CHAPTER I

What Is Traditional Amongst Us?

The central theme of this book is one that few, if any, historians or political theorists would have chosen to explore as recently as fifteen years ago. Indeed, nobody could have chosen it prior to two developments in the course of those fifteen years that have assuredly taken most students of American politics completely by surprise. To begin with we want to examine these two developments, dealing first with the simpler and more familiar of the two.

Up to a recent moment—just what moment we need not say precisely—the American political tradition did not constitute a problem, whereas today it does. Put otherwise: Up to a certain recent moment Americans did not raise questions about an American political tradition for the simple reason that everybody knew, or thought he knew, what the tradition was. In other words, everybody took it for granted that there was a traditional American way of self-government, a traditional American way of doing things politically, that reached back over the decades to the generation that produced the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, and the Bill of Rights. Put otherwise again: everyone took it for granted that underlying our traditional way of doing things politically was a traditional set of political principles or political beliefs that Americans, back over the decades, had cherished both because they were correct political principles,

that is, principles that Americans *ought* to cherish, and because they were *ours,* bequeathed to us by *our* forefathers. And, here again, everyone assumed that these principles could be fully articulated without difficulty if and when the occasion arose to do so. Hence, the task of identifying and spelling out our basic political principles was far from being deemed a problem of importance by scholars, statesmen, or even the ordinary citizen. For example, when our great waves of immigration descended upon us at the turn of the century, and we suddenly faced the challenge of the "greenhorn," the newly-arrived immigrant from, for example, Eastern Europe, the greenhorn who spoke no English and had had no experience with anything remotely resembling American political principles, everybody seemed to know what needed to be done: namely, teach the greenhorn the English language (English, curiously, not American) which constituted the first step toward his Americanization, and then teach him Americanism, that is, the principles of our political system. Everyone seemed to agree, in other words, that there was such a thing as Americanism (that is, an American political tradition) and—a matter of great importance for us here—that Americanism *ought to be inculcated upon the immigrants.*[1] More: It was the *duty* of those immigrants to understand and cherish our political principles, and *our* duty to see to it that they did. And certainly everyone agreed that there could be no question about what ought to be said in the textbooks used in the Americanization schools. So, new Americans like Edward Bok were duly Americanized—indeed, Bok could and

[1] This is admittedly quite different from what we find today. Witness only the argument often encountered to this effect: "Because we don't know what Americanism is, who can tell us what is un-American?" In the groves of academe, of course, such reasoning was frequently used to assail the House Un-American Activities Committee. We suspect that this might well have been the reason the name of the Committee was changed.

did call his autobiography *The Americanization of Edward Bok.*[2]

Today, by contrast, there certainly is a problem about the American political tradition, even though different commentators might differ in their formulations of that problem. One provisional formulation of the problem we can offer is this: Some amongst us are today saying things about the American political tradition, about the traditional American way of doing things politically, about the political principles that have the sanction of tradition in America, that others of us believe to be untrue. And this belief is bolstered because we have had, in the last few years, a sudden spate of books involving a kind of inquiry into the American political tradition that we had never before seen in America. Take, for example, Harold Hyman's *To Try Men's Souls.*[3] It concerns itself with the history of *loyalty* oaths in America, and the author arrives at the following conclusion (very disturbing of course to those who had been saying that loyalty oaths were somehow *un*-American) : In point of fact, loyalty oaths have figured promnently in the American political tradition; in point of fact, loyalty oaths were administered and defended, equally and unabashedly, by George Washington, by one of the authors of *The Federalist,* and by Abraham Lincoln. Nor, according to Hyman, is that all: Horrible though the fact be to contemplate, the very Declaration of Independence includes a loyalty oath, one moreover that our forefathers *administered* as a loyalty oath.[4] Or take, for another example, Leonard Levy's

[2] Bok, *Americanization of Edward Bok* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1920) .

[3] Hyman, *To Try Men's Souls: Loyalty Tests in American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959) . The best commentary on Hyman's position is Charles S. Hyneman's "Conflict, Toleration and Agreement: Persisting Challenge for Democratic Government," The Edmund J. James Lecture, University of Illinois, 1962, *University of Illinois Bulletin,* No. 75 (1965) .

[4] Indeed, the Constitution contains within it a loyalty oath that no President has yet refused to take.

The Legacy of Suppression.[5] It is concerned with the status of freedom of expression in the American past and arrives—with great reluctance on the part of the author—at the conclusion that the founders of the American republic certainly did not believe in freedom of speech and press as we today understand it. Their intention was that it should remain *il*legal in the United States to speak ill of the government and its officials. Indeed, horrible as *that* fact may be to contemplate, the very idea that the individual citizen has a right to speak and write things that tend to bring the government into contempt was, according to Levy, unknown in America down to a date considerably later than 1789 (when, as you know, our Bill of Rights was written).

Both of these books, let us take care to note, were written by men whose research had brought them rude surprises—surprises, moreover, precisely about what *is* traditional politically in the United States. They were written by men who suddenly found themselves wishing, and wishing out loud, that the American past had been *different* from what it in fact was; by men, one might go so far as to say, who end up with the conclusion: The tradition, contrary to what we have been told, embodies *wrong* political principles, not right ones. That is an extremely interesting fact in itself, and one that we shall explore in some detail later. Our point here, however, is that the two books in question did not get themselves written until a very recent date, which is to say that people had for a long while been talking grandly about the American political tradition without knowing even the first things about it. Not

[5] Originally published by Harvard University Press (1960), this book has been reprinted in the Harper Torchbook series. In the Harper edition, Levy answers certain criticisms of his work in his preface. This he does admirably. But here, as well as in his later work, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), he is still unable to surmount his own libertarian prejudices which simply prevent him from comprehending or explaining to others the nature of that tradition which he does find through his own researches.

surprisingly, then, when someone at last took the trouble to go back and study the facts, the facts turned out to be different from what our publicists had been alleging them to be. In other words—which of course explains how these books came to be written when they did—a question was suddenly in the air, disturbing in the very nature of the case, that had not been there before, namely: What is traditional amongst us, politically, after all? Or, if you like, How much do we really know about the tradition? and, Hadn't we better go find out what has been traditional amongst us, find out what kind of thing it really was? All this (and many other examples could be cited) represents a new kind of inquiry amongst us, and shows that Americans are suddenly somehow disturbed about their political tradition, and disturbed about it in a way that is quite unprecedented. For the first time, to go no further, some Americans (as we have already intimated) are questioning our national habit of identifying the traditional with the good. For the first time, again, some Americans, a different set to be sure and a small one, are beginning to question whether there is an American political tradition at all, in the sense of a single set of political principles that the generality of Americans have in fact cherished through the long sweep of their history. That question is not, perhaps, yet being asked in a very clear or sophisticated manner, but it too is in the air, and we may be sure we have not heard the last of it.

Furthermore, we have yet to ask seriously, though this also some Americans are beginning to ask, What do we actually mean by "tradition" to begin with? Consequently, to go no further, we have no answer to the question: Suppose that the generality of Americans, at some mid-point between the Framers' time and ours, up and changed their minds about political principles in general, so what had been traditional up to that moment was replaced by something new, something therefore that is "traditional" only for recent decades? Must

we, in such a case, cease to speak of *the* tradition? Must the traditional be understood as only that which reaches back over the decades to the beginnings? And, in any case, what in America *are* the beginnings? The Declaration of Independence, you say? Ah, but perhaps there was already a political tradition in America, even perhaps a very old tradition in America, when the Declaration was written; a tradition, moreover, that we must understand in order to understand the Declaration. And from all of this we can see at once that the American political tradition is now a problem where it was not a problem before. And we can also perceive precisely why that topic would not have occurred to anyone fifteen or twenty years ago; or, if you like, would not have been regarded as sufficiently problematic to merit the attention of the scholarly community.

Before moving along to the second development to which we referred earlier, let us pause to nail down and develop a little further what has been said up to this point. The *main* point is that we (meaning by "we" above all "we scholars," "we professionals in the field of political science") begin to discover that we are astonishingly *ignorant* about the American political tradition, this, moreover, on any showing you like as to what we mean by "tradition"; and that we have only just begun, in recent years, to do something about it—that is, to begin to make the studies, do the research, that might some day dispel our ignorance and make us knowledgeable.

This is *not* to say that we have no literature on the American political tradition. Such books as Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents,*[6] or Clinton Rossiter's *Seedtime of the Republic,*[7] come to mind at once. And we have other books, of

[6] Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920* (2 vols.; New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1927, 1930).

[7] Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955).

more or less the same sort, by Ralph Gabriel,[8] by Merle Curti,[9] and by a handful of other scholars one could name if one put one's mind to it. And the question arises, What can be said about these books in connection with the main point as stated above? Principally this: They tend to prove the main point rather than disprove it, because they are "thesis" books, question-begging books, whose authors pretty clearly "knew" all the answers before they began their research. The American political tradition, the books say with a single voice, is the tradition of "freedom" and "equality," the tradition of "rights of the individual," or, if you like, of the *natural* rights of the individual, as proclaimed by our Declaration of Independence and as glorified and protected by our Constitution and our Bill of Rights. But this, clearly, the authors do not learn, or even profess to learn, by consulting these documents; they know it before they pick them up. One might even say they pick up the documents only in order to spot passages that confirm, or seem to confirm, the thesis; and, in general, there has been no one to say them Nay. If there were difficulties about all that (and, as we shall see, the difficulties cry up at you once you get to thinking about it), none of the authors mentioned was about to call attention to them. Indeed, the safest guess is that the authors in question saw no difficulties, though they were aware that some of our ancestors (the New England theocrats,

[8] Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought: An Intellectual History since 1815* (New York: Ronald Press, 1940) and *Main Currents in American History* (New York: Appleton-Century Company, 1942).

[9] Among Curti's books: *The American Paradox: The Conflict of Thought and Action* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1956); *Probing our Past* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), and *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946). These works, along with those cited in footnote 8, above, constitute only a portion of that which we term throughout this volume "the official literature." James McGregor Burns, Robert A. Dahl, and Richard Hofstadter are today among the most prominent who accept the same framework of thinking and analysis. The "old timers" would include James Allen Smith, Charles Beard (at least in his earlier publications), and Albert Kales. We will have occasion to cite others in the following chapters.

for example) were certainly no friends of the rights of the individual, and they show that awareness by, so to speak, brushing them aside as a mere minority voice that has been silenced by the mainstream of the tradition. But no, we do *not* forget that we have a literature of the American political tradition, which has created the general intellectual atmosphere in which books like Hyman's on the loyalty oath, and Levy on freedom of expression, can seem so shocking (though few pay any attention to them).[10] And no, we do not forget either that that literature still rides high in our universities, and provides the ideological base for most of what we hear from our political commentators and our political pundits. But we are convinced that the days of its ascendancy are numbered and that the time has come to begin to talk very seriously about where we are going to be when the thesis of that literature finally comes crashing down, as, for reasons we have already begun to make clear, come crashing down it must (as a result of the re-examination of the whole business that is now under way). There are, to put the matter quite simply, too many questions—questions that now are being asked—that the literature cannot answer. Indeed, nobody can answer them because the necessary research and thinking have yet to be done, and because as the research *gets* done we have on our hands not more and simpler answers but more and more mysteries that need to be cleared up. Perhaps, therefore, it would be helpful if, before turning to that second development of recent years that helps explain our topic, we set forth specific examples of the kind of questions the literature (let us, for the sake of convenience and clarity, call it the official literature) cannot answer, though, to be sure, the time has come when they need answering.

(1) The Constitution was written in 1787 by the men we

10 When and if we do heed such literature, it is likely to be with the response of the kid who confronted "Shoeless" Joe Jackson: "Tell me it ain't so."

call our Framers, and went into effect in 1789. But also in 1789 the First Congress wrote, and sent forward for ratification by the states, the Bill of Rights. So much everybody knows, as he knows too that we, as a nation, have lived ever since under the Constitution as amended by the Bill of Rights. Ah! But everybody also has tucked off in the corner of his mind this further piece of what we are going to call *guilty* information, information about which one does not feel quite comfortable, information about which, by preference (conscious or unconscious), we have always preserved a discreet silence, namely: Those famous Framers were, almost to a man, *opposed* to the adoption of a Bill of Rights, agreed to the adoption of the Bill of Rights only very reluctantly, and saw the Bill of Rights go into effect with grave misgivings as to what its effect might be on the frame of government devised at Philadelphia.[11] That we know off in the corner of our minds, and one might have expected our scholars, the custodians of the lore of our tradition, to raise and answer the questions: *Why* were the Framers opposed to the Bill of Rights? What reasons did they give for opposing the Bill of Rights? Might they have been correct in opposing a Bill of Rights, in arguing, as argue they did, that a Bill of Rights was incompatible with the Philadelphia Constitution? Which *is* the American tradition—the political philosophy of the Framers, which opposed a Bill of Rights, or the principles of the amendmentities (so they were called) of 1789? The official literature has no answer to such questions because, for good

11 This we would not so much as guess from such books as: Zechariah Chafee, *Free Speech in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941); Alexander Meiklejohn, *Political Freedom: The Constitutional Powers of the People* (New York: Harper, 1960); Edward Dumbauld, *The Bill of Rights and What It Means Today* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957); and Robert A. Rutland, *The Birth of the Bill of Rights, 1776–1791* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

or ill, it has systematically avoided them. Yet they now become very important questions.

(2) The Declaration of Independence, with its references to the Creator, to the laws of nature and of nature's God, to Divine Providence, appears to be the declaration of a religious people, of, more specifically, a *Christian* people. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights, by contrast, have in them not one word that could not have been written, and subscribed to, by a people made up of atheists and agnostics.[12] The Declaration seems to be the declaration of a people who wish to make clear above all else their commitment to work the will of God; the Constitution and Bill of Rights seem to be the expressions of a people whose exclusive concern is with the things of this world. Now: What happened between 1776 and 1787? Did there take place some far-reaching shift in the religious sentiments of the American revolutionaries? If not, then, which *is* the American political tradition—the religious commitment of the Declaration, or the religious indifferentism of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights? Again, the official literature (which, we may note in passing, has never wasted much time or thought on the religious emphasis of the Declaration) has no answers. Yet, answers are certainly called for.

(3) The Declaration, we are told, speaks of "natural" rights, and even pauses a moment to list some of the natural rights with which all men are endowed by their Creator: specifically, the right, or rights, to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness. More: The Declaration proclaims that governments are instituted to protect men, *all* men presumably, in the enjoyment of their natural rights. Now: One might fairly have expected that the revolution-makers who wrote the Declaration would, when their revolution had succeeded and the time had come for them to write a Constitution, take as their central problem: *What* rights must be protected? What form of government will best protect those rights? But, paradoxically, the Constitution says little about rights and their protection (and virtually nothing about what we today speak of as rights), and, curiously, the Bill of Rights itself tends to avoid the term "rights," and says nothing about how rights are to be protected (see the discussion in Chapter 7). The Constitution speaks—in its Preamble, where the question of what the new government is being instituted for is answered—not of rights, but of a whole series of purposes that are not present, even by implication, in the Declaration: a more perfect union, for example, and justice, the blessings of liberty, the general welfare, etc. Still another fact that most of us have not dwelt on is this: The Framers of the Constitution were often accused, through the period of 1787–89, of having betrayed the "spirit," that is one supposes, the principles of 1776. And again the questions, once you look a second time, crowd in on us. How do we explain the sudden disappearance, between 1776 and 1787, of natural rights, and of the problem of how natural rights are to be protected? Had the American people changed their minds, somewhere along the line, about *the* great issue over which, for so we are told, the Revolutionary War had been fought? In any case, which *is* the tradition, natural rights and their protection? Or the ends of government as set forth in the Preamble of the Constitution? The best answer the official literature has for us is that the Bill of Rights was devised precisely to repair an "oversight" on the part of the Framers. But clearly this answer will not do. The *fact* is that the Philadelphia Convention heard, and unanimously voted down, a last-minute attempt to bring the Constitution into line with the Declaration on this point. Why? The official literature has no answer.

[12] This fact is, mistakenly in our opinion, taken to mean by certain of our best natural law theorists that there can be no real dialogue or recourse to reason in the American system. See on this point a very provocative article by L. Brent Bozell, "The Death of the Constituiton," *Triumph*, III, No. 2 (February, 1968).

(4) The Declaration asserts flatly that "all men are created equal" and makes the resultant "all equal men" the subjects of those natural rights of which we were just speaking. Equality, we are told, *is* therefore one of the basic principles of the American political tradition and we are, in consequence, committed as a nation *to* equality. Yet the Constitution says nothing of equality, and neither, rather surprisingly, does the Bill of Rights (unless just possibly by implication) —and this despite the fact that the Preamble offered the Framers every opportunity *to* include equality as one of the goods the new frame of government was to assure.[13] Equality just disappears from our political vocabulary, disappears as the ink dries on the Declaration of Independence, and is not heard of again, to all intents and purposes, until Abraham Lincoln reminds his contemporaries of the language of the Declaration and begins to insist that America has failed to live up to one of its deepest commitments (though Lincoln himself turns out to have understood by the word equality some rather curious things). And when equality finally reappears in a great public document it does so in the form not of equality simply, but equal protection of the laws, which neither that generation nor the two subsequent generations appear to have interpreted as a promise of equality, at least not equality of the kind that our Supreme Court now seems ready to champion. The question cannot be sidestepped. What *is* the American political tradition? Is it a tradition that exalts equality as one of the goods of the good society, or a tradition that, like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, conspicuously avoids the topic of equality—and, in avoiding it, seems to repudiate the Declaration of Independence commitment? Is the American political tradition the tradition of the textbooks, which indeed situates the "all men are equal" clause at the center of our political experience, or is it the tradition of

13 See our discussion below, principally Chaps. 5 through 7.

American life as it is actually lived and thus a tradition of inequality? The official literature this time does have an answer, namely: The tradition is equality; but, as we have seen, that answer will not bear confrontation with the facts, not even with the facts that are most notorious.[14]

(5) The men who made the American Revolution, we have all been brought up to believe, were in fact conservatives, not revolutionaries or even patriots.[15] As Edmund Burke put it, they were fighting for the traditional rights of Englishmen, were therefore fighting for the best interests of England itself. Concretely, we are told, the slogan of the Revolution was "No Taxation Without Representation." And the implication here is that Englishmen had been being born for centuries with a right not to be taxed by a government in which they were not represented, despite the fact that millions of Englishmen were not admitted to the vote, that is, to being represented in Parliament, until the present century. Now: Nothing is more natural, after the fact of a war, than for the historians on each side to concoct the prettiest story possible about the purpose for which that side shed its blood (and spilled that of its opponents), though to a considerable degree that is precisely what has *not* happened in this case. Burke's interpretation of the American Revolution, perhaps because it lent itself to the designs of the democratizing forces in England, pretty much prevailed on yon side of the Atlantic too (and is reflected in the bad conscience the English, in general, have shown during the recent world crisis of so-called colonialism). Nothing is more natural, either, than for the heirs of a revolution to try, soon after it is over, to wrap it in the mantle of a tradition. Nevertheless the idea that the American revolution-

14 See Chap. 5.

15 Such a view is so widely held that we cannot possibly cite all those who maintain it. We do know that Daniel Boorstin was one of the first to maintain the notion with some success. See his *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

aries were fighting for their rights as Englishmen begins, like the other theses we have been examining, to crumble under the impact of new and factual research—for example, that of John Miller of Stanford, whose book[16] on the years leading up to the Revolution has become a "must" reading for all students of American history. Our point here, however, is merely that there are questions in the air that the official literature simply cannot answer: If our ancestors were fighting for their traditional rights as Englishmen, as we are told, then we are entitled to be told *what* traditional rights of Englishmen, and to be shown that Englishmen had in fact traditionally enjoyed those rights—as, also, we are entitled to be told what happened to those rights after the Revolution was over. Are they, for example, the same rights that were in due course written into the Bill of Rights? If so, then why—the question, you notice, keeps on bobbing up—why were the Framers reluctant to embody them in their new constitution? And, in any case, if we wish to know the purpose for which the Revolution was fought, why not do the obvious thing and go to the revolutionaries' own statement as to what they were up to, that is, to the Declaration of Independence as a whole and not to this or that phrase, wrenched out of context, that happens to lend itself to a particular interpretation of the Revolution. Again: What are we to make of the fact that the agitators who whipped up the first ardor of the revolutionaries, those agitators (like Sam Adams and Tom Paine) to whom the official historians go for quotes to support their thesis, disappear from American history in the course of the war, and that the war turned for its actual leadership to another breed of men altogether—a breed of men who precisely did *not* talk loosely about "rights?" Finally, a question that the official historians tend to avoid like the plague, what about the rights of the

[16] Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Stanford University Press, 1957).

American Tories, who were silenced, persecuted, robbed and, finally, driven across the border into Canada like so many cattle? They were "all men" too, but where were the famous natural rights when *they* needed them? Don't misunderstand us: Our purpose is not at all to "debunk" the American revolutionaries, toward whom we feel a reverence that we are willing to place beside that of any Chinese traditionalist meditating on his ancestors. Our point, as it has been all along, is that there are too many questions the official literature cannot answer, and especially the big question we always end up with, namely: What *is* the American political tradition? Is it, back beyond 1776, a matter of the traditional rights of Englishmen—so that as we trace the tradition back from our day to its beginnings, it so to speak crosses the Atlantic in 1776 and earlier than that can best be studied not in America but in England? Or should we, in tracing it back, keep to this side of the Atlantic? Might it be that in 1776 there was already a highly developed *American* (American, not English) political tradition, hazy perhaps on some points but crystal-clear on others, of which the Declaration of Independence is a natural expression precisely because the rights it claims are, if we may put it so, the rights not of Englishmen but of Americans? Might the notion of the Declaration of Independence as the beginning for the American tradition—for that is what it becomes in the official version of our history—be false? and false in the two-fold sense that it conceals (*a*) the Americanness of the Declaration and (*b*) the truly revolutionary character of the steps taken in 1776 and 1787, so inviting us to miss the point about what really happened through those crucial eleven years? These are the important questions that you should keep in mind as we proceed.

We come now to the second of the two recent developments that account for the topic we have chosen, namely: the eruption, into the vocabulary and intellectual apparatus of politi-

cal philosophy, of such concepts as *symbols, symbolization, symbolic forms;* and of such related concepts as *myths, constitution of being, the self-interpretation of a political society, representation,* etc. This, as far as American political science is concerned, is mainly a matter of the sudden impact upon our political thought of the writings of Professor Eric Voegelin, whose major works have been signed from the Louisiana State University Press.[17] To put the matter in its briefest and simplest terms: Professor Voegelin has fixed attention upon what, for most of us who have come under his influence, is a wholly new dimension of political experience and thus of political analysis. And he has set us off, as political scientists, on a new kind of task, specifically, the identification and understanding of the symbols and myths that "represent" the American people in their experience as a political society. This is not to suggest that the key words we have used—by way of edging into the problem—were wholly new when Voegelin began to write. American political scientists had long been aware, of course, that symbols—for example, the flag, the Great Seal, the slogan *e pluribus unum,* perhaps even the slogan "In God We Trust"—had some kind of role in politics, and precisely as symbols to which political orators might appeal in their attempts to sway the hearts and minds of their fellow citizens. They had also been aware that, somewhere along the way in our study of politics, we must take into account something called *myths,* that is, tales about the past, most particularly perhaps tales about our national heroes of the past, that the people tell over and over again to themselves and, without regard to their historicity, believe to be *true* tales that, besides being true, embody an important "lesson" or "moral," which people are perhaps less likely to violate

[17] Voegelin, *Order and History*: Vol. I, *Israel and Revelation*; Vol. II, *The World of the Polis*; Vol. III, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956, 1957, 1957). Also, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

because of its embodiment in a cherished myth. The tale about George Washington and the cherry tree, for example, was such a tale, there to remind us that the Father of Our Country, he who was First in the Hearts of his Countrymen, already as a little boy stood committed to Truth. And little boys who hear the tale will necessarily take to heart the noble precept "I Cannot Tell a Lie," will recognize it as pointing up the same moral as "Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness" that they learn at Sunday School, and will, in consequence, be better patriots because of associating the nation George Washington founded, *their* nation, the United States, with a central teaching of *their* religion, Christianity. So much, so to speak, was in the air when Voegelin began to write, but the political scientists who spoke of such things as symbols and myths did so—naturally enough no doubt given the prevailing intellectual mood—as part of their general self-imposed task of identifying the role of the *irrational* in politics. They themselves, being "scientists," were not, of course, about to be taken in by such things as myths and symbols; myths and symbols were regarded primarily as ploys by which the smart people "manipulated" the stupid people, who because of their stupidity could only be appealed to on the level of irrationality. Part of the task of the political scientist—and some may recall the efforts of Thurman Arnold in this connection—was to spot such symbols and myths and try to understand how they "work," [18] the extent to which they do indeed make people's hearts go pit-a-pat and do affect people's otherwise incomprehensible "behavior." (It is interesting to notice, in passing, that the major proposal in Mr. Thurman Arnold's major book in this area was the proposal that our society be operated in the future by, of course, people in the know about

[18] Arnold, *The Symbols of Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935) and *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937).

such things as symbols and myths, like a well-run insane asylum, where the big job is simply to make all the inmates as comfortable as possible under the rather dreadful circumstances.) Thus, one may fairly say that the American political scientists before Voegelin who spoke of myths and symbols certainly did not take the myths and symbols as such seriously: Symbols and myths as such were by definition nonsensical, though because nonsensical a very serious business—as, for the psychiatrist, the delusions of Miss DeHaviland in the snake-pit are a very serious business. Moreover, one may fairly say that those who spoke of myths and symbols in those days tacitly assumed that myths and symbols differed among themselves *only* as regards their *effectiveness* for purposes of manipulation, so that—and this is the main point—one did not ask whether, for example, this myth was true in some sense in which that myth was false, or whether this symbol was meaningful in some sense in which that symbol could be shown to be empty of meaning, or, above all perhaps, whether this cluster of symbols or myths was beneficent in its workings while that cluster was maleficent in its workings. Indeed the political scientists in question were, in general, men who denied that the political scientist has any proper concern with such matters as beneficence (who is to say what is beneficent?), or meaningfulness (isn't meaningfulness a matter of opinion, and isn't one man's opinion as good as another's?), or even truth (except, if you like, the "scientific" truth of the laboratory and the table of statistics).[19]

To all that kind of thing Eric Voegelin, from the first moment of his appearance on the scene, said: "Not so." The task of political analysis *begins,* he teaches, with each people's attempts at *self-interpretation,* at *self-understanding,* as a political society. And peoples, he points out as a matter of *historical fact (each* people in the course of constituting itself as a political society), soon raise with themselves, and attempt to answer, the questions: Who am I? What am I here for? Where do I fit in the *constitution of being*— in the whole complicated business of gods and goddesses, of good and evil spirits, of life and death and successive generations, of men and animals and insects and plants? What do I assert as *true,* as *good,* as *meaningful,* as *beautiful*? These, Voegelin teaches, are questions that *no* people constituting itself as a political society can sidestep, questions that do arise as a matter of course, in the process by which (in Rousseau's phrase) a people *becomes* a people, that is, gets itself politically organized for action in history (if, that is, it be a people aware—for not all peoples are—that there is such a thing as history); or, if not for action in history, then for action simply, since act a people must as it becomes and lives its life as a people and chooses between alternative courses of action. So that, even beyond these questions, there always lie the further questions: How do I—this people—decide what to do? To what standards do I refer my decisions *as* to what to do? By what procedures am I to decide what to do, and on which persons or types of persons in my bosom am I to rely when I make such decisions? All these, says Voegelin, are questions to which *all* peoples give, have to give, some kind of answer, even if the answer be refusal to answer (which is itself, curious as that may seem, a kind of answer). Now, according to Voegelin, peoples typically answer these questions precisely through the development of symbols and myths. Hence, political philosophy, as most political scientists understand the term, is a tardy development in the history of a people, and, moreover, a development precisely out of the stuff of symbols and myths. The symbols and myths become, therefore, the *first* order of business for the political scientist; and, in the first instance at

[19] This is true, we conjecture, because most of these political scientists were greatly influenced by the "behaviorists" or, if not that, were weaned on John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty.*

least, the myths and symbols are to be taken seriously above all else in politics.

To put this another way, Eric Voegelin has taught us that what we are in the habit of calling the political *tradition* of a people is above all a matter of its self-interpretation (from moment to moment, from decade to decade, from century to century) from the beginning to the end of its existence as a people. It is a matter, therefore, of a people's own understanding of its place in the *constitution of being* and of its *role in history,* of what it calls upon itself to be and do as it lives its life as a political society—a matter, in short, of the *symbols* by which it represents or interprets itself to itself. And that, Voegelin teaches us further, is above all a matter of the way a people symbolizes, pictures to itself, its relation to, as he puts it, transcendent truth, that is, the truth of the soul and the truth of society, as apprehended by Western man in the course of, first, his religious experience, and, second, his experience in the realm of philosophy. All societies think of themselves, once they begin to think of themselves at all, as representing a truth, a meaning, about the nature and destiny of man, and thus about that which, in the constitution of being, is above and beyond man. Man in society, Voegelin emphasizes, in fact *always* asserts, never fails to assert, a relationship, even if only the negative relationship of denial, to that which is above and beyond him, and thus transcendent.[20] (We may speak of the negative relationship of denial when man in society sets himself up as that which is the highest in the constitution of being, as men in some societies have done.) Political societies no doubt begin as mere external facts, that is, as this or that segment of humankind who are "represented" by a ruler or a set of rulers—represented in the sense that they in fact obey commands emanating from a recognizable source

20 See in particular Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics.*

of authority, which does, as a matter of fact, act for that segment of mankind in its relations with other segments of mankind with respect to such matters as war, commerce, and the like. But, as Voegelin points out, soon or late man in society shows himself unwilling to leave it at that: Regimes that are *merely* external relations of command and obedience are, we perceive, inherently unstable and short-lived; thus, a moment inevitably comes in the life of any emergent society when it begins to think of itself as what Voegelin terms a little *world of meaning* all its own, with such and such a relation to the other little worlds of meaning around it, and to a *great* world of meaning of which all the little worlds of meaning are merely parts. For the human beings within each little world of meaning, the meaning for it becomes, to use Voegelin's vocabulary, the "mode and condition" of their self-realization as human beings; or, as another great political philosopher of our day would put it,[21] it becomes their regime, their way of life, illuminated for them in due course by rites and myths, symbolic in character, that express their relation as human beings first to each other, then to the political authority whose commands they obey, and then, finally, to that, be it God or higher law or the music of the spheres, which is above and beyond all human beings. "The self-illumination of society through symbols," writes Voegelin, "is an integral part of social reality, and one may say even its essential part; for through such symbolization the members of a society experience it as more than an accident or a convenience; they experience it as of their human essence." [22] Or again: "Every human society has an understanding of itself through a variety of symbols." Or still again: when political science goes to work on a given society, "It will inevitably start from the rich body of

21 We refer here, of course, to Leo Strauss.
22 Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics,* 27.

self-interpretation of [the] society and proceed by critical clarification of . . . [its] symbols." [23]

A few further points, and we shall have followed Voegelin about as far as we need to for our purposes. First this point: A people that has given itself a set of symbols does not just leave it at that. With the passing of time it develops its symbols; perhaps enriching or impoverishing them, perhaps giving them new twists, perhaps emphasizing this symbol at the expense of that one, or even perhaps dropping old symbols and replacing them with new ones. The original symbols are likely, Voegelin teaches us, to be *compact,* that is, compressed, by comparison with that which they will become with the passing of time—by which we may understand him to mean that the original symbols hold within themselves the potentiality of development, unpredictable development one may add, in this direction or that one—much as the child is a *compact* version of the man that he is to become, and becomes that man by developing this potentiality or that one in this way or that. Put otherwise, the original symbols are full of alternative possible meanings which in due course may be seized upon, now this one and now that one, and developed. Voegelin calls the process by which the alternative meanings separate off from the original symbols, *differentiation,* a process the understanding of which is indispensable for our subsequent analysis of the American tradition.

Second: In Western Civilization basic symbolizations tend to be variants of the original symbolization of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition: variants, this is to say, of the tale according to which a *founder,* Moses, leads the people out of the realm of darkness, *Egypt,* into the *desert* (the essential meaning of which is that it is *not* Egypt, but a place from which the people can move in any of a thousand directions, including back to Egypt, and must, because it no longer has

[23] *Ibid.,* 28.

the Egyptians to tell it what to do, *choose* a direction) toward a Promised Land, which it becomes the business of a people, through its action, to conquer or achieve or build (as the case may be). (The Old Testament symbolism, with which all of us are of course familiar, is Voegelin's favorite example of what we mean by the *compactness* of an original set of symbols—as the history of the Jews, and their successive experiments with alternative meanings of the symbols, is the prime illustration of what he means by differentiation.) In the desert, we must notice further, the Founder, or Founders, give (s) the people its political regime or order, including the basic rules by which it is to move toward the Promised Land.,

Third: We must not, when we stand in the presence of an original or compact set of symbols, look for what we fashionably call political *principles;* the principles come only later, as a result of what Voegelin calls critical clarification of the symbols—or, if you like, as a result of what happens to the symbols when political philosophers and pundits go to work on them, and spell out their content in what we may call *propositional* form. The critical clarification, which may be skillful or unskillful, faithful to the original symbols or unfaithful to them, etc., comes later, after the symbols, but always proceeds with the symbols as its raw material.

Fourth and finally: Voegelin gives us no rules by which to proceed with this new kind of analysis of a political society. There are no rules to tell us where to begin or what precisely to look for as we seek to understand a political society in terms of its representative symbols. Nor are there rules to tell us when we have got hold of the symbols that do in fact represent a society to itself, do in fact illuminate, for the members of a society, the meaning of that society, do in fact constitute the mode and condition of their self-realization. At first glance the absence of such rules might seem an insurmountable barrier to the fruitful implementation of this form of analysis.

However, two rules do suggest themselves on the basis of Voegelin's own practice: (*a*) We must try to begin at the beginning, lest we mistake some more or less differentiated variant of the basic symbolization for the basic symbolization itself. (Voegelin, for instance, is careful to go back beyond the Convenant at Mount Sinai to the Covenant between God and Abraham, from what we might call the myth of Moses to the myth of Abraham.) Now this, as we have already intimated, poses great problems as we approach the American political experience, where we cannot easily say that this or that is the beginning. And a further complication is this: We must be very careful not to begin before the beginning, that is, with a set of symbols put forward at a moment before the people begins to constitute itself as a people. To avoid this pitfall, we must show some kind of historical continuity between the beginning that we seize upon and that much later moment at which the people is in fact constituted as a people for action in history. This, of course, will also take some thinking about in any analysis of the American tradition. (*b*) A second, though implicit, rule is this: We must never lose sight, over and above the symbols upon which we are fixing attention, of our people's *action;* that is, what it in fact does as compared, or contrasted, with what we would expect it to do given this or that set of symbols that it seems to have put forward in the course of its attempts at self-interpretation. Put otherwise: Unless we can see a *correspondence* between the symbols we have in hand and the people's action in history, the symbols we have in hand do not in fact represent that people, and we must look a second time for the symbols that do in fact represent them.

With these two rules in mind we are prepared to ask, Where in America *is* the beginning? The official literature, as yet uninfluenced by the mode of analysis set forth here, answers this question roughly along the following lines: The beginning

is the Declaration of Independence, which is the moment at which the American people begins to speak as a people and to constitute itself as a people. In a larger and more encompassing sense, the beginning is the Founding Fathers, the Framers, who first wrote the Declaration of Independence, which is their statement of principles in the war they fought for their traditional rights as Englishmen, then wrote the Constitution in which they laid down our frame of government, then wrote *The Federalist,* in which they explicated the Constitution, then wrote the Bill of Rights, in which, by way of repairing an oversight, they spelled out the rights that our frame of government was instituted to protect. Thus, while the beginning is the Declaration of Independence, we also stand in the presence of what may aptly be termed the Myth of the Framers, and in the presence of a cluster of symbols—Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Federalist Papers, Bill of Rights—which *are* for many people *the* basic symbols of the American political tradition, representative as a matter of course because all four have been adopted, as nothing else has been adopted, by the American people (one of them by tacit ratification in a war fought in its name; two of them by formal process of ratification; one of them, *The Federalist,* by tacit elevation to the plane of authoritative Scripture). But even more than being adopted as basic symbols, they have been acted upon, so we are told, by the American people.

Why do we label this a myth? For a number of reasons. For one thing because it plays a recognizably mythical kind of hanky-panky with the heroes it holds up for our admiration by concretely lumping together as Framers or Founding Fathers the actors in four separate and distinct operations. Stated another way, once having identified the symbols that constitute the beginning, there is something more than a slight tendency to attribute their origins to one source (Framers or Founding Fathers) which necessitates the lumping to which

we have referred. However, as a matter of historical fact, we know better than this. Thomas Jefferson, who did indeed write the draft of the Declaration of Independence, was not present at Philadelphia; one of the authors of *The Federalist,* Hamilton, played at Philadelphia a role not unlike that the Mets once played in the National League. The original proponents of the Bill of Rights were men who actually walked out of the Philadelphia Convention. And most of the miscellaneous writings of Thomas Jefferson that are held up to us as part of the wisdom of the Founding Fathers played *no* role in the founding, if by founding we mean founding, because they are dated long after the founding was completed.

Second, it is a myth because purely aside from the hanky-panky about the Fathers it is an obvious oversimplification, not to say prettification, of the sequence of historical events it putatively summarizes. For example, no lad-of-a-boy learning the tale at school would ever guess—and this bears repetition because it is so highly important—that the historical Framers, who did in fact frame the Consitution, opposed the very idea of a Bill of Rights. And this opposition, as we see from *The Federalist,* was deep-seated.

Third, it is a myth because it was in fact invented after the fact, and invented for a purpose that myth-makers often address themselves to in myth-making enterprises, namely: to get across a point that the actual historical record, the story as it actually happened, is likely to obscure or refute. For instance we are told that the four great documents, the symbols that the myth venerates, follow upon one another as logically and sense-makingly as the seasons of the year: We the people, acting through our representatives the Framers wrote the Declaration, which is precisely the kind of Declaration you would expect from us the people who will in due course write the Constitution; and the Constitution is just the Constitution that we who gave ourselves the Declaration would naturally

have written. More: The Constitution would not have been adopted (another point, by the way, that seems about to go down the drain as a result of current research) but for its faithful explication and brilliant defense in *The Federalist;* and the Bill of Rights was just what we needed in order to round out the whole business and bring the Constitution fully in line with the Declaration of Independence. All of this makes a nice, tidy package and is precisely what our official literature disposes us to believe.

Fourth, it is a myth because it has a way of surviving which is like that of a myth. It is believed and cherished quite without regard to its historicity; believed and cherished with the kind of passion that myths engender; believed and cherished, finally, by persons who, quite naturally, share the purposes of those who originally invented it.

Finally, and most important, it is a myth because like that of most typical American myths, it spins itself out of nothingness: The hero rides into town out of a vaguely eastern nowhere (those rights of Englishmen, who from the vantage point of the Liberty Bell are indeed East), already possessed of the qualities he is to show at High Noon, unexplained, unaccounted for, without even an immediate past, so that we don't know where he was yesterday or the day before, when and how he learned to "draw"—learned to draw so quickly or shoot so straight—or who taught him the lofty principles by which, before riding off into the setting sun, he does justice in the course of the day. If, of course, we look too closely—too closely in either case—we realize that before the beginning the myth holds out to us there must have been an earlier beginning—and unless we have surrendered to the myth, we shall want to go behind its beginning to learn more about the hero. Most exponents of the myth, as we might well expect, do not look too closely. But we must do so if ever we are to answer the question, Where, in America, *is* the beginning?