate “in all cases to which the separate States may be interrupted by the exercise of individual [states’] legislation.” More importantly, Congress established as the national legislature, could also summon the armed forces of the United States against any state failing to fulfil its duties to the Union. Clearly the primacy of one nation-state over thirteen states’ interests rekindled the nationalist programme which the drafters of the Declaration had in mind in July 1776.

As we can see, the national dynamic was set in motion with the repeal of the political compromise that the Articles had formed. The myth of national consensus which the colonies had sent to the Western world in 1776 should now be acted upon. Regional or state differences were still accepted but the overall nationalistic programme developed by the three new bodies, Legislature, Executive and Judiciary, was meant to direct the people into one people under one government<sup>98</sup>.

Accepting to comply to the new more centralised rules of the national government was not easy for the large states. At times, some delegates actually complained about “a dictatorial air” in sessions, particularly when debates moved on to the actual representation of each state in Congress. Here again, the myth of the consensus was rekindled when the delegates eventually approved of the “Great Compromise” with capital letters emphasizing the actual commitment of the large and small states to the working of the Union, i.e. the nation. In fact, the “Great Compromise<sup>99</sup>” was the Convention’s turning point on July 16, 1787. The final wording of the 23 articles of the Constitution also reflected the actual creation on paper of a nation-state when it came to make the final linguistic choice to define “the people”. If Gouverneur Morris, the final drafter of the text, had first placed at the beginning of the Constitution the sentence, “We the people of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts [...] do ordain, declare and establish the following Constitution for the Government of Ourselves and our Posterity”, his colleagues soon realized that one of the states thus mentioned

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<sup>97</sup> BERNSTEIN Richard, *Are We to Be a Nation, The Making of the Constitution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987p. 160.

<sup>98</sup> BERNSTEIN, *ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>99</sup> The “Great Compromise” resolved that each state would receive an equal vote in the second branch of the legislature of the United States, while seats in the first branch would be apportioned on the basis of the number of “other persons” (slaves); a census would allow for adjustment for representation in the lower house according to population growth. (BERNSTEIN, *ibid*, p. 167).

might not ratify the final text. Therefore, the first sentence was altered into “We, the people of the United States do ordain [...]”<sup>100</sup>

Finally, the purposes of the new “national” government, - the word “national” was preferred to “federal” which echoed petty party quarrels -, were listed on paper as a further commitment towards the people: “to form a perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”<sup>101</sup>

Benjamin Franklin, the eldest and supposedly wisest delegate, concluded the debates on September 17, 1787, a few moments away from the formal agreement on the final text, by expressing his feelings about this moment which was historical for the foundation of the American nation. According to him, the final draft of the Constitution reflected the actual exemplariness and exceptionalism of the work done during the Convention: “It astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching as near to perfection as it does, and I think it will astonish our enemies... Thus I consent, Sir, to the Constitution because I expect not better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best”<sup>102</sup>.

However, if the Constitution was drafted in Convention, democracy required that each state and its people ratified it. For this, an actual campaign had to be launched to explain the purpose of the new Constitution to the people. Indeed, the need for a national government did not seem to be so well understood or even requested by all the American people if we consider the tense debates that took place in each state. Most Americans saw their need fulfilled by local representation and a local Congress. Like the decision to separate from Britain, fierce debates over the ratification of the Constitution was taken up by the press, by pamphleteers, occupying public debates for almost two years. While the states that readily ratified the Constitution celebrated with bonfires, parades and processions the symbolic birth of the nation, accounts of these celebrations were reported in newspapers across the nation.

Anti-Federalists, looked critically at this commitment to a federal government. According to historian Richard Bernstein, the ratification and its debates “acted as a catalyst for the creation of a national political community, transforming the ways Americans thought of themselves and encouraging the growth and popularity of national loyalties.”<sup>103</sup> In fact, each state population was encouraged and asked to look beyond their traditional borders and to envisage the nation space in which they now lived, as well as a larger community to which they also belonged. Federalists and Anti-Federalists<sup>104</sup> opposed their views in local

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<sup>100</sup> BERNSTEIN, *Are We to Be a Nation*, *op.cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>101</sup> BERNSTEIN *ibid*, p. 183.

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Franklin, quoted in BERNSTEIN, *ibid*, p. 185.

<sup>103</sup> BERNSTEIN, *ibid*, p. 199.

<sup>104</sup> In Virginia for instance, Federalists were represented by James Madison, Georges Wythe... and Anti-Federalists by Patrick Henry, George Mason and James Monroe...



newspapers or in pamphlets. The latter saw the Constitution as far too nationalizing to the extent that it was imposing a centralized rule over the sovereignty of the states, over individual liberties leading in the short run to the destruction of the principles of a republican government. On the other hand, federalist newspapers like *The Massachusetts Centinel*<sup>105</sup> began to publish a small allegorical illustration of the slow progress of the ratification in the form of a series of pillars “The Federal Pillars”, each bearing the name of a state, erected one by one every time another state ratified the Constitution. The drawing also bore the prediction “it will yet rise” echoing the Federalist anthem “The Raising.” Allegorical or symbolic meaning also brought weight to pamphlets and arguments. John Jay in his most popular essay *Address to the People of the State of New York* reminded the people that the Union would enable them “to continue to move and act as they hitherto have done, *as a band of brothers*.”<sup>106</sup>

Other essays or pamphlets were published on both sides under pseudonyms that also conveyed some symbolic meaning to the readers: “An American”, “An Old Soldier”, “A Son of liberty”, as well as Roman or Greek pen names which sounded republican. Raising among the numerous pamphlets and eventually winning the “pamphlet war” were *The Federalist (Papers)* which came to embody the authoritative voice on the new charter of government. Alexander Hamilton signed his papers by the name of “Publius”, who was also known and acclaimed as “*Publicola*” (people-lover) in Rome. *The Federalist* first appeared in New York City newspapers then in major newspapers throughout New England. According to George Washington, the contribution of *The Federalist* was essential to the winning over of the anti-federalist states. Washington described its contribution as meriting “the notice of posterity; because in it are candidly and ably discussed the principles of freedom and the topics of government, which will be always interesting to mankind so long as they shall be connected in Civil Society.”<sup>107</sup>

By August 1788, the Constitution had won the support of eleven states. Rhode Island and North Carolina seemed to be unmovable. In order to celebrate the symbolic moment of the ratification of the national Constitution in their respective states, the Federalists staged ceremonial parades. Usually a ship representing the Union, was towed throughout a city<sup>108</sup>. The text of the ratification was read publicly with the number of votes for and against. The celebration or “Grand Federal Procession” was planned ahead and local

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<sup>105</sup> Massachusetts was the sixth state to ratify the Constitution on February 6, 1788.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in McLAUGHLIN Andrew, *Foundations of American Constitutionalism*, Gloucester Mass., Peter Smith, 1972, p. 145.

<sup>107</sup> George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 28 August 1788, in John C. FITZPATRICK ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1931-1944, vol. 30, p. 66

<sup>108</sup> WALDSTREICHER D., *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, *op.cit.*, p. 76

craftsmen as well as women would march in the streets carrying home-made banners behind the local political leaders. Besides New York and Philadelphia chose to build “federal arches” to celebrate the momentous event of the nation being built into a long-lasting Civil Society. During the constitutional debates, the delegates had spent much time debating who should be represented in Congress and how. They had finally agreed that “the people” should take pride of place in the federal system. The Federalists now had to spread and publicize the federal, in fact national, sentiment to the people of the United States. Celebrations of the Constitution should be a more popular and a more festive event than the 4<sup>th</sup> of July that had become over the years too serious according to newspaper articles. In most cities, old battalions marched and orations were delivered, turning the day into a remembrance day more than a festive celebration of national liberation<sup>109</sup>. Judging from the numerous re-christening of places and inns into “federal”, as well as the excitement found in articles celebrating each ratification which brought further toasts and marches in states which had already ratified it, it appears that the whole nation was watching the slow progress of the Constitution between 1787 and 1789. In fact, readers from all classes, were witnessing the gradual spreading of nationalism throughout the country whose states, cities and people’s manners were gradually mapped out for American readers. For once, the excuse of ratification and celebration led readers to look beyond their own state borders and to envisage a united nation.

### **III – C: The President and the role of the inaugural addresses in the national mythology.**

According to Waldstreicher, Americans lived in “the midst of perpetual fetes” in the two years that followed the drafting of the Constitution. At the end of this festive time-period, he believes that the Federalists had succeeded “in sacralizing the Constitution as the true culmination of the American Revolution.”<sup>110</sup> Jefferson believed it was the outcome of a second revolution. However, from then on national spirit had to be kept up before regional tensions, and the federal government with all its complexities and refinements had to be set in motion for the future welfare of the American people.

Gradually, the American president whose role was to guarantee the execution and application of the Constitutional articles became central to the celebration of nationalism. Clearly, in spite of the early reluctance of some delegates, either democrats and anti-federalists, who believed that it would be dangerous to place the destiny of the nation in one man, the first presidents, all national heroes, all founding fathers of the nation, naturally came to bring their own charisma and vision to the national project.

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>110</sup> WALDSTREICHER, *op.cit.*, p. 108.

Before the delegates met at the National Convention, Madison had devised a plan for the Constitution in which he had place a figure-head, the President at the apex of the Republican system, “a national officer, acting for and equally sympathizing with every part of the United States.” Besides, considering this remote position above the parties, the President would be able to have “a broader vision of national interests” which he had to pursue into the future. Above party politics, Presidents would have incentive “to define national interest more proactively, more coherently and for a longer time than Congress.”<sup>111</sup> Madison’s plan had raised concerned among the Anti-Federalists as well as with, least of all, Jefferson who believed that a president standing above Congress could rapidly become an “elected monarch.” However, in his *Autobiography*, he confided that he had been wrong as the actual practice did not lead to any abuse on the part of the head of the American state such as the rise of an “elected monarch.”<sup>112</sup> for instance.

My fears of the feature [presidency] were founded on the importance of the office, on the fierce contentions it might excite among ourselves, if continuable for life and the dangers of interference either with money or arms. My wish therefore was that the President should be elected for seven years and be ineligible afterwards [...] Although this amendment has not been made in form, yet practice seems to have established it. The example of four presidents voluntarily retiring at the end of their 8<sup>th</sup> year and the progress of public opinion that the principle is salutary, have given it in practice the force of precedent<sup>113</sup>.

With the promulgation of the Constitution, the function of the president was eventually designed as the apex of the system of government, controlled by two bodies through a system of checks and balances. Naturally, the elected president of the new Republic became the focal point of the secular faith in the nation and what Madison had defined as his “broader vision of national interests” became his natural prerogative as well as the expectations of those who looked up to him. He naturally became the master of American ceremonies and celebrations. He was the source and the object of popular nationalism at different moments in the nation's year: on July 4<sup>th</sup> the president issued a declaration reminding the people of the great historical time that the Declaration of Independence represented for the nation. From Washington onwards, the president was also involved in Thanksgiving Day, once again reminding his people of the greatness of Providence (Nature or Nature's God) which had placed their nation under such good auspices. After the Civil war, Presidents were also asked to present a State of the Union speech every January in which they delivered their views on

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<sup>111</sup> Madison on the role of a president, quoted by ROBERTSON D., *The Constitution and America's Destiny*, op.cit., Cambridge, CUP, 2005, p. 153 and p. 162

<sup>112</sup> Jefferson to Madison, December 20, 1787.

<sup>113</sup> JEFFERSON T., *Autobiography*, in *Writings*, op.cit. p. 92.

the national project yearly. Finally, it is in the first inaugural addresses of the national heroes that were Washington, Adams or Jefferson that we can also observe the manner in which these leaders, whose reputation and career placed them above party strife, launched the new nation on new tracks while mustering up nationalist feelings among their people.

Indeed, quite naturally, the first American presidents happened to be national heroes. Washington had vanquished the British and freed his nation, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson as Founding Fathers were the heroes of American independence. Their charisma, their experience and their natural leadership, as well as their American virtues, cast on the presidency of the American Union a great aura of respect and awe. They created the function of president and placed it at the symbolic apex of the nation, though such a situation had not been planned by the Constitution<sup>114</sup>. Throughout their inaugural addresses, Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison kept on forging a sense of national belonging, as well as the idea that Americans were actors in the national communal project. Speeches were essential to spread their nationalist programmes, but so were flags, the architecture of national buildings and the choice of a capital city. New symbols (the national flag, the anthem, the choice of Washington D.C. and the architectural style of the Capitol) were in fact merely echoing and repeating the national rhetoric already elaborated in the wake of 1776. This time, “the people” had their eyes directed to the source of nationalism: the President.

### **The role of the inaugural addresses in the staging of the American Nation.**

Presidents became naturally entrusted with a mantle of moral responsibility and virtues that far transcended them. The duty of the first presidents towards their people was to transform the fledgling nation into a strong nation capable of gathering the support of all her people, of expanding westward without losing her virtues, while keeping at bay her potential enemies. For that purpose, presidential inaugural addresses became of right nationalist agendas. They served as a vehicle for the dreams and ideals of the newly elected leaders while mirroring the political and economic climate in which they were delivered. As we will see, in their addresses, the first presidents appealed to the national mythology which had been developed since 1776, in order to reach out to the body of the nation, while relating new popular myths.

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<sup>114</sup> The convention gave the president responsibility to shape the nation’s policy agenda. He was encouraged to participate in the initial stages of the policy process by providing Congress with information on “the state of the Union” and by “recommending such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” Such was the description given to presidential *duty*. See ROBERTSON D., *The Constitution and America’s Destiny*, *op.cit.*, p.214.

## George Washington's Thanksgiving

Fears of entrusting one man with the destiny of the nation were erased when George Washington came to be that man. Washington had acquired the reputation of having acted selflessly over the years. He had been a dedicated patriot during the revolutionary period. He confirmed his aura when he officially refused to receive any financial compensation or emolument for his military command or for his work as President<sup>115</sup>. Washington was a national hero. He had saved the nation against British troops and he had presided over her second birth during the drafting of the Constitution. Washington represented a continuation of the spirit of 1776 which most delegates were willing to re-enact or resurrect in 1787, leaving behind the intermediate decade of internal strife under the Articles of Confederation. In other words, it seemed that nationalists, more than ever tried to revive the initial dynamic of nation-building among the people who had been left out of government practice under the Articles. Washington who had retired from public life since 1781, represented the perfect hero to tie in the spirit of 1776 and that of 1787. David Waldstreicher notes that having Washington as president “reinforced assumptions of continuity and consensus.”<sup>116</sup>

Washington's first task was to praise the Constitution, and the people that had come together to form the nation-state, while rekindling the spirit of the revolution, i.e. that wind of change that had blown in 1776 when the United States had agreed on a common destiny.

He delivered his first inaugural address on April 30, 1789 from the city of New York on the balcony of the Senate Chamber at Federal Hall, a symbolic place. Washington was elected unanimously by the first electoral college. The oath of office was sworn on the bible. Contrary to the secular text that the National Convention produced in which God is never mentioned, in his address, Washington essentially paid tribute to the Almighty who, according to him, was presiding over the destiny of the American nation. He couched his Thanksgiving into a praise for American liberties, while acknowledging the exceptional blessings that Americans had received over the years:

It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nation, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes [...] No people can be

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<sup>115</sup> see Washington's first inaugural address, in *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States, (Vol.1 George Washington to James A. Garfield)*, Bedford, Mass, Applewood Books, 1998, p.7-9

<sup>116</sup> WALDSTREICHER, *op.cit.*, p.117.

bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the US.<sup>117</sup>

Washington also recalled the strenuous years through which the people had gone from revolution to union, thus emphasizing the collective effort of the citizens in nation-building as well as the myth of consensus. In doing so, he also stressed the solemnity of the ratification of the Constitution, “the great constitutional charter”, as the final stage towards the birth of the nation-state, praising the American people for their political wisdom.

Every step by which they [the people of the United States] have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency and in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their united government the tranquil deliberation and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities [...] They are now under the influence of which the proceedings of a new and free government can more auspiciously commence.

In order to define his own mission in office, Washington wished to step aside from the official article which defined “the duty of the President<sup>118</sup>”. Instead, he suggested presidents should provide moral and patriotic inspiration to Congress whose duty it was, to uphold the Republican values inscribed in the Constitution:

It will be more consistent than those circumstances and far more congenial with the feelings which actuate me to substitute, in place of a recommendation of particular measures, the tribute that is due to the talents, the rectitude and the patriotism which adorn the characters selected to devise and adopt them.

Washington naturally echoed the official symbols of the nation by referring to the “*e pluribus unum*” motto, which he illustrated in recognizing the diversity as well as the individuality of the people of America, placing in the national government the responsibility for keeping the Union together while allowing each citizen to pursue his own “happiness”:

I behold the surest pledges that on one side no local prejudices or attachments, no separate views nor party animosities, will misdirect the comprehensive and equal eye which ought to watch over this great assemblage of communities and interests, so, on another, that the foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality, and the pre-eminence of free government be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens and command the respect of the world.

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<sup>117</sup> Washington’s first inaugural address in *Inaugural Addresses*, *op.cit.*, p.7-9.

<sup>118</sup> See footnote 113.

In the final paragraphs of his first address, Washington stated his own patriotism - “an ardent love for my country”-, by recalling his participation in “the arduous struggle for its [the nation’s] liberties.” Then resorting to the nationalist mythology, a clear echo to the “self-evident” promises of the Declaration of Independence, Washington placed the nation on an equal footing with other Western nations. More precisely, he shared with the people his enthusiasm for the prospect and rise of the new nation. According to him America counted citizens who had strong moral virtues (“happiness”, “duty”, “honesty”, “public prosperity”, “felicity”, “order and right”) and who were endowed with unalienable rights (“the sacred fire of liberty”) which had been first defined in the Declaration of 1776. Washington reiterated in typical nationalist rhetoric the national virtues already publicized through print-culture under the pen of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Hector St John de Crèvecoeur and Noah Webster. According to the new President, God had entrusted Americans with a new system of government, and He had appointed them to uphold these virtues and rights. Here again Washington seemed to impart a religious mission to the new state though the Constitution delegates had clearly designed a secular state, where church and state were separated.

There is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage, between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity; since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself as ordained; and since the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

Washington reaffirmed the American religious “civic” attachment that Jefferson and Paine had defined for America in 1776, i.e. strong faith in good government and civic virtues, while casting upon the nation the stamp of a manifest “moral” destiny. This worshipping of the symbols of the nation far surpassed the secular dimension of the Constitution. In this very first inaugural address, Washington symbolically endowed the Constitution with a strong religious and civil significance which was not part of the original plan. In so doing he rekindled the myth of the Chosen Nation which had dominated the Puritans’ beliefs in the colonial period, itself a legacy of the Hebrews. Washington fostered the myth of a Christian nation which must have reassured a large part of religious Americans who saw the separation of church and state in the Republican Constitution as anathema<sup>119</sup>.

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<sup>119</sup> Washington’s second inaugural address delivered from Philadelphia on March 4, 1793 was very brief (one paragraph) in which he simply thanked the “people of United America” for entrusting him with their confidence.

## The reinvention of Thanksgiving Day

In September 1789, a few months after Washington delivered his inaugural address fraught with religious meaning, New Jersey representative Elias Boudinot felt empowered to introduce a resolution in Congress which suggested that:

A joint committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States, a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the many signal favours of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a Constitution of government for their safety and happiness<sup>120</sup>.

The resolution was much debated in the House of Representatives where Boudinot counted many detractors who believed that the President had no duty recommending the people to thank the Almighty if they did not wish to do it - since the Constitution was not mentioning any religious duty. True Republicans believed that church and state had to be kept separated. However, Boudinot approached Washington directly, while the Senate finally accepted the “Thanksgiving” resolution. A few days after Boudinot’s encounter with Washington, on October 3, 1789, the president delivered his famous Thanksgiving speech hallowing November 26 as a day of thanksgiving and prayer for America. Washington was resorting to yet another day of rituals which he was re-inventing<sup>121</sup> to celebrate the nation and the national Constitution. Washington indeed declared:

I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> day of November next to be devoted to the People of these States in the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. *That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks – for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation – for the signal and manifest mercies, and the favourable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the tranquillity, union and plenty, which we have since enjoyed – for the peaceably and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitution of government for our safety and happiness and particularly the national One now lately instituted [...]*<sup>122</sup>

Along with the lay celebrations of July 4<sup>th</sup>, Americans now had another symbolic day of remembrance and rituals to praise their coming together into an orderly and happy nation. The year 1789 was also rich in significance as the

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<sup>120</sup> Elias Boudinot, resolution presented to the House of Representatives, September 25, 1789, quoted in DAVIS Catherine L., *Count Your Blessings: a Daily Devotional of Praise and Thanksgiving*, Colorado Springs, Chariot Victor Publishing House, 1997, p. 28.

<sup>121</sup> The first Thanksgiving celebration was apparently held in Massachusetts in 1671.

<sup>122</sup> George Washington, *Thanksgiving Proclamation*, October 3, 1789.



French Revolution happened in the summer, with in its wake the establishment of the first Republic and the passing of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man during Washington's terms<sup>123</sup>. These international events also served as a strong moment of reassurance for Americans. American observers, particularly Jefferson who was still in France in the summer of 1789, interpreted the Revolution and the choice of a Republican government in France as a tribute to American wisdom, "the appeal to the rights of man, which had been made in the US was taken up by France, first of the European nations."<sup>124</sup>

George Washington's terms also set about a new role for the President, as guardian of the national territory. Indeed he launched into tours of the national territory between 1789 and 1791, travelling to the South and New England where he was celebrated by crowds of people who saw him as the father of the nation. The press naturally amplified his visits and conveyed the impression that everywhere he went he awakened strong patriotic feelings among the people of all classes<sup>125</sup>. Jefferson referred in awe to Washington's character and to the duty he had accomplished for the nation when, in his first inaugural address in 1801, he revered the historical symbol Washington had become over the years. Washington had invented the role of president as the nation's symbolic apex for his successors : "with the high confidence [the people] reposed in the first and greatest revolutionary character, whose pre-eminent services had entitled him to the first place in his country's love and destined for him the fairest page in the volume of faithful history."<sup>126</sup>

### **John Adams' civic nation by design**

The following president, John Adams furthered the myths of the chosen nation, as well as that of the Christian nation by keeping up the tradition of Thanksgiving, while adding more symbolic meaning to the short history of the American nation which he turned into a national narrative. For instance John Adams, in his March 4, 1797 inaugural address from Philadelphia, launched into a narrative of the birth of the nation by casting a retrospective glance on the Revolution and its heroes and by admiring the bravery of American people over these tumultuous years. Holding the position of historian, Adams re-cast recent history into an already mythical narrative. He also created the myth of the virtuous Founding Fathers of the nation. Indeed, he reminded his listeners that

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<sup>123</sup> A Bill of Rights was also drafted in 1791, which served the same popular principles as the set of promises of the Declaration which were here re-enacted and repeated. As early as December 1787, Jefferson had insisted on the role of a Bill of Rights "providing clearly and *without sophism* for freedom of religion, freedom of the press, protection and standing armies..." (Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, December 20, 1787)

<sup>124</sup> Jefferson, *The Autobiography*, in *Writings*, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>125</sup> WALDSTREICHER, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, *op.cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>126</sup> Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

when “men of reflection” (among whom he was) realized that “no middle course for America remained between unlimited submission to foreign legislature and total independence”, they relied on “the purity of their intentions, the justice of their cause and the integrity and intelligence of the people, under an overruling Providence” to finally break “the chains”, “to cut asunder the ties which had bound them.” Then pursuing his narrative of the nation, with its heroes and its magnificent American people, Adams resorted to the myth of consensus. He went over the fateful episode of the Confederation, which he described as a test to their civic virtues, from which Americans raised again stronger than before thanks to “their usual good sense, presence of mind, resolution and integrity.” He comforted the people in believing that they had devised “a happy constitution of government” which heralded “a new order of things”, there clearly recalling the other national motto “*novus ordo seclorum*.” In fact, Adams crafted into his address some moments of self-congratulation (“the hearts and judgements of an honest and enlightened people”), which culminated in feelings of self-righteousness when he declared about the American Republic:

This is very certain, that to a benevolent human mind there can be no spectacle presented by any nation more pleasing, more noble, majestic or august, than an assembly like that of all the branches of the legislature exercised by citizens selected at regular periods by their neighbours to make and execute laws for the general good.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, after having endowed their valiant knight, George Washington with “immortal glory for posterity”, and a sacred place in the national history, Adams concluded his speech by speaking in the name of the nation, restating the national commitment, the civic contract or “civic compact” expressed by each citizen through his own person, in the principles of the national government which in turn was designed to preserve their liberties and pursuit of happiness. Adams concluded his address by reminding his people that the American Republic was “a nation for the national good”, placing here the people at the centre of a popular national project, thanks to a populist rhetoric.

### **Thomas Jefferson’s nationalist agenda.**

Thomas Jefferson delivered his first oath of office in the new federal city, in Washington D.C., symbolically placed at the heart of the now fifteen states, in the new Senate Chamber of the partially built Capitol building, itself at the centre of the capital city<sup>128</sup>. His election was much debated and great tensions occurred between Federalists and Republicans. He eventually defeated John Adams who was hoping to be returned for a second term.

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<sup>127</sup> John Adams in *Inaugural Address*, *op.cit.*, p. 13-17.

<sup>128</sup> See III – D, p. 68.

After the usual compliments paid to those who had called upon him to undertake the duties of “the first executive office”, Jefferson opened up his inaugural speech by a far-reaching national dream or ideal for America which he clearly embodied placed as he was at the heart of the nation, in the Capitol. Jefferson naturally praised the achievement of America but he also forecast a great future for the nation in constant expansion westward and abroad, placing the country among the leading nations of the world commercially but above those nations morally.

A rising nation, spread over a wide and fruitful land, traversing all the seas with the rich productions of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations who feel power and forget right, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye – when I contemplate these transcendent objects, and see the honour and the happiness and the hopes of this beloved country committed to the issue, and the auspices of this day, I shrink from the contemplation and humble myself before the magnitude of the undertaking<sup>129</sup>.

Jefferson was clearly envisioning a collective national dream for America proposing to the people to invent the nation westward where “a wide and fruitful land” was awaiting. He appointed himself as a lay prophet having gained this position thanks to his contribution to the making of the nation. Anthony Smith notes that nationalist leaders often base their rhetoric of the future of the nation on “a land of dreams” which can be far more significant than any actual terrain<sup>130</sup>.

Indeed wishing to appease the political tensions that had caused division in Congress and had heightened party strife, Jefferson acting as a “sage”, tried to project the nation into a promising future, thus reminding the representatives and the people in general about their great collective mission for the Union which was to work on consensus, order and good work for the national good.

Let us then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and one mind. Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things.

Jefferson clearly inspired the American people into action by reiterating that their duty lay in upholding and even in worshipping American virtues “peace, order, prosperity and happiness of the nation”, for which he had “acquired an habitual attachment and veneration.” Jefferson like his predecessors in office rekindled the faith in the institutions by evoking the nationalist mythology by means of self-congratulation, resorting to laudatory terms to praise the successful undertakings of the collective effort. Emphasizing the use of the collective pronoun “we”, Jefferson underlined “a due sense of our equal right to

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<sup>129</sup> Jefferson, *Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1801, *op.cit.*, p. 19-21.

<sup>130</sup> SMITH A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

the use of our own faculties”, “the honour and confidence” received from the people, “resulting not from birth, but from our actions and their sense of them.” In the first year of his term, Jefferson refused to follow the Thanksgiving tradition asserting that the State was not entitled to meddle into private matters of belief and religion. But in his first address to the nation, he resorted to his well-known deism when he thanked Providence for “all its blessings”, asking the people and himself “what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people?”. Jefferson also envisioned the growth of the nation, furthering the myth of the “chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation.”

By 1801, when Jefferson was elected, the president was in charge of spreading the nationalist philosophy but also of defining the policies of his government for the next term. Subsequently, all inaugural addresses over the next two centuries have served both these purposes. In 1801 and in 1805, Jefferson clearly reaffirmed the philosophy of the nation, based on the natural consensus of the Union, formed by a politically if not (yet) culturally homogenous population of white men joined by a national commitment to republican government, which in return guaranteed them their liberties and “the pursuit of happiness.” Jefferson's inaugural addresses could be described as the first political “nationalist manifestoes” as he developed his views in terms of commercial and territorial expansion placing America at the heart of European competition on both these fronts while presenting their own dealing with foreign nations as virtuous:

In the transaction of your foreign affairs we have endeavoured to cultivate the friendship of all nations, and especially of those with which we have the most important relations. We have done them justice on all occasions, favoured where favour was lawful, and cherished mutual interests and intercourses on fair and equal terms. We are firmly convinced, and we act on that conviction, that with nations as with individuals our interests soundly calculated will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties, and history bears witness to the fact that a just nation is trusted on its word when recourse is had to armaments and wars to bridle others.<sup>131</sup>

In his second inaugural address, Jefferson openly declared his expansionist policy which he based on discovery and even conquest. Justifying the purchase of Louisiana by Congress, a great source of tension between Federalists and Republicans, he turned to the people to pass a judgement on this action accomplished for the sake of the country and its future generations:

I know that the acquisition of Louisiana had been disapproved by some from a candid apprehension that the enlargement of our territory would endanger its union. [...] The larger our association the less will it be shaken by local passions; and in any view is it not better that the opposite bank of the Mississippi should be settled by our own brethren and children than by strangers of another family ?

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<sup>131</sup> Jefferson, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1805, p. 23-27.

Jefferson contributed to embody the promise he had made in the Declaration of Independence, that of the "pursuit of happiness" to hard working farmers of the land. He concluded his second inaugural address by rekindling but one last myth, that of the Promised Land which seemed to embrace all the other myths evoked previously :

I shall need the favour of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with His providence and our riper years with His wisdom and power, and to whose goodness I ask you to join in supplications with me that He will so enlighten the minds of your servants, guide their councils, and prosper their measures that whatsoever they do shall result in your good, and shall secure to you the peace, friendship, and approbation of all nations.

More than any printed texts under the pen of American nationalist intellectuals, the impact of the presidential speeches on the nation, circulated in newspapers, served the purpose of reasserting the principles of the national mythology at regular periods, feeding the cult of the national Constitution. The first presidents came to symbolize the nation and to act as her "lay" prophets. Jefferson for instance, thanks to his direct appeal to the people, managed to mobilize the energy of the nation by providing inspiration and vision, heralding the idea of "a great nation of futurity"<sup>132</sup>.

### **III – D: More symbols and rituals to celebrate the nation-state and popular American nationalism**

In his analysis of the manner in which a group coalesces or forms a nation, i.e. recognizes its sense of self through certain prisms, Anthony Smith notes that these prisms can be as varied as sacred texts, language, religious shrines or tombs, art and architecture, city planning, as well as the whole range of crafts and minor arts<sup>133</sup>. In fact, a recognizable American literature, as well American arts, i.e. a "high" culture, did not rise before the 1830s when Thomas Cole began painting the American landscape or representing the course of the American Empire or when Emerson delivered a public speech on the missions of the "American scholar."<sup>134</sup> However, popular crafts and minor arts such as furniture making for instance already bore a very distinct American style in the 1790s.

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<sup>132</sup> The expression was quoted by John O'Sullivan in the two articles he devoted to America's "Manifest Destiny", published in the *Democratic Review* in 1835 and 1845, in which he declared: "our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity."

<sup>133</sup> SMITH A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>134</sup> See Thomas Cole: *Essay on American Scenery* (1836), *The Course of Empire* (1836) and Ralph W. Emerson's Oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, "The American Scholar" (August 31, 1837)

As for the architecture of public buildings, it became part of an elite debate as early as the revolutionary era as we know. If Capitol buildings in the states' capital cities were often inspired by Roman temples, like in Virginia, the general public became more concerned and involved in the appointment of a location for the national capital, as well as the creation of a grand design for the national Capitol at the centre of Washington, in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the debate began as early as 1791, reflecting the trend towards more pragmatic practices of nationalism for the people. The capital city of America should represent the sacred centre of federalism where American people could come for pilgrimages, to worship the shrine of the Great Seal and the work of their delegates.

### **Architecture, national buildings and the creation of Washington D.C.**

Capitols were seen as temples to the Republican institutions which the people could turn to and revere by elite members of the American aristocracy like Jefferson. They were designed to embody order and perfection with their clean rectangular lines. The elevation of the buildings towards the sky, which housed lofty principles and ideas was to be achieved by their pillars and Doric columns. Palladian architecture was selected to remind American people that their Houses of Parliament were like the Capitols of yore, i.e. the Greek and Roman temples, in which the secular faith of the people could be expressed towards their government.

Jefferson was aware of the importance of grand buildings to house national and state assemblies. He was asked to propose a plan for the Capitol in Virginia while he was in residence in Paris in September 1785. His inspiration came from the Maison Carrée in Nîmes as he found it "very simple, but noble in expression." According to him such a building would do "honour to our country, as presenting to travellers a specimen of taste in our infancy, promising much for our maturer age."<sup>135</sup> Jefferson's purpose was to adopt a classical architecture for American Republican buildings which would naturally remind passers-by and visitors that America was the modern successor of ancient Republics. Public buildings were worth spending public money on as they would naturally forge the eye and the taste of the New Adams who would in turn find in these, models "for their study and imitation." Capitols should stand for symbols of statehood and "a proof of national good taste" to mock the various criticism addressed to Americans by European visitors. Jefferson saw in the majesty of these public buildings a means to "improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile them to the respect of the world, and to procure them its praise."<sup>136</sup> In other words the American republic would benefit from grandiose public edifices both internally as it would forge the taste of Americans for

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<sup>135</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, Paris, September 20, 1785, in *Writings, op.cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>136</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, *ibid.*

beautiful architecture worthy of imitation, while fostering an American architectural school in its wake. However Jefferson's remarks suggested that elitist taste, "high" culture could only be found in men having received a classical education and that they in turn should pass on to American people those tastes, by imposing some imitation of classical Western architecture, as if no original art or architecture could spring from American soil. In this discourse of art and architecture, Jefferson seemed to lack nationalist vision, reflecting instead very conservative and aristocratic tastes.

Naturally Jefferson tried to contribute to the elaboration of the location and architecture of the capital city, Washington D.C. However, the idea of appointing a sacred place for the capital city, as well as a new genuine design for its planning were brought by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French architect who had emigrated to America and who had designed Federal Hall in New York. L'Enfant wrote to George Washington in 1791, asking him the favour of supervising the implementation of "the capital of all ages." Like Crèvecoeur, a decade earlier, L'Enfant seemed more adamant as a foreigner than any American Jefferson, to prove to the rest of the Western World that America was now a new nation, which would soon supersede older nations with its original plannings and designs. Such were his early plans when he wrote to Washington with his idea for "the capital of this vast Empire", thanking him for the appointment he had been honoured with. He underlined the exceptional situation in which the American people were as:

No nation perhaps had ever before the opportunity offered them of deliberately deciding on the spot where their Capital city should be fixed – or of combining every necessary consideration in the choice of situation<sup>137</sup>.

Symbolism was at its height when Washington, in the District of Columbia, was chosen to become the place of the future capital of the national Federation. The city was chosen for its central location at equidistance or midpoint between the existing fifteen states and regions<sup>138</sup>. As the Constitution defined the limits of the new seat of its federal government as not exceeding a ten-mile square, the district of Columbia was thus drawn along this geometry. Besides, the Masonic inspiration found in the pyramid on the Great Seal, led L'Enfant to place the four square corners in the cardinal directions. Two lines were drawn from corner to corner at the crossing of which the Capitol was going to be built, at the geometric heart of the sacred square. Over the years, - as Washington D.C. like

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<sup>137</sup> Pierre Charles L'Enfant to George Washington, February 1791, quoted in MEYER, Jeffrey F., *Myths in Stone, Religious Dimensions of Washington D.C.*, Berkeley, L.A., University of California Press, p. 27.

<sup>138</sup> MEYER, Jeffrey F., *Myths in Stone, op.cit.*, p. 8-9.

Rome was not built in one day<sup>139</sup> -, the roads would be numbered from the Capitol out, which was the natural focal point of the city and of the nation, where roads both began and ended, where pilgrims could walk to the national source of order and law in order to worship their Constitution.

The religious meaning and the necessary rituals that surrounded the worship of the Republican institutions in 1791, were clearly reproduced in the choice of the “temples” that would be erected in the capital city. There Jefferson’s classical tastes prevailed. For instance, the Capitol building, placed at the heart of a new world order, became known as “the Temple of Liberty”. A statue representing the Goddess of Liberty would be added in 1863 to the summit of the capitol dome, to complete the illustration that Congress held the destiny and values of the nation.

While Washington was away on tour in 1791, Jefferson took the liberty of sending plans to L’Enfant, of European cities which he had collected when visiting them. Jefferson believed that the French architect would find them worthy of inspiration and imitation<sup>140</sup>. Jefferson’s nationalism seemed very subdued compared to L’Enfant’s far-seeing plans for the “nation of futurity” which the French architect wished to design as the allegory of the Great Seal mottoes, “*annuit coeptis, novus ordo seclorum*.” Jefferson had thought city plans of Carlsruhe, Amsterdam, Strasbourg, Paris, Orleans, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Turin and Milan would offer L’Enfant some help towards his grand planning, while the architect had thought the new city needed an exceptional and unusual plan instead. It was quite untypical for Jefferson, who normally believed in America’s exceptionalism to suggest to build the capital on European cities which he had so often decried in the past as seats of inequity, overcrowded or stifled by masses of paupers. L’Enfant dismissed Jefferson’s subdued plans, judging them “tiresome and insipid”, while the Capital city should project “a sense of the real and truly beautiful.”<sup>141</sup> L’Enfant tried to plan a truly American city at the heart of the nation as a sacred centre to which American people could converge.

Jefferson also mentioned to L’Enfant his own view on what the central federal building should look like. His ideas were similar to those he sent to the Virginia Capitol designers in 1785, adding “I should prefer the adoption of some one of

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<sup>139</sup> Historian Jeffrey Meyer notes that Washington D.C. would be the site of symbolic battles in terms of architecture and monuments over a century. Each new addition or refurbishing of older buildings having had to be fraught with some symbolic meaning of the Republic, they were debated at length in Congress and reviewed in newspapers, supporters and detractors each analysing the weight of a new dome for the capitol, or a new statue to adorn it... Tensions were particular high around the Civil War as every proposal was charged with double-meaning by anti-federal southern representatives.

<sup>140</sup> Jefferson to Major L’Enfant, Philadelphia, April 10, 1791, in *Writings, op.cit.*, p. 975.

<sup>141</sup> L’Enfant to Washington, quoted in CRAIG Lois, *The Federal Presence: Architecture Politics, and Symbols in the United States Government Building*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1978, introduction.



the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years.” As for the President’s house which was not going to be at the heart of the capital city, Jefferson displayed the same conservative European tastes adding: “I should prefer the celebrated fronts of modern buildings, which have already received the approbation of good judges. Such as the *Galerie du Louvre*, the *Gardes Meubles*, and two fronts of the *Hotel de Salm*.<sup>142</sup>”

According to Jeffrey Meyer, Pierre Charles L’Enfant’s plan provided the initial impetus for the myth of Washington D.C.<sup>143</sup>, echoing the religious symbolic of John Winthrop’s “Citie upon the Hill”. Then the Capital was collectively shaped through the contributions and objections, as well as the support and obstructions of presidents, commissions, architects and the people through their representatives and senators. The slow building and mapping of the National Capital reflected the careful elaboration and crafting of national myth-making.

## Conclusion

We, the American people, call upon the myths of the past, reinterpret them, and recreate them  
to make sense out of the confusion of our uncommon history.  
(Jeffrey F. Meyer, *Myths in Stone*, p. 11)

With their rituals and their political rhetoric and symbolic, some American nationalist leaders forged the Republican beliefs of the people between 1774 and 1809, leading them to understand that they belonged to one nation. The purpose of this chapter was to deconstruct and examine the origins of American nationalism by looking at the invention of its symbols and the elaboration of its mythology that are so well known today and even shared by people living beyond American borders. As we understood, the process was slow. From the fostering of strong feelings of patriotism in the years preceding 1776, nationalist leaders like Jefferson or Paine relied on the colonists’ local or parochial attachment, to elaborate a nationalist sentiment which they managed to spread throughout the country in the immediate wake of the Declaration of Independence. However, nationalist feelings were hard to preserve during the Confederation time-period while consensus was slowly forgotten by the political elite. Therefore, in the couple of years following the passing of the Constitution which many Republicans saw as a second chance providentially given to the nation to exist, nationalist feelings were again spread among the people. The

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<sup>142</sup> Jefferson to Major L’Enfant, *ibid*.

<sup>143</sup> MEYER, *Myths in Stone*, op.cit., p. 11.

political elite seemed to realize that no nation could exist without popular support and love. It was then necessary to reaffirm or reiterate the national ideology invented in 1776, to bring the people into the worship of the national institutions and national future. To reach out to the American people, symbols and myths were designed or reinvented, often ritualised in the yearly national calendar. Having survived the troubled years of the Confederation Articles, the nation was clearly standing the test of time and durability thus forging a successful narrative for historians or lay prophets.

Americans seem to be drawn to national celebrations as a political strategy which could be explained by their own religious background of collective celebrations or worship. Jefferson as we saw, already equated religious celebration and revolutionary action in 1774 by suggesting a day of fast and prayers in churches to mark American colonists' resentment towards English rule on the occasion of the closing of Boston Harbour by the British Admiralty. David Waldstreicher who devotes his research to the analysis of national fêtes in America, underlines the American desire "for spontaneous emergence." Waldstreicher also describes these festive innovations as sites of "national identity, effective political action and mass-mediated delight."<sup>144</sup> Indeed with public celebrations and rituals, it is possible for a large number of people, constituting the body of the nation, to join in and practice nationalism.

From 1776 until the end of Jefferson's second term in 1809, American national myths were forged by political leaders. By analysing his prolific writings during this time-period, I showed that Jefferson was one of the architects of this political and somehow cultural nationalism. From his common myth of descent, in which he suggested that Americans had an ancestral filiation with great Saxon tribes, Jefferson began the national narrative of the group offering Americans from Saxon origin or other European origins the sense of a distinctive shared history which they had begun by making the choice of exile. The common decision to flee unwanted European governments to accomplish their dreams in a New land forged British colonists' association to a specific territory in 1776, presented to them as an abode for exiled having taken their destiny in hand. This common background was also inscribed by Jefferson in the first design of the Great Seal on which the representation of six nations coming together commemorated this cultural symbiosis. However, at the beginning of the Republic, most nationalist myth-makers concentrated on making the nationalist programme understood by the elite at the expense of popular beliefs. Most obvious of all was the various allegorical designs engraved on the Great Seal which require lengthy explanations and a sound classical culture to be understood. However Jefferson's nationalist dynamic was relayed in a number

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<sup>144</sup> WALDSTREICHER D., *op.cit.*, p. 2

of texts produced by American intellectuals or educated emigrants expressing their new identity as Americans, in “a personal plebiscite” of the new nation, to quote E. Renan. By couching their arguments and personal feelings, in more mundane or practical illustrations, Paine’s *Common Sense*, Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard* philosophy all aimed at reaching a large public, spreading the myths of American ideology.

Many of these myths (that of the Chosen Nation, that of the Promised Land, that of the Pastoral Dream and that of Puritan virtues and self-righteousness) were already part of a common judeo-christian background but they were promoted in speeches and prints, and represented in national symbols, in the wake of the Declaration of Independence. A strong sentiment for the patria was born then but the people who should have been at the heart of the process were not involved in nation-building in the following decade. Indeed under the Articles of Confederation, America was characterized for a decade by misgovernment under the control of regional elites who served their vested interest, not the people’s interest. However, American nationalism survived this first test and the Confederation period became one of the episodes of the collective narrative. Eventually, in 1787, the National Convention founded a true nation-state by promoting a federal Constitution. This time, the people were apparently placed at the heart of the political process thanks to the use of celebrations and processions staged in every town during the ratification period. The eventful previous decade was already celebrated as a national saga by federalist leaders who relied on popular manifestations to promote the rise of the national figure-head, the president. If the affective dimension of the people had been neglected before, after 1787, it seemed that the nationalist programme relied on popular adhesion to the Constitution whose value was praised over and over, in presidential speeches and inaugural addresses. It appears that American leaders understood the necessity of selecting and appointing specific dates in the yearly calendar to remind the people of the reasons why they came together. Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day emerged as those symbolic days in the year during the recent history of the nation could be celebrated and restated, as well as great national heroes remembered. Similarly, State of the Union speeches or inaugural addresses by Presidents are being used to this day as myth-telling moments or nationalist manifestoes.

The national mythology, which for a major part was religiously inspired, required rituals and worship, serving the purpose of erasing the heterogeneity, cultural and regional, of the various communities which lived on the American territory from 1776 on. From patriotism which had to be spread among each state by dint of efforts by a handful of nationalist leaders, Jefferson, Adams, Paine, Franklin, to nationalism, i.e. a passion for the common consensus and a common destiny embodied in the nation-state in 1787, great incentive and

dynamics, found symbols and myths, had to be imagined and celebrated to be understood by the masses that formed the nation. If union and a common destiny were accomplished at a symbolic level, in the Great Seal or the Great Compromise or the National Constitution, famous popular texts, as well as celebrations or the federal capital represented and illustrated the nation time and national space for the people.

Those symbols had to be carefully chosen which explained the length of time that was taken by Congress to decide on the final symbols of the Great Seal, as well as the couple years that the states took to finally ratify the Constitution, or the century which it took Americans to build the national Capital. Each symbol, each myth had to be tested, had to encompass the national virtues and had to stand the test of time and history<sup>145</sup>. America clearly relied on those myths to forge its identity as a nation out of the motley communities that co-existed on the nation's territory in 1776, and to encompass the individual cultures of emigrants which the celebration of American virtues would necessarily attract. Myths had to be nationally understood but also somehow universally understood which explains why so many foreigners easily adhered to Jefferson's promise of the American dream over the last two centuries.

### **A national education for the people**

Central to the spreading of the political ideal of a few philosophers and statesmen was the role of education. Post-revolutionary France and post-revolutionary America both designed a state-run, standardized, public education system which, according to Gellner, was one of the means to achieve cultural homogeneity. Contrary to Britain that neglected to develop a system of national education before 1871, in America, Jefferson, George Whyte and Benjamin Rush were fervent promoters of the development of public schools in which an American curriculum could be diffused among the young generations. Franklin,

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<sup>145</sup> It is surprising that the creative display of a new national flag, encompassing the new states and the western expansion was only chosen as late as 1818. Afterwards, its display as the centre-piece of Independence Day decorations, focused public attention on a ubiquitous and unequivocal symbol of the nation's revolutionary saga. In fact the Star-Spangled Banner achieved its final design in Baltimore in August 1813, during the "second war of independence" (1812-1814) which opposed the British to the Americans. It had been ordered by Major George Armistead who was commander of Fort McHenry in Baltimore. The third and final Flag Act was passed on April 4, 1818. The national anthem, in fact a poem by Francis Scott Key, had been inspired by the flag flying over Fort McHenry on the dawn of September 14, 1814. With its ever-changing number of stars, the flag validated at the popular level, the federal notion of an infinitely expandable union of states while displaying the geography of the nation with its stars and reminding the crucial moment of the foundation of the nation with its 13 stripes. In a way, the stars and stripes also served as the symbol of nation mapping.

Washington and Adams also worked towards the creation of colleges or donated their wealth to the improvement of knowledge and education of American citizens. Jefferson first focused on the education of the elite before turning to "the people" when he developed plans for higher then for primary education for his own state of Virginia, founding the first American university in Charlottesville. To John Banister, he wrote from Paris in 1785:

What are the objects of an useful American education ? Classical knowledge, modern languages, chiefly French, Spanish and Italian, Mathematics, Natural philosophy, Natural history, Civil history and Ethics. Every other article (but modern languages) can be as well acquired at William and Mary College, as at any place in Europe<sup>146</sup>.

Jefferson knew that self-government and the preservation of the Republican institutions and ideals would only work if it was conducted and understood by a well-informed, literate people, "by far the most important bill in our whole code [of laws in Virginia] is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness.<sup>147</sup>" In other words, devising a nationalist programme, enshrined in a federal Constitution and institutions were not enough to guarantee the nation's safety and stability, without ensuring and enlisting the participation of "the people", without getting their *plebiscite*. The people had to remain the finality of the nation, and as such nation-building should be explained to them, along with her history and her futurity. Symbols, myths and rituals of the nation could be devised but if the people did not worship or practice those, there would be no nation. "Sacred" documents could all be printed and easily circulated among the people stating the civil compact between the people and their government, but this would be of no avail if they could not be understood by the people. Besides, statesmen like Jefferson or Adams also looked to education to provide "the moral foundations for an enduring political system, ameliorate religious antipathies, bridge racial and class misunderstandings, give reality to the principle of equality, justify the logic of freedom and provide *the common denominators of national unity*.<sup>148</sup>" In his 1786 letter to Virginia educationist Reverend George Whyte, Jefferson concluded "Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [...]."

Benedict Anderson analysed the part played by the printed word in the spreading of nationalist ideas and in the invention of nations. Anderson particularly observed the case of the Americas, where middle-class political leaders and

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<sup>146</sup> Jefferson to John Banister Jr, Paris, Octobre 15, 1785.

<sup>147</sup> Jefferson to George Whyte, Paris, August 13, 1786.

<sup>148</sup> COMMAGER H., *Jefferson, Nationalism and the Enlightenment*, op.cit., p. 68 (my italics).

intellectuals had understood the power of the printed word as pedagogical or nationalist tools as we observed. With the creation of a standardized American language in print thanks to the contribution of Noah Webster, texts and newspaper articles could be circulated across the states and events, national or regional could be shared by the literate readers. According to Benedict Anderson, by spreading knowledge about the principles and ideals of the American nation in book or letter forms, "these fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, *the embryo of the nationally imagined community*."<sup>149</sup> Usually such was a process that was set up prior to the rise of independence. In America, print culture that emphasized the ideal of the new Republic through newspapers and declarations, as well as the fixity of the American language, accompanied by education policies voted in 1791, led to the fostering of this imagined nation among millions, particularly newcomers who would soon be taught the American language and American beliefs in local primary schools, especially in the new communities built in the west, where homesteaders had the obligation to build a school. Clearly, perpetuating the founding principles of the American nation across time and space was planned out at the federal level from 1787 on, showing that implanting the pragmatic principles of nationalism was at the heart of the Republican project.

Finally, the voting of Land Ordinances which said that each new state would receive a bill of rights and enter the Union after a probationary period showed that the federal legislators were introducing the idea of a test, or a trial to the national adhesion and national values. The 1790, 1795, 1798, 1802 Naturalization Acts upheld the principle that a foreigner could not become a citizen until he understood the principles of liberties and responsibilities that formed the political basis of American nationality, i.e. an individual had to prove that he adhered to the national ideal and that he understood the duties he had towards the nation, the "civic compact", to become a member. People who did not share the political values lying at the heart of the American nation, were by definition, foreigners: loyalists, non whites, natives.

The concept of "alien" existed at the root of the so-called universal, all-inclusive Declaration of Independence. But "aliens" were barred from becoming citizens as early as 1796. American nationalism, like any other nationalism, was also feeding on a national antipathy either against another nation or a common internal enemy (the natives) against which the people tightened, reaffirming their ethnic, racist or political traits. Jefferson had first believed that America's "aliens" could rally the nation by understanding and learning that adopting the American values would bring them benefit and advantages. In his second inaugural address in 1809, he stated that the natives who had been disturbed in

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<sup>149</sup> ANDERSON B., *Imagined Communities*, *op.cit.*, p. 44 (my italics). Anderson also notes that between 1691 and 1820, no less than 2.120 "newspapers" were published in North America, of which 461 lasted more than ten years.

their hunting and gathering traditions by the arrival of “the stream of overflowing population from other regions”, could also benefit from the great progress brought by American civilisation by applying themselves to the virtuous mode of life of cultivating land:

Humanity enjoins us to teach them agriculture and the domestic arts; to encourage them to that industry which alone can enable them to maintain their place in existence and to prepare them in time for that state of society which to bodily comforts adds the improvement of the mind and morals<sup>150</sup>.

Here in a few words, Jefferson was referring to the “pursuit of happiness”, that “simple felicity” which should go on perpetuating the virtues of the nation and whose all-encompassing promise would necessarily bring natives to join in America’s common destiny.

For the benefit of these “aliens”, Lewis and Clark whose expedition was launched by Jefferson in 1803, carried with them the symbols of the American republic in the form of medals minted for the expedition to be used in gift exchanges with native chiefs. Medals represented Jefferson himself or the Great Seal. Lewis also received from Jefferson, specific instructions regarding the natives which he should “make [them] acquainted with the position, extent, character, peaceable and commercial dispositions of the United States, of our wish to be neighbourly, friendly and useful to them [...]”<sup>151</sup> Jefferson resorted to a creative process to diffuse American nationalism beyond the frontier where soon thousands of settlers would move. Old rites and symbols as well as new ones had to be traditionalised in a relatively short time in this rapid social, political and cultural change of the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Invention of an artistic national tradition (poets, writers, painters, natural scientists)**

With the transformation of American society owing to a great influx of new immigrants, the great continuing westward expansion and the accelerating industrialization and urbanization –changes created pressures on the nation. Myths had to be reinvigorated and reinvented or allegories adapted to more popular tastes. Classical figures and themes had to take a more modern turn or outlook “to channel and control the energies of the newly mobilized and enfranchised masses”, to trigger “atavistic emotions” among the new Adam of the West for instance<sup>152</sup>.

In 1785, an anonymous contributor to the *Columbian Magazine* hoped that Americans “shall have poets that will *eternize* in song, their native groves and

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1805, p. 25.

<sup>151</sup> Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, June 20, 1803 in *Writings, op.cit.*, p.1129

<sup>152</sup> SMITH A., quoting KEDOURIE and HOBSBAWM, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford, OUP, 1999, p. 9.

ivers." Singing the superiority of the American wilderness over the tamed European landscape was one of the main sources of nationalist pride among post-revolutionary American writers, but they used English rhymes or traditional epic poems to do so. In America, Nature was sublime, on a grand scale but also benevolent to men who were consequently morally improved in nature. This was allegorically chanted by poets with references to ancient Greek poems or represented in paintings in classical scenes which reflected the European tradition of American "high culture" at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For instance a series of engravings celebrating the "American genius" or "American liberty" were drawn in the 1790s, such as the most famous *Triumph of Liberty* (1796) by Peter C. Verger, allegorically couching one of American virtues in a classical scene. At the centre of this complex print the "Genius of America" stands in front of a tomb dedicated to heroes of the American Revolution. She is attended by the goddesses of Liberty, Justice, Peace and Plenty, also represented on the Great Seal. On an obelisk to the right is the Goddess of Liberty with a copy of *The Rights of Man* below. In the foreground, on the right hand side, looking disgusted, a group of kings turn away from the scene. These national moments immortalized in highly classical Western culture could no longer speak to the American farmer, Jefferson's ideal American. American virtues and values had to be represented in minor and major arts adapted to the new generations. From 1791, Benjamin Rush had tried to convince his educationist friends, including Jefferson, that classical symbols were only understood by men having received a classical education and that they only displayed a continuing dependence on classical learning which stifled America's creativity

To further the reading of this chapter which I deliberately close in 1809, by evoking the opening of the national territory to the west and pointing to the need for renewed symbols or new myths to reinvigorate popular nationalist beliefs, students could reflect on the role of artists or bards, like historians or poets, of the next generation. They too participated to the depiction of the American nation and to the representation of its nationalist mythology. Anthony Smith posits that nations go on renewing themselves thanks to three dynamics: recurrence, continuity and reappropriation<sup>153</sup>. In this article, I tried to analyse how political leaders and a handful of intellectuals managed to foster cultural homogeneity where there had been hardly any. It would be interesting to continue the analysis of American myths and symbols in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century when times of tension occurred within the sacred Union during the Civil War, or when cultural shocks happened between old Eastern values and new Western traditions within the same national space. How did historians, political leaders and artists, as well as the American people in general, cope with these "tests" and new challenges? How did they or do they manage to recurrently

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<sup>153</sup> SMITH A., *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, op.cit., p.9.



muster “the people” by re-enacting the founding moments of the nation, to re-appropriate into more modern support the original symbols and myths of 1776, to forge a sense of continuity of the initial community’s union, to continually inspire among Americans the ideal of a common glorious past and of a promising future ?

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