

AMERICA IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE UNITED STATES IN AMERICA

I have been waiting 40 years for someone to write this book. Recently, I have concluded that no one else is going to write it and therefore I should try. Contemporary events have given a new urgency to a problem that has always existed in this country, namely, a confusion about the name of the country. The problem that this book addresses is the United States's single biggest problem because it underlies every domestic and international policy of the government, as well as religious, educational and cultural discussions in the country.

The problem manifests itself in a confusion between the nation-state and an idea about the nation-state. "America" is regularly invoked as a name for the country. A mythical element inevitably intrudes upon what are purported to be historical statements or simple statements of fact. The confusion is deeply embedded in the language spoken within the United States and the language that other countries have adopted in speaking about the United States. Every fourth or fifth sentence in the press or on television reinforces the dangerous conflation.

Many writers would claim that they are well aware of the distinction between the existing country and a mythical, ideological or quasi-religious dream named America. For example, there are several hundred books about "the American dream" that one might suppose are precisely about this distinction. But the test is consistency of usage. If a book exists that is linguistically consistent on this distinction between the dream and the country, I have never found it.

I propose to show through a combination of history, politics, culture and religion the importance of this distinction. I will be consistent in the use of "America" and "American." I have enough material for a thousand page book but no one would likely read that. A letter to the editor or an op-ed essay cannot make the case, but a book of two to three hundred pages might make a serious and readable argument.

During each of the last 20 years I have had occasions to address professors from other countries on this theme. Not only do they understand the point but most of them immediately grasp the significance of consistently making the distinction. In contrast, those colleagues in U.S. universities who don't find the argument ridiculously unnecessary usually find it clever or entertaining but not something that seriously affects the way they speak. I would hope that a book length study might convince some of them that there is a real problem here. My larger interest is to raise awareness in the general population as people listen to politicians, advertisers, educators and religious leaders.

The current best seller, *Treason*, by Ann Coulter has the premise that "liberals hate America." The charge could be dismissed as silly except that left wing

critics are vulnerable to her attack if they do not consistently distinguish between America and the United States. The manipulation of "America" by right wing commentators understandably suits their purposes. The distressing fact is that the left in the United States accepts the same language. A symposium in *Harper's* asked a panel "What is wrong with America?" Not one respondent noted the ambiguity of the question.

One of the few places where some ambiguity in the meaning of America is recognized is textbook publishing, but the main issue is buried without addressing it. Textbook publishers have "bias" guidelines. For example, in Harcourt's guide there is, among a dozen of possible cases of bias, the caution "beware of geographical chauvinism in the use of the term America and American." Since "America" could refer to South, Central or North America, there is no place simply called America. Guidelines at Houghton Mifflin say to avoid "America" and "American" and substitute "the United States" and "a citizen of the United States." Evidence that the guideline writers are not seriously grappling with the issue is the fact that the guidelines themselves repeatedly use "American" to refer to people who live in the United States.² The advice to avoid the word "America" is quixotic; students in U.S. schools should be studying the importance of America in the United States.

The writers of these bias guides have identified a genuine problem but they are oblivious of the deep roots of the problem. For almost 500 years the term America has had a double meaning: a geographical meaning (North, South, Central) and a religious (or quasi-religious) meaning. In the latter meaning, America has meant a place of riches, which from the start could take a spiritual or a material form. America could be the name of the endtime (a restored paradise) or a name for an abundant secular future. This split within the second meaning could be clouded over for an individual or a group in thinking about America. A cartoon in the *New Yorker* had one of the pilgrims on the boat saying, "My first interest is religious liberty; then I want to get into real estate."

The ambiguities in the term America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might seem a trivial issue. But the problem is that one emerging nation state in the northern part of America deliberately conflated itself with both the ideological and geographical meanings. Of the 4 words it used to describe itself - United States of America - the most important was the third, that is, of. If it had called itself the United States in America, the geographical meaning might have emerged more clearly. Other nation states in America might have had mutual relations with a republic called the United States in America. Instead, the colonies of "British America" declared themselves the United States of America, thereby identifying themselves with Europe's dream of paradise and, by implication, laying claim to the western half of the world.

The bold claim of this new federation did not cause much of a stir for the

world's powers, although it had immediate effect on other peoples in America. Visiting writers from England, France and Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century recognized the potential for good or ill in the new republic.³ President James Madison announced in 1823 that the New World was closed, a doctrine not treated with much seriousness until the end of the century when the United States was ready to take America to a world empire.

Thanks to the protection of two oceans, the benefit of extraordinary natural resources, the stability of a flawed but workable constitution and the energy of a quasi-religious mission, the United States of America had the ability to expand geographically and to absorb great numbers of people from other countries. The successive waves of immigrants came expecting to find America; they were usually disappointed when they found that they had arrived in the United States. About half of the immigrants promptly turned around and left. Those who stayed did so on the promise that life would be better for their children. The glory of the United States is that the belief came true for millions of the children and grandchildren of the immigrants. That is, the United States was for many people a partial embodiment of America. The shameful disgrace of the United States was the exclusion of African slaves and their descendants from full participation in the American dream.

America can be a good dream or a nightmare but in neither case is it a country. Without America, the United States would not likely have survived its civil war or been able to absorb waves of immigrants. In a nation that is not really a nation (people supposedly related through common ancestry), the tenuous bond of the people is the idea of America. It is hardly surprising that U.S. citizens fervently believe in America. The result of this faith and liturgy is usually called patriotism but what is celebrated is not the country so much as an idea about the country, what eighteenth century preachers called the sacred cause of liberty.

What is sustaining and uplifting within the country can be frightening for other countries. When the United States is conflated with America, its foreign policy is entangled with the missionary impulse of religion. Sometimes that is merely irritating when the United States assumes everybody should be like us (America, after all, is the future of every nation). Sometimes it can be disruptive to international order when the United States, thinking it is America, refuses to enter international treaties. The subtitle of Will Hutton's recent book, *A Declaration of Interdependence*, announces its argument in the subtitle: *Why America Should Join the World*.⁴ That will not and cannot happen, although it would be helpful if the U.S. government would enter binding agreements.

Most of the rest of the world have been taught to say America when they mean United States. Europeans, who originally conceived America, are not of much help here. They regularly talk about Europe and America as if those were comparable terms. At least the European Union has abandoned talk of a United

States of Europe, which, they realized, would actually be a union of nation states, whereas the United States of America is not the union of Brazil, Argentina, Chile...but the union of New York, Virginia, Massachusetts.... Terrorists, it is quite clear, are out to destroy America. I am not aware that Osama ben Laden has ever referred to the United States. He probably knows little about the United States but he knows America, the overbearing religious force that has economic, religious and cultural repercussions.

One of the best known writings on religion in the United States is a 1967 essay by Robert Bellah.⁵ The essay seems to open up the right issue but its title - *Civil Religion in America* - only further obscures the nature of religion in the United States. The religion of the United States is America. This religion can exist in nearly pure form or blended with Protestant, Catholic and Jewish traditions. The phrase *Civil religion* has been discussed ever since Bellah's essay but the phrase, borrowed from Rousseau's *Social Contract*, is unnecessary and obfuscating. American religion can be a genuine reform of older religious traditions but without the restraint of those older traditions, America can be a frighteningly apocalyptic religion.

Because America is rooted in the imagery of the bible, the idea has been compatible with various forms of Christian and Jewish religions. Other religions have had a difficult time flourishing in the United States. The rise of Islam is perhaps the most serious challenge to the American religion that has yet arisen. Although Islam is probably most often thought to be an external threat to the United States, it could be one of the keys to genuine reform of the American religion in both its secularized form and its relation to Jewish and Christian traditions..

The present may seem to be the least auspicious moment for clarifying the relation between the United States and America. Since 2001, America has nearly overwhelmed the United States, its governmental policies, its ordinary social practices, and its traditional religions. The willingness to listen to other peoples, never a highlight of the country, has been reduced even further. Nevertheless, recent events have so shaken United States identity that eventually the country, after the one millionth rendition of God Bless America, may come to see itself as one nation among many, a nation whose annual budget of 400 billion dollars of military wares cannot provide security.

I do not think the change will come quickly or easily. At some point this country may need to get a name. *United States* is not really a name, any more than is *Federation* or *Republic*. The name would have to be continuous with the past. *United States in America* could still be the right name, the initials USA providing continuity. This proposal would undoubtedly be met with derisive rejection by many people, a reaction that I would take to be a good sign. It may seem too late to change the country's self-description but two centuries is a short

time in the life of humankind. The United States is an interesting experiment in the history of humanity, the possible transition from nation-state to a new order beyond nationalism. But there is an understandable and widespread fear that the United States is the greatest threat to world peace. When the United States was a struggling adolescent, its naive talk about America could be taken as amusing. But we are long past the time when the United States should take its adult role in the world and stop its dangerous posturing.

This book is not an attack on America. No one gets anywhere in this country attacking America. And, as I have said earlier, America can be a valuable idea.

My hope is that the effect of reading this book would be that the reader would have a greater appreciation of both the United States and America, but no longer confuse the two. That in turn would lead to more effective criticism of United States policy both from within and beyond the country.

1. Ann Coulter, *Treason* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003).

2. Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

3. Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of its Political, Social and Religious Character* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961); Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Knopf, 1949); and especially, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper, 1988).

4. Will Hutton, *A Declaration of Interdependence: Why America Should Join the World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

5. Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America,' in *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).