EPISODE 28
AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 28 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now for the last few episodes I've been going over some of the ideas which started to become implanted in the Western mind during the Age of Enlightenment.

But if you are an American, and if you have even a vague recollection of the American History that you learned back in school, you might well have been feeling at least a little uncomfortable as I have been incessantly railing against the evils of the latter part of the 18th Century. After all, wasn't this the time of the American Revolution? And weren't our founding fathers the explicit disciples of the philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment. And wasn't the Republic that they were creating supposed to be a direct reflection of those values?

Well, not exactly.

To explain why this is so, however, it will first be necessary to explain some of the crucial differences back then between the world that was happening in Europe and the world that was happening in North America.

And to begin with, you need to understand that at the time of our Revolution the European mind held two almost contradictory ideas about America and Americans.

First of all they saw our portion of the New World as literally a new world. That is to say, we were Arcadia. Eden. A place where all the phoniness, artificiality, and class consciousness of the old world no longer applied. We were free of the stuffiness of rank and aristocracy. Our endless forests and fields and wilderness just cried out for a new beginning. You'll recall that Rousseau, far from believing in Noble Savages, was actually a sort of 18th Century hippie philosopher who believed that the truly educated and evolved being would live in harmony with Nature, and away from the oh so strained politesse of the big city.

And America exemplified that. Indeed when Benjamin Franklin lived in Paris in the 1770s he was the toast of the capital. He wore a plain, so-called 'frontier' jacket. Instead of donning a powdered wig like the rest of the country, he walked around in his plain bald head and unkempt long hair. And he was already justly famous for his discoveries in electricity and for his many invention. In fact, since 'renaissance' means 'new birth', people throughout Europe rightly saw him as the true Renaissance Man.

At the same time, however, Europeans also saw Americans in general as a bunch of unsophisticated rubes who were woefully behind the times.

Consider this. Around 1780 America contained around three million people. Now this does not seem like much these days. But at the same time all of England only had about eight million people. Scotland and Ireland each had about one million. And the per capita wealth in America was probably actually higher than any of these places. Scotland and Ireland in particular were notoriously poor, with the majority of their inhabitants living in pathetic huts. Kind of like West Africa today, except much, much colder and more miserable.

But except for Franklin, and to a lesser extent Jefferson, where were all the poets and painters and philosophers and other creative types that one would expect to be bursting forth from this New World with its New Beginning? Granted you could try the excuse that everyone was too busy building anew to bother themselves with poetry. But there was no getting around the fact that Americans had far more leisure time than did the poor souls of Scotland or Ireland. Yet Scotland had produced Adam Smith, David Hume, James Watt, Robert Burns, and a whole slew of lesser known thinkers and doers. Ireland, about as impoverished a place as you could get, had produced Jonathan Swift and Edmund Burke. So if the American experience was so unique and wonderful, then how come it was so remarkably unoriginal and uncreative?

One explanation was that the Colonists were by and large just a group of back woods farmers more concerned with generating and accumulating wealth than with addressing any of the deeper issues of life. What's more they were living in the past, holding on to ideas about religion and politics which the 'modern' 18th Century European mind had long discarded.

And there was a lot of truth in this latter assessment.

For one thing there was the Americans' intense religiosity. You'll recall that by the latter half of the 18th Century no self respecting French or British intellectual believed any more in any sort of old time religion. Even positive Deists only saw a God that had created mathematics, the Universe, and Reason, but that was in no way personally involved with mankind or with any individual humans. But

Americans, whether descendants of the Utopian Puritans, Penn's Quakers, or even the Church of England planters in Virginia, still clung to a belief in the Bible and in a personal God who judged and/or saved them. And they in turn almost invariably saw the Europeans as hopeless degenerates. Even Jefferson, who was by far the most Deist and the most free thinking of the founding fathers, was thoroughly disgusted by the morals of everyone around him when he was posted to France in the 1780s.

More tellingly, in political thought the Americans were almost literally a century behind the times. As I've already mentioned, the so-called 'Enlightenment thinker' most quoted by the founding fathers was none other than John Locke, who had done most of his writing in the 1670s and 1680s, almost a full century before the true Age of Enlightenment. His ideas of the 'rights of man' were therefore only progressive in terms of the 17th Century, and had to do with the relative rights which free men had in relationship to their legitimate king and with the quote/unquote 'natural' rights which men had to protect their property. As we have just seen, though, by 1780 the 'rights of man' in Europe had started to morph into radical moral and personal liberty, and the entire idea of kings and aristocracy had come to be seen as corrupt and unjustifiable.

And you'll also recall that while it is true that Locke's philosophy could be seen as existentialist, given that he believed that knowledge could only come from experience, and that the independently existing Ideals conceived of by Plato and Descartes did not exist, Locke also took that to mean that this made faith in God all the more important. In point of fact he (along with the Colonists who saw themselves as his intellectual heirs) was about as fervently anti-atheistic and in favor of a literal interpretation of the Bible and belief in a personal God as was possible.

It wasn't just in theological matters, though, that the American Colonists were stuck in the 17th Century. It also had to do with just who and what they thought that their fight was with.

Now you'll no doubt also recall from your American History, as taught in school, that our Revolution resulted from a clash between a despotic all-powerful king and a ragtag group of patriots yearning for freedom and democracy. And the evil King George with his autocratic taxes and pronouncements was always presented as the obvious bogeyman. Indeed, the Declaration of Independence is filled with specific recriminations against the king. Indeed John Hancock supposedly signed the document with a large flourish specifically so that 'King George could read it without his spectacles'.

But this portrayal is totally ignoring the reality that way back in 1688 the British had gone through their own Glorious Revolution. And though not much emphasized in our own histories, in Britain itself this is considered one of their most important dates. For this is when they essentially did away with the idea of a monarch having any real power at all.

Let me explain. You'll remember that in the 1530s, at the height of the Reformation, Henry VIII, basically for reasons of lust and greed, did away with the Catholic Church in England. This, however, did not do away with all of the Catholic sympathizers in the realm. And over the next 150 years several British monarchs, including Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I, made not so secret attempts to re-install Catholicism as the State religion. Worse, the middle of the 17th Century saw the ascendancy of the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, mostly exemplified by Louis XIV of France, which held that a king was answerable only to God.

Needless to say, the fact that Charles I was not only a Catholic but was also trying to push this theory on already pretty independently minded Englishmen did not bode well for him. The 1640s and 1650s in England were therefore a genuine time of troubles, with wars, rebellions, the beheading of Charles, and the establishment of a 'Republic' which quickly became a dictatorship headed by Oliver Cromwell. At his death, however, cooler, more conservative heads prevailed, and Charles II, a good Protestant, was invited back to the throne.

But his son, James II, turned out to be another Catholic. And by this time Parliament, which had been slowly gaining power for the past century or so, had had enough. So in 1688, in a mostly bloodless coup d'etat, Parliament deposed James II. It then invited William of Orange, a Dutchman married to a relative of James, to become the titular head of England. But titular meant titular. Acceptance of the crown was totally conditional on William recognizing that he would become a mere figurehead, and that from then on Parliament would hold all of the real power.

This meant that a century later King George III didn't possess much more actual authority than does Queen Elizabeth today. So that one of the greatest ironies of our Revolution is that in their minds the Americans were fighting a battle which had been actually fought and settled a century earlier. In reality their beef should have been with Parliament. These were the people who had passed the Stamp Act and the other taxes which the Colonists objected to. This was the body which did not want to extend the franchise to a bunch of rough hewn farmers from across an ocean.

And here's another irony, this one relating to our particular historical and geographic situation. For it turns out that America's unique frontier mentality dovetailed completely with the 17th Century ideas about the primacy of the individual.

Because Europe had always been a crowded place. A place where everyone was born into a social class. Where everyone had always been an extremely small link in a giant interconnected economic, social, and political chain. But to a large extent most Americans of necessity really were rugged individuals. Both the men and women had to build houses from scratch, turn forests into fields, and raise extremely large families. And although they did have their church congregations and a certain amount of local government, in a very dramatic way the real center of power, of other people telling them what to do, was some three thousand miles away. So that to such a mentality the concept of an actual legalistic social contract could indeed make sense.

And what was true for the Colonies in general was especially true for the planters of Virginia, a place which not so coincidentally also produced most of America's early political theorists. And the geography of Virginia was such that back then roads basically didn't exist. All travel was up and down the various tributaries of Chesapeake Bay. This meant that, outside of Williamsburg, towns also literally did not exist. Rather every planter, whether Washington, Jefferson, or Madison, not only owned hundreds of slaves, but also presided over his own little community of both free and indentured white tradesmen, such as coopers and blacksmiths and the like.

In essence, each of these founding fathers already owned their slice of Arcadian Eden. Each of them was already master of all that he saw. And this is what they extrapolated from when they thought of Independence.

Which brings us to a final misconception often held about our Revolution. Namely: Just how much of a real revolution was it? It certainly didn't intend to overthrow the social order or the economic order, as did, say, the French and Russian ones would do later on.

In fact, historians agree that were you to have visited the Colonies in the 1760s you would have found an overwhelmingly contented lot of proud and loyal English subjects of the King. But the Seven Years War (1756-1763) had just ended, and although battles had been fought all across the globe (leading some historians to call this the first true World War), some of the most significant battles had been in North America, where Britain, at great expense, had finally and permanently cleared the French

both out of what is today Quebec and out of their great fortress at Louisbourg in present day Nova Scotia.

And for this the Colonists were extremely grateful. Unfortunately, however, although on average they were wealthier than British farmers and peasants, they hadn't paid for any of this. Which is why Parliament, quite reasonably in its view, passed the Stamp Act in 1765.

The Colonists, whether in Massachusetts in the north or Antigua in the Caribbean, did not like this one bit. First, because nobody has ever liked paying taxes. But, second, because the ostensible purpose of the tax was to support all the British officers stationed there. Yet now with the French finally defeated there was no real need for all those officers to be in the Colonies. Most importantly, though, all of the Colonies already had their own legislatures which were supposed to handle taxation, and this was the first time that Parliament had instituted 'taxation without representation'.

An overwhelmingly negative reaction throughout the Empire caused the Stamp Act to be hastily withdrawn. But throughout the Colonies, and especially in Massachusetts, groups called the Sons of Liberty had formed. Depending on your point of view, these semi-secret societies were either composed of loyal patriots or of lawless thugs. Things were not helped when, in 1770, British soldiers surrounded by a mob fired back and ended up killing five in the Boston Massacre. Then in 1773 the ante was thoroughly upped when Sons of Liberty staged a pretty violent riot and deliberate destruction of property in response to a tax on tea. What we call the Boston Tea Party.

In the view of Parliament this was getting close to becoming an armed rebellion. So Boston was placed under military rule. Which led to more local militias being formed. Which led to the (rather small) Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775.

At this point the difficulties were mainly confined to the Boston area, and there was little if any longing for independence in the rest of British North America. But in 1774 a certain Englishman named Thomas Paine had landed on these shores. A true 18th Century revolutionary, he despised the whole concept of the monarchy and aristocracy, believed in a radical egalitarianism in property and everything else, and envisioned a totally independent America in which this new world would unfold. In January, 1776, he published a small book entitled 'Common Sense'. And historians are still unsure as to why this pamphlet literally sparked a full blown revolution. But there is no doubt that it did. It is estimated that over 500,000 copies ended up being printed and sold, this in a country with a population of around three million. And by July of that year, the Declaration of Independence was ranting and railing against the very idea of kingship, not against an overreaching Parliament.

Although one should keep in mind that virtually none of the Colonists ever really adopted the radicalism of Thomas Paine or any of the other Enlightenment figures from England, Scotland, and France. Again, always remember that shouts of 'Liberty' and 'Freedom' were meant to evoke 17th Century ideals of the words, namely property rights and inherent privileges of social classes, and most definitely not the licentiousness or leveling of class that the terms came to mean by the end of the 18th Century. Also, be aware that at the start of the American Revolution only a small fraction of the population was in favor of full independence. In fact, places like New York and most of the Carolinas were Loyalist right up until the end of the war. And at the end, perhaps a third of the people were still Loyalist and another third didn't care one way or the other and just wanted it all to be over with.

And this podcast is obviously not the place for a full history of the American Revolution. But you might be interested to know that when Jefferson wrote the famous line, ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ he was intentionally cribbing from John Locke. That the original line was ‘inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property’. And that, just to remind you, when Jefferson substituted the word ‘happiness’ he was intending the political meaning of the word from around 1730, which was roughly equivalent to the Roman ideal of Civic Virtue. And definitely not individual pleasure.

Speaking of Rome, though, I hope that by now I’ve drummed it into your heads that what the Founders were trying to found had absolutely nothing to do with Athenian democracy, and everything to do with an idealized version of the original Roman Republic.

Just to quickly go over it all again, though: Ever since around 400 BC just about everyone in the civilized world was quite familiar with the city-state of Athens and with its particular form of government. And the group consensus was pretty overwhelming that democracy was a pretty terrible idea. After all, if 'the people' were so inherently wise, why would you ever need any government at all? If we rely on a simple majority of opinions, where is the place for truth as opposed to falsehood, smart as opposed to stupid, right as opposed to wrong? And it is just plain common experience in every village and culture and civilization in the world that a lot of the people walking around are just plain ill informed and/or self-centered and/or not caring about the general welfare, either.

What's more, the actual example of Athens was horrible. Demagogues were always swaying popular opinion. The city-state was in an almost constant state of war, and most of the wars had been started by its population having voted democratically. The place which was supposedly the pinnacle of

ancient culture and rational philosophy also democratically voted to kill Socrates simply because he annoyed everyone by trying to be truthful.

Nor were the Athenians particularly moral. They constantly cheated their fellow city-states. Much of their population was enslaved. Their women were probably less free than in other cultures of the time. They considered everyone else other than themselves to be barbarians. And as for their sexual practices, even the rest of the 'barbarian' ancient world thought of the Athenians as pedophile perverts.

It's not that certain political theorists, in the roughly two thousand years since then, weren't ever intrigued with the possibility of democracy. But the assumption was always that it would only be possible in a relatively small community where everyone knew each other and where social norms and social pressure would make sure that ideas and actions would be restrained.

What's more, by the 18th Century the entire country of Greece had long been a forgotten backwater of the Ottoman Empire. And Athens lay basically in ruins.

So what the writers of our Constitution were trying to re-create in this gigantic North American Eden which they now found themselves in control of was not the glory that was Greece.

Rather it was the grandeur that was Rome.

Specifically the founding fathers envisioned a latter day version of the almost mythical early Rome, before the Empire and the Emperors and the wealth and the arrogance and the decadence. Back when the men were thought to be uniformly stoic and brave and the women were thought to be uniformly chaste and virtuous. This is why quotes from Cicero and Livy and Virgil sprang forth from the founders' lips and their written pages much more than did quotes from Aristotle or Homer. This is why we have a Capitol building which was inspired by a temple on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. That's why our Senate is called a Senate.

And classical, ideal Rome was a Republic. A place where, basically, the political system was based upon the belief that at least some of the people could be trusted to be intelligent, wise, and just at least some of the time.

That is to say, groups of citizens were deemed to have enough sound judgment to choose the member of said group who was known to be the most qualified and responsible and to have the most, er, sound judgment. This representative would then meet with other representatives, and together they would make all the important decisions concerning war, peace, property disputes, and the various other reasons why governments were necessary in the first place.

Now the founding fathers weren't so naive as to think that it would be easy to come up with the right sort of set up so that such a plausibly ideal state of affairs wouldn't degenerate into hereditary senators and then eventually into an oligarchy and an Empire, as Rome had. And this is why they spent so much time working out all those checks and balances. And to them any sort of direct democracy was the scariest option available. That's why state legislatures were supposed to select the Senators. That's also why an Electoral College was supposed to select the President.

An even more difficult task was to figure out exactly who among the population could be trusted to be of sound enough judgment to be among those to pick a representative with sound enough judgment. For, contrary to what might have been intimated to us in grade school, possible political systems do not consist of a simple binary choice between having an absolute tyrant with nobody else having a say and a pure democracy where every single person has the same say.

After all, even Caligula and Saddam Hussein had *some* advisers. Hitler was always complaining that his henchmen never did what he asked of them. And in the much wider and more common world of kings and oligarchies there were usually tens or hundreds of people who in practice gave advice, had responsibilities, and made decisions. Moreover, social mores and long held customs almost always kept even 'absolute' monarchs in check.

At the other extreme, even in modern day liberal democracies not everyone has the vote. For instance, mental incompetence is usually a disqualifier. In many states convicted felons cannot vote even after having served their time. Seventeen-year-olds can't vote even if they have an IQ of 160 and are already better educated than most adults.

So the trick would seem to be to somehow come up with a way on the one hand to make the franchise as wide as possible so as to minimize the chances for oligarchies and special interests. Yet on the other hand to make sure that the incompetent, the irresponsible, and those who just have no skin in the game are kept out.

Which is why the founding fathers made the stipulation that only property owners could vote.

To modern ears this sounds insanely elitist. But modern minds usually don't realize that back then land in the Colonies was ridiculously cheap. It was common for newly opened frontier land to sell for $1 an acre. And even in settled areas it was relatively easy for even simple tradesmen to acquire a house and a lot. Modern minds also usually don't stop to consider that back then most of the functions of government had to do with protecting property rights. Why should non-property owners be involved in such deliberations?

As for women, it probably would never have occurred to the men (*or* women) back then that wives and mothers would have the slightest interest in man's domain of arguing over property or where to build a road or whether or not to declare war. At the time government had virtually no role in education or in any of the social welfare concerns that it presently has. More importantly, religion and culture had ingrained in everyone the ideal that husband and wife were to strive to be one inseparable unit. Therefore—seriously—all that they needed to express themselves with was one vote. Indeed the very thought that a husband and wife might vote for different candidates would have no doubt horrified everyone.

And as for the slaves, well… The continued existence of that peculiar institution just confirms the point that the 'freedom' and 'liberty' which the Revolutionaries were fighting for were concepts directly out of the 17th Century. In the end, for all the fulminations against evil King George, what was really going on at the end of the revolutionary process was the same thing that was going on at the beginning: A struggle over which legislature would be paramount, the British Parliament or the (new) American Congress. In the end all of the radical ideas of Voltaire and Diderot and Bentham had absolutely no resonance, let alone effect, on the American experience.

As a final illustration of this point, consider the rest of the life of Tom Paine, the only genuine radical to take part in our Revolution. Although he held positions of responsibility throughout the conflict, and was honored by a grateful nation at the end of it, in 1787 he moved back to England. And when the French Revolution broke out in 1789 he eagerly moved there, and even though he spoke no French he ended up becoming a deputy in their National Convention. He also continued to write, and his later works, such as 'The Rights of Man' and 'The Age of Reason', which argued for the wholesale overthrow of governments and outlined his extreme hatred of all organized religion, were so offensive that he was tried and convicted in absentia in England for treason. He also ended up getting on the wrong side of Robespierre, and only escaped the guillotine due to a guard mistakenly marking the wrong prison cell.

When he returned to the United States, however, it almost got worse. Because now that the American public knew that he was a true Son of the Enlightenment, and especially shared its view of Religion, he was thoroughly reviled, repudiated, and shunned. So much so that when he finally died in 1809, this former leading light of American Freedom, in fact the man historians consider the person most responsible for lighting the fuse of Revolution, got exactly six people—three of them people he was looking after—to attend his funeral.

Now, having said all that, let it also be said that there was one aspect of the 18th Century that the Americans were all on board with. In fact, they were ahead of the curve on this one. And that was their enthusiasm for material progress, for technological innovations, and for more efficient ways to get things done. Indeed, not only were Americans justly famous for this frame of mind right from the beginning, but their strange amalgam of intense religiosity and intense materialism would be a trademark of American culture up until the present day.

But let it also be said that this 'spirit of improvement' had far more to do with the 17th Century's Scientific Revolution than it did with any English or French philosophers from the 18th Century. So the point still stands that, for all intents and purposes, the United States was almost totally unaffected by the real Age of Enlightenment.

In fact, just about the only manifestation of Enlightenment ideals was our Bill of Rights, which were proposed and then ratified at the beginning of the French Revolution, so as to show solidarity with the French people. But you might not know this part of that history: Because, right after they were adopted, they were immediately forgotten about for the next 140 years. And it was only in the 1930s when this supposedly 'sacred charter' was resurrected for the public consciousness.

So that's it for our brief sojourn into American history. And in a couple of episodes we'll return to Europe to see what happened when they attempted to put Enlightenment ideals into practice.

But next episode we're going to kind of take a side step and look at an issue which is incredibly important today, and that sort of does and also sort of doesn't have its roots in those 18th Century debates. Namely, I'm going to be talking about male and female, men and women, the relationships between them, and how thoughts about all that have changed so drastically between all those classical civilizations and the postmodern world of today.

But that is for next time. For this time I would once more like to thank you so much for so far having listened.