

NATION AND EMPIRE
THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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The effort of historians in American history has lately focused on the idea of American empire. Books are written with the intent to prove that imperialism has been a core characteristic of America since its founding. The primary focus of these efforts is establishing a distinction between what constitutes an “empire” and what constitutes a “nation” and proving that America is an empire rather than a nation. Instead of debating whether the United States is an empire or a nation, it would better serve our understanding of history to study how early Americans defined nation. This paper will begin by analyzing the term nation, its root and relevant terms, and will demonstrate that “nation” was linked to nativism, homogeneity, and nature. Comparisons made to Ancient Greece and its empire under Alexander will then show the similarities and differences between nation and empire. Ancient Greece, known as having incorporated some of the earliest principles of democracy, eventually dwindled under despotism, and it is important to view the United States comparatively to determine whether the experiment of this nation will endure. This paper will show how the United States has evolved from its own notions of nation, which had exclusivist and nativist tendencies, to a nationalism of shared American ideologies within a context of pluralism that was derived from concepts of empire. Imperialism allowed the United States to evolve from homogenous exclusion to heterogeneous toleration. This was ultimately achieved when America found itself fighting against its own historical interpretations of nation, thus transforming the world from the Age of Empires to a new age, but not to the Age of Nation-States. By examining the positives and negatives of nation and empire, it will be seen that America is an accumulation of national and imperial traits, thus creating the first union in the Age of Nation-Empires.

To begin to understand nation, one must first understand its Latin root, nat. Nat is the root for native, nature, and nation. From these three words come many other words, including nativism, nativity, natural, naturalism, national, and nationality. Coming from the same Latin root, these words not only share similar letters, they share a similar meaning. By looking at the definitions of each of these words, a better understanding of nation can be found. The word nat itself refers to birth, or being born. Such a root definition makes sense when thinking of words like native and nativity. The word native refers to a sense of “belonging to or associated with one by birth.”¹ Nation, especially in the American sense, most assuredly includes this belonging or association by birth. To become a citizen of the American nation, one only needs to be born in an association with another citizen or the land itself. Such ideas of citizenship as it relates to nation lead to further discussion when viewing other words derived from native. Native yields not only nativity, or birth, but also nativism.

The first definition of nativism is “a policy of favoring native inhabitants as opposed to immigrants.”² Despite the United States being formed by a people who, for the most part, could not call the American continent their native home, American history has shown this policy of favoritism against immigration. This nativism focused on “otherness” of groups based on religion, culture, or even political otherness. Protestant favoritism was an early manifestation of nativism. One of America’s well known nativists of the early 19th Century, Samuel F. B. Morse, “urged Protestants to abandon their religious differences and unite against Catholic schools, Catholic office holders, and lenient immigration laws.”³ In addition, Congregationalist minister Josiah Strong “sharply indicted immigration and

¹ “native,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008.

² “nativism,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008.

³ Billington, “Anti-Catholic Propaganda,” 365.

socialism as imperiling American development [believing] that immigrants provided the greater portion of American criminals and harmed the morals of the native population.”⁴ Strong’s favoritism was not limited to the Protestant religion. His view of the American nation also included a racial bias in favor of Anglo-Saxonism. In *Our Country*, Strong pronounced that in addition to having “the larger portion of the Anglo-Saxon race for generations to come, we may reasonably expect to develop the highest type of Anglo-Saxon civilization.”⁵ Religiously, it was the consistent belief that “Protestantism was, after all, connected intimately to the political purposes of the founding fathers when they established the nation.”⁶ In the 19th Century, “Anglo-Saxonism was closely allied to Protestantism and was often said to share its virtues.”⁷ American favoritism with regards to race and religion extended to cultural and political terms as well.

The Philadelphia riots of 1844, as Michael Feldberg points out, reveal how favoritism of nativism was also culturally motivated. During the riots, “on their way from Kensington, the nativists passed a German Catholic church but did not harm it, underlining the anti-Irish basis for their actions.”⁸ This shows nativist opposition again looking for “otherness” in people, whether the focus was on others being Catholic, Irish, or perhaps even political-economic otherness. Richard Hofstadter pointed to how “the major [American] political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, [and] the value of economic competition.”⁹ These political rights were to be protected and preserved against any “foreign subversion,”¹⁰ and fears of

⁴ Shapiro, *Identity and Intolerance*, 164.

⁵ Strong, *Our Country*, 168.

⁶ Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots*, 95.

⁷ Kramer, “Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons,” 48.

⁸ Feldberg, 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

political otherness were vocalized by nativist leaders like Samuel R. Kramer who claimed that a longer residency requirement would prevent immigrants from “get[ting] the Constitution of the United States into their own hands and sell[ing] it to a foreign power.”¹¹ Whether that was possible or not was beside the point for those who held such nativist views. The issue was preserving the American nation as an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Capitalist society.

The Greek Empire under Alexander had a similar idea of preserving its culture. Alexander had the idea of “using religion to impose peace upon diverse nations.”¹² It should be asked whether this is due to underlying ideas of religion or political expediency. Alexander’s incorporation of other religions, even to the point of offering up sacrifices to gods of local cultures he conquered, shows that he was less religiously motivated than he was politically. This same idea could be seen in the Protestant missionary movements perpetually supported by Americans. Americans sent missionaries throughout the world in “a new American campaign to export its culture.”¹³ This connection between religion and imperial undertaking is perhaps most evident in President William McKinley’s explanation of annexing the Philippines. McKinley claimed that “there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died.”¹⁴ Many scholars point to the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War as America’s first real imperial engagement, making it an important similarity that Christianity

¹¹ Ibid., 102.

¹² Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, 552.

¹³ Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, 3.

¹⁴ Olcott, *William McKinley*, 110-111.

and Civilization were seen as congruous elements in American culture, just as the Greeks attempted to impose a single religion upon their conquered nations.

The second definition of nativism is “the revival or perpetuation of an indigenous culture especially in opposition to acculturation.”¹⁵ Although Americans were not the original, indigenous peoples on the continent, Anglo-Saxons, Protestants, and Capitalists were seen as indigenous to the American notion of nation. The American nation was also formed out of opposition to political acculturation. Peter S. Onuf pointed out that “as the American people broke away from, and defined themselves against, the British people, their nation became self-consciously political.”¹⁶ The American nation’s aversion to European acculturation was primarily political, denouncing European despotism and imperialism as antithetical to American freedoms. In some ways, Americans were more disposed to incorporating European culture within their new nation. Americans “built their homes and public buildings in the Greek temple style and named their cities and towns for those of antiquity.”¹⁷ Predominantly, however, Europe was seen as the “Old World nations that drenched their lands in ‘human gore’ and dealt in ‘injuries, violence, and bloodshed.’”¹⁸ Americans obviously kept a blind eye to the injuries, violence, and bloodshed that occurred within their own borders.

While resisting political acculturation with Britain, Americans demanded acculturation from other groups within their borders. The American nation was extremely opposed to allowing traits from historic cultures and institutions seen as barbaric from influencing it. The cultures that saw the greatest opposition were those within its own

¹⁵ “nativism,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008.

¹⁶ Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 160.

¹⁷ Repousis, “The Trojan Women,” 457.

¹⁸ Watts, *The Republic Reborn*, 154.

territorial borders. Concerning Native American tribes, Thomas Jefferson wrote to William Henry Harrison that “our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States, or remove beyond the Mississippi.”¹⁹ This incorporation into American citizenry would have seemed less opposing to their culture had it not been followed with Jefferson’s expectation that it included “certainly the termination of their history.”²⁰ As many scholars have pointed out, “in [Jefferson’s] view, Indians were to be civilized or exterminated,”²¹ and civilization meant conforming to the idea of American nation. The American nation consisted of its own distinct ideologies, and as the American borders increased, no conflicting ideologies were recognized. “Although Americans knew at a practical level that Indians controlled a significant proportion of North America, on an ideological level they conceived of the entire continent as empty.”²² Despite the fact that Indians were the actual “natives” to the American continent, Americans chose to completely disregard them as a disappearing nation.

Since Americans often compared themselves to Greek culture, it is only fitting to examine Americans’ relations with the true Native Americans, and compare them to the Greek empire and its response to some of the cultures it conquered. “More and more charmed by his new subjects, [Alexander] abandoned the idea of ruling over them as a Macedonian, and conceived himself as a Greco-Persian emperor governing a realm in which Persians and Greeks would be on an equal footing, and would peaceably mingle their culture

¹⁹ Jefferson, *From Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison concerning Native American Tribes*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, 47.

²² Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and US Colonialism*, 15-17.

and their blood.”²³ Alexander often annihilated entire villages, but his acceptance of Persia on equal footing shows that empire allows for the incorporation of other cultures in ways that a nation cannot. In Alexander’s view, one did not need to be Greek to be a native or citizen of his empire. In America, on the other hand, nativism originally dictated citizenship as exclusive to Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

It has been argued that “nativism might have been a refuge for psychologically disturbed individuals or a socially acceptable means by which one group differentiated itself from another group in order to reinforce its collective ego.”²⁴ The fact of the matter is that differentiating itself from others is what Americans did best. As Onuf explained it, “this was a nation defined by its enemies, at home and abroad.”²⁵ Americans were faced with the immediate differentiation as independent colonies from their mother country of Great Britain. Thomas Paine pointed to the *Common Sense* of how “in no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet, and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverses the common order of nature, it is evident they belong to different systems: England to Europe, America to itself.”²⁶ Thomas Jefferson is often seen with regards to “the radical distinction he drew between the unjust pretensions of the European powers and the natural rights of the United States,”²⁷ but he is most famous for his differentiating between the white race and others.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson repeatedly pointed to his belief “that there are varieties in the race of man, distinguished by their powers both of body and mind [and] that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and

²³ Durant, 547.

²⁴ Feldberg, 82.

²⁵ Onuf, 13.

²⁶ Paine, *Collected Writings*, 28.

²⁷ Tucker & Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty*, 62.

circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.”²⁸

Given Jefferson’s view on extermination or assimilation, with the usual leaning toward extermination or removal, it is clear that his view of the American nation was mostly limited to a specific collective that differentiated itself from groups outside and inside America’s territorial and racial borders. Jefferson’s views would be carried on until Andrew Jackson completed the work of Indian removal, seeing Native Americans as “savage, cruel, bloodthirsty, cannibalistic butchers of innocent white women and children, and should be driven into submission or extinction.”²⁹

It should be asked why extinction or extermination was so prevalent an idea in early American history. Empires had certainly engaged in exterminating cultures and peoples who were different, but not always. Turning back to Ancient Greece, there was no specific rule with how to deal with conquered civilizations. Whereas some villages and groups were ordered to be burned to the ground, others were spared and even incorporated into Greek culture. Alexander himself took to wearing foreign clothing and married various Persian women out of “hopes of uniting the two nations.”³⁰ With regard to the Jews, upon their defeat, they were usually deported to various areas of the empire, and in many cases joined Greek military camps. The same would happen to the Jews under the Romans as well. The understanding of empire was that it could consist of different ethnic and religious groups, and was therefore more congruent to a heterogeneous society. Nation, on the other hand, originally limited itself to a homogenous society, the term itself most commonly used in the 18th Century with regards to race or ethnicity, rather than a political territory.³¹

²⁸ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

²⁹ Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail*, 54.

³⁰ Durant, 547.

³¹ Gray, “Visions of Another Empire,” 353.

Homogeneity in American history has been known by many words, including union, simultaneity, equality, and oneness. Its roots are, in many respects, linked to the Protestant religion. John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* sought to create a unified city that would shine for all nations to see. He counseled his followers thus: "We must be knit together in this work as one man; [...] we must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labour and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission, and community in the work, our community as members of the same body."³² This Christian rhetoric of being one became significant when American presidents counseled the nation to hold specific days of prayer and thanksgiving. In the middle of the 19th Century, prominent author Sarah Josepha Hale "imagined millions of families seated around the table on the same day, thereby unifying the vast and shifting space of the national domain through simultaneity."³³ Even today, Americans join in celebrating Thanksgiving as a national holiday, a day where homogeneity and simultaneity is most prevalent.

One of the enemies to homogeneity, faction, was vehemently written against in the Federalist Papers. James Madison wrote, "We have seen the necessity of the Union, as our bulwark against foreign danger, as the conservator of peace among ourselves, as the guardian of our commerce and other common interests, [...] and as the proper antidote for the diseases of faction."³⁴ By calling upon common interests and limiting Constitutional rights to a select few, early American leaders understood Rousseau's way of thinking, in that "to be a nation requires continuity as well as identity, a tradition of culture as well as the

³² Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*.

³³ Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture*, 35.

³⁴ Madison, *Federalist Paper No. 14*.

creation of a political structure.”³⁵ Once the political structure was secured, Americans continued to work toward maintaining a homogenous culture. “Secured in their respective rights, the new state-republics would be drawn into ever closer union by their harmonious interests, common principles, and reciprocal affection.”³⁶ In his First Inaugural, Thomas Jefferson spoke to Americans with fervor: “Let us, then, fellow-citizens unite with one heart and one mind.”³⁷ The Jeffersonian vision was one of “faith in the universality of human nature and, in turn, the possibility that nation and empire could somehow become one,”³⁸ but this was subject to his views on race. Perhaps early Americans had learned a lesson of heterogeneity from their imperial ancestors. Greek society had incorporated democracy to such a degree that, eventually, freedom was enjoyed by many. Will Durant, in his well-documented account of Ancient Greece, concluded with this realization: “Individualism in the end destroys the group, but in the interim it stimulates personality, mental exploration, and artistic creation.”³⁹ In other words, while democracy may stimulate individual growth, it is imperative that the individual sees himself as part of the collective. This is where nationality becomes important. A nation could only remain successful if its individuals saw themselves as part of a homogenous group, despite differences.

When Americans went abroad, their ideas of successful nationality through homogeneity went with them. When John Ledyard traveled through the Russian Empire, he observed that the “Russian government [...] had done little to bring any unity or definition to the empire. For Ledyard, the ill-defined nature of the Russian Empire, the confused and confusing boundaries and borderlands, and especially the uncertain relationship between

³⁵ Barnard, “National Culture and Political Legitimacy,” 239.

³⁶ Onuf, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ Gray, 355.

³⁹ Durant, 554.

ethnicity, language, culture, religion, skin color, and status made for a cruel, corrupt mix.”⁴⁰ Ironically, the very same uncertainty existed in the United States as long as heterogeneity existed. In his discussion on the Philadelphia riots, Feldberg pointed out that although it has been the “perspective [that] cultural richness and freedom pluralism has been a positive good, scholars have recently begun to note that, historically, the heterogeneity of American ethnic groups has caused an extraordinary amount of conflict, disruption, and violence.”⁴¹ K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan have shown this “tension between pluralism and the desire for homogeneity” in their discussion on Chinese exclusion during the late 19th Century.⁴²

Although the Chinese were originally welcomed to the United States, this was out of America’s desire for cheap labor. The American nation was not ready to allow other nationalities to be incorporated into its society, except under their belief “that in their outward thrust Americans were encountering a variety of inferior races incapable of sharing America’s republican system and doomed to permanent subordination or extinction.”⁴³ This could have meant a status of slavery, servitude under cheap labor, or perhaps even subordination to the homogenous culture of America. At the turn of the 20th Century, Charles Carroll’s *The Negro a Beast* concluded “that ‘the pure-blooded White is the creature whom God deigned should perform the mental labor necessary to subdue the earth; and that the Negro is the creature whom God designed to perform the manual labor.’”⁴⁴ This similar racial superiority was encouraged by Aristotle who told Alexander “to treat the Greeks as freemen, ‘barbarians’ as slaves. But [Alexander] had been surprised to find among the

⁴⁰ Gray, 355.

⁴¹ Feldberg, 79.

⁴² Wong & Chan, *Claiming America*, 9.

⁴³ Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 6.

⁴⁴ Shapiro, 156.

Persian aristocrats a degree of refinement and good manners not often seen in the turbulent democracies of Greece.”⁴⁵ Alexander chose to incorporate Persians within his own administration, as compared to Americans not even allowing non-whites to vote. Much like Alexander’s empire moved from limited democratic principles to autocratic incorporation of outside cultures, the American notion of nation has also adapted to its heterogeneity and allowed multiple races and ethnicities within its framework.

The freedom that is enjoyed by Americans today, regardless of race, is largely due to how nation has been defined, but the modern definition has seen significant changes over the last two centuries. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, it called upon “the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them.”⁴⁶ This is another connection using the Latin root, nat. Nature and nation have been intrinsically linked to each other for as long as nations have existed. In 1584, Richard Hakluyt spoke of the inhabitants of the West Indies as being “natural” subjects, thus showing the interchangeability between nature and native, or nature and nation.⁴⁷ Most American ideas with reference to nature were religious in origin, relying on the belief that God created man and his place according to nature. Much like God allowed man to be born as part of nature, man then unified according to nature to create a nation.

Although Jefferson’s vision of nature pronounced “that all men are created equal,”⁴⁸ the practiced vision of nature by Americans was one of dividing groups according to racial or ethnic differences. It was not always God that separated man by nature; it was man’s own definition of nature that usually divided them. This was even recognized, to a degree,

⁴⁵ Durant, 547.

⁴⁶ Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*.

⁴⁷ Hakluyt, *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting*.

⁴⁸ Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*.

by America's early leaders. In Federalist Paper Number 10, James Madison claimed that "the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man."⁴⁹ Although this statement may have been more in reference to political faction, racism was also seen as being a part of the nature of man. Benjamin Franklin admitted desiring an increase of whites in the world, asking, "why increase the sons of Africa by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all blacks and tawneys, of increasing the lovely white and red?"⁵⁰ Franklin concluded that he was "partial to the complexion of my country, for such kind of partiality is natural to mankind."⁵¹ Franklin's use of "country" in this context is synonymous to nation, therefore placing nature as a separator of nations.

By understanding that early Americans viewed racial superiority as part of nature, we gain a better perspective of how slavery was justified in a nation claiming to be "governed by God's natural and moral law of equality."⁵² Some scholars have claimed that early Americans like Jefferson were obvious hypocrites, but as Onuf explained this paradox between equality and slavery, "'Nation' proved to be a protean concept in this Age of Revolution, capable of taking on new meanings both for proponents of popular self-government and for those who sought to make sense of its antithesis: the institution of slavery."⁵³ In his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens*, David Walker explained that Hannibal defeated the Romans because "they were dis-united, as the coloured people are now, in the United States of America, the reason our *natural enemies* are enabled to keep their feet on our throats."⁵⁴ It is significant that Walker saw the different races as being "natural"

⁴⁹ Madison, *Federalist Paper No. 10*.

⁵⁰ Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² O'Sullivan, "Manifest Destiny."

⁵³ Onuf, 149.

⁵⁴ Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the United States*, italics added.

enemies, but we should also note the contemporaneous understanding that success in a nation was determined by unity or the lack thereof, thus reiterating the earlier discussion on homogeneity. It is also significant that Thomas Jefferson spoke of the “law of nature and nations” as being one and the same.⁵⁵ Slavery was not, therefore, an institution hypocritical to American principles of equality, but was a “natural relationship [...] of war, and the only arbiter between nations at war was a ‘just God.’”⁵⁶ God had dictated nature, which had dictated the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons to lesser races, and only God could therefore determine which nation prevailed.

This belief that God dictated the outcomes of wars between nations was also prevalent in Ancient Greece. The difference was in the connection between God and man. Ancient Greece had numerous gods, some of whom had previously been men. Eventually, Alexander declared himself a god. Although no American leader declared themselves as god, they certainly took it upon themselves as being God’s chosen on the earth. Nehemiah Dodge shared in the American sentiment that “by the grace of God, Washington, Jefferson, and other enlightened citizens, formed a constitution, and for certain reasons, declared that we were free and independent States.”⁵⁷ It was God who chose Americans as the homogenous group whose superiority was justified in their victories over lesser peoples. Likewise, “Alexander deified himself as a means to easier rule over a superstitious and heterogeneous population.”⁵⁸ Eventually, America’s definition of nation was able to take on Alexander’s strategy as it was faced with the need of “unifying [heterogeneous] worlds [...]

⁵⁵ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

⁵⁶ Onuf, 149.

⁵⁷ Dodge, *Discourse Delivered in Lebanon, Conn.*

⁵⁸ Durant, 549.

by the reverence which the common people would give [to America's] claims to divinity."⁵⁹ It remains to be said what factors contributed to America's move from homogenous goals to heterogeneous tolerance, which is now where we turn to.

It was an embrace of certain characteristics of empire that eventually led America's development as one of the world's most free and equal societies. Though the imperial powers of Europe were often looked upon as being in a degenerate state of wars, America found its own defining moments in war. As Onuf explained, "thousands of patriots had to lose their lives in a bloody war for independence; the new nation's self-defining moment, so that liberty might be secured."⁶⁰ After having essentially fought two wars for independence, William Appe asked, "Suppose an overwhelming army should march into the United States for the purposes of subduing it and enslaving the citizens; how quick would they fly to arms, gather in multitudes around the tree of liberty and contend for their rights with the last drop of their blood."⁶¹ It comes as no surprise that a nation so defined by wars was faced with a civil war to overcome its internal threat of slavery. Indeed, "Americans were a people who would rather die as free men and women than live under slavery and tyranny."⁶² Eventually, Americans broadened their fighting spirit to include the need to "wage war against tyranny in all its manifestations," regardless of where the battle in the world was to be fought.⁶³

In many respects, American imperialism was nurtured by American nationalism, incorporating its religious, cultural, and political beliefs of superiority. Religiously, "imperialism could be seen as growing directly out of Protestant nationalism."⁶⁴ This was

⁵⁹ Ibid., 549.

⁶⁰ Onuf, 8.

⁶¹ Appe, *A Son of the Forest and Other Writings*.

⁶² Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 106.

⁶³ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁴ McLeod, *Nation and Religion*, 58.

shown earlier with regards to the Protestant missionary movement, as “American national leaders supported this [late 19th Century] shift in strategy, and with missionaries, sought cultural rather than political empire in China.”⁶⁵ Protestant nationalism in America followed Protestant nationalism in Britain, where “there was a growing tendency to explain British achievements as much in terms of the intrinsic qualities of the Anglo-Saxon race as of the superiority of the Protestant religion.”⁶⁶ The Protestant homogeneity between the United States and Britain undoubtedly helped their friendly relations leading into the First and Second World Wars.

American involvement in the Second World War was the most significant factor in America’s move from homogenous inclusion to heterogeneous tolerance. The Civil War had freed the slaves, but America was far from tolerating differences. Black codes filled the law books throughout the South, and the “separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature”⁶⁷ dictated justified racial segregation throughout the nation. Just as “antebellum Americans defined themselves through comparison with Europe,”⁶⁸ by the middle of the 20th Century, Americans were forced to compare themselves with Nazi Germany. Joining their homogenous counterpart Great Britain, the Americans agreed that “the war against the Nazis was [...] a war for democracy and civilization.”⁶⁹ For the first time in American history, it was not merely imperial powers that the United States fought, but a new kind of enemy. Nazi Germany had espoused nationalism to the extreme under despotism. Hitler sought a homogenous society and pronounced the Aryan race as supreme. Images of genocide shocked Americans, despite the fact that the United States had seen millions exterminated in

⁶⁵ Hunter, 5.

⁶⁶ McLeod, 59.

⁶⁷ Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*.

⁶⁸ Repouisis, 459.

⁶⁹ McLeod, 63.

their own lands only a century earlier. This was not the first time that America took on the role “as the advance guard of civilization, leading the way against backward and barbaric nations and empires.”⁷⁰ Americans saw their involvement in the Spanish-Cuban-Filipino-American War as one having humanitarian motivations, but this war was the first of its kind, introducing America to “nation” and nationalism as the enemy.

America’s enemy in WWII was not Germany, but the very principles it had espoused for years as a nation. America found itself fighting nativism, homogeneity, and nature as it was defined by the Nazis. This enabled America to move beyond some of its characteristics of nation. This is in conformity with Lee Benson’s “sociological theory [which] assumes that in the realm of moral and cultural preferences ‘men behave according to patterns set by groups to which they do *not* belong, or by certain individuals whose patterns influence them in determining their own.’”⁷¹ In essence, America needed to face its own historical problems of nation in order to experience a civil rights movement that later secured a heterogeneous society with true equality.

What the Second World War did for the United States was give it an entirely new way of looking at imperialism. Imperialism was a way to secure peace in the world as the world’s hegemon, which required the nation to look within itself. As the Cold War developed, the United States hoped to extend its political, ideological, cultural, and economic influences they saw as superior to the rest of the world. What the U.S. had learned was that in order to be an empire, nations of all types needed to be accepted as equals. This included nations within and outside its borders. After 9/11, the United States is now confronted with another difficult task, that of balancing nation and empire. The

⁷⁰ Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 416.

⁷¹ Feldberg, 81.

motivations of terrorists along with motivations of American interests abroad, has shown the continued “desire of each side to assert the superiority of its own system of values.”⁷² It is now to history that we must look for guidance. America must learn from Alexander’s demise, whose “solitary exaltation and the growing multitude of his cares inclined him to seek forgetfulness in heavy draughts of wine.”⁷³ After a week and a half of drinking, Alexander died, leaving his empire separated and governed by various successors. The United States must not engage in “solitary exaltation,” but rather seek international aid in securing freedom and equality in this world. The international community can act as an “empire of liberty” far greater than America can on its own. In addition, America should never “seek forgetfulness,” but rather look to its own history repeatedly to learn from its mistakes and choose wisely between traits of nation and empire.

When looking at American history, certain questions should be asked with respect to empire and nation. Is it a bad thing for the American nation to take on traits of empire? Is homogeneity better than heterogeneity, assimilation better than cultural pluralism, or racism better than tolerance? Rather than defending America as being anti-imperial, or trying to denounce America as being an empire, perhaps scholars should study the positives and negatives of empire and nation together. The United States today can not be seen as being either a nation or an empire. It is both. It is the accumulation of national and imperial traits, seeking to form a more perfect union, incorporating different cultures, peoples, and ideas. Originally, the notion of nation included favoritism based on ethnicity, race, culture, religion, and politics, but by incorporating imperial traits, this notion of nation has evolved and begun to include diversity. It has been the greatest experiment of nation-empire

⁷² Ibid., 78.

⁷³ Durant, 550.

building this world has ever seen. Now, as the United States moves forward with an agenda to spread democracy and liberalism around the world, its nation-empire is faced with similar questions regarding the incorporation of different cultures, religions, and nationalities within its sphere of influence. The only hope is that America is able to balance the positives of nation and empire, avoid the negatives of both, and secure a world that is not only safe for democracy, but safe for global empire.

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