

Is America an Experiment?

*Vitalizing Conservatism in Minnesota
and the Nation*



Wilfred M. McClay

Center of the American Experiment is a nonpartisan, tax-exempt, public policy and educational institution that brings conservative and free market ideas to bear on the hardest problems facing Minnesota and the nation.

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Introduction

Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President, Center of the American Experiment: This exceptionally creative and interesting oral essay is based on Prof. Wilfred McClay's remarks at an American Experiment Luncheon Forum earlier in the year. It was the first in a series of year-long Center events aimed at vitalizing conservatism in Minnesota and the nation and marking – in perfectly nonpartisan ways – the Republican National Convention to be held in St. Paul in September.

Just two days before Professor McClay spoke, for example, we released a superb symposium featuring 40 writers addressing the seldom-asked question, “What Does It Mean to be an Urban Conservative?” Next up in July are two more thematically tied events: A Luncheon Forum with Prof. Joseph Fornieri on “Lincoln’s Political Faith: Does It Still Have a Place in Presidential Leadership?” And a second symposium, this one titled “Principle and Pragmatism: Getting the Balance Right,” which will include the views of upwards of 30 scholars, politicians, and other men and women.

As for Professor McClay, I hate to admit it, but I finally became familiar with his work in any substantial and deserved sense only last year. First, it was his lead essay in the January 2007 *Commentary*, which asked the question: “Is Conservatism Finished?” His answer – which has something to do with why we invited him to speak – was “No”. Then I finally caught up with a previous lead essay of his, in a 1998 issue of the *Public Interest*, in which he posed the same question he raises and answers here, “Is American an Experiment?”

Bill McClay holds the Sun Trust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he’s also professor of history. Before Tennessee, he taught at Georgetown, Tulane, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Dallas.

He is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington; a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy center, again in DC; and he serves on the National Council on the Humanities, which is the advisory board for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

His books include the award-winning *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America*; *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*; *The Student's Guide to U.S. History*; and he's currently writing the first major biography of the pivotal American sociologist David Riesman.

Married with two college-age children, Professor McClay did his undergraduate work at St. John's College in Annapolis (where he grew up), and his doctorate at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Wilfred M. McClay: A visit to one of the great American historical sites helps us remember our origins, and thereby remember a part of who we are. Whenever one visits a reconstructed colonial American setting – and here I am thinking not only of a relatively elegant town like Williamsburg, but also of somewhat more spare or rugged places such as Jamestown or Old Sturbridge Village or Plimouth Plantation or St. Mary's City – one is forcibly reminded of the tentativeness and fragility of the entire American undertaking.

That impression follows one even into the more famous venues. Go to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Faneuil Hall or the Old North Church in Boston, the Old Senate Chamber at the State House in Annapolis. All are lovely, well-kept sites. Yet one is struck not by their grandeur, but their tininess, their almost self-effacing modesty. Even the most jaded among us may feel compelled to pause for a moment, and ponder the astounding fact that a nation so colossal could have grown from seeds so small. When one thinks about the chaotic and tumultuous social history of Jamestown and early Virginia, or contemplates the half-mad audacity of the New England Puritans, who were convinced that their lonely adventure huddled together in a remote and frigid wilderness was a divinely appointed mission of world-historical importance, one does not sense historical inevitability or destiny. Far from it. The longer and more deeply one studies the American past, the easier it is to imagine that matters could have turned out very differently. It's easier to see

America not as a land of destiny but as something tentative, fragile. As an experiment.

This sense of America as an experiment was also well expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famous address on "The American Scholar" in 1837, when he complained that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." By speaking of "courtly" muses, Emerson wished to remind his listeners of the fiercely anti-monarchical and anti-aristocratic premises undergirding American political life. But the thrust of his remarks went deeper. It urged would-be American writers to find their own way, and treat their European heritage not as a sacred legacy but as an exploitable (and dispensable) resource. And in a different but complementary way, the influential American historian Frederick Jackson Turner propounded a theory of American origins that discounted the "germs" of European culture, and instead found the genius of American democracy arising directly out of the life of the American frontier. Either of these views was likely to lend considerable support to the idea of America as a land of experiment: an ever-unfolding enterprise that was not tied down to any enduring principles or precepts or institutions drawn from the past, but was instead committed to an understanding of human life as open-ended improvisation and unfettered exploration, a perpetual trial-and-error undertaking.

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The language of "experiment" has seen steady use throughout American history. But for whatever reason, this idea, the idea of America as an experiment, has taken hold with a particular vengeance in our contemporary discourse. It is, in fact, so ubiquitous that one stumbles on it virtually every day, without even looking for it. And the usages are often of a very suspicious quality. Let me cite two representative examples.

Marjorie Heins, director of the Arts Censorship Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, casually invoked the idea during the course of a

March 1998 C-SPAN appearance, in connection with the suit brought against the National Endowment for the Arts by controversial performance artist Karen Finley and several others who had been denied NEA grants on the grounds that they offended general standards of decency. Of course, Ms. Heins thought the NEA's denial of funding to the likes of Ms. Finley was deplorable, and marshaled all the most familiar arguments as to why this was the case. But the clinching argument, in her mind, was contained in her declaration that "we are as a nation collectively involved in a great experiment," and that our national commitment to free experimentation demands that we be "mature" enough to "contribute" some portion of our tax dollars to the subsidizing of forms of expression that we do not like. (That it might be more logical to demand such maturity first from those who receive and distribute such federal monies, rather than from the taxpayers who pony them up, was an unexplored alternative, though one that the Supreme Court now appears to have endorsed.)

Another, rather more chilling example of the language of experiment appeared in a roughly contemporary op-ed piece in the *New York Times* by the eminent Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe, dealing with the possibility of human cloning. Tribe argued that it was premature and perhaps unwise for us as a nation to move to prohibit such cloning, and he adduced a variety of grounds for this assertion. At the head of the list was the need to preserve the central importance of experimentation in American culture. A society that privileges certain behaviors as natural and stigmatizes others as unnatural, he wrote, runs the risk of "cutting itself off from vital experimentation," including experimentation with alternative lifestyles. The prohibition of cloning in particular might serve to open a Pandora's Box of reactionary sentiment, ultimately serving to cast a pall of doubt over all those who are experimenting with "unconventional ways of linking erotic attachment, romantic commitment, genetic replication, gestational mothering, and the joys and responsibilities of child rearing." One might have thought that responsible social policy ought

to be directed precisely toward clarifying and strengthening those linkages, and that the word "marriage" might play enough of a role to deserve mention. But the point is that the great experiment that is America must be permitted to go on, no matter what – even if it threatens the very foundations of human dignity.

In both cases, then, we see the idea of America-as-experiment offered as a last refuge of the otherwise unthinkable or indefensible. One often sees the partisans of the most extreme forms of multiculturalism, or advocates of a transformation in the standards of American citizenship, or other opponents of the very idea of a common American culture, making a similar flourish: America is not, in their view, a set of fixed beliefs or standards or customs or laws or codes or institutions. *America is an experiment.* And what, one can almost hear the average contemporary American say, could possibly be wrong with that? Is not experimentation a healthy and wonderful thing? Is not America at its best a nation devoted to individual liberty, and to the pursuit of all the things that inquiring minds want to know?

Even the late Neil Postman, one of the most sensible and perceptive critics of American education and popular culture, suggested in his last book that we ought to install the idea of America as an experiment as *the central narrative of American history*. This means for him that we will now define America as "a perpetual and fascinating question mark," a "series of stunning and dangerous questions" that "will always remain unanswered." Or, as he says in another place, we have always been a nation "formed, maintained, and preserved on the principle of continuous argumentation."

I would submit that, far from being desirable, this is truly a ghastly idea, unrealistic and unappealing. It envisions our national life as something resembling an academic seminar, or an endless television talk show, or worst of all, a 1960s commune. One might be forgiving for thinking this sounds more like something out of Dante than Tocqueville. It mistakes the means for the end, supposing that continuous argumentation itself

can be a *substitute* for truth, rather than a means of discerning truth.

But what may make Postman’s view attractive to many of us is the favorable view we all have of the idea of experiment. One may in fact be taking on one of the few remaining shibboleths of American life in questioning the idea of America as an experiment. Experimentation, we tend to feel, is a wonderful thing, a trademark of individual liberty, the sign of a curious and questioning mind – a quality more inclusive than motherhood, and certainly much healthier than apple pie. A life lived without experiment, we imagine, is doomed to be hidebound, unimaginative, nasty, prudish, and short.

Perhaps. But such statements beg the question of what an experiment is, and of what it might mean to live in a country that embodied an experimental spirit. Is the spirit of experiment the same thing as an endless process of asking “why not?” Is it a sort of endless project of deconstructing the stable, reconfiguring the given, overturning the traditional, and driving our carriages over the bones of the dead, in William Blake’s grisly phrase? Is America the land of anti-traditional tradition, of what Irving Howe called “the American newness”? Is that what we mean by liberty, the liberty to declare independence of everything that has come before us, to discard the tried and embrace the untried – exercising our creativity even if it means reinventing the wheel?

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Clearly this imprecise and sentimental idea of America as an experiment needs to be examined. To do so, we first have to take a closer look at the idea of experiment itself. Dictionaries define experiment in three ways: first, as a test made to demonstrate a known truth; second, as a test to examine the validity of a hypothesis; and third, as a test to determine the efficacy of something previously untried. The Latin roots of the word strongly suggest the guiding idea of *trying* or *testing*. But what should be obvious, in all three definitions, is the fact that experiment is always

related to some specific end, some well-defined goal, some truth, hypothesis, pattern, or principle to be confirmed or disconfirmed. Even trying the efficacy of something untried, which might seem to include the “why not?” school of experimentation, actually doesn’t on closer examination. It doesn’t because the concept of “efficacy” is necessarily related to some very particular and carefully circumscribed end.

Experiment is the indispensable core of modern science, which is in turn a Western product par excellence. But the key to an effective scientific experiment lies in the careful definition of the problem, a definition that does not swerve in midstream, and that always seeks to identify, understand, and harness the real and objective laws of nature, rather than seek to transform or obliterate those laws.

In that sense, the American nation most definitely *was* an experiment at the outset. In particular, it is crystal clear that the Framers of the Constitution, and the early generations of American national political leaders, thought of their handiwork in precisely this way. Alexander Hamilton began the first number of the *Federalist* with the famous speculation that it “seemed to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.” The word “experiment” is not used here, but the concept most certainly is; and the word itself occurs in twenty-four of the papers in the *Federalist* – always in a very practical and unmythical way, with the clear implication that experiments succeed, experiments fail, and that is the process by which knowledge progresses.

In contrast, it’s revealing to ask ourselves whether someone in the position of Marjorie Heins would ever be willing to concede that the “experiment” of subsidizing broadly offensive art had failed. Is there any conceivable evidence that she and others like her would find persuasive? Or, in Mr. Tribe’s

case, can one identify a purpose or end for all this social experimentation – or for that matter, any conceivable set of common values that could take precedence over the sovereign right of self-determining individuals to live experimentally? In that case, what do these two individuals *really* mean by experiment? And what, in general, do contemporary Americans understand it to mean?

In any event, the word “experiment” was used quite conspicuously by George Washington, in his First Inaugural Address, where he echoed Hamilton’s view almost exactly, remarking that “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the *experiment* entrusted to the hands of the American people.”

So Washington himself thought of America as an experiment. But this was best understood as a careful and focused practical experiment, not an open-ended utopian foray in human engineering or consciousness transformation. And the ends of the experiment are made clear in Washington’s statement. They are the preservation of liberty and the republican model of government: freedom and self-governance. Or, as we sometimes put it, ordered liberty. They were not talking about an open-ended commitment to achieving absolute equality of condition, let alone the satisfaction of every desire and the drying of every tear. They had very specific goals in view. The Framers by and large saw this new constitutional order as an informed, realistic, and focused effort to use the knowledge of history and human nature in order to *defy* the known effects of history and human nature.

This was, in itself, a bold and imaginative effort, whose outcome was far from certain. History seemed to teach the doleful lesson that the fate of even the best free republics was the fate of Rome, America’s exemplar *and* its warning. And human nature was perverse and incorrigible, a fact that ensured that the republican form of government would be exceptionally unstable and corruptible. The example of Rome hung over the early nation,

as if it were one of Neil Postman’s gigantic question marks. Everywhere one looked, the adulation of Roman models was evident – in the neoclassical architecture, in the public statuary, and even in the classical *noms de plume* (Publius, Brutus, Cato) chosen by both proponents and opponents of the Constitution. But since even Rome had succumbed, in the end, to the corruptions and ambitions of human nature, that adulation was inevitably double-edged and laced with profound doubt.

So there was plenty to be nervous about in the American experiment. Yet by the time Abraham Lincoln gave his 1838 speech on “The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions,” before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, the results of the experiment were in. “America had been felt to be an undecided experiment,” said Lincoln; “now, it is understood to be a successful one,” having conclusively proved “the capability of a people to govern themselves.” But success, he continued, brought its own perils. As the “patriots of Seventy-Six” who had created the new nation passed away, and a post-revolutionary generation came of age, there was the danger that the commitment to the republic would flag, now that the success of the experiment was no longer at issue, and the younger generation was left without a proper field of activity for its own heroic aspirations. Lincoln worried that “the temple must fall” unless “other pillars” be provided to take the place of the Founding generation, pillars “hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason” rather than the powerful but unsustainable passions that had motivated the first patriots. In a sense, then, Lincoln saw a perpetuation of the spirit of experimentalism, and of experimental urgency, as a part of any effort to perpetuate our political institutions. Perhaps this was why, twenty-five years later at Gettysburg, he recurred to the idea that the Civil War itself was a “testing” of whether the product of such a republican experiment “can long endure.” It was one thing to make a democratic republic work, it was quite another to sustain its working.

* * *

Lincoln was right to raise these issues. Part of the value of the idea of experiment is the sense of alertness and responsibility for our own lives that it awakens in us. If we do not hold up the walls, who will? But, whatever one thinks of his formulation, it seems hard to escape the fact that the scope and character of the experiment were also being slightly redefined by Lincoln and arguably expanded beyond what Washington had in mind – most notably in the Gettysburg Address’s invocation of the war’s call for a “new birth of freedom.” Yet such language seems mild compared to the distended language of Franklin D. Roosevelt, often praised as an example of the pragmatist spirit in American politics. The economic conditions of the day, he declared, demanded “bold, persistent experimentation.” One should not get too fancy about it; instead, “take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.” With such language we have come a long way from the notion that the aim of the experiment is the cultivation of a regime built around ordered liberty. And yet, to give him his due, Roosevelt still clearly linked the process of experimentation with results. Like a good pragmatist, he recognized that an experiment can produce negative results, or even fail altogether.

But the important point to bear in mind is that these examples illustrate how pliable are the uses of the idea of “experiment.” Roosevelt’s language was pointing toward the sense of experiment that we increasingly hear expressed today, one that is more than willing to entertain the transformation of the American people and nation and institutions into something radically different from what they are and have been. In this view, the American project, to the extent we can even talk about such a thing, is unfinished and nothing to take any great pride in – yet. Fortunately, however, nothing is static or fixed. We are continually remaking, reinventing, and recreating ourselves as a people. Democratic ideals are being recast, civic identity is in flux. This is America – anything is possible. Ours is, as the title of popular textbook has it, an “unfinished nation.”

Of course, these things are true to some extent. We are indeed always changing and adapting. America is still a land of extraordinary possibility. And to call America an “unfinished nation” can be viewed as a form of honest affirmation, a way of endorsing an enterprise that has repeatedly fallen far short of its professed ideals, perhaps most notably and shamefully in its treatment over several centuries of African slaves and their descendants. But the question is whether everything is therefore to be open to transformation. A proper experiment requires stability in the object and means by which the experiment is conducted, and in the ends the experiment is designed to achieve. It is one thing to argue that the experiment needs to be conducted more faithfully, and quite another to say that it needs to be redefined or junked altogether. In the historian John Fonte’s telling words, we need to be on our guard about the concept of America as an “unfinished nation,” since this can be employed as “a blank check to argue for the reinvention of the American nation-state from its origins as an experiment in self-government tempered by constitutional liberty, to a permanent cultural revolution.” Thus would the concept of America-as-experiment be transformed into Experimental America.

A salient expression of this theme appears in the late philosopher Richard Rorty’s book, *Achieving Our Nation*, an attempt to revive the fortunes of leftist thought in American political life by urging American academic intellectuals to stop theorizing so much and simply to get back to the business of social transformation. The book was warmly received by those who want to see in it an affirmation of America, and an effort, in accents recalling the glory days of the Popular Front, to recover the mantle of patriotism for the Left. Yet this hope simply does not bear up under scrutiny. Rorty has the considerable virtue of being a clear writer, a virtue that makes it hard to hide the real thrust of what he is saying:

Nobody has yet suggested a viable leftist alternative to the civic religion of which Whitman and Dewey were prophets. That

civic religion centered around taking advantage of traditional pride in American citizenship by substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's principal goal. We were supposed to love our country because it showed promise of being kinder and more generous than other countries. . . . This was a counsel of perfection rather than description of fact. But you cannot urge national political renewal on the basis of descriptions of fact. . . . You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.

There is a lot to ponder here. Consider, for example, the implications of the words, "taking advantage." But the last two sentences are especially startling. What makes them particularly fascinating is the fact that they come from a leading advocate of pragmatism, a philosophy that, whatever else it means, is committed to an emphasis upon the actual, the immediate, the concrete, the particular, as opposed to the ideal or fantastical. One would have thought that a pragmatist would be less of an idealist, would have more respect for the way things are.

But his statement serves to make the point that there are some respects in which America is *not* an experiment, and it is pernicious to talk as if it is. There is a big difference between saying, as Lincoln did, that the great achievements of our fathers are fragile, and ever in need of support and bolstering, and saying that our country does not exist yet, because it does not yet correspond with the dreams of enlightened intellectuals. This is the language of "unfinished nation" taken to its extreme. "Achieving" our country is the sort of ungrammatical phrase that always should be a tip-off that an intellectual heist is taking place. We do not use the word "achieve" in the way Rorty has tried to use it. One accomplishes a task; one does not "accomplish" a country. One lives in it. Unless, that is, one is a pragmatist who urges us to

live in a dream country, rather than the one that actually sustains us.

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A more serious way of making this point is to say that we cannot live in the world provisionally. Otherwise, we will reach the end of our lives without ever having begun them. A far better pragmatist, William James, understood this fully. We *must* make choices, ultimate choices, merely to live. We are not born into a vacuum, or on probation from reality. We have specific fathers, mothers, contexts in which our duties and obligations are shaped. Our duties are to them, not to the fathers, mothers, and others that we would have preferred to have, had we been able to create the universe in a manner more after our own hearts. We cannot withhold ourselves from our country until it meets USDA standards of purity. We do not have it in our power to reinvent the world first, and then and only then begin to live in it. The past has a reality, has inescapable sway, has authority over us. And we cannot be nurtured by that past until we acknowledge its reality.

A primal love of one's country, like the primal and inexplicable love of Being itself, constitutes an enormous emotional and spiritual resource, to be drawn upon in all the endeavors of one's life by those fortunate enough to have it. Such love is not synonymous with complacency. Nor is it synonymous with any particular ideological commitment or political identification. But it is incompatible with the idea of America as an open-ended experiment, an entity yet to be achieved, in which all options are open, all traditions are subject to dissolution, all claims are revocable, and whose Constitution is an amorphous *living* document that means what our judges and law professors tell us it means today, when they are not creating new things out of whole cloth. If everything is open to change, then nothing finally matters but the narcissistic self, the one still point left in a turning world. But this is a recipe for disaster, for lives stunted by the false excitement of

a provisionality that is, at best, nothing more than an extended adolescence.

My point, simply, is that experimentation cannot be an end in itself; the very concept disintegrates at the first analytical touch. The experiment of America, like all experiments, means nothing unless it is undertaken for the sake of what is not experimental. And for the sake of those convictions, beliefs, and fundamental commitments embodied in the term “ordered liberty.” ■



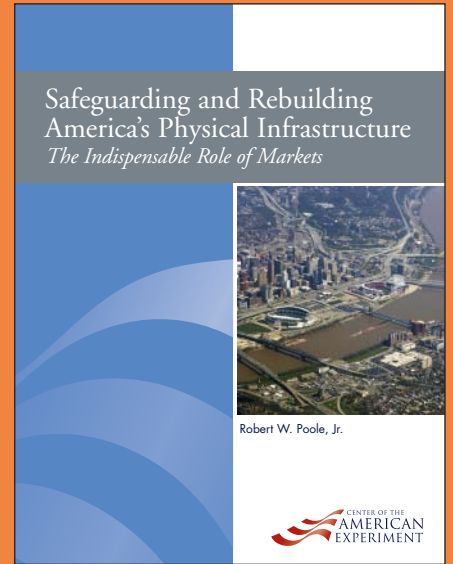
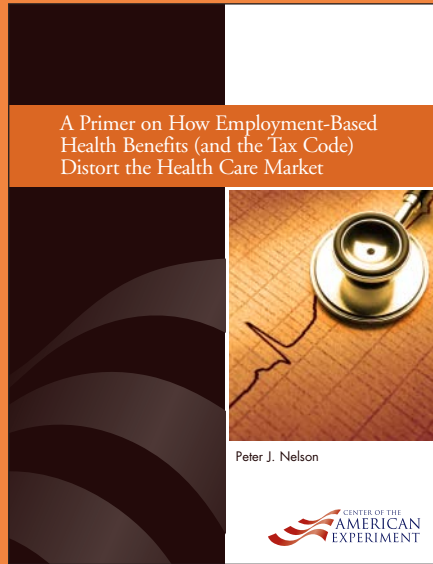
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