

**American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Anglo-Saxon Ethnogenesis in the  
'Universal' Nation, 1776-1850<sup>1</sup>**

**ERIC KAUFMANN**

*European Institute, The London School of Economics and Political Science,  
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK*

**ABSTRACT**

*The history of nativism in the United States has received considerable scholarly attention, yet the few systematic attempts to explain it have focused predominantly on psychological or economic causes. This paper asserts that such explanations fail to address the crucial cultural dimension of the nativism issue, which must be analyzed through the prism of historical sociology. Specifically, this paper argues that American nativism cannot be understood without reference to an 'American' national ethnic group whose myth-symbol complex had developed prior to the large-scale immigration of the mid-nineteenth century. Without understanding this social construction, it is difficult to explain subsequent attempts to defend it. This paper, therefore, does not seek to retrace the history of American nativism. Instead, it focuses on the period prior to 1850, when American nativism was in its infancy. It examines the development of an Anglo-American ethnicity during 1776-1850 and attempts to delineate its structure. This 'American' complex of myths and symbols, with its attendant set of lifestyle images and narratives, is shown to conform to more general models recently presented by theorists of ethnicity and nationalism. Finally, it is argued that American nativism may have exhibited a very different pattern if an 'American' national ethnicity had not taken root.*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a paper delivered at the British Association of American Studies Annual Conference held at the University of Birmingham, 4-7 April, 1997.

The literature on American nativism has tended to ascribe American nativist agitation, which began in earnest just prior to 1850, to short-run economic or psychological causes.<sup>2</sup> The origins of this approach can be traced to the early progressive "race" theorists of the 1920's and 30's, with their belief that "Racial hatreds, national hatreds, group hatreds have always rooted deeply in man's fight against man for the means of subsistence and display...."<sup>3</sup> Yet, such a stance clearly fails to explain why outbreaks of nativism (the 1920's, for example) have tended not to correlate with poor economic times (such as the early 1930's). An approach that stresses the impact of ad hoc national "moods" or economic hardship on nativism likewise fails to appreciate the importance of the cultural-historical substratum which conditions the nature of an ethnic group's response to other groups.

Why did Anglo-Protestant Americans assume the mantle of nativism? This seems like a straightforward question, but it is not. First of all, as some have suggested, the term "nativism" is a misnomer, and has been as much a didactic tool as a hermeneutic device.<sup>4</sup> In fact, native residence served merely as a shorthand for membership in the dominant *national ethnic group*. "Sometimes, nativists found the native-born 'foreign' and immigrants suitably American," remarks Dale Knobel.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Anglo-Protestant Americans barely blinked at British (and Anglo-Canadian) Protestant immigration, yet native-born Catholics were hardly immune from nativism. "Ethno-nationalism" or "dominant ethnicity" is therefore a more accurate description for what passes for nativism. Furthermore, any explanation of dominant-group ethno-nationalism demands a

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Pozzetta 1991, Curran 1975, Solomon 1956 or Higham 1955.

<sup>3</sup> Baker, Newton Diehl, Carlton J.H. Hayes, Roger Williams Straus (eds.), *The American Way: A Study of Human Relations Among Protestants, Catholics and Jews* (Chicago & New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1936), 94, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> This opinion has been expressed by Linda Bosniak in her essay, " 'Nativism' the Concept: Some Reflections," in Juan F. Perea (ed.), *Immigrants Out!: The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States* (New York, N.Y. & London: New York University Press, 1997), 279-99.

<sup>5</sup> Dale T. Knobel, *"America for Americans": The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne, 1996), xiii.

mapping of the dominant ethnic group which arose within the supposedly exceptional, universalist, American nation-state.

## **Theorizing American National Ethnicity**

### National Ethnicity

Ethnic groups will be defined here as communities which share a belief in common ancestry and homeland and which meet a threshold requirement of population and territory (real or imagined) that distinguishes them from similar phenomena like tribes and clans.<sup>6</sup> Nations, on the other hand, will be defined as modern communities of mass culture whose members share a politico-territorial identity and are bound together by shared legal obligations, an official culture and a common history.<sup>7</sup>

The nations of the world, almost without exception, were formed from ethnic cores, whose pre-modern myth-symbol complex furnished the material for the construction of the modern nation's boundary symbols and civil religion. This does not entail the continuation of an *ethnie*-nation unity. It merely specifies that the modern nation derived its name, official language, national symbolism, conception of territorial boundaries and its history from the ethnic group or groups that inhabited the land in pre-modern times.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of the United States, the national ethnic group was Anglo-American Protestant ("American"). This was the first European group to "imagine" the territory<sup>9</sup> of

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<sup>6</sup> E.K. Francis, *Interethnic Relations*, (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 6.

<sup>7</sup> A.D. Smith, *National Identity*, (London: Penguin, 1991), 69.

<sup>8</sup> Smith 1991, 39.

<sup>9</sup> The sense of national territory embraced by the Anglo-Americans was, in the first instance, regional, and was also elastic - tending to advance with the frontier. Even so, there was a generalized appreciation of the grandeur and fertility of the American landscape, which, during the nineteenth century, was believed to be a source of national invigoration and a hedge against European decadence. See Merle Eugene Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 37-38. The Daniel

the United States as its homeland and trace its genealogy back to New World colonists who rebelled against their mother country. In its mind, the American nation-state, its land, its history, its mission and its Anglo-American people were woven into one great tapestry of the imagination. This social construction considered the United States to be founded by the "Americans", who thereby had title to the land and the mandate to mould the nation (and any immigrants who might enter it) in their own Anglo-Saxon, Protestant self-image.

## **Colonial Antecedents**

### Ethno-Religious Homogeneity

The origins of Anglo-American ethnicity may be traced to the settlement patterns that characterized the United States during the colonial period. David Hackett Fischer writes that the United States began as a collection of cultural regions based around core English settler groups. New England was dominated by the Puritans, the Middle Atlantic by the Quakers, the Coastal South by southern English Cavaliers and the Appalachian hinterland by Anglo-Scottish Presbyterians.<sup>10</sup>

Most of this "colonial stock" had arrived in the seventeenth century from Britain.

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Boone/Pathfinder myth, which dated from the 1820's, though largely narrated by New England writers, concerned the frontier from Tennessee to Pennsylvania, and can arguably be treated as a national image, "the embodiment of an America as rooted as the soil, as primordial as the Germany that gave birth to Siegfried." See Miller, Perry, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 10.

<sup>10</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 787. This is, of course, a contentious thesis. Fischer's critics tend to accuse him of over-generalization: they grant that he has identified important cultural forces, but insist that the cultural regions (both British and American) which he denotes are more complex than he imagines. Local variation within cultural regions, and non-core ethnic/regional fragments are fingered as dimensions of this complexity. Critics also claim that several groups other than the English (notably the Fenno-Scandinavians and native Indians in the backcountry and the blacks in the lowland south) have had a major impact on American folkways. See reviews by Wilbur Zelinsky, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (September 1991), 526-31; Kenneth Morgan, *Social History*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (October 1991), 373-75; Jack Greene, *Journal of Social History*, Vol.24, No. 4 (Summer 1991), 909-11; Colin Brooks, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.25, No.2 (August 1991), 275-78.

Hence it is not surprising that the American free population on the eve of revolution was over 60 per cent English, nearly 80 per cent British and 98 per cent Protestant. Immigration usually made up less than 15-20 per cent of the colonies' white population growth.<sup>11</sup>

## Colonial Integration

Colonial America, while relatively homogenous ethnically, did embrace great sectarian diversity.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite this religious heterogeneity, one unifying characteristic of American Protestantism was its non-conformity: Quakers, Mennonites, Congregationalists, Huguenots and Baptists were conspicuous in this regard. Even the "established" Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches were far less hierarchically organized in the United States than in Britain.<sup>13</sup>

There is no question that antagonism between various Protestant sects abounded in the colonial United States, particularly in seventeenth-century New England, where Congregationalism was an established, intolerant Church.<sup>14</sup> However, this did not preclude the existence of a more generalized Protestant identity, which strengthened greatly after independence, something we shall later discuss in greater detail. One early manifestation of this identity was popular anti-Catholicism.

By the early eighteenth century, a tradition of anti-Catholicism had become well-established in Britain, forged through protracted warfare with France and fanned by a

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<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Easterlin, "Economic and Social Characteristics of the Immigrants" in Richard A. Easterlin (et al), *Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), 56.

<sup>12</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1973), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Brookhiser, *The Way of the WASP* (New York: Free Press 1991), 26; Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 31.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the Congregational Church was disestablished in Connecticut in 1708 as a result of the colony's toleration acts. This did not occur in Massachusetts until 1733. See Terry Alan Baney, *Yankees and the City: struggling over urban representation in Connecticut, 1880 to World War I* (Unpublished PhD. dissertation, the University of Connecticut, 1989), 5.

stream of popular pamphlet literature.<sup>15</sup> This feeling was reflected in colonial institutions: in the American colonies prior to 1700, only Rhode Island gave Catholics full civil and religious liberty. After the Revolution, most states continued to carry anti-Catholic statutes on their books.<sup>16</sup> The French and Indian War of 1754-63 helped to ignite anti-Catholic sensibilities. The treatment of the Acadian expelees illustrates the degree to which an exclusive Anglo-Protestant consciousness operated in the period just prior to independence:

Lawrence's original intention was to scatter the [Acadian] exiles throughout the British North American colonies...But...fear, hatred, and acute distrust for all things French dominated in the hearts and minds of the Atlantic seaboard settlers, such that at no time were the Acadian exiles given more than grudging acceptance....<sup>17</sup>

The Acadians' language and religion made them pariahs in the American colonies, where they were, nearly irrespective of location, forced into indentured servitude and reduced to extreme poverty. Roughly a third died of disease and exposure, prompting the rest to migrate, after a sojourn in France, to Catholic, French-speaking Louisiana during 1765-85.

The spread of several important ideas, which had their origin in New England, also added to the fibre of Anglo-American ethnicity. New England's Puritan sense of election and mission, and its description of America as a New Canaan, or promised land, slowly came to infect the entire nation.<sup>18</sup> Its vision also came to influence the American outlook through a nation-wide religious revival known as the Great Awakening (1725-

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<sup>15</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 40-42.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, NY: Macmillan 1938), 9, 21.

<sup>17</sup> James H. Dormon, *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to an Ethnohistory* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983), 16-17.

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 103-6, 110-11.

50). John Armstrong has noted that religion provided one of the few vehicles of mass communication in the pre-modern era and it was religion that was largely responsible for American intercolonial integration in the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Led by Jonathan Edwards, amongst others, the Great Awakening spread like wildfire across the colonies from New England to Georgia and is described by some as the first instance of American self-consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Boston emerged as a colonial centre of liberal thought.<sup>21</sup> This development coincided with a notable increase in intercolonial communication and a growing concern with American events and symbols, especially after 1760.<sup>22</sup> New York's emergence as a centre of commercial publishing similarly advanced the national reach of New England writers.<sup>23</sup> As Tocqueville commented in the 1830's: "The principles of New England spread at first to the neighboring states; they then passed successively to the more distant ones; and at length they imbued the whole Confederation. They now extend their influence over the whole American world."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 201-3.

<sup>20</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation Into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988), 226.

<sup>21</sup> Solomon, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Merritt has documented this trend with a content analysis of major journals in both the North and the South from 1735. See Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1966), 66-74.

<sup>23</sup> Early nineteenth-century men of letters like William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe resided in New York, and exchanged ideas via literary journals like *Knickerbocker Magazine* and the *Democratic Review* in the 1820's and 1830's. See Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1987), 141.

<sup>24</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Introduction by Alan Ryan. (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1994. First published 1835.), 33. Notwithstanding Tocqueville's monocausal explanation, New England's influence was mediated by that of other regions. The South, especially the lowland South, was a particularly important source of divergence, with its relatively hierarchical division of white labour, its dearth of large urban areas and its plantation slavery system. Differences between North and South must be placed in context, however - the South participated in many of the social changes that gripped the north between 1800 and 1850. Indeed, the narration of southern distinctiveness, to say nothing of nationalism, was a feature of the *late* antebellum period. Common adherence to the Yeoman ideal and western expansion (Jefferson and Jackson were exemplars) and a keen interest in the nature of American national identity were part of the shared cultural orientation of both North and South, though tension between the Yeoman and Cavalier motifs emerged in Southern discourse by the 1830's. See William R. Taylor,

## The Consequences of Revolution

Prior to the American Revolution, the United States participated in a transatlantic, mercantile society in which ideas, personnel and goods passed freely between the North American colonies, Britain and other parts of Empire like the Caribbean. The American elite, whether urban or rural, northern or southern, was an important participant in this transatlantic dialogue. This American imperial class maintained its connections with the transatlantic debate after the Revolution, in the process helping to shape an American *national* consciousness distinct from Britain.<sup>25</sup>

The Revolution was by no means a clear-cut nationalist movement, but began as a civil war that split Whig and Tory in Britain, the United States and in what was to become Canada.<sup>26</sup> In fact, British Whig intellectuals like Edmund Burke and Charles James Fox encouraged the American Revolutionaries, while members of the colonial Whig elite like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington became convinced of the need for independence no sooner than a year or two before the Revolution.<sup>27</sup> In fact, in much of the Middle Atlantic and in parts of the South, Tories were a majority, but eventually, the Whig vision prevailed and the Revolution began to be woven into a new American ethno-history, in which a nation of small-farming Davids had vanquished the Imperial Goliath.

Many scholars would concur with the view that an American sense of community arose, complete with its heroic mythology, but most would label this a *civic* national

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*Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller 1961), 16, 316-17.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Burchell discusses the connections between post-Revolutionary English and American upper-class culture in "The Role of the Upper Class in the Formation of American Culture, 1780-1840," in R.A. Burchell (ed), *The End of Anglo-America: Historical Essays in the Study of Cultural Divergence* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press 1991), 184-212. For more on the same theme, see Brooks, 278.

<sup>26</sup> For more on Canada's American Tory legacy, see Kaufmann, Eric, 'Condemned to Rootlessness: The Loyalist Origins of Canada's Identity Crisis,' *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1997).

<sup>27</sup> Richard M. Burkey, *Ethnic and Racial Groups: The Dynamics of Dominance* (Menlo Park: Cummings, 1978), 158, and W. Stewart Wallace, *United Empire Loyalists: the Beginnings of British Canada* (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook and Co., 1921), 13.



process rather than an ethnic one. Yet from the outset, the words and actions of Americans indicate that a growing sense of American ethnicity underpinned the civic rhetoric. This ethnicity grew out of a sense of isolation that Oscar Handlin calls "the horror" of rootlessness brought on by the colonists' incessant migration and the ontological meaninglessness of living in alien surroundings.<sup>28</sup>

One scholar who has studied the nature of this ethnic response is Rogers M. Smith, who has dubbed it "Ascriptive Americanism." The French and Indian wars of the 1750's and early 1760's had driven home the differences between the English-speaking, Protestant American colonists and their nonwhite, Catholic/pagan and French/Indian-speaking "other." Furthermore, the Proclamation of 1763 had stymied what the Anglo-Protestant colonists deemed to be their providential mission to settle the Catholic-occupied trans-Allegheny west. Accordingly, Smith holds that many Americans were unaware of liberal rights theories, and were only persuaded to revolt by the religious and cultural arguments that designated them a chosen, white, Protestant people.<sup>29</sup>

Hence for Alexander Hamilton, the Quebec Act of 1774, which retained the laws and customs of the French in Canada (despite the presence of thousands of British Protestant residents), reflected the fact that British monarchists and French Catholics were united in their support for hierarchy and tyranny against the republican Americans:

This act [Quebec Act] makes effectual provision not only for the protection, but for the permanent support of Popery...What can speak in plainer language, the corruption of the British Parliament, than its act; which...makes such ample provision for the popish religion, and leaves the protestant, in such disadvantageous situation that he is like to have no other subjects in this part of his domain [Canada], than Roman catholics....<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Oscar Handlin, *Race and nationality in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957), 130.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers Smith, "American Conceptions of Citizenship and National Service", in Amitai Etzioni (ed), *New Communitarian Thinking* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 237-39.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, Alexander, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, Vol. I*, edited by Harold C. Syrett (New York & London: Columbia University Press, [1775] 1961), 170, 175.

As several theorists have remarked, a sense of election is a feature common to many ethnic groups, especially Protestant ones, and it appears that the Americans were no exception.<sup>31</sup> In more general terms, these American developments may be viewed as part of a more universal phenomenon in which individuals seek to achieve a measure of belonging and terrestrial immortality through identification with a group rooted in land and kinship.<sup>32</sup> The result is ethnogenesis.

It is also significant that a set of symbolic "border guards" were being used to distinguish the Americans from surrounding populations. The Americans were considered to be *White*, in contrast to the Natives and black slaves, they were *Protestant* and *English* (in speech and surname), unlike the Catholic French to the north and west and the Spanish to the south, and they were *Liberal* democrats, in contrast to the British, both at home and in the colonies to the north.

### **The Protestant "Establishment"**

In the decades following independence, America's Protestant<sup>33</sup> unity - which the treatment of the Acadians underscored - soon began to crystallize around a Protestant "voluntary establishment" centred on the major theological seminaries.<sup>34</sup> The non-sectarian nature of the American constitution and the disestablishment of the Congregational Church in New England were the first steps along the road to Protestant

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<sup>31</sup> See Armstrong, 81-90 for discussion of the *antemurale/ghazi* concept. Armstrong's analysis of the crusade-jihad spiral of holy war on pages 59-61 is also instructive as is Connor Cruise O'Brien's, in *God:Land: reflections on religion and nationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 23-42.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 175.

<sup>33</sup> Not all American Protestants were British, of course. The Protestant unity to which I refer was most explicit among the mainline British denominations, but can be seen to encompass larger numbers through both the Protestant inflection of the secular culture and the pan-Protestant assimilation process - which is treated later in this article.

<sup>34</sup> Hutchison, William R. (ed.), *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4, 303.

unity.<sup>35</sup> Two other important forces promoting Protestant unity were public schooling and voluntary associations. Public schools, like churches, reached only a fraction of the dispersed American population in the eighteenth century. Yet, by the early nineteenth century, inter-denominational education was flourishing: "In the cities of the East as well as in the pioneer western states," remarks Timothy Smith, "an adequate educational system required the cooperative efforts of men of many religious persuasions. These efforts nurtured the growth of an interdenominational spirit, a Protestant consensus, which became a principal element in the nation's consciousness of its identity."<sup>36</sup>

Public funding for Catholic schooling was not an issue until the 1840's, in New York City and Philadelphia, when it was mooted by Anglo-Protestant antipathy.<sup>37</sup> Hence it is instructive to consider the Protestant influence in public school texts - which *all* participating American children read - in the early nineteenth century. In addition to required readings from the King James Bible, American public schools did not mince words about the Protestant nature of the nation. In early nineteenth century history texts, "the true religion is patently limited to Protestantism. Catholicism is depicted not only as a false religion, but as a positive danger to the state; it subverts good government, sound morals, and education." Even more revealing of Anglo-Protestant attachment is the surprising revelation that history texts, *beginning in the 1790's*, portrayed Britain in largely benign terms. From the 1820's onward, the notion of Americans as genealogical descendants of Englishmen also gained in currency.<sup>38</sup>

Inter-denominational Protestant nationalism was likewise bolstered by the rapid growth of voluntary associations, which were sprouting at the rate of 70 per year by 1820. Anti-Catholic fraternal societies were represented among the new civic

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<sup>35</sup> Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York, 1963), 55-71.

<sup>36</sup> Timothy Smith, "Protestant Schooling and American Nationality, 1800-1850," *The Journal of American History*, March, 1967, 680-83, 694-95.

<sup>37</sup> Knobel, 57-58.

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 47-53, 105, 121-23.

associations of the 1820's, providing the organizational base from which nativist agitation would later spring.<sup>39</sup> The ecumenical movement within mainstream Protestantism also drew on anti-Catholic antipathy, a platform evident within the Disciples of Christ, an ecumenist sect formed in 1819, and in the Society for the Promotion of Christian Union (SPCU), founded in 1839. Following closely from the precedent set by the SPCU, The Evangelical Alliance for the United States (1847), precursor to the Federal Council of Churches (1908),<sup>40</sup> brought together leading Protestant clergy from the nation's major denominations. Like its secular counterparts, this voluntary organization drank heavily from the springs of anti-Catholicism.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Anglo-Saxon Myth**

American ethnogenesis was closely tied to the American nation-state's Whig origins and the work of Whig historians helped to define the genealogy of the new Republic. The idea that the pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxons had known a primitive form of freedom that had its roots in the German forests had emerged in England by the sixteenth century. Some of the more radical variants of the theory held that the Anglo-Saxons carried a desire for freedom in their veins, and had a destiny to realize this impulse. These ideas found a very fertile audience across the Atlantic. Eighteenth century "Real Whig" historians like James Burgh and Catharine Macaulay stand out in this regard.<sup>42</sup> These

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<sup>39</sup> Knobel, 32-34.

<sup>40</sup> The FCC was conceived with the anti-Catholic plank still in its platform. However, liberal movements within ecumenical Protestantism led to the removal of anti-Catholicism from the Council's list of concerns by 1910. (Cavert 1968: 54-56)

<sup>41</sup> Philip D. Jordan, *The Evangelical Alliance for the United States of America, 1847-1900: Ecumenism, Identity, and the Religion of the Republic* (New York, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 34, 42; Roof & McKinney, 85-87; Robert A. Schneider, "Voice of Many Waters: Church Federation in the Twentieth Century," in Hutchison, William R. (ed.). *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 99-100.

<sup>42</sup> H. Trevor Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1965), 30, 183-84, 194-98 is a particularly good source for American Anglo-Saxonism. See also Allen J. Frantzen & John D. Niles (eds), *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 1997) or

interpreters of English history directly influenced the American independence movement.

In Reginald Horsman's words,

The various ingredients in the myth of Anglo-Saxon England, clearly delineated in a host of seventeenth and eighteenth-century works, now appear again in American protests: Josiah Quincy Jr., wrote of the popular nature of the Anglo-Saxon militia; Sam Adams stressed the old English freedoms defended in the Magna Carta; Benjamin Franklin stressed the freedom that the Anglo-Saxons enjoyed in emigrating to England; Charles Carroll depicted Saxon liberties torn away by William the Conqueror; Richard Bland argued that the English Constitution and Parliament stemmed from the Anglo-Saxon period....George Washington admired the pro-Saxon history of Catharine Macaulay and she visited him at Mount Vernon after the Revolution.<sup>43</sup>

Were these prominent Americans merely expressing an abstract ideological exuberance which happened to have an English historical referent? Liah Greenfeld appears to take this stance, arguing that Americans equated Englishness with Liberalism and no more.<sup>44</sup> Yet such an argument cannot explain the infatuation with the Anglo-Saxons displayed by the statesmen of the new Republic. Explicit in this regard was U.S. president and founding father Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed to John Adams in 1776 that the Americans were "the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; and on the other side, Hengist and Horsa, the *Saxon chiefs from whom we claim the honour of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed.*" (emphasis added)<sup>45</sup>

Notice that Jefferson has distinguished between the Americans' ideological and genealogical inheritance, both of which he saw as deriving from the Anglo-Saxons. The idea that the Anglo-Saxon English had self-selected themselves through immigration to

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Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1959).

<sup>43</sup> Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 409.

<sup>45</sup> Horsman, 22.

escape the British (Norman) yoke and bring the torch of freedom to America was a quintessential myth of ethnogenesis.<sup>46</sup> Accompanying purified religion and purified liberty therefore, was a purified American genealogy. In this manner, the Americans, like the Québécois, Afrikaners and Anatolian Turks, were performing a feat of particularistic fission from the mother stock which would form the basis for an entirely new ethnic group.

### **The Institutionalization of Anglo-Saxon Ethnicity**

The Anglo-Saxon myth, meanwhile, was grafted onto American experience. For instance, the New England town meeting was likened to the Anglo-Saxon tribal council while the statements of Tacitus regarding the free, egalitarian qualities of the Anglo-Saxons he encountered were given an American interpretation.<sup>47</sup> The most widely-read American historians of the late nineteenth century: George Bancroft, William Prescott, John Motley and Francis Parkman, helped popularize the myth as did academics in University English literature departments.<sup>48</sup>

The nineteenth and early twentieth century historiography of American presidents like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson provides yet further evidence that the Anglo-

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Frank Gossett, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon Superiority in American Thought, 1865-1915*, (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1953), 82; Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth Century America", *American Historical Review*, vol. 89, no. 4, 1984, 909-928. Gossett and Ross discuss the nature of the American adaptation of the Teutonic-Whig germ theory which connected the ancient Anglo-Saxons to the Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution and other events. In the American interpretation, the United States was seen to represent the culmination of the Whig theory of history.

<sup>47</sup> Anita Haya Goldman, *Reconciling Race and Rights: Emerson and the Construction of Nationality*, (Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1992), 246.

<sup>48</sup> Ross, 917; Gossett, 201-3.

Saxon myth was a historicist force in the American conscience collective.<sup>49</sup>

What is less clear is the extent to which the Anglo-Saxon myth penetrated down the social scale. While it is difficult to ascertain whether a majority were aware of the Whig formulation of the Anglo-Saxon myth, unless totally isolated from non-Anglo-Saxons, they were conscious of their "WASP" cultural markers (White race, "Anglo-Saxon" in speech and surname, Protestant in religion) and understood themselves to be "Anglo-Saxon".<sup>50</sup> It is evident, however, that firm conclusions in this area await further historical research.

### **The Origins of Anglo-Conformity**

The process of assimilation that has helped maintain ethnic boundaries throughout history had an early start in the United States with the anglicization process, or what Milton Gordon and Will Herberg have called anglo-conformity.<sup>51</sup> This phrase describes a process of dominant-conformity that is nearly universal among national ethnic groups, as terms like Turkification, Magyarization and Russification indicate.<sup>52</sup> In the U.S., immigrants were to be made into Americans by embracing American English, American Liberty, American Protestantism and, ultimately, by intermarrying with Americans.

Anglo-conformity had its roots in the pre-Revolutionary era with the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge among Germans. Founded in the mid-eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin and Anglican minister William Smith, the society pursued

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<sup>49</sup> Edward N. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants, 1875-1925* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 112-13, 137-40.

<sup>50</sup> A notable exception occurred in parts of the South where the white population knew itself to be merely "white" or "American."

<sup>51</sup> Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 89; Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Garden City, N.Y.: Country Life Press, 1955), 34.

<sup>52</sup> For instance, in 1778, no more than 39 per cent of Hungary's population was of Magyar stock. However, during the next century, Magyarization policies managed to assimilate much of Hungary's non-Magyar population to the ethnic core. See Francis, 93-4.

what it called the "anglicization" of Pennsylvania's large German population.<sup>53</sup> After the revolution, attempts to have federal laws printed in German (1796) and to gain official status for German in schools and courts (1837) were rebuffed. The result was a gradual assimilation of Pennsylvania's German population. This was especially pronounced among the Mennonites, whose close theological affiliation with the Quakers rapidly created an "extended cousinage" among the different communities of eastern Pennsylvania.<sup>54</sup>

Other groups to undergo assimilation included the Welsh and Scots, whose languages were all but dead in America by the early nineteenth century, as well as the Huguenots, who in the nineteenth century disappeared entirely.<sup>55</sup> A similar fate befell the Dutch and Swedes, something not lost on Peter Kalm, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Swedish botanist who wrote of New York in the mid eighteenth century that "the majority... who were of Dutch descent, were succumbing to the English language. The younger generation scarcely ever spoke anything but English, and there were many who became offended if they were taken for Dutch because they preferred to pass for English."<sup>56</sup>

Of similar significance was the "WASP" form to which these non-English groups were assimilating. In addition to adopting the American English language and the American belief in liberty, they even began to alter their surnames. Among Pennsylvania Germans, for example, Zimmermann became Carpenter and Rittinghuysen was changed to Rittenhouse, while among the Huguenots, revolutionary Paul Revere's surname reflects a change from the French Rivoire while John Greenleaf Whittier's mother's family had originally been called Feuillevert. All of these developments led eighteenth century American statesmen like John Jay and Jedediah Morse to consider their people

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<sup>53</sup> Lucy Eve Kerman, *Americanization: the History of an Idea, 1700-1860*, (Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, U.C. Berkeley, 1983), 8,36.

<sup>54</sup> Fischer, 423.

<sup>55</sup> Jon Butler, *The Huguenots in America: A Refugee People in New World Society*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983), 71, 198.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Conant Harper, *The Course of the Melting pot Idea to 1910* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 52.



"essentially English" in ancestry despite the presence of some continental Europeans.<sup>57</sup>

Jay made the point very clear in the second *Federalist* paper when he opined that "Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people; a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion...very similar in their manners and customs."<sup>58</sup>

A halt in immigration also contributed to the assimilation process. The War of Independence, for instance, brought immigration to the colonies to a virtual standstill and during the 1793-1814 period, only three thousand immigrants arrived per year.<sup>59</sup> This hiatus created the conditions which allowed the various ethnic groups in the new country to draw closer together and lose their differences. As Richard Burkey puts it, "although pockets of European ethnicity still remained, by 1820 the great majority of the citizens of the new country were subscribing to a new ethnicity-American; only the racial groups were excluded from membership."<sup>60</sup> Since the blacks and native Indians were not entitled to participate in civic affairs they cannot be considered part of the American nation and, therefore, the Americans at this point must be considered one of the world's first ethnic nations.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Gordon, 86-87; Brookhiser, 117.

<sup>58</sup> Jay is quoted in Benjamin Schwarz, "The Diversity Myth: America's Leading Export," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1995, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Immigration was somewhat higher in the 1780s than in later decades, when war raged in Europe.

<sup>60</sup> Richard M. Burkey, *Ethnic and Racial Groups: The Dynamics of Dominance* (Menlo Park: Cummings, 1978), 170.

<sup>61</sup> Walker Connor notes that in 1971, the majority of nation-states had populations in which ethnic minorities comprised over 25% of the population. Furthermore, most analysts would agree that nations are modern and as one of the first integrated mass participation polities, that the U.S. was one of the world's first nations. Thus the free population of the 1820 United States should be considered a nation with above-average ethnic homogeneity. See Walker Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group, is a ...", in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

## The Anglo-Americans in Theoretical Context

With regard to ethnicity theory, the American case can be framed within the broader ethnogenetic process. Typically, ethnies form either through *fission* from a parent stock: i.e. Ulster Protestants from Scots, Dutch from Greater Germans, Quebecois from French, Afrikaners from Dutch; or *fusion* with other ethnies or ethnic fragments: i.e. Mexican Mestizos from Aztecs and Spanish Creoles; English from Anglo-Saxons, Normans and Celtic Britons; or Japanese from Chinese, Koreans and Southeast Asians.<sup>62</sup>

Fission and fusion are processes that create ethnies, but more often, as Fredrik Barth points out, ethnic boundaries tend to remain relatively stable while population flows back and forth across them. During such a process, ethnies accrete new members to their core through assimilation. The Zulus, Greeks, Jews and Magyars are all good examples of ethnies that have absorbed newcomers arguably more numerous than the original core stock.<sup>63</sup>

Given the foregoing, we can now specify the nature of American national ethnicity: it emerged through ethnic fission from an English Protestant parent stock and, like most ethnies, followed the Barthian model and employed methods of dominant-conformity to accrete diverse immigrant populations to its ethnic core while maintaining its ethnic boundaries.<sup>64</sup> What complicates this otherwise simple picture is the pride with which "Americans" viewed their liberal civilization, a pride which occasionally expressed itself in the form of "extravagant" universalist rhetoric.

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<sup>62</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 64-70; Connor, 214-15.

<sup>63</sup> See Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the social organization of culture difference* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), 20-25; Connor, 215-16 or Francis, 28-31 (Zulus) and 93-4 (Magyars).

<sup>64</sup> The Americans' founding date (1607) differs little from that of the Ulster Protestants, Quebecois and Afrikaners.

## **The Exceptionalist Fallacy: "Double-Consciousness" and Cosmopolitan Rhetoric**

The symbol of liberalism, as noted, proved useful in *reinforcing* "American" ethnic particularism. Nevertheless, one should not to gloss over the underlying theoretical conflict between liberalism and ethnicity. There was this tension in American culture, one which gave serious consideration to both liberal principles *and* ethnic boundary defense and furiously tried to marry the two. This is borne out by a less selective analysis of the writings of those very authors most often used to provide examples of the cosmopolitanism of America. For instance, what would exceptionalists make of Emerson, who proffered that America was:

The asylum of all nations...the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles and Cossacks, and all the European tribes, of the Africans and Polynesians, will construct a new race...as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages.<sup>65</sup>

While nevertheless maintaining (around the same time) that:

It cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy any very high place in the human family...The Irish cannot; the American Indian cannot; the Chinese cannot. Before the energy of the Caucasian race all other races have quailed and done obeisance.<sup>66</sup>

We would do well not to pass judgement on Emerson (a noted liberal who opposed both nativism and slavery) because his dualistic attitudes were entirely in keeping with those of his contemporaries. For example, Walt Whitman, influenced by Anglo-Saxonist philology, wrote in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) that "the Anglo-Saxon stock of our language

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<sup>65</sup> Curti, 202.

<sup>66</sup> Anita Haya Goldman, *Reconciling Race and Rights: Emerson and the Construction of Nationality*, (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1992), 242-4.

[is]... the most important part, the root and strong speech of the native English for many centuries", later adding that "I think the Saxon has an element no other language has."<sup>67</sup>

Herman Melville, meanwhile, wrote that the U.S. was "settled by the people of all nations [and that] all nations may claim her for their own", yet he admired the anti-Catholic popular literature of the 1840's and 50's as an expression of the people, failing to approach nativist sentiment with the same critical stance he did the class and slavery issues of the day.<sup>68</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville's writing contained similar dualities, at once commenting on the cosmopolitan rootlessness of the United States while observing that:

There is hardly an American to be met with who does not claim some remote kindred with the first founders of the colonies; and as for the scions of the noble families of England, America seemed to me to be covered with them.<sup>69</sup>

Tocqueville also repeatedly referred to the Americans as the "English race in America" or the "Anglo-Americans", indicating that he felt the three terms were basically interchangeable. It seems Tocqueville's cosmopolitan view of America was merely a rhetorical tool used only in his more futuristic moments. The same duality can be observed in the writings of Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Franklin and Hamilton and probably had its roots in the Old Testament with which Protestants were so familiar.

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<sup>67</sup> John E. Bernbrock, *Walt Whitman and "Anglo-Saxonism"* (Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1961), 42, 190.

<sup>68</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1988), 65, 142-3.

<sup>69</sup> Tocqueville, 173-4. For the comments of theorists of American exceptionalism, see Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 2, Greenfeld, 399 and Zelinsky 1983, 236.

As Conor Cruise O'Brien notes, the Bible's message at this point was largely particularist, as when it was written:

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6).

Yet despite the predominantly ethnic tone, the selective reader could tease out some universalist passages such as:

Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the Gospel unto Abraham saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham (Gal. 3:6-9).<sup>70</sup>

In the Bible, as in the writing of many Americans, a predominantly ethnic message is in tension with the logical implications of an underlying universalist communal philosophy. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan utterances that Emerson referred to as "extravagant declamations" should not be construed as representative of the temper of the times. Instead, they should be treated as the futuristic, cosmopolitan side of a dualistic American mind which clung just as surely to an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant vision of the nation. This psyche was described by Emerson as one of "double-consciousness" whereby the quest for security, exemplified by "race" (ethnic group) and family, could be reconciled with the quest for individuality, represented by associative friendship and liberal universalism.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> O'Brien, 4-6.

<sup>71</sup> Goldman, 284.

## Romantic Nationalism and the Republican "Golden Age"

"When we see, among the happiest people in the world, groups of peasants directing affairs of state under an oak, and always acting wisely, can we help but despise the refinements of those nations which render themselves illustrious and miserable by so much art and mystery?"<sup>72</sup> With characteristic aplomb, Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed the *zeitgeist* of a new cultural movement known as romanticism which took root in eighteenth century Europe and proved especially influential in the following century. Based on the idea of raw nature as the source of power and wisdom, it carried within it a critique of rational, civilized modernity.

In Germany, romantic scholars like Herder, Hegel or Fichte developed the idea that nations are organic outgrowths of nature whose natural destiny is to express themselves through independent statehood.<sup>73</sup> This led intellectuals, notably among conquered peoples (but also among independent, Republican nations), to espouse the cause of ethno-nationalism.<sup>74</sup> Scholars in America, like their European counterparts, participated in these romantic nationalist activities. Earlier, we described the romantic American interest in Anglo-Saxon liberties, an interest which pre-dated the Revolutionary era. This line of thinking had inspired Jefferson to tell English radical John Cartwright "that he hoped Virginia would divide its counties into wards of six miles square, for these 'would answer to the hundreds of your Saxon Alfred.'"<sup>75</sup> Jefferson's vision glorified the Yeoman, or independent farmer, as the cornerstone of the Republic, and he believed that the nation gained strength from the Yeoman's contact with nature.

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<sup>72</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 361.

<sup>73</sup> Hans Kohn, "Western and Eastern Nationalisms", in A.D. Smith and John Hutchinson (eds), *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 165.

<sup>74</sup> A.D. Smith 1986, 161.

<sup>75</sup> Horsman, 23.

In the early nineteenth century, American romantics embraced Jefferson's vision, but also endorsed a bombastic, expansionist Americanism, exemplified by the view that the American continent was to be settled by the surging energy of the "primeval" Anglo-Saxon race. Walt Whitman captured this spirit of ethnic chauvinism well when he exclaimed: "What has miserable inefficient Mexico...to do...with the mission of peopling the New World with a noble race?"<sup>76</sup> Whitman's interest in Anglo-Saxon philology, part of a widespread literary movement in the 1850's known variously as Gothicism or Anglo-Saxonism, can be explained as another instance of the same romantic thinking.

Yet the Gothicism of Whitman, Poe, Emerson and others had begun, by the 1850's, to exhibit a nostalgic sensibility that scorned the expansionist, utilitarian industrialism of the new America. Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* (1819) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Ambitious Guest* (1835) provide early examples of this thinking. In both cases, there is a lament that the acquisitive attitude of the Yankee has left him blind to nature's more sublime virtues. In a similar vein, in *Among the Hills* (1869), John Greenleaf Whittier wrote:

Our yeoman should be equal to his home,  
Set in the fair, green valleys, purple walled,  
A man to match his mountains, not to creep,  
Dwarfed and abased below them.<sup>77</sup>

In the minds of romantic nationalists such as these, the new economy, which increasingly bound farmers to agents from urban centres, was seen to undermine their independence, and, by extension, that of the Yeoman Republic. Cities were viewed as sinful and unnatural. This sentiment clearly animated Boston reformer-socialist Wendell Phillips, who in the 1860's proclaimed that: "My idea of a civilization is a very high one, but the

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<sup>76</sup> Horsman, 235.

<sup>77</sup> Ian Stuart Marshall, *Mountains to Match the Man: National Identity and the Mountain in American Literature* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1988), 269.

approach to it is a New England town of some two thousand inhabitants, with no rich man and no poor man in it; all mingling in the same society...That's New England as it was fifty years ago....[The] civilization that lingers beautifully on the hillsides of New England, nestles sweetly in the valleys of Vermont, the moment it approaches a crowd like Boston, or a million men gathered in one place like New York, it rots."<sup>78</sup>

### The American Golden Age

The theme of the Golden Age has been arguably a universal among nations and ethnic groups since Hesiod first introduced the concept. It represents an idealized period in the past when the collective was seen to be united and heroic. Typically, the romantic nationalist views the present as an age of decline and seeks to use the myth of an idealized past to revive the virtues which were seen to characterize the national ethnic group during its Golden Age.<sup>79</sup> The nostalgia that pervaded the writing of many mid-nineteenth century Americans may thus be considered a form of romantic yearning for a purer, more "natural" Golden Age Republic. It was this nostalgia which was to fire the ethnic nationalist phenomenon known as nativism which later came to grip the land.

### Conclusion

This paper has tried to illustrate that the United States was not an exception to the rule that nations are formed by core ethnic groups which later attempt to shape the nation in their own image. The American case betrays many of the same features that characterize other ethnic groups. These include: a sense of election (Puritan), a myth of exclusive genealogical descent (Anglo-Saxon), a set of cultural boundary markers ('WASP'), a

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<sup>78</sup> Bernard K. Johnpoll and Lillian Johnpoll, *The Impossible Dream: a century and a half of the American Left* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 119.

<sup>79</sup> A.D. Smith 1986, 192.



process of dominant-conformity (anglo-conformity), an association with a specific territory (United States/Frontier), a lifestyle representation (Yeoman) and a communal Golden Age (Jefferson's Republic) to which the group seeks to return. Together, these elements formed the myth-symbol complex of the "American" ethnics. This ethnic structure, once crystallized, decisively shaped the reactions of the American nation for over a century.

If the Anglo-Americans had not considered themselves an indigenous American ethnic group, they might have reacted to new immigrants in a less proprietary fashion. Moreover, without a Golden Age republican ideal to filter events, American reaction to industrialization and urbanization may not have taken on such stridently nostalgic overtones. The defensive, romantic impetus behind the Know-Nothing, Populist, 100 per cent American, Ku Klux Klan, and Immigration Restrictionist movements might thereby have been muted. The anglocentric America that actually emerged might instead have developed as a more pluralistic society, like that found in present-day Mauritius or Trinidad, where no acknowledged founding group exists. Scholars have often ignored the role of national ethnicity in the American case, believing that the nativism of an exceptional nation requires an exceptional explanation. Hopefully this oversight can now be corrected.