

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

**PURITAN ELECT, AMERICAN ELITE:  
PRIVILEGE REDEFINED**

AN ESSAY IN

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For years, tradition had dictated that an elite few were the rulers over the many. During the Constitutional Convention, Alexander Hamilton argued that “people are turbulent and changing” (Alexander Hamilton, MPAH 26). He sought a government wherein permanent authority would rest with “the rich and well born” (Hamilton, MPAH 26). This idea of an elect few who are the enlightened was inherited from America’s early Puritan ancestors. Individuals such as Governor John Winthrop promulgated it centuries earlier, teaching in his famous “City upon a Hill” discourse that God had separated the high from the low, or, in other words, the privileged from the unprivileged. Even the Constitutional Convention and ratification debates were conducted by an unchecked group of political elites. They formed the Constitution using the *elect or elite doctrine* to form an elite set of rules, or Bill of Rights, that needed solid protection, while leaving all other issues, or “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, [...] reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (Constitution, MPAH appendix xiv). By doing so, however, these political elites unintentionally opened the possibilities of changing the definition of privilege. “In order to form a more perfect Union,” (Constitution, MPAH appendix iv) state leaders needed to sacrifice certain degrees of sovereignty to be swallowed up by the whole. The Bill of Rights was written in order to prevent the federal government from legislating in areas left to the states, which indirectly labeled certain rights of privilege. These definitions of privilege did not immediately change a specific practice, but in theory, they allowed for future reinterpretation of privilege as seen in the Bill of Rights.

The first area where the definition of privilege was challenged was that of political participation. Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists ascended to power during the 1790’s, and the idea of the privileged few continued to dominate politics. When discussing public credit, Hamilton claimed, “those who are most commonly creditors of a nation, are, generally

speaking, enlightened men” (Hamilton, MPAH 33). Tradition had also seen the privilege of voting belonging to “a community of interests among all who had rights to protect,” (Joyce Appleby, ITR 28), or rather, among all who had property to protect. Property was deemed as a qualification to suffrage, and remained so in various states. Principles in the Constitution, however, enabled reinterpretation of the privileges of those within the community with rights to protect. The 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment defined it as “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (Constitution, MPAH appendix xiii). It was this principle that guided the Revolutionary War, and by including freedom of the press, the Constitution placed government action before the eyes of every individual, not merely property owners. At the turn of the Century, “the dropping of property qualifications turned suffrage from a gentleman’s privilege to a widely-shared activity of white men” (Appleby, ITR 29).

Although privilege in suffrage was redefined from being a right of property owners to being a universal liberty, the elite doctrine maintained its influence. Only select groups were given the right to vote. Women were not given this universal liberty when property was no longer a requirement. In fact, “single, propertied women who had voted in New Jersey lost that privilege in 1807” (Appleby, ITR 28). Blacks were also denied the right to vote in most states, and where they were given the right, property remained a qualification. Although certain groups remained outside of the definition of privilege with regards to suffrage, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century ushered in “a society dominated by ordinary people” (Gordon S. Wood, MPAH 7).

With political elites before the eyes of a growing number of privileged people, freedom of the press became increasingly important, and with growing publication came growing privilege. Those who were given the vote “now felt empowered to inspect their officeholders’ every move” (Appleby, ITR 36). In order to remain informed of every move,

“publicity required an expanded reading public” (Appleby, ITR 40). The elite doctrine held that those who were called to lead necessarily were the educated. This doctrine continued to maintain its strength, calling upon further nationalization of education. “In a republic,” it was believed, “instruction should be universally diffused,” simply because political power itself was theoretically diffused universally (Appleby, ITR 122-123). Again, the elite doctrine remained the guiding principle in regards to education, pushing forward attempts at educating based on increased political participation.

The privilege of education, however, was reinterpreted to include a wider population than that of suffrage. Literacy grew, not only for white males, but women as well. “Perhaps nothing challenged gendered prescriptions more than the issue of women’s education” (Appleby, ITR 152). The motivation for educating women, however, did not grow according to increased voter participation, but out of increased devotion to the specific role of motherhood. Women were to be the mothers of the future leaders of the nation, their sons in particular, and would therefore need to have greater education “to insure domestic tranquility” (Constitution, MPAH appendix iv). The privilege of education was extended to include women, but certain barriers remained, those of race, and those of geography. Racial stereotypes and prejudices continued through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Educating blacks would have seemed unnecessary in comparison to whites with ideas that blacks were “in reason much inferior [...] and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous” (Thomas Jefferson, MPAH 124). For these reasons, the elite doctrine maintained its justification “to make great allowances for the difference of condition [and] education” regarding race (Jefferson, MPAH 124). Geographically, “the literacy gap between women and men in most of the North was closed, though literacy for both sexes remained lower in the South” (Appleby, ITR 153).

The growing trend in education in the North assisted in the emergence of Northern Capitalism that further challenged the nature of privilege within the elite doctrine. On his trip through America, writer Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “when all the privileges of birth and fortune are abolished, when all professions are accessible to all, [...] they have opened the door to universal competition” (Alexis de Tocqueville, MPAH 194). This universal competition opened further doors of industrialization, urbanization, and education, separating the North from the South. “Northerners began to articulate a national economic program, reflecting the fact that the South specialized in a single, export staple in great demand and the North produced a diversity of processed and manufactured goods” (Appleby, ITR 246). Social and economic hierarchies diverged wherein “a mutual respect based upon literacy, morality, and appreciation of work took the edge off disparities in wealth, rendering the Southern gentlemen’s obsession with honor more and more archaic to those Northerners cultivating a shared rectitude” (Appleby, ITR 245-246). Socially, Northerners saw themselves as the educated elite, while economically, the North’s need for cotton kept the South as king of the economic hierarchical order.

The separation of North and South economically and socially eventually led to the greatest controversy over the definition of privilege. As political participation, education, and commercial opportunities expanded, “universal liberty meant freedom for all, or at least all white men” (Appleby, ITR 29). The 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution reiterated the rights of “life, liberty, or property” (Constitution, MPAH appendix xiv). These rights were interchangeably used within the debate of slavery. Southern debate focused on the right of property, rallying behind “the rights of slave owners honored as those of any other man of property” (Appleby, ITR 55). Northern debate focused on the right of the human being to his own life and liberty. “Some Americans – North and South, black and white – formed anti-

slavery societies in the 1780's. Because they took natural rights literally, they began working for the repeal of those state laws that had created property in human beings" (Appleby, ITR 45). The definitions of privilege were clearly seen differently between the two sides.

Privileges were increasingly defined to incorporate blacks in the North as states passed abolition laws. The South, however, held a distinction between master and slave, holding the elite doctrine wherein "the Children of Israel themselves were slave-holders, and [...] the meek and humble Saviour of the world in no instance meddled with the established institutions of mankind" (Thomas Roderick, MPAH 260).

As the United States expanded westward, the issue of slavery and defining privilege according to race dominated the debate. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 showed the sharp contrast between geographical definitions, as North and South voted distinctively different. Blacks, however, were not singled out as racial inferiors. Indians were also found in confrontation with American interests. In regards to the Indians, President Jackson specifically declared privilege to be in favor of the "States, claiming to be the only sovereigns within their territories" (Andrew Jackson, MPAH 374-375). The Indians were given the privilege or opportunity of choosing emigration out of the states, or "submitting to the laws of the States, and receiving, like other citizens, protection in their persons and property" (Jackson, MPAH 376). Throughout the years of the early republic, Americans used the elite doctrine in raising up a cultural hierarchy, wherein Americans were the elect few, and all others were given opportunity to join or depart. The Puritans believed themselves to be the elect chosen through hereditary lines, whereas the Americans believed themselves to be a distinct elect or elite group that, through time, could be reinterpreted to include additional people according to contemporaneous interpretation of the nature of privilege.

When the Puritans formed colonies in the New World, they believed themselves to be the elect of God, with power to form a city upon a hill for the entire world to look upon. When the Founding Fathers established a Constitution, they sought to remedy the effects of faction causing “distinct interests in society” (James Madison, MPAH 28) between elites and others. They understood, just as the Puritans did, that there were those who had greater interests than others, the privileged and the unprivileged. The Constitution included the Bill of Rights to protect these interests from unrighteous usurpation. These were interests of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as the Declaration of Independence demanded, yet the Constitution defined these interests using different words, of “life, liberty, [and] property.” Perhaps the pursuit of happiness was defined as property in the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment because of a biased interest at that time in the privilege of property over happiness. It may be that this bias was thinking predominantly about slavery. All biases aside, the early years of the Republic of the United States of America proved to show how certain unalienable rights always privileged the elite few, however the elite were contemporaneously defined as part of America’s elect.

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