

**THE IDEA OF AMERICA:
REFLECTIONS ON THE BIRTH OF THE UNITED STATES¹**

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*To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe
in something.²*

I. Introduction

In *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*, Gordon S. Wood looks beyond mere dates and events of the American Revolution and examines the ideology of the men who founded the United States of America. By illuminating the beliefs and motivations behind the Founders' actions, Wood argues that the Revolution is the source of the nation's values and identity, and therefore, "the most important event in American history, bar none."³ Full of anecdotes and careful analysis, *The Idea of America* bridges the 235-year gap between the Founders and this generation and persuasively illustrates an American identity forged by the American Revolution.

Part II of this review looks at this iconic author and his approach to the American Revolution. Next, Part III analyzes the essay structure and overall readability of the book. Parts IV and V examine two of Wood's essays, "The American Enlightenment" and "The American Revolutionary Tradition, or Why America Wants to Spread Democracy Around the World." These essays represent Wood's two central themes:—that history must be viewed through the eyes of contemporaries, and that the American Revolution was the most important event in American history because it provided America with its identity. Finally, Part VI will conclude this review.

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¹ GORDON S. WOOD, *THE IDEA OF AMERICA: REFLECTIONS ON THE BIRTH OF THE UNITED STATES* (2011).

² *Id.* at 322.

³ *Id.* at 2.

II. Gordon Wood and His Thoughts on America

Gordon Wood is “an American institution.”⁴ A former Air Force officer, he is the Alva O. Way University Professor and Professor of History at Brown University.⁵ He is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, which is “considered among the definitive works on the social, political and economic consequences of the Revolutionary War.”⁶ His literary contributions also include *Empire of Liberty*; *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*; and *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, all prize-winning books.⁷

The eleven essays in *The Idea of America* span Wood’s entire career and provide an open window into his philosophy as a historian. According to Wood, “[t]he responsibility of the historian . . . is not to decide who in the past was right or who was wrong but to explain why the different contestants thought and behaved as they did.”⁸ In the 1960s, he began by reining in post-World War II consensus-era historians like Louis Hartz. In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz maintains that Americans have always been free and equal.⁹ Wood believes such a characterization paints the American Revolution as “a peculiarly conservative affair, an endorsement and realization, not a transformation, of the society.”¹⁰ Wood turns Hartz’s interpretation on its head and argues the American Revolution was one of the most radical republican movements the world has ever experienced.¹¹

⁴ David Hackett Fisher, *The Revolution Re-envisioned*, N.Y. TIMES, Jul. 24, 2011, at BR12, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/books/review/the-idea-of-america-by-gordon-s-wood-book-review.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁵ Bonnie K. Goodman, *What They’re Famous For*, HISTORY NEWS NETWORK (Apr. 2, 2006, 3:44 PM), <http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/23524.html>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 21.

⁹ *Id.* at 8 (citing LOUIS HARTZ, *THE LIBERAL TRADITION IN AMERICA* (1955)).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 7–8.

¹¹ See *id.* at 198 (arguing that the heart of radicalism in the American Revolution was actual representation, ordinary men represented by ordinary men, because it constituted an extraordinary transformation in the relationship between society and government). Notably, some modern scholars view the American Revolution as less than revolutionary. For example, in *The American Revolution*, Jack Greene argues that “[i]n rejecting monarchy and the British connection and adopting republicanism, the leaders of these settler revolts did not have to preside over a wholesale, much less a violent, transformation of the radical political societies that colonial British Americans had constructed between 1607 and 1776.” Jack P. Green, *The American Revolution*, AM.

Seeking to be objective, Wood also began revising the Progressive view of history, which came into vogue in the early twentieth century and views the Revolution as a conflict of competing economic interests. According to Wood, Progressive historians like Claude Bowers, who wrote *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America*, show partiality to the likes of Thomas Jefferson over Alexander Hamilton due to their disdain for the robber barons and big corporations of the era.¹²

Wood claims that “too much of our history writing tends to take sides . . . crudely reading back into the past the issues of the present.”¹³ “The drama, indeed the tragedy, of history,” says Wood, “comes from our understanding of the tension that existed between the conscious wills and intentions of the participants in the past and the underlying conditions that constrained their actions and shaped their future.”¹⁴ In *The Idea of America*, Wood succeeds in his endeavor to understand these tensions and eloquently develops them for his readers.

III. The Structural Flow of *The Idea of America*

While revised for this publication, Wood originally wrote the individual essays to answer questions that emerged during his research.¹⁵ As such, *The Idea of America* does not flow easily from chapter to chapter. Nevertheless, the book’s subtitle, *Reflections on the Birth of the United States*, sets a clear theme for the collection. Whether enlightening the reader on the Founders’ idolization of the Roman Republic, the tendency of world political leaders to believe in conspiracies as a means of explaining behavior, or explaining tensions over monarchism in the 1790s, Wood successfully illustrates the interplay between external events and our Founders’ philosophies, and how this combination allowed the birth of a nation.

HIST. REV. (Feb. 2000), <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/105.1/ah000093.html#REF12>.

¹² WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 19 (citing CLAUDE G. BOWERS, *JEFFERSON AND HAMILTON: THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 140 (1925)).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 22.

¹⁵ Jeff Glor, “*The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*,” CBSNEWS.COM (May 16, 2011, 2:52 PM), http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504367_162-20063242-504367.html.

In an effort to increase the book's cohesiveness, an "Afterword" follows each essay to explain context and tie in previous essays. Wood also compensates for not being able to delve deeper into the subject matter by graciously recommending additional readings from various historians. By including these recommendations, Wood makes *The Idea of America* a great primer and resource for further study.

Despite the essay format, most of *The Idea of America* reads as smoothly as David McCullough's *1776*¹⁶ or Walter Isaacson's *Benjamin Franklin*.¹⁷ Wood creates vivid imagery and successfully expounds difficult concepts, allowing the reader to comprehend the complex environment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unfortunately, most of his first essay, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," is written for academics. Wood fills thirty pages comparing and discussing different approaches historians have taken when writing on the American Revolution and discussing the concept of ideas in terms the general reader will have to read multiple times to comprehend. His overview of historical perspectives and his historical philosophy in the Introduction is sufficient. By leading off with "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution" in chapter one, Wood unnecessarily risks his readers' loyalty. Whether one endures (or skips) Wood's first essay, the remainder of the book is splendidly written and an informative read.

IV. A Closer Look at "The American Enlightenment"

In his essay, "The American Enlightenment," Wood presents his philosophy that historians can explain the founding fathers' behavior by first understanding how they perceived themselves. Specifically, he shows that the Revolutionaries believed they were building an enlightened empire of liberty and were the most enlightened people on earth.¹⁸ He provides a plethora of examples of the Founders pointing to their mass education programs, literacy levels, criminal justice reform, creation of civic and humanitarian societies, and widespread use of American English¹⁹ as evidence of their enlightenment. According to Wood, it is critical to recognize the concept of the American

¹⁶ DAVID MCCULLOUGH, *1776* (2005).

¹⁷ WALTER ISAACSON, *BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* (2003).

¹⁸ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 276.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 280–85.

Enlightenment because “America became the first nation in the world to base its nationhood solely on Enlightenment values.”²⁰

Notably, scholars do not universally accept the reality of the American Enlightenment. In his essay, “Revolution Without Dogma,” Daniel J. Boorstin argues that historians overlook the significance of our national birth certificate as a Declaration of Independence vice a French Revolutionary-style Declaration of the Rights of Man.²¹ Boorstin relegates the American Revolution to a legal dispute, finding that when “[c]ompared even with other colonial rebellions, the American Revolution is notably lacking in cultural self-consciousness and in any passion for national unity.”²²

Wood disagrees with Boorstin’s approach. According to Wood, it is irrelevant whether the Revolutionaries attained enlightenment to the level of David Hume and Adam Smith.²³ He argues it is more important to realize that the Founders saw themselves as enlightened and acted accordingly.²⁴ It is their “commitment to enlightenment” that brought about large-scale social change.²⁵

“The American Enlightenment” is an intriguing essay that successfully shows how enlightenment ideals gave birth to the nation. Unfortunately, being constrained by the essay format of the book, Wood only provides a cursory examination of the topic. Further, while he thoroughly explains the Revolutionaries’ commitment to enlightenment

²⁰ *Id.* at 274–75.

²¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *Revolution Without Dogma*, <http://clio.missouristate.edu/FTMiller/Revolution/Essays/db.htm> (last visited Sept. 15, 2011). Daniel J. Boorstin was a prize-winning author, who served as Librarian of Congress from 1975 to 1987. His book, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (1973), received the 1973 Pulitzer Prize in history. The Library of Congress, *Daniel J. Boorstin, 1914–1924* (Mar. 2, 2004), <http://www.loc.gov/homepage/boorstin.html>.

²² Boorstin, *supra* note 21.

²³ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 289; David Hume (1711–1776) was an influential Scottish philosopher and is recognized as “a precursor of contemporary cognitive science, as well as one of the most thoroughgoing exponents of philosophical naturalism.” William Morris, *David Hume’s Life and Works*, HUME SOC’Y (December 29, 2010) <http://www.humesociety.org/about/HumeBiography.asp>. Like Hume, Adam Smith (1723–1790) was also a Scottish philosopher and is considered the father of modern political economics. *The Consise Encyclopedia of Economics: Adam Smith*, LIBR. OF ECON. & LIBERTY, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/bios/Smith.html> (last visited July 25, 2012).

²⁴ *Id.* at 288.

²⁵ *Id.*

ideals, he summarily attaches these ideals to modern Americans without illustration. This thin connection makes it difficult for the reader to associate “The American Enlightenment” with Wood’s overall theme that the Revolution is the source of the nation’s values and identity.

V. A Closer Look at “The American Revolutionary Tradition, or Why America Wants to Spread Democracy Around the World”

In his concluding essay, Wood showcases his belief that the American Revolution marked a fundamental shift in values and ideas and made Americans an ideological people.²⁶ “To be an American,” Wood argues, “is not to be someone, but to believe in something.”²⁷ Citing to Lincoln, Wood illustrates just how deeply the American Revolution affected American consciousness. “We are a grand experiment,” Wood states, paraphrasing Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, “and it’s worth fighting for that because the world counts on us . . . we are the last best hope and if we fail, democracy fails everywhere.”²⁸

Thankfully, the Union did not fail. Wood shows that Americans continued to believe that they were the standard for democracy in the world and cites several examples to effectively support this thesis.²⁹ One of the most audacious examples is a statement from President Grant to the French in response to the establishment of the Third French Republic in 1870. Completely ignoring French revolutionary tradition, Grant wrote, “[w]e cannot be indifferent to the spread of American political ideas in a great and civilized country like France.”³⁰

Wood describes American support and enthusiasm for revolutions in the nineteenth century so the reader can appreciate the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. According to Wood, when the Bolsheviks came to power the United States refused to extend diplomatic recognition for sixteen years, which was contrary to its historical practice of immediately extending relations to revolutionary governments.³¹ Wood maintains this paradigm shift can only be understood in terms of

²⁶ *Id.* at 320–21.

²⁷ *Id.* at 321.

²⁸ *Book TV: The Idea of America* (CSPAN2 television broadcast May 11, 2011), available at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/300328-1>; WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 326.

²⁹ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 326.

³⁰ *Id.* at 330.

³¹ *Id.* at 331.

America seeing its core beliefs in liberty and democracy in fundamental opposition to the ideology of the Bolshevik revolution.³² In other words, the Bolshevik Revolution was not the “*genus Americanus*” form of revolution.³³

Typically, scholars argue that the Cold War began sometime immediately before, during, or immediately after World War II. For example, in his book *The Cold War is Over*, William Hyland argues the Cold War began in 1939.³⁴ Similarly, John Gaddis, who authored *The Long Peace*, claims the Cold War began immediately following World War II.³⁵ Wood, on the other hand, convincingly argues that the Cold War began in 1917.³⁶ This is material to Wood’s thesis because it explains America’s later support for non-communist authoritative governments in apparent contradiction to America’s revolutionary tradition.³⁷ Wood cautions against characterizing the Cold War as a clash of markets or American abhorrence to revolution; rather, “our Cold War actions . . . represented our confused and sometimes desperate efforts to maintain our universalist revolutionary aspirations in the world.”³⁸

Wood’s analysis of America’s revolutionary tradition is brilliant. Not only does he make the case for the existence of such a tradition, he shows how the traditional paradigm shifted with the Bolshevik Revolution. The analysis offers an original perspective on American foreign policy in the twentieth century. A minor criticism flows from the essay’s title. It is not clear why the “or Why American Wants to Spread Democracy Around the World” section of the title is needed. Further, Wood does not make that case in the essay. “The American Revolutionary Tradition” by itself seems more related to the subject matter.

This concluding essay to *The Idea of America* is particularly relevant in light of recent revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. American

³² *Id.* at 330–33.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ WILLIAM G. HYLAND, *THE COLD WAR IS OVER* 11 (1990) (arguing that the Cold War began when Russia and Germany signed a nonaggression treaty only three weeks before the start of World War II).

³⁵ JOHN L. GADDIS, *THE LONG PEACE* 21 (1987).

³⁶ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 331.

³⁷ *Id.* at 330–33.

³⁸ *Id.* at 333.

attitudes have been mixed, especially in Libya.³⁹ Wood observes that ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan have “drained away most of our idealism about changing the world,” and that Americans “seem to be in a quandary about what to do, about what our role in the world ought to be.”⁴⁰ It is hard to disagree with Wood on this point. For this reason, the nation’s senior political and military leaders should read *The Idea of America* and put it on their subordinates’ reading lists. A better understanding of the nation’s origins and identity can only help remedy our current identity crisis. As Wood states, “history is to a society what memory is to a person . . . if you don’t know where you come from it’s going to be difficult to know where to go.”⁴¹

VI. Conclusion

Gordon Wood’s work is a must have on the shelf of any student of the American Revolution, and *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* is no exception. Full of original thought and keen illustrations, Wood successfully argues his central thesis that the American Revolution is the most important event in our nation’s history. *The Idea of America* is an enjoyable and informative read.

³⁹ See David Frum, *Why U.S. Must Intervene in Libya*, CNN.COM (Mar. 7, 2011), http://articles.cnn.com/2011-03-07/opinion/frum.libya.choice_1_moammar-gadhafi-libya-friend?_s=PM:OPINION (arguing that the United States must intervene in Libya to oust Moammar Gadhafi); *but see* Edward N. Luttwak, *Libya: It’s Not Our Fight*, L.A. TIMES (Mar. 21, 2011), <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/mar/21/opinion/la-oe-luttwak-libya-20110321-31> (arguing that the United States should not intervene in Libya because it will be depicted as aggressive, predatory and anti-Muslim).

⁴⁰ WOOD, *supra* note 1, at 334.

⁴¹ *Book TV: The Idea of America* (CSPAN2 television broadcast May 11, 2011), available at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/300328-1>.