

Harry Truman, dropped the "freedom from want and fear" and replaced it with "freedom of enterprise." Freedom of enterprise is an American Dream that has been present from the very beginning—liberation from Britain had very profitable implications for merchants like John Hancock and real estate speculators like George Washington—and at certain points in American history (the Gilded Age, the 1920s) has enjoyed special prominence. The closing decades of the twentieth century have been particularly notable in this regard, and a vast commercial infrastructure dedicated its considerable resources to persuading Americans to understand the Declaration of Independence in such terms. And that's more or less where we remain today: life, liberty, and as much entertainment as is digitally possible. For now.

If there is one constant in the Declaration of Independence, it lies in the way no version of the status quo is ever completely acceptable. It provides us with (often imperceptibly shifting) standards by which we measure success but simultaneously calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be, a gap that defines our national experience. A piece of wishful thinking composed in haste, the Declaration was born and lives as the charter of the American Dream. It constitutes us.

CHAPTER 3

DREAM OF THE GOOD LIFE (II): UPWARD MOBILITY

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE may be the charter of the American Dream, but between that abstract document and current reality are countless variations on the pursuit of happiness: *e unum, pluribus*. Yet it is also true that among all the possibilities, as variegated as any American who has ever lived, are basic classes of dreams that rest on concepts whose meaning both transcends a particular context and gets defined by that context. The Puritans dreamt of freedom; so did African Americans. Both understood freedom to represent a loosening from coercive restraints, but the nature of the restraints was very different. For the Puritans, they were primarily spiritual; for African Americans, they were all too often literal (which in turn could have major spiritual consequences).

Similarly, while the Puritans and many of their successors sought to live good lives, the nature of "good" changed over time. In the nineteenth century in particular, the term began to take on a more obvious secular orientation (though in its fondest formulations, moving up in this world by no means precluded moving up in the next one). Hard work was no longer a (hopefully useful) distraction from the dictates of fate but rather an instrument of fate itself, a tool for self-realization.

Like the American Dream broadly construed, this one of the good life exists in a series of variations. The most common form was cast in

terms of commercial success. For hundreds of years, American readers and writers have had tireless appetites for tales of poor boys (and, later, girls) who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires that towered over the national imagination (and in some cases towered over the national landscape as well). The archetypal example of such a bootstrap-pulling figure is steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, whose regularly published capitalist sermons, culminating in his highly selective posthumous *Autobiography* (1920), are tiresome catalogs of implemented plans and surmounted challenges, all wrapped in a com- placently moral tone. But there are other forms of mobility, too: tales of transformation through education, for example, or people with modest resources who triumphed in the arts, sports, or other realms of human aspiration.

And like other American Dreams, the power of this one lay in a sense of collective ownership: anyone can get ahead. An assertion of universal enfranchisement is routinely reaffirmed by this dream's boost- ers (the obsessive quality of their reaffirmations never quite leading them to raise troubling questions about the ongoing need for regular reassurance). Occasionally, it has been roundly condemned as an opiate of the people, usually by critics of American society who are dismissed as disgruntled, foreign, or both. Only rarely have the contours of this dream been seriously explored and tested in a sympathetic, but prob- ing, way. But that could not happen until those contours had clearly emerged. It took a couple hundred years for the realities of American life to shape the Dream of Upward Mobility.

*"If rascals knew the advantage of virtue,
they would become honest men out of rascality."*

—Benjamin Franklin, ca. 1776

The American Dream of the Pilgrims and Puritans may have been otherworldly, but earthly improvement was not necessarily antithetical to their plans. Indeed, in many cases it was an important component of them. Moreover, these people were frequently a minority even in the heart of New England, where the unchurched often played pivotal roles in actually making that society work.

Throughout the British colonies—as well as non-British colonies—

the prospect of moving up in the world was an avowed motive of virtu- ally every Euroamerican (and even some non-Euroamericans). This was particularly true of apprentices and indentured servants who signed contracts to work, in many cases as virtual slaves, for fixed terms in return for the price of passage. In the early years in particular, these parvenus were given a payment in cash or supplies with which to make an independent start in the world when their contracts ended. That start might yield riches, but riches were not the sole measure of moving up in the world. Economic self-sufficiency, a secure and esteemed pro- fession (e.g., the ministry), the leisure to pursue a career in politics: these among others were the yardsticks by which upward mobility was measured.

In an important respect, however, the Dream of Upward Mobility, particularly in the South, was actually *too* successful; it quickly became apparent to those who employed servants that it was in fact quite expensive to support them and that they could become dangerous com- petition when they moved on. Better, they concluded, to invest in slaves, who cost more initially but who had no payoff price and even rose in value. (Indeed, the slave trade itself became a major means of upward mobility for many colonists.) African Americans, who were only a tiny fraction of Virginia's population in the mid-seventeenth century, repre- sented almost half of it by the mid-eighteenth. And in parts of some colonies, like South Carolina, they were well more than half. By the time of the Revolution, slavery was legal in all the colonies, and inden- tured servitude was on the decline. Upward mobility remained possible, but the terms had a decisively racial cast. For much of American his- tory, then, upward mobility was understood, even defined, by a visible alternative of immobility.

Nor was mobility necessarily honored even among Europeans and their descendants. In many respects, colonial American society was still structured along traditional English lines of deference and noblesse oblige. Aristocrats had privileges other colonists did not, and commerce itself was viewed as ungentlemanly by important segments of the elite—even if, as with the case of plantation owners, it was increasingly important to sustaining their stature. Nor was this social stability defined and regulated solely by established authorities back in England. Massachusetts, for example, remained a theocratic colony substantially controlled by clergy well into the eighteenth century.

No one was more aware of this than Benjamin Franklin, born in

series of such aphorisms strung together comprised "The Way to Wealth," the widely reprinted preface to his 1758 collection *Poor Richard Improved*.

Homilies like these help explain why Franklin has often been considered the prophet of American capitalism. Yet making money for him was always the means to a greater end: public service and notoriety (not necessarily in that order). He retired from the printing business as soon as he could do so comfortably and began his pioneering work on the nature of electricity as a man of leisured learning. He refused to take out a patent for the hugely popular wood stove he invented, because he believed that scientific knowledge should be freely shared and diffused. His philanthropic work, which included the creation of the first fire department, lending library, public hospital, and countless other municipal institutions in Philadelphia, gradually widened as he became involved in colonial affairs. His diplomatic work in France during the Revolution, and the prestige he lent to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 (he apparently slept through much of it), were capstones of a career that had been notably distinguished long before the Declaration of Independence, which he helped Jefferson draft. Here, truly, was the first American celebrity (and one quite ready to avail himself of celebrity's fruits).

Rarely, if ever, has any American been so upwardly mobile—or more clear about the basis and meaning of his success. "I conceived my becoming a member would enlarge my power of doing good," he wrote to a friend of his election to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1751. "I would not however insinuate that my ambition was not flattered by all these promotions. It certainly was. For considering my low beginning they were great things to me."

And, somehow, great things were always beginning, and always overcoming false steps and setbacks along the way. An epitaph Franklin wrote for himself, probably in the late 1720s, brilliantly captures the essence of a worldly, yet deathless, American Dream in which sins and mistakes made along the way were merely "errata"—the spiritual equivalent of typographical errors—in a process of self-realization:

The Body of
B. Franklin,
Printer;
Like the Cover of an old Book,

Its Contents torn out,
And strip of its lettering and Gilding,
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be totally lost:
For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more,
In a new & more perfect Edition.
Corrected and amended
by the Author *

Franklin's American Dream was not universally admired by his contemporaries or heirs. John Adams, himself a man of relatively modest beginnings who served with Franklin as ambassador to France during the Revolution, was exasperated by what he termed his "continual dissipation," dissipation which Adams felt grew out of Franklin's all too complacent view of himself and humanity in general. Mark Twain, who had little patience for the pieties of either man, spent much of his career repeatedly satirizing the sage of Philadelphia: "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow just as well," he wrote in an 1870 sketch, "The Late Benjamin Franklin." Yet the core components of Franklin's dream as expressed in his writings—trust in the basic decency of human beings, a belief that earthly and heavenly rewards are broadly consonant, and, above all, a serene confidence that both can be attained—reflected the core convictions of a great many Americans of his time. Here, truly, was a Founding Father of the American Dream.

What is so enchanting as the American Dream? To be possessed of that Dream presupposes that, like St. Paul, one must be obedient to the vision splendid.

—Edgar DeWitt Jones, *The Influence of Henry Clay upon Abraham Lincoln*, 1952

If anything, Franklin's core convictions were even more widely embraced in the decades after his death in 1790. But they also under-

* Perhaps not surprisingly, Franklin later decided on a considerably simpler epigraph for the headstone he ultimately shared with his wife: "Benjamin and Deborah Franklin 1790." (She died in 1774 while he was on a long sojourn in England.)

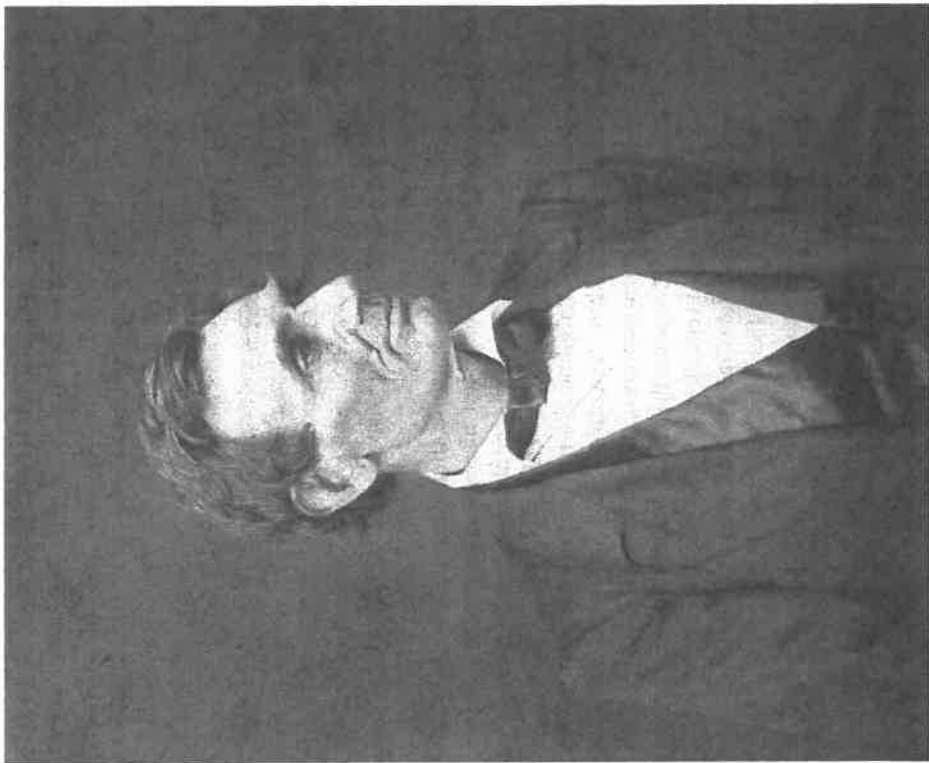
country. There the force of tradition, familial ties, and, above all, the force of slavery limited the appeal and efficacy of the self-made man. There was a place for such figures in southern mythology—men who began with virtually nothing did amass fortunes, as vividly depicted in later novels like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*—but because of the contradictions involved, being “self-made” through slave labor was a wobblier construct.

Indeed, while slavery had been a powerful presence in American life for well over two centuries by 1850, it was increasingly considered a threat to the Dream of Upward Mobility by a small but growing number of people. These people did not necessarily have any direct economic interest in slavery—nor, for that matter, did they always care whether it was wrong. What concerned them most was the way the peculiar institution compromised their view of themselves and their country. Such people felt the legitimacy of both depended upon not having too great an ideological gap between what actually was and what the Declaration of Independence said should be. This was, however, a relatively subtle point of view and would have a hard time competing with the more visceral appeals to resentment and narrow self-interest that are the usual staples of political discourse. Fortunately, one of the men who took up this challenge was no ordinary politician—in part because he came as close as any American to actually being an authentically self-made man.

I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.

—Abraham Lincoln, speech to the 166th Ohio Regiment, Washington, D.C., August 22, 1864

In 1860, journalist John Locke Scripps of the *Chicago Tribune* proposed to write a campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln for the upcoming



DREAM CANDIDATE Abraham Lincoln in 1860 (photographed by Alexander Hesler). “It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life,” he told a journalist around the time this portrait was made—one of the great fibs of American political history. Few people incarnated the American Dream more vividly; no one expressed its possibilities, and limits, more powerfully. (Wm. B. Becker Collection/photographymuseum.com)

presidential campaign. But the candidate expressed skepticism about the project. "It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life," Lincoln replied, in Scripps's recollection to Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon. "It can all be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in Gray's *Elegy*, 'the short and simple annals of the poor.'" Lincoln was alluding to the once-famous 1750 poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," by the English poet Thomas Gray:

*Let not ambition mock their useful toil;
Their homely joys, and desir'dy obscure;
Nor grandeur hear with disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.*

"That's my life, and that's all you or anyone else can make of it," Lincoln told Scripps.

This is untrue, and Lincoln knew it: there was a great deal to be made of his early life. The managers of his successful presidential campaign of 1860 relentlessly exploited his humble beginnings (though by the time he ran for president he was a wealthy lawyer) and gave Lincoln the nickname of "the Rail-splitter," a moniker that emphasized his familiarity with manual labor. Lincoln's entire public persona—his homely looks and unkempt appearance, his celebrated sense of humor, the self-effacing modesty he repeatedly deployed while running for and holding office (evident in his remark to Scripps)—was leveraged on his modest beginnings and what he had made of them. Even his oratory eloquence derived its power from Lincoln's reputed poverty; it was made, and heard, as a testament to how democracy could elevate Everyman.

Such an understanding was possible because of Lincoln's great conviction in this regard and because the facts of the case, slim as they are, tend to support him. The only surviving child of his parents, he was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. His ancestors apparently came to Hingham, Massachusetts, during the first wave of Puritan migration and in subsequent generations spread into Pennsylvania and Virginia. Lincoln's paternal grandfather, also Abraham Lincoln, was killed by Indians while clearing farm land. There is virtually no information on the family of Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks. She died when he was a child, though his stepmother,

Sarah Bush Johnston, raised him as one of her own brood, and the two seemed to regard each other with great affection (she outlived him).

Lincoln's father, Thomas, migrated first to Indiana—"it was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals in the woods," his son told another newspaper biographer in 1859—and then to Illinois in search of land uncomplicated by disputes over legal titles (a sign, it should be said, that the Lincolns were not exactly impoverished, as Thomas Lincoln sought to own land, not rent it). "[A]braham] though very young was large of age, and had an axe put into his hands at once," he wrote of his boyhood, "and from that till within his twentieth year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument—less, of course, plowing and harvesting seasons." Lincoln had little in the way of a formal schooling; in his own words, there was "absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education" in the rural Midwest of the early nineteenth century. Still, he somehow learned to read and write, and "the little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under necessity."

When he was nineteen years old, Lincoln got his first chance to see the wider world: he and a friend made a flatboat trip down the Mississippi River to New Orleans with a cargo of farm produce. During the trip they had to fight off seven black men who tried to rob and kill them. Three years later, he made a second trip with a stepbrother and cousin; upon his return he settled in the village of New Salem, Illinois, where he had a brief, unsuccessful career as a dry goods merchant. He subsequently worked as a hired hand, a surveyor, and a local postmaster, all the while reading avidly and carefully. He also served in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War against the Creek Indians and took lifelong pride in the fact that he was elected captain.

This background became virtually his only credential when Lincoln made his first bid for public office in 1832, seeking to represent Sangamon County, where New Salem was located, in the state legislature. He finished eighth in a field of thirteen for four slots, "the only time I have ever been beaten by the people," he later explained in a rare boast that suggested the depth of his investment in democratic values.* What is most remarkable about the campaign, however, is the way in which it

* Lincoln lost in his 1858 attempt to represent Illinois in the U.S. Senate, but in that race the votes were actually made by electors in the state legislature, which was apportioned on the basis of an 1850 census that did not fully reflect his party's strength.

sentatives, where he insisted on making a moral issue of slavery whenever he could. For everybody else, the real issues in the country were over the best means for promoting upward mobility for whites, like how to finance the building of transcontinental railroads, or deciding whether or not immigrants should be allowed to come here and pursue upward mobility themselves.

But slavery managed to come in through the back door. The problem can be traced back to the very issue that gave Lincoln trouble: the Mexican War. He opposed it on principle, but that rapidly became a moot point. Far less moot was a proposal made by the Pennsylvania congressman David Willmot that slavery be excluded from all territory conquered from Mexico. With that nation virtually prostrate by the end of 1847, the question of how much of it to take, and in what form, became very much a burning issue.

It's important to note that at this stage of the game it wasn't exactly a matter of the South wanting Mexico and the North not wanting it. Some southerners wanted no part of a creole nation that would dilute its European blood further; some northerners wanted more U.S. territory in any form it might take. But in the ensuing years, opinions hardened along increasingly sectional lines. The regions became increasingly suspicious of each other, and the Whig Party, which had previously been national and which had elected two presidents, collapsed in the South and dwindled up North.

This was tragic to many, not for racial reasons but because it made it difficult to accomplish things that in theory had little to do with slavery. A very good example of this was the building of the transcontinental railroad, one of whose major champions was Stephen A. Douglas. Like Lincoln, the Vermont-born Douglas had grown up in Illinois and came up through the state legislature—Lincoln as a Whig, Douglas as a Democrat. Unlike him, Douglas ascended rapidly through his party's ranks and as U.S. senator was a major figure in national politics. It was Douglas who, in collaboration with the mortally ailing Henry Clay, shepherded through a series of provisions in the so-called Compromise of 1850.

In the years that followed, Douglas repeatedly asserted he didn't care whether slavery was voted up or voted down in new states. (In fact, this was not exactly true; Douglas was generally antislavery.) But he cared very deeply about the chartering of transcontinental railroads, and in 1854 he hoped the first one or ones would run through Illinois or

Michigan, where he had invested heavily in real estate. In order to get Congress to go along with his plan, he knew he was going to have to offer southern congressmen some incentive, especially because some political and business leaders wanted that line to run through Texas. It appears Douglas thought he could get his railroad bill passed by offering a bill stipulating that residents of the northern territories of Kansas and Nebraska, through which new railroads were likely to run, could decide for themselves whether to allow slavery when they became states. Actually, he originally tried to be vague on this point until southern senators pushed him into making it explicit by actually repealing the old line created by the Missouri Compromise.

Douglas's proposal—known as "popular sovereignty"—proved explosively controversial. Proponents argued for its simplicity; opponents argued it sounded more straightforward than it really was, since nothing could stop slaves from moving in *before* Kansas or Nebraska became a state. (Imagine a community trying to decide whether it was going to be alcohol-free *after* drinkers, liquor stores, and bars were already settled there.) Douglas shepherded the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law in 1854, but the price was disastrous: he split his own Democratic Party and, in rendering the Missouri Compromise dead, handed his opponents the issue they used to create a new party. Ironically, Douglas's subsequent railroad bill—which for him was a major, if not *the* major, reason for the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the first place—could not get through Congress. (Lincoln signed it when he became president.)

The new political party Douglas inadvertently helped spawn called itself Republican, in self-conscious homage to the ideology of the Founders. Its membership was a hybrid of old Whigs, nativists opposed to allowing immigrants into the country, and disaffected Democrats united in their distaste for slavery (and African Americans generally). Lincoln joined two years after it formed, and the strength of the speeches he gave opposing the Kansas-Nebraska Act helped him become its nominee to run against Douglas when he came up for reelection in 1858.

Lincoln was appalled by the doctrine of popular sovereignty. He had always viewed slavery as a necessary evil, and he believed that the Founding Fathers had as well. And he believed, as he believed they did, that it would eventually die out. But now it seemed that slavery was getting new protection and even being affirmed as a positive good. Moreover, in its 1857 decision *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the U.S. Supreme Court

ruling not only that slaves were property, not citizens, and thus had no rights, but also that the rights of whites included owning, moving, and retrieving such property wherever they pleased—and compelling others to respect those rights. Freedom meant the right of some people to own others. Slavery was not receding; it wasn't even holding its own. Instead, it seemed to be becoming more powerful.

Why did this matter so much to Lincoln? This brings us to the crux of the matter. Lincoln was not opposed to slavery because he cared very much about *slaves*. He was opposed because he cared very, very deeply about *whites* (and unlike some of his fellow Republicans, he cared about *all whites*). Slavery was bad for *them*. And it was bad because it contaminated and, if left unchecked, would eventually destroy the American Dream in which he believed so deeply.

How did slavery corrode Lincoln's American Dream? In two important ways. The first was economic. The presence of slavery impeded upward mobility not only of African Americans but also of European Americans, because the slave economy narrowed the prospects of men without the ever-greater amounts of capital necessary to invest in slaves. So, for example, a small farmer who employed hired hands for wages was at a distinct competitive disadvantage compared with a large plantation owner who paid his slaves nothing (and whose slaves had children who then also became assets of the plantation owner). Slavery hurt not just that small farmer but his hired hands as well, who would be viewed as too expensive relative to slaves; indeed, it was the relatively high cost of indentured servants that had led to the introduction of slavery into the southern economy in the first place. Of course, one could also claim that the factory owner who paid his workers a pittance—and who, moreover, didn't even have to pay for the upkeep on his workers—was as bad as any plantation owner, if not worse. This was the frequent riposte of slave owners, and the emerging factory system in the Northeast in particular gave force to the charge. But Lincoln lived in a time and place where it was still possible to believe, as he put it, that "there is no such thing as a man who is a hired laborer, of necessity, remaining in his early condition." He went on to render his understanding of the matter:

A young man finds himself of an age to be dismissed from parental control; he has for his capital nothing but his two strong hands that God has given him, a heart willing to labor, and a freedom to choose the mode of

his work, and the manner of his employer; he has got no soil nor shop, and he avails himself of the opportunity of hiring himself to some man who has capital to pay him a fair day's wages for a fair day's work. He is benefited by availing himself of that privilege. He works industriously, he behaves soberly, and the result of a year or two's labor is a surplus of capital. Now he buys land on his own hook; he settles, marries, begets sons and daughters, and in course of time he too has enough capital to hire some new beginner.

Lincoln regarded this a description of reality, and an attractive one it was. Virtue and reward are locked in a symbiotic embrace; it seems like a description of heaven on earth. Of course, he wasn't alone in subscribing to what was known as "free labor ideology": the seeds of Franklin's vision were bearing fruit. To be sure, plenty of people in Lincoln's time regarded it as sentimental nonsense. Conversely, however, there were plenty of people *after* Lincoln's time—too many people after Lincoln's time, truth be told—who did not.

For Lincoln, the dangers associated with upward mobility were not its internal tensions and contradictions but rather threats from those who could prevent it from fully taking root. Unlike the dreams of many of his contemporaries, Lincoln's was an expansive one; indeed, its very legitimacy depended upon its expansiveness. In the last of seven celebrated public debates he held with Douglas throughout Illinois, he explained why it was important to keep slavery from spreading—for whites' sake:

Now irrespective of the moral aspect as to whether there is a right or wrong in enslaving a negro, I am still in favor of our new Territories being in such a condition that white men may find a home—may find some spot where they can better their condition—where they can settle upon new soil and better their condition in life. I am in favor of this not merely (I say it here as I have elsewhere) for our own people who are born amongst us, but as an outlet for *free white people everywhere*, the world over—in which Hans and Baptiste and Patrick, and all other men from all the world, may find new homes and better their conditions in life.

If, as Lincoln feared, new slave states were formed, the Hanses, Baptists, and Patricks of the world would not be inclined to come here—or would be defeated by the slave system when they did.

Yet even more than the economic problem posed by slavery, what might be termed its psychological implications troubled Lincoln. He began thinking this through in some notes he made to himself around the time of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. "If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B.—why not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally that he may enslave A.?" he asked. One answer might be on the basis of color, but if so, Lincoln noted, than one could theoretically be enslaved by anyone with skin fairer than his own. And if the basis of slavery was intellectual capacity, did not a person have a right to enslave anyone with less? In the years that followed, Lincoln explored such questions publicly and privately, eventually distilling his own position into three simple sentences: "As I would not be a *slave*, I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

And democracy, it almost went without saying, was for Lincoln the greatest form of government. He realized this. was not something everyone took for granted. "Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of equal rights to men, as I have, in part, stated them," he wrote in notes to himself in 1854. "Ours began by affirming those rights. They said, some men are too *ignorant* and *vicious* to share in government . . . We proposed to give *all* a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together. We made the experiment, and the fruit is before us."

What scared Lincoln was that slavery weakened this affirmation of democracy and inculcated bad moral and political habits. The end result would be the very thing he talked about two decades earlier in his Young Men's Lyceum Address. In an 1858 speech during his Senate campaign, he articulated these fears again but framed them this time in terms of a slavery issue that now dominated his, and the nation's, consciousness. In language of rare moral power and emotional urgency, Lincoln addressed those whose hatred of African Americans he found not only appalling but truly dangerous:

Now, when by all these means [e.g., popular sovereignty, the *Dred Scott* decision, etc.] you have succeeded in dehumanizing the negro; when you have put him down, and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in the darkness like that which

broods over the spirits of the damned; are you quite sure the demon which you have roused *will not turn and rend you?*

"What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence?" Lincoln asked. Was it the nation's impregnable coastline, its army or navy? No. "All of them may be turned against our liberties, without making us stronger or weaker for the struggle," he explained. Instead,

our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius for independence, and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises.

In short, the great weapon in the preservation of the American Dream was the "political religion" he spoke of in 1838.

This religion was codified in sacred scripture that functioned as a guide to action: the Declaration of Independence, a document that gained new significance for Lincoln in the 1850s. As he would later explain, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." In the resounding affirmation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, he clearly recognized what he called "the sheet anchor" of American identity. Lincoln took this affirmation very seriously. And because he did, he could not help but feel that blacks, no less than whites, were entitled to it.

This was, however, a more complex matter than I'm making it sound, and his understanding of the Declaration was by no means universal. For starters, any assertion that slaves were included in the Declaration of Independence must confront the obvious fact that the Founding Fathers themselves were slaveholders. Yet for Lincoln this was less a matter of hypocrisy than an intractable problem that defied immediate resolution. "They found the institution here," he told the crowd at the sixth Lincoln-Douglas debate. "They did not make it so, but they left it so because they knew no way to get rid of it at that time." The Founders' silence about slavery in the Constitution and their determination to keep slavery from the territories testified to their

inated an old southern Whig, whose constituency was mostly the states of the upper South. Lincoln won the four-man race with less than 40 percent of the electorate, virtually all of it in the North. The American Dream of Upward Mobility seemed to have been realized in its purest form: a poor boy born in a log cabin had been elected the president of the United States. But his very election seemed to portend the end of those United States, and with it the dream of the boy. The South would not abide the results, and the war came.

The Civil War was a huge personal and political vortex for Lincoln, in which he was forced to consider all kinds of matters—notably military strategy—that had never previously concerned him. Yet despite the burdens and distractions that preoccupied him, he never lost sight of his American Dream. Indeed, the war proved important for it in two important respects.

The first is that for Abraham Lincoln, the war was an opportunity to reaffirm the nation's commitment to the Dream of Upward Mobility. This is work he began even before taking office. In February of 1861 Lincoln made a train tour from Springfield to Washington, giving speeches along the way. There was a reluctant quality to many of these speeches—he wanted to say as little as possible about the war situation before he was in a position to do anything about it—but there was one theme he repeated throughout the trip: the American Dream of Upward Mobility as both a beautiful promise and a moral imperative. "I hold that while man exists, it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind," he told a crowd of Germans in Cincinnati, reaffirming his support of immigration. He reiterated this idea a little over a week later in Philadelphia. "I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy together," he told a gathering at Independence Hall, site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. "It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance." As president, Lincoln was, as he put it in Indianapolis, "an accidental instrument, temporary, and to serve but a limited time." But while he was in office it was his job to embody the Dream. As he said in Philadelphia, "If this country cannot be saved without giving up that

principle—I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on the spot than to surrender it."

In the months and years that followed—culminating in the assassination he seemed to chillingly predict—he grappled with the two great and pressing questions of the era: would the Union be saved? And: what would become of slavery? Then and since, the attention paid to these two questions has obscured the degree to which both were in effect two aspects of a larger question: how do we sustain the American Dream?

As far as Union versus slavery went, Lincoln was unambiguously clear about his own priorities. "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery," he told newspaper editor Horace Greeley in August of 1862. "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."

In fact, Lincoln already had a plan he would announce the following month: the Emancipation Proclamation, which, issued in Lincoln's constitutional capacity as commander-in-chief, freed slaves in rebelling states strictly on the basis of military exigency. In one sense, this was little more than a symbolic gesture, since Lincoln was in effect freeing slaves precisely where he had no actual power to do so. But as he and others recognized, he was setting a process in motion that would destroy slavery altogether. The very timing of the proclamation was designed in a successful public relations bid to prevent foreign intervention in the war, and it fostered desertions on the part of slaves who now had the prospect of freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation was also reinforced by Lincoln's support for a constitutional amendment to end slavery everywhere, which was passed by loyal states and signed by the President, who was reelected in 1864, at the very end of his first term of office. A long-standing goal—what for others was actually a separate long-standing American Dream—had finally been realized. Years before, when he began his Senate bid, Lincoln had declared, "A house divided cannot stand. I believe that this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free." Now, the house was reunited on the basis he favored. This was a tremendous achievement.

And yet, during his first presidential campaign, Lincoln had repeatedly expressed a sentiment that was arresting in its inversion of the familiar truism that might makes right. Instead, he asked, in a formula-

tion rendered most memorably in a famous speech in New York, "Let us have faith that *right* makes *might*." His course in ending slavery seemed to fulfill this prescription: doing the right thing (abolishing slavery) helped secure the cause (saving the Union). Or, to put it another way, he did well by doing good.

There has always been something about this that has left me a little uneasy. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," Lincoln wrote in 1864, and yet for his entire political life, the fight against slavery was simply a means, not an end. The end, presumably, was Union. But why was Union so important? Would two, or many, United States have been such an awful thing? Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the rebelling Confederacy, who served in Congress with Lincoln back in the 1840s and was friendly with him long afterward, later wrote that for Lincoln, "the Union with him, in sentiment, rose to the sublimity of religious mysticism." There's a sense of bemusement, even exasperation, in Stephens's observation with which one can sympathize.

What is ultimately apparent, however, is that Union was not an end any more than abolition was. It, too, was a means. The true end was the American Dream, a goal that sometimes seemed submerged but would nevertheless resurface again and again throughout the war. Take, for example, this passage from Lincoln's address to a special session of Congress held on July 4, 1861, on the brink of the first great battles:

This is essentially a People's contest. On the one side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life. Yielding to partial, and temporary measures [like the presence of slavery in 1776] from necessity, this is the leading object of the government for those whose existence we contend.

The following year, in his annual message to Congress, Lincoln followed up his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation by making a formal request for a constitutional amendment to end slavery altogether. In giving freedom to the slave, he explained, the government assured freedom to the free. In so doing, lawmakers would preserve what Lincoln called "the last, best hope of earth," a place where

upward mobility would thrive without hypocrisy or the challenge of alternative ideologies that would subvert it.

But not all of Lincoln's invocations of the American Dream were made at the level of formal oratory in great halls. "This government must be preserved in spite of the acts of any man or set of men. It is worth your every effort," he told a group of soldiers returning from the front on their way home to Ohio in 1864. "Nowhere in the world is presented a government of so much liberty and equality. To the humblest and poorest among us are held out the highest privileges and positions. The present moment finds me at the White House, yet there is as good a chance for your children as there was for my father's." (So much for Lincoln's claim that it would be a "great piece of folly" to make anything of his early life.)

Perhaps you agree that the American Dream—a specific American Dream of Upward Mobility that fused earthly goals and heavenly means—is a more coherent, even attractive, justification for Lincoln's life and behavior than mere Union. But if you do, you might well share a sense that it somehow isn't quite adequate, either. It is surely an attractive vision. But it just doesn't quite seem enough when one considers the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, or the almost cavalier attitude Lincoln had toward African Americans themselves.

Which brings me to my second point about the impact of the Civil War on Lincoln: it revised—maybe a better term would be "chastened"—his notion of the American Dream. The principal form this chastening took was a growing skepticism over one of the key premises of the American Dream of Upward Mobility from the time of Benjamin Franklin: the ability to shape one's destiny. Perhaps, Lincoln was increasingly inclined to speculate, there was an invisible hand with objectives far removed from things like success in the marketplace. "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party," he noted to himself some time during the late summer of 1862, on the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation. "I am almost ready to say this is true—that God wills this contest."

Almost, but not quite. Actually, the really remarkable thing here is not Lincoln's reluctance to give up his sense of human agency (that would come) but rather that God would be playing such a large role in his private deliberations. Lincoln routinely mentioned the Almighty in his speeches, showed deep knowledge of the Bible, and had strong

moral values regarding issues like slavery. But he belonged to no church, never attended services regularly, and during his campaign for Congress in 1846 was attacked by his opponent, an evangelical Methodist minister, for his religious infidelity. The charge was serious enough for Lincoln to publish a response, in which he asserted that "I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion." (As Gore Vidal, an often caustic skeptic about virtually everyone except Lincoln, points out in an introduction to an edition of Lincoln writings, "the key word, of course, is 'open.'") Yet in that same statement, Lincoln also said that "in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the 'Doctrine of Necessity'—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held to rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument. The habit of arguing thus, however, I have, entirely left off for more than five years."

There are a number of things that are interesting about this statement, particularly in light of Lincoln's subsequent career. First of all, the Doctrine of Necessity he spoke of was hardly the typical ideology of the freethinking atheist—it derived from Puritan ideology, emphasizing the degree to which men and women could not know if they were saved. Saying that he no longer had the "habit" of making this argument might reflect a growing need for tact on his part politically or that he no longer believed in the doctrine. In any event, there was a notably ecumenical quality to Lincoln's invocation of religion for the next fifteen years, and even his meditations in 1862 were a strictly personal affair.

Yet as the war dragged on, his youthful convictions resurfaced, and he began making the argument again. By the final year of the war, Lincoln was no longer "almost" ready to concede God's will: he did so readily. "I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity," he wrote in a letter in April of 1864. "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised, or expected. God alone can claim it." Two weeks later, he went further, doing something he never did before: making his convictions public (albeit in a typically subtle way). "When the war began, three years ago, neither party, nor any man, expected it would last till now," he told a gathering in Baltimore. "Each looked for the end, in

some way, long ere today. Neither did any anticipate that domestic slavery would be much affected by the war. But here we are; the war has not ended and slavery has been much affected—how much needs not now to be recounted. So true it is that man proposes, and God disposes." God, it appeared, cared more about slavery than Union: as Lincoln was speaking, the former was clearly dying and it was far from clear the latter would survive. (Nor was it clear Lincoln himself would be reelected, dealing as he was with a military stalemate and challenges from within his own party.)

Still, he told the crowd, there were reasons for optimism: "We can see the past, though we may not claim to have directed it; and seeing it, in this case, we feel more hopeful and confident in the future." In the classic formulation of the Dream of Upward Mobility, the past is irrelevant—except as a measuring stick for anticipated success. Now, however, the past is a source of hope in its own right. Moreover, Lincoln was no longer expressing the view, as he had for most his career, that one could will an outcome through hard work and a clean conscience. One simply had to trust in the ways of God—just as Augustine, a favorite of the Puritans, trusted that the fiery trials through which men would pass would lead them to the City of God.

The culmination of this line in Lincoln's thinking was his Second Inaugural Address, which he delivered on March 4, 1865. By this point in the war, slavery was abolished, the Union was virtually saved, and the end of the bloodshed was in sight. One might well imagine another man—especially another man with a deep investment in the American Dream—marking the occasion as a moment of triumph. It would not be altogether implausible, after all, to argue that the outcome really was a matter of right making might, of conviction carrying the day, and, above all, of a man from modest circumstances propelling himself to the pinnacle of national achievement, realizing a dream, and then leading his people to save that dream for others. Was this not, in fact, a crowning achievement, the culmination of all they fought for?

Amazingly, the answer was no. In this brief address—it could not have taken more than ten minutes—Lincoln repeated some of the ideas he had been mulling over for the past three years: that the course of the war had not been desired or expected; that its course had been unpredictable, and that both sides had invoked God's aid against the other. But, he said, God had his own idea about what this war was really about, and it seemed to be punishment for the sins of *both* sides:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-mah's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Spiritually speaking, we are back in the world of the Puritans. The diction and themes of this passage call to mind the Gospel of Matthew, in which Christ's betrayal is both inevitable and blameworthy—and which influenced John Calvin's theories of predestination that proved so influential for the Puritans. One senses the death of Lincoln's Dream of Upward Mobility here, even as an older American Dream was reborn.

"Everyone likes a compliment," Lincoln wrote in thanks to the New York editor and political fixer Thurlow Weed, who he mistakenly believed had praised the Second Inaugural. Lincoln said he expected the address to wear "as well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced." Perhaps he was especially gratified by Weed's putative praise because, as he explained, he did not believe it was very popular: "Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them." Nevertheless, he wrote, "it is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it." A month later Lincoln was assassinated, an almost biblical casualty of the war he prosecuted with a firmness of purpose and humility that only grew more remarkable with the passage of time.

The Dream of Upward Mobility, however, lived on. If Franklin, Emerson, Clay, and others were its Old Testament prophets, then Lincoln was its Jesus Christ. In the decades that followed, countless admirers proclaimed themselves disciples of the Dream, spreading the Good News to anyone who would listen: that in America, it was possible to

make your own destiny. Virtually none of these figures adopted the skepticism that shaded Lincoln's own understanding of the Dream as he aged, and all too many indulged a sense of complacency about the likelihood of success—and their own role in achieving it. Conversely, the Dream also served as a powerful vehicle for blaming those who did not succeed and for distracting those who might otherwise have sought structural changes by seducing them into thinking they weren't really necessary.

If there was one redemptive element in all of this, it lay in something that Lincoln cared very deeply about: that the purview of the Dream be expanded as widely as possible. By the end of the twentieth century, it wasn't just Hans, Baptiste, and Patrick who were pursuing—and occasionally achieving—upward mobility, but Elizabeth, Elena, and Kanesha, too. The Russian-Jewish immigrant Mary Antin, who rose from illiteracy to become a successful writer (albeit one whose later career was marked by mental illness, financial insecurity, and disillusionment), felt with special intensity the very things Lincoln spoke about. "As I read how the patriots planned the Revolution, and the women gave their sons to die in battle, and the heroes led to victory, and the rejoicing people set up the Republic, it dawned on me gradually what was meant by *my country*," she explained in her own 1912 memoir *The Promised Land*. "The people all desiring noble things, and striving for them together, defying their oppressors, giving their lives for each other—all this made it my country." One is reminded here of something Lincoln said about immigrants and the Declaration of Independence in a speech in Chicago in 1858: "They have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration." And while you may consider it a matter of wishful thinking on my part, I find it hard to believe that Lincoln would have been all that upset to learn that one of the most vivid exponents of the American Dream a century and a half later is Oprah Winfrey, who built a media empire largely on pluck and the force of her own mythology as a self-made woman.

In the end, of course, the Dream of Upward Mobility will prove every bit as mortal as Lincoln himself. And despite all the passion he brought to it, I think he always knew, even before he became president, that it would. I say so because of the way he ended a speech in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in September of 1859. The purpose of Lincoln's speech was to honor the rapid pace of Progress in the nineteenth century and