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"The Origins and Nature of American Nationalism"

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Portland State College

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HOST: As many of you know, tonight's lecture in the Portland State College series is also the first of another series. After learning of the resignation of President Cramer about a year ago, the faculty of Portland State established the John Francis Cramer lecture as an expression of our continuing respect for the man who led this college during the first three years of its official, chartered, christened, degree-granting, storm-tossed, embattled, bursting-at-the-seams existence.

I think it's fair to say that this was an acute case of manifest destiny over which President Cramer presided with firmness, tact, and great ability. It takes time for any event to become established as a meaningful and important part of the life and tradition of a college. It's our hope that the John Francis Cramer lecture, as it is offered in each successive year, will become such an event in the life of this college.

Tonight's speaker, we are sure, will do much to invest this new series with the importance we want it to have as a tribute to Dr. John Cramer, who was our president and remains on this campus as one of our colleagues. Dr. George Hoffmann, professor of American History and chairman of the Social Science Division, will introduce our guest and speaker.

GEORGE HOFFMANN: Friends of Portland State College, it's a pleasure indeed to introduce so distinguished a historian as Dr. Henry Steele Commager, adjunct professor of History at Columbia University and professor of American History and Civilization, American Studies at Amherst College. Dr. Commager was born in Pittsburgh, received his Bachelor of Philosophy degree from the University of Chicago, Master of Arts from the University of Chicago, and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He also holds degrees from Oxford University and from Cambridge University, as well as a number of honorary degrees. He has attended Copenhagen University. He has talked at—in addition to his present position as adjunct professor of History at Columbia and at Amherst—he started his academic career at New York University. There, he became one of the youngest full professors. In academic language—it has a different connotation than it may sometimes have to a layman—a full professor is one who has arrived at the ultimate in terms of rank. It doesn't have anything to do with his capacity for food or drink or anything else.

[laughter]

HOFFMANN: I have to explain that. [laughs] Some of my… many not-so literal friends sometimes wonder what I'm talking about when I speak of a full professor.

[laughter]

HOFFMANN: At any rate, Dr. Commager became professor of History at the New York University, where he served until 1938 in that capacity, and then became professor of History at Columbia University and continued there until 1956, when he went to Amherst. And he continues, as I mentioned, as adjunct professor of History at Columbia. He also has held the Harmsworth chair of American History at Oxford, as well as the Pitt chair of American History at Cambridge. He is one of the very few, I believe, only American or any other nationality to ever hold chairs at two English universities, Oxford and Cambridge.

I asked Dr. Commager… I read a long, long list of accomplishments and distinctions that simply make a person such as myself about an inch high. I asked him, of all of these many honors and distinctions… I didn't feel, without a long discourse, that I could include them all. So I asked him if there was anything he would like to have me say, and he said, "Yes, there was one thing," that he was a fellow at Peterhouse College and the only one, the only American, to hold that distinction in its six hundred years of history. So I mention this in addition.

He holds, of course, membership in many, many societies; the American Historical Association, the Massachusetts Historical Association, and many others. He has talked, in addition to those

colleges and universities I've mentioned, he has talked at Brandeis University. He's talked at the University of Virginia and at Boston University. During World War II, he served with the LWI, and in subsequent years to World War II, he also served as a state department lecturer in German universities in 1954 and in Italian and Israeli universities in 1955.

He is the author of numerous books. We are especially well-acquainted with several of his many books here at Portland State. We've used his very fine two-volume American history in our History courses for many years. *Documents of American History* is another one of the books we have used that Professor Commager has edited. In addition, we've used his very fine anthology, the Civil War story: the Civil War told through those who fought in the war and participated in the war*, The Blue and the Gray*. In addition to these, there are simply almost dozens of books. I told one of my colleagues that I felt that I should introduce Dr. Commager as a man who has written more books that I have read, and this is almost literally true. I threatened this introduction, with some of my less knowledgeable colleagues, that I would introduce him as having written more books than *they've* read. And I'm sure of this.

[laughter]

HOFFMANN: At any rate, it is, with a great deal of pleasure, that I introduce this occasion, the occasion of the first John Francis Cramer lecture, Professor Henry Steele Commager, who will speak to us tonight on the subject of the origins and nature of American nationalism.

Dr. Commager.

[applause]

HENRY STEELE COMMAGER: Professor Hoffmann, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great distinction to give the first of the John Francis Cramer lectures, and indeed to be associated with this young and flourishing institution of learning here in what is not so young but is a very flourishing state. I believe you're a hundred years old now, which gives you a certain dignity even in the eyes of a representative from Massachusetts.

[laughter]

COMMAGER: And I want to discuss something that is, I think, of consuming interest not only to Americans, but to people of all countries. People everywhere are concerned with the creation of nations, and we are, at the moment, in the midst of the greatest era of nationalism in all history. Twenty-eight new nations have emerged since 1945, and a half-dozen more are

clamoring for emergence, are about to be born, in various parts of the globe. So that the experience of the United States with nationalism, is, I think, an experience of immediate concern and of far-reaching interest to the society generally.

There've been nations long before the American Revolution or the French Revolution. But the rise of self-conscious nationalism, a cultural and linguistic and even an emotional nationalism, as well as political, is very largely a product of the last two centuries. I have no intention of entering into the vexatious and quite insoluble question of the origins of nationalism in the Old World. Some historians trace that back to the Crusades, others to the 15th and 16th century. The important thing is that the nationalism with which we are familiar is very largely a product of the late 18th and the 19th centuries, and that this nationalism represented something new in history. If not, indeed, something fundamentally different from the nationalism of the past.

Beginning with the French Revolution, older nations such as France herself or Denmark, for example, or Norway […], experienced a new birth of nationalism. And all through the 19th century, nations struggled towards birth of states and states disintegrated into nations as people conscious of a common language and a common culture in history strove to transform that cultural consciousness into political organization. Thus, with such peoples as the Greeks and the Serbs and the early years of the century; thus with the many states of Latin America in the early and middle years of the century; thus with Belgium in the '30s, or with Germany and Italy and Bohemia and Finland in subsequent years; thus in the 20th century with the emergence of the so many of the new states of Asia and of Africa. The whole thing culminating, as I suggested, in this enormous outburst of national self-consciousness we have witnessed since the Second World War.

Now, against the background of this emergent nationalism, or more recent nationalism, the American experience of 1776 often appears to be a familiar and a normal historical experience. And even American historians have customarily interpreted it as a harmonious part of the history of modern nationalism. In one sense, this is proper enough. Of course, Americans experienced those same compulsions, many of those same pressures, stimuli, that quickened nationalism in the nations of the Old World, and the same forces of the economy; the Industrial Revolution and railroads and things of that kind that operated in the Old World operated, likewise, in the New.

Yet in a very real sense, the American experience differed, and differed fundamentally, from the experience of Old World nations. In a very real sense, it can be said that the American experience, far from being merely an extension of or a repetition of the history of European

nationalism, reversed the history of European nationalism. Reversed in the processes of history and introduced, therefore, something new into the realm of history.

This was the view of one of the most sagacious of American statesmen, namely John Adams. I know no better or more dramatic way of introducing the subject than to quote two letters written by men involved in the Revolution. First, the letter from that historian preacher, Jeremiah Belknap, to his friend, Hazard, just after the Revolution was concluded. And the second, a letter from John Adams to his friend, Hezekiah Niles, some thirty-five years later. Writing to Hazard, Belknap said, "Comparisons sometimes illustrate subjects, but where can one be found to illustrate this: imagine, my friend, thirteen independent clocks, going all together by the force of their own weights and carrying thirteen independent hammers fitted to strike one bell. If you can so nicely wind and adjust all these clocks as to make them move exactly alike to strike at exactly the same instant, you'll always have a curious and regular beating of time. But ever so small of a deviation from the point of identity, who will be able to know the hour by the sound of such an automaton?"

The plain English of this is that our present form of federal government appears to be inadequate to the purpose for which it is instituted. John Adams couldn't have seen this letter, because it was a private letter and was not published until our time. Yet, in 1818, he wrote almost precisely the same, using the same metaphor, to his friend Niles, but note with a different conclusion. "The colonies," he said, "had grown up under constitutions of government so different, there was so great a variety of religions, they were composed of so many different nations, their customs, manners, and habits had so little resemblance, their intercourse had been so rare, and their knowledge of each other so imperfect, that to unite them in the same principles in theory and the same system of action was a very difficult enterprise. The complete accomplishment of it in so short of time and by simple means was perhaps the singular example in the history of mankind. Thirteen clocks were made to strike as one. A perfection of a mechanism which no artist had ever before effected." Well, it was, and John Adams' writing after 1787 could use the same image and note that it was something new and unique in history.

But because thirteen American states hugging the Atlantic seaboard became a single nation spanning the continent, and embracing now no less than fifty states, we take American nationalism for granted. There was, however, nothing foreordained about it. And the real question that every student of our history must ask themselves is why the United States did not go the way of Latin America? Why the United States did not go the way of Europe? Why nationalism did not fragment American territory as it fragmented the territory of most parts of the globe, and, as it does to this day continues to fragment the Middle East, to fragment India, to fragment other parts—Africa—and other parts of the globe.

It's well to remember that the most elementary foundations for the new nation still remained to be laid. To many contemporaries, indeed, the forces that threatened the security of the new nation appeared far more formidable than those that promised it prosperity. It would take me far too far afield to cite you evidence or examples of this. Suffice, perhaps, to quote the French statesman Turgot, who said that, in the General Union and the provinces among themselves, "I do not see a coalition or a fusion making one body one and homogeneous. It's only an aggregation of parts, always too much separated, preserving always a tendency to division by the diversity of their laws, their manners, their opinions, still more by the inequality of the actual forces. It's only a copy of the Dutch Republic. But after all, this republic has not to fear, as American republic had, the enlargement of some of its provinces."

The English economist Josiah Tucker said the same thing, that the American republic was bound to fragment, bound to break up because of the force of the backcountry. "Their fate," he said, "seems to be a disunited people 'til the end of time." Even some Americans agreed with that. Nathaniel Gorham, for example, of Massachusetts, in the Federal Convention said that we didn't need to worry too much about how big the lower house of Congress was. After all, nobody, he said, would imagine the United States would still be in existence 150 years from now on this scale, and so it would be unnecessary to worry about the increase in size.

That perverse and effervescent member of the Convention, Gouverneur Morris, the *enfant terrible* of the Convention, some of you will remember some of his activities of one kind or another. Among other things, he actually drafted the Constitution that we now have, and the literary form of the Constitution owes more to him than to anybody else. He was a wooden-legged man, you know; he had lost one of his legs in an amorous escapade. He was a wooden-legged statesman who had the nerve to… the only man in all of history who had the nerve to slap Washington on the back. He did it in a moment of enthusiasm when he had a bottle of wine and he bet a bottle of wine that he would do it, and he did. And he wrote in his diary, "The great man turned and looked at me, and I wished the earth had yawned and swallowed me up."

[laughter]

COMMAGER: Said Morris, "Fond as the framers of our national Constitution were of the republican government, they were not so much blinded by their attachment as not to discern the difficulty or, perhaps, the impracticality of raising a durable edifice from crumbling materials. History, the parent of political science, had told them that it was as vain to expect permanently from democracy as it was to construct a palace on the surface of the sea."

But we don't need to go to these melancholy predictions to bring home to us the elementary truth that making thirteen clocks strike as one was, as Adams put it, a singular example in the history of mankind. How much more remarkable to make forty-eight—and let us hope fifty, it's a little too early to know—let's hope fifty clocks strike as one.

How did it happen? How did it happen that that people, which confessed the most heterogenous of all racial stocks, the most varied soils and climates of any nation, the most diverse and competing economic interests, the most variegated religious pattern, nevertheless achieved a stable and enduring national character? Achieved it with a rapidity and achieved it with an ease that confounded the expectations of friends and of critics alike?

In the Old World, with its age-old traditions of feudalism and dynastic nationalism, principle of the particular triumphed over the principle of the general. But in the New World, the principle of the general triumphed over the particular, and ours was the first major nation where the general triumphed over the particular; where, as I say, the processes of fragmentation and disintegration that almost everywhere in the globe had accompanied nationalism were arrested and reversed, and gave way to consolidation and to unity.

One very important consideration is, of course, that the United States had developed almost wholly in the era of the Industrial Revolution. I need not to point out the importance of such things as transportation, for example, in welding the new nation together. But it's appropriate to remember that Latin America too developed in the era of the Industrial Revolution. It is relevant to remember that in Europe, the Industrial Revolution appears to have accentuated disintegration rather than to have mitigated it. It's appropriate to keep in mind, for example, that all the forces of geography, all the forces of economy and of industry and of everything else, have been unable to bring Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland together in a single nation to overcome the disintegrating forces of religion and of traditional enmities and hostilities.

What, then, is the explanation of this phenomenon? This phenomenon of integration, of consolidation, that is otherwise, I think, in the realm of the inexplicable?

Indeed, it's so surprising, it seems that great many Americans have ascribed it very cheerfully to Providence. Only the intervention of God could possibly explain the success of America in becoming a single nation. I shan't pause to give you examples of that. You can sum them up, in all probability, from your own experience and your own thinking on the matter.

In a very real sense, I think we can say that Lincoln's observation was historically correct: the fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation. The new nation was created. It was almost a contrivance. It was a contrivance, a creative act of will on the part of soldiers and statesmen and scholars and men of letters and scientists and artists and philosophers and men of faith, who put their talents and their energies together to construct a national organization. The United States started as a national state rather than as a nation. It started as a state and was confronted with the task of vindicating that political and constitutional decision in all other realms. Here again, the contrast with the Old World is very profound indeed, for in the Old World, as you know, and in as well in the new nations of Asia and of Africa, nations start as nations and become states. And in the United States, it is the other way around.

When the long traditions, for example, of English or French or Swedish or Danish nationalism are compared with what Americans had in 1776 or '89, the contrast is clear enough. Even in those states where political organization was fairly old, as in England or France, the nation grew out of well-cultivated soil, out of centuries of cultural and historical integration. And for the new nations of the 19th and 20th century, nations such as Norway or Belgium or Italy, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, or in our own day, the nations of the Arab world or of Israel. We have a thousand years of history behind almost each of them, for almost all other nations on the globe, the creation of political nationalism or political statehood is a culmination of centuries and millennia of history, but for the United States, it was a starting point for the creation of nationalism. We started with a political organization and filled in the nationalist attributes and ingredients later on.

That filling in was to a very large degree of conscious and deliberate undertaking. We had to furnish the new nation state with its ingredients of laws and language and literature, education and history with heroes and myths and symbols, and song and story and ballad and all the other ingredients that go into self-conscious nationalism. As Thomas Paine said, Paine who himself who contributed so much to the making of the new nation, "A new era for politics is struck, a new method of thinking hath arisen." And this sense of newness has since delivered a responsibility on the part of all those who are concerned that making the nation was so widespread as to almost be universal in the generation of the Revolution. "Our style and manner," said Paine at another time, "our style and manner of thinking of undergoing a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes, we hear with other ears, we think with other thoughts than those we formerly used. We can look back on our own prejudices as if they had been the prejudices of another people."

Thus, the remarkable Noah Webster, who set out single-handed to create an American language. He didn't create one, he ended up by spelling labor and honor without the u, which

was the original labor-saving device, I suppose, of the American people, but was scarcely a new language. But Noah Webster was very conscious of the responsibility of creating a new culture. "Unshackle your minds," he exhorted his countrymen. "Unshackle your minds and act like independent beings. You have an empire to raise in support of your exertions and a national character to establish and extend by your wisdom and virtue. So turn everywhere we will. We find the same self-conscious determination to create the ingredients of a nation."

Young Alexander Hamilton, for example, not always enthusiastic for homegrown products, nevertheless wrote his friend, Rufus King, "We are laboring hard to establish in this country principles more and more national, and free from all foreign ingredients, so that we should be neither Greeks nor Trojans, but truly Americans." And all through Jefferson's great corpus and Jefferson's writings runs the same theme, and we must turn deliberately away from the Old World, create an American language and American letters and American law and American politics and an American culture.

Improvement and the nationalization of cultural inheritance spread out even into fields where it might be regarded as wholly irrelevant; into the fields of science, for example. Into the fields of art and into the fields of music and into the fields of mathematics. Thus Nicholas Pike, who wrote one of the most widely used textbooks on mathematics in the 18th century, wrote in a new edition of 1788 as the United States, now an independent nation, it was judged that a system might be calculated more suitable toward our meridian than any of those heretofore published. It wasn't as quite absurd as it sounds. He didn't really propose a new mathematical system as the legislature of Texas did some years ago when it resolved that since 3.1416 was too difficult for *pi*, *pi* should hereafter equal 3.

[laughter]

COMMAGER: But, after all, Thomas Jefferson did, within a few years, introduce the decimal system in currency, and if any of you have tried to do mathematics or arithmetic with pounds, shillings, pence, and guineas, I suggest you try to keep your accounts in that form someday to see the enormous advantage and indeed, I think, the real secret of American economic supremacy is a substitution to the decimal system for a pound, shilling, pence system of English coinage.

But in any event, this notion of independent nationalism spread, as I say, into realms such as music or as art or as mathematics or as geography. Here is one Robert Davidson, otherwise unjustly unknown to fame, who wrote a geography in verse. "We'll now take our stand," he said, "on this happy and prolific and wide-spreading land, where nature is wrought with a far

nobler hand. No more let the Old World be proud of her mountains, her rivers, her mines, her lakes, and her fountains; though great in themselves, they no longer appear to be great when compared with the great we have."

Well, however it might fare in any event with mathematics and geography, one thing was clear, and that was that the new nation must have its own philosophy. "Here, social man," said Joel Barlow, "a second birth shall find in a new range of reason. Lift his mind, feed his strong intellect, a purer light, a nobler sense of duty and of right."

Turn where you will, you find the same deliberate determination to start over in the cultural realm.

How then did Americans go about? How did they achieve the extraordinary end of welding this vast nation together so firmly that the Great Revolt of 1861 did not succeed, but failed; for we must everlastingly ask ourselves a whole series of questions. Now, the first one I gave you earlier: why didn't we turn out to be like Latin America and have twenty nations or twenty-two? And another, why didn't the Southern Confederacy succeed? Most secessions of that kind do secede; witness the history of Europe in the 19th, or of Asia and Africa in the 20th century. And the South had more ingredients of nationalism in 1861 than the United States had in 1776. Also, I may say, though, that is a separate discussion, a separate lecture. The South held more of the trump cards in the battlefield as well.

Well then, I cannot do more today than to suggest some of the more broader aspects of this enterprise of nation-making. What is clear is that national unity for the whole, broad continental area of the United States was not foreordained. The United States lacked many of the essential ingredients of nationalism at the beginning. Just what those ingredients are is a matter of dispute. Almost every historian, however, includes a territorial foundation, a political organization, a language, and the history and traditions, and, in all probability, though there is dispute about this, a common religion.

Now the United States had one or two of these. It had, after all, a language; and all the efforts of Noah Webster and others to Americanize, it didn't get very far. The experience of the United States with language is a very interesting thing; it deserves a good deal more attention than we customarily give it because we take it for granted, though we should not take the English language for granted. It's a remarkable thing that the American people were able to be American, and yet use an inherited language and not feel under any inconvenience as a result of the use of that language. It's the English who feel the inconvenience nowadays rather than the Americans. This, I suggest, if not unique, is most unusual. American English has departed far

less from standard English of England than Canadian French has from Parisian French, or Mexican Spanish from Madrid Spanish, or Brazilian Portuguese from Portugese of Madrid [sic], or the East Indian Dutch from the Dutch of Amsterdam, and so it goes. We are almost the only major colony that has retained the language intact. And, but, the great achievement here is not so much retained in the language intact without the embarrassment or inconvenience to ourselves. It was, rather, maintaining a uniform and standard language, and this was a very great achievement that owes much to Noah Webster and to Webster's readers and spellers and dictionaries.

Need I remind you, perhaps I need because we take all these things for granted, that we do have in this enormous territory a single and uniform language, and that it is practically impossible for any ordinary person to know by speech what class any person belongs to or what region he comes from. Compare that to the situation of almost any European country. There are far greater differences in a little country like Denmark, in the speech of the Copenhagener and the Jutlander. In a country like England, in the speech from London or from Surrey or from Devonshire to Yorkshire or to Lancashire. In a country like Switzerland, where there's four different languages. There are far greater differences than there are in this enormous territory of the United States, and with the possible exception of the speech of the Negro, it is impossible, I think, to think to tell anything about a person's class or economic affiliation by his speech. Whereas in the Old World, as Orwell has said of the English, every Englishman is branded on the tongue with his class. So, generally, in Europe, language and accent bespeak social position, religious affiliation, as well as region.

The United States managed to overcome that, and quite deliberately managed to overcome it, because the fathers of the American language, as it were, set themselves to creating a uniform language, a uniform grammar, a uniform spelling; to wiping out social distinctions and wiping out regional distinctions, and existing beyond the hopes and anticipations of contemporaries.

We did, then, have a language, though the fact that it is a common and uniform language and is an element of union among us, is an American accomplishment rather than an accident of history.

One of the second ingredients of nationalism: territory. We take territory for granted. You out here in Oregon, surprisingly enough, take territorial unity for granted, though you shouldn't because Oregon was originally a part of the Hudson's Bay Company domain or the Northwest and Hudson's Bay Company domain. And it's really a surprising matter that it was attached to the United States rather than to Britain or Canada. But the remarkable thing isn't just that Oregon stayed in the Union, but that the territory west of the Mississippi stayed in the Union,

for if there was one principle upon which every statesman or philosopher was in agreement in the 18th century and the early 19th, one universally accepted doctrine, it was that a republic could not be large.

A military empire might possibly be large. A non-military empire could be medium-large, but a republic had to be small. In part, they got that from the reading of Plato. In part, they got that from the observation of the Swiss Republic or the Dutch Republic. In part from their experience with England and with the colonies, but it was almost generally, almost universally accepted that a republic could not be large.

How was the United States going to survive if it was a large country? As one citizen of Pennsylvania wrote at the time of the Revolution, “There has been one path that can lead the United States to destruction, and that is their extended territory. It would probably be to effect this that Great Britain ceded us so much wasteland,” and that the notion that the West was bound to be disintegrating was a notion deeply implanted not only in American psychology, but in the conclusions of and the thinking of almost every European observer.

As Henry Adams, our greatest historian, said, looking at the United States of 1800, “No prudent person then dared to act on the certainty that when settled, government could comprehend the whole. And when the day of separation should arrive, and America should have her Prussia, Austria, and Italy, as she already had her England, France, and Spain, what else could follow but a return to the old […] condition of local jealousies, wars, and corruptions which had made a slaughterhouse of Europe.”

Yet the result was precisely the opposite. Territorial growth more rapid and more extensive than that of any other nation in modern history did not make for disunity, but for unity. Instead of fragmenting the nation, it diffused, it strengthened the nation. Instead of contributing to particularism, it diffused nationalism. This is a most remarkable achievement. It owes something to the federal system which was the invention, as it were, of the fathers. It owes something to that remarkable… to the remarkable insight of men like Hamilton and Jefferson and Madison and Pinckney and others, who saw that there might be strength rather than weakness in the diversity that would come with great size, so that particularism would cancel each other out. Special interests, as it were, would cancel out.

In any event, Americans turned size into an asset instead of a debit. Almost everywhere in the world, size is still a debit as far as nationalism is concerned. And as we look about us, we see almost everywhere in the globe nations breaking up in and fragmenting into smaller units, except where a military power is strong enough to prevent it, as in the case of Communist

Russia and Communist China. Look at what's happening in the Middle East. Look at what's happening in Africa as it's splitting into one, little country after another. Many of them not viable nationalities at all, like Ghana and the Congo and Nyasaland and various others. Look at what at Latin America. Almost everywhere, size splintered up. But the United States turned it into an element of strength and an element of unity.

That meant many consequences. And one of the consequences, particularly interesting though, is that in America, love of country, patriotism, has almost always been a generalized, rather than a localized, affair. Very few Americans have that passion and attachment to a particular soil, or a particular region or county or town or village, that is so common in the Old World. Americans do have, or did have, a regional literature, but rather a nostalgic regional literature. Rather a tribute, I think, to the passing of regionalism to anything else. We have no literature comparable, for example, to the English literature of country and village. To that loving study of field and river and brook. To those curious two-volume history of cricket and lower puddle. Or of trout fly, fly casting on the upper Tweed, or something of that kind that engages the energies of retired colonels in England.

In America, they almost always think of their country as a whole. Boys and girls not only in the prairie states, but in the Northwest and the Southwest can sing with rapture, "We love thy rocks and rills and woods and templed hills," though most of them wouldn't know a wood and a templed hill if they saw it.

[laughter]

COMMAGER: They take for granted that Plymouth Rock in New England belongs to them just as surely as Texas and Arizona belong to them. The whole of American patriotic sentiment seems to be a nationalized patriotic sentiment, and our most normal psalm is "America the Beautiful," which chants the praises, as you know, of spacious skies and purple mountains and prairie land from sea to shining sea. And the most characteristic of American poets, Walt Whitman, sang the song of the open road, "Healthy, free, the world before me, the long, brown path before me, leading wherever I choose."

We have so much […] Nathaniel Hawthorne to Longfellow in the 1830s, that we'd have no country at all. Well, that's something of an exaggeration, but many foreign observers came to the same conclusion, that America was too large for any person to take in, and that American patriotism was inevitably so generalized that it would be weakened. This was, in part, the product of a pioneering experience, in that habit of using up land and moving on, that which is the very essence of the westward movement in America. It is, in part, a product of large-scale

immigration from the Old World; once immigrants had torn up their roots and transplanted themselves, the subsequent transplanting were minor affairs and came relatively easy. The pioneer learned to cherish whatever he had; to believe that it was the best place in the globe until he moved on to some other place. To name it Eden or to name it New Babylon until he had gutted it, and moved onto some new Eden or some new Babylon.

"Woodman, spare that tree, touch not a single bough; in youth it sheltered me, and I'll protect it now," said the pioneer as he burned down the forest or cut them down and moved on to bigger and better forests to burn down or cut down. This habit of movement made it very difficult to get permanent attachments, and most of us think of those Americans who somehow have stayed in backwaters like Massachusetts or Virginia or South Carolina and maintained permanent attachments, as not really very American, as more English or more European than American because of these curious devotions to locality. Well, mobility was both cause and consequence of this general affection for the Old World, and that mobility need was to say a constant in our history. The greatest period of the westward movement has been in the last fifteen or twenty years, far greater than in the period before 1890, at which time Turner announced the end of the frontier.

What should we say of the third of the ingredients of nationalism? A common body of history, traditions, loyalties, affections, an historical past, with all that goes with the historical past, its heroes, its villains, its friends and allies, its enemies and antipathies, its institutions and its culture.

It's scarcely necessary for me to remind you that for a century and a half, America had been a part of the British Empire, and that such loyalties had existed. They'd been loyal to the mother country. Such attachments had existed even to the royal family or to the mother country. There was, as yet, no firm American feeling. There was feeling for Pennsylvania or Virginia or the Carolinas, but not for America as a whole, though that was in the making somewhere in the 1770s and 1780s. It would be relatively easy to make out a case both for the absence of that common sentiment and for the birth and development of that common sentiment, because in a country as large as America, with its people as literate and as articulate, you could find expressions on both sides. You could find, for example, a Lewis Morris, father of that Gouverneur Morris, whom I quoted a little while earlier, providing in his will that his son, Gouverneur, should never set foot in the neighboring colony of Connecticut lest he abide that lowcunning, so incident to the people, of that country. But you can find on the other side Patrick Henry saying, "I am no longer Virginian. We are no longer men of Massachusetts. Our great title is Americans."

Be that as it may, this was an expression of wish and of hope rather than of reality, for there was not of yet a common body of history or tradition or of loyalty or patriotism. There was not yet a sense of common past because there was no common past. All of that was in the making. And the rapidity and the success with which American set themselves to create a common past is one of the most thrilling chapters in the whole modern, cultural history. Almost every American generation was conscious of the responsibility of the necessity of creating a sense of the past and a sense of common patriotism. Again, it would delay us far too long for me to cite chapter and verse, for this is, indeed, the subject of a very special and elaborate analysis.

Suffice to say, turn in any direction you will, there was this awareness of the need for a common past and a common body of traditions, and a determination to create it and to create it with extraordinary rapidity. Note, for example, the rapidity with which Americans created their heroes.

We were pretty lucky, in the beginning, in having some villains. We've had no luck since the Revolution in having villains. We had George III and Benedict Arnold to get us started, and we've been doing business on them ever since. They're rather shopworn by now, and it's rather a pity that we can't get some new villains, but we haven't had any major ones since the Revolution, which shows how fortunate we are.

But we started out by great, good luck with heroes all made to order. No country was ever so fortunate in its founding fathers than the United States, or in having a man like George Washington as a father of its country, and one of the fascinating chapters of our cultural history is the speed with which Washington became a national hero and a myth and a legend in his own lifetime. As early as 1776, John Adams, who didn't look kindly on anyone who wasn't a member of the Adams family, nevertheless wrote to his wife that every monarch in Europe looked like a valet beside George Washington. "Washington," he said, "was a demigod." And from that time on, the idea that Washington was an immortal caught on and increased, so that in his own lifetime, he came to occupy something of a position that Alexander the Great did or the Frederick Barbarossa did or that […] did or that Joan of Arc did for their countries. And the speed, again, with which Americans achieved for themselves, the symbolical and mythological equivalents of Remus and Romulus, or of Horsa and Hengist, or of the Norman conquerors or of Joan of Arc, is a fascinating chapter in our history, though it is one, as I say, that I cannot pause to elaborate upon.

Much of this early appeal to self-consciousness, this early conscious creation of a national past and a national character, sounded a martial note. But that was a reaction into the War of Independence. One of the most interesting things about American nationalism is the things we

did without. You know, there is a famous paragraph in Henry James' biography of Hawthorne, in which Hawthorne takes a stand in 1840, and looks out on the America of 1840 and all the things that weren't there. He said, "It takes a great deal of history to make a little literature." And what did Hawthorne have? And then comes that paragraph which I cannot cite to you exactly, in which he says, "No nation as yet… no country as yet, scarcely a national name. No monarchy, no aristocracy, no church, no cathedrals, no abbeys, no Norman churches, no ivy-clad parsonages, no great palaces, no castles, no thatch cottages, no great universities, no Oxford, no Cambridge, no public schools, no Eton, no Harrow, no cathedrals, no bishops, no politics, no art, no music, no museums, no literature, no novels, no sporting class, no..." Well, and then he says himself as a lower case, "and, after all, we managed to write novels anyway."

But the point is that we started without a great many things that European countries had as a matter of course. Now, one of the things that we managed to create a nation without—and I'm going to mention several things—we managed to create a nation without a military establishment or a common enemy. That's a very remarkable thing. If you pause to think of the role of the common enemy in the creation of nations, you will realize how extraordinarily difficult it is not to have one. You will realize that almost every nation that has come into existence in the 19th and 20th century has found it essential to have an enemy. Think, what… well, there wouldn't be any Irish nationalism without England, without Cromwell.

[laughter]

COMMAGER: And think what Russia has been to Swedish nationalism. What Germany has been to French nationalism. What Austria has been to Italian nationalism. What, today, Israel is to Arab nationalism, and the Arab countries to Israeli nationalism. Or what, may I say—if you don't object to injecting a political note—but in our egregious folly, we are enabling China to do to create a new Communist nationalism, with the United States as a feared and hated enemy by our policies of non-recognition and non-intercourse. This is a very familiar and a very old and well-established phenomenon in the history of nationalism.

The United States didn't have a common enemy. To be sure, we had England, but it's hard to have England for a common enemy. We won the first war. We persuaded ourselves that we won the second; the English never argued about it because they forgot that there was one. And the English aren't good at holding grudges anyway. So we had to shift from the common enemy of England and find a new one, and there wasn't any new one. Not until the mid-20th century have we been able to conjure up again a common enemy.

Now this meant that we had to get along without the image of the enemy, and we had to get along, likewise, without those things that are partially a product of that image and partly a creation of it, a creator of it, namely the military. We are one of the few nations who had become a nation without the military establishment. Think of the role of the military in the history of French nationalism, the history of German and Prussian nationalism. In Sweden and Italy, everywhere you turn, the military has been one of the great instruments in the creating of nationalism, and one of the great instruments in the spread of nationalism. But the United States never had a military until our own day. We disbanded the army after the Revolution; the total army, officers and men, was less than 1,000 when Washington took office. It was less than 16,000 at the outbreak of the Civil War. Not until the 20th century did we get a real military. We never had a military class. There was never any real social prestige in Annapolis or West Point, such as there was in Sandhurst or Dartmouth in England, for example. The military never influenced nor dictated public affairs as they did abroad. The uniform was not, in the 18th and 19th century, influential in the creation of nationalism. Quite the contrary.

We managed, therefore, to become a nation without national antipathies, without a national enemy, without the military establishment, which was a very extraordinary achievement, and one that is hard to match, I think, in the history of any other nation.

I may add, just in passing, because time does not permit me to elaborate upon it, that we managed to become a nation without another very important ingredient: the ingredient of religion. I said at the beginning that scholars are of some difference of opinion about whether religion is an essential ingredient or just a common one. But in any event, it *is* a common one. It is hard to imagine, again, Irish nationalism without Catholicism. It is hard to imagine Italian nationalism without religion or German nationalism without it. To this day, church and state are one in almost every nation in the Old World, and think of the role of religion in the creation of the Arab nations, or of Israel or of Pakistan or of other parts of the globe today. Religion has been a crucial ingredient in the making of nationalism, and church and state have often been two sides of the same coin.

The United States was the first Western country to disestablish the church, to set up a system of separation of church and state, and it was the first Western country to permit absolute equality in religious denominations and religious faiths. It was assumed, at the time, that that would not only lead to moral depravity of the most dangerous character, but that it would be disintegrating as far as the state was concerned, for the church was one of the props of the state, and the state was one of the pillars of the church. But the United States got along without a state church, and need I say that religion in America got along without state aid, and got along very well; rather better, than in the old… most Old World countries.

This was an American invention, as it were, the separation of church and state, and the notion of independent churches, and America managed to create its own nationalism without a religious basis, and we are the first of the countries, certainly of the Western world, that have done so. Even today, most countries have a religious basis for nationalism. Even Communist China and Communist Russia, it isn't religion in our sense of the word, but they have made Communism itself a religion and, therefore, a prop of the state. It is, I think, an extraordinary tribute to American nationalism that was able to forego that particular affiliation.

Well, these crucial ingredients of nationalism, then—a firm territorial basis, a homogenous population, history and traditions and loyalties, a military establishment, national antipathy, a religious organization—all these were lacking. Yet we managed to create nationalism anyway.

And, in the process, we departed in two other respects from the European pattern, two respects of very great interest. One is that American nationalism was, to a degree, a democratic achievement. That it was an achievement in which… an achievement, really, of the people at large. Again, unless you are familiar with the history of modern nationalism in other countries, even as recently as our own day, the history of the making of Israel, the history of the making of the Arab states, or Pakistan, you will not realize, I think, how to what an extraordinary degree nationalism in most countries has been the creation either of a dynasty, an army, a religion, or an intellectual elite. In the case of Israel, of an intellectual elite. In the case of Pakistan, the same thing, an intellectual elite.

Ours is the first country where the creation of nationalism was a, as it were, a popular undertaking, and a popular enterprise, where everybody participated and continued to participate, because every new generation of immigrants continued to participate, because we decided on a liberal immigration policy, something we have abandoned since 1924, I think, to our loss. We were able to incorporate the newcomers from the Old World into the body politic and the social body and the economic body and the cultural body and to make them, again, elements of strength instead of elements of weakness, so that we turned heterogeneity into strength instead of having it weaken and fragment the country as it might have otherwise done. And that was because we accepted immigrants as equals just as we accepted Western territory as equals. We take that for granted, but there is no reason why you should. The United States is the first country in the world to get rid of colonies and turn them into states. Every other country has kept its backcountry as colonies. The United States, by the ordinance of 1787, decided that Ohio would be a state, not a colony. And that Iowa and Oregon and that all other parts would be states, not colonies.

Well, the American nationalist undertaking was a popular, a democratic undertaking. A democratic enterprise. One to which people generally contributed, and there it differs again, most sharply, from the national nation-making of most other nations.

Finally, in one other respect the American experiment differed, and differed very sharply from the European, and that was in its relation to Romanticism. Everywhere in the Old World, the emergence of nationalism was associated with Romanticism. From the literary point of view, as those of you know who are students of literature, nationalism is merely a function of Romanticism. The age of reason had been non-nationalist, it had been a cosmopolitan age. It had been an age which tried to ignore national boundaries and national differences and create a international society, cosmopolitan society; and very largely succeeded in doing so. It was very difficult to develop genuine nationalism in the cosmopolitan age of the 18th century.

But Romanticism looked with approval upon nationalism, because it did associate itself not with cosmopolitan things, but with everything that was local. It was parochial, it was traditional, it was emotional, rather than with things that were general and that were rational. I need not elaborate on anything as familiar as this, as familiar to students, that Romanticism concerned itself with the past, with the golden age of the past, with chivalry, with the Middle Ages. It cherished origins and traditions and myths and legends; the picturesque and the sentimental. The medieval. It was like… you remember Robinson's poem of "Miniver Cheevy who loved the Medici, albeit he had never been one. He would've sinned incessantly if he had been one." It looked back and admired the Medici, and everything connected with them.

It addressed itself, therefore, to the recovery of the past. The recovery of folktales and folklore and border ballads and the architecture of the past. It recreated Gothic architecture. It recreated the folklore of the Middle Ages in the novels of a Hugo in France or the plays of a Schiller in Germany or the novels of an Ingemann in Denmark or Wergeland in Norway or the novels of a Scott in Scotland and the border country. It conjured up the past rather than the past.

Romanticism, by its very nature, looked backward, and nationalism that was associated with Romanticism, by its very nature, looked backward. But in the United States, and almost alone in the United States of all nations, Romanticism did not look backwards because there wasn't any back to look to. In the United States, we had, as Hawthorne wrote in his preface to *The Marble Faun*, "A country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity in broad and simple daylight." And he added the hope that it would be a long time before romance writers may find congenial and easily handled themes in the annals of our stalwart republic.

Well, Romanticism then, in the Old World, was reactionary. But the New World went in for Romanticism, too, as all of you know; you have some examples of its architecture out here, all of you who in school have to endure the bad poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, know what Romanticism did to Mr. Poe and his poetry and some of his writings. Romanticism raged through American culture, which then ravaged… ravaged it quite as it ravaged it in the Old World.

But with this fundamental difference: that it couldn't operate in the political realm. It couldn't force us to look to the past because we had no past as yet to look to, though we tried to create one. It was in the 1840s, as late as that, that we discovered the pilgrim fathers, as you know. 'Twas in the 1840s that we discovered Plymouth Rock and Bradford's journal was published, discovered and published for the first time. Hutchinson's history was recovered and everyone went around repeating Mrs. Hemans' dreadful verses about the stern and rock-bound coast. As you know, it's neither stern nor rock-bound, it's sandy, but she had never been over here and didn't know any better.

[laughter]

COMMAGER: And people who don't think don't know any better either, but in any event, we tried to recover a past, but there wasn't much to recover. And what did we do with our customary ingenuity? We weren't going to be deprived of the advantages of Romanticism, so we substituted the future for the past, and American Romanticism looked forward instead of backward. American Romanticism romanticized the West instead of the Old World. Romanticized the prairies and the plains and the Rockies and the Pacific. Romanticized the westward movement. Romanticized the future above all; as James Fenimore Cooper wrote in a letter to a friend over in Greece, "The moral feeling with which a man of sentiment,"—a very typical Romantic phrase—"a man of sentiment looks upon the plains of your hemisphere is connected with recollections." Here it is mingled with his hopes that the same efforts of the mind is equal to the one as to the other.

But a speculator on the moral things can enjoy a satisfaction here that he who wandered over the plains of Greece will seek in vain. The pleasure of the latter is unavoidably continued with the melancholy regrets while here, all that reason allows will be hoped on behalf of man.

[program ends]