

# Looking for America

## **An account of this site's main theme and of how I came to it.**

Lots of unflattering things are said about Americans, and for lots of good reasons. But every so often people in this country do things that strike me as appealingly "American" in ways I sketch and try to explain in the materials collected on this site.

It's a truism that many Americans did such things on 9/11, notably in New York. Many more do them less dramatically every day, usually with so little public notice that we have to remind ourselves that a republic's strength depends on what ordinary people do when no one's looking. A republic has to assume that a significant minority of its citizens take certain values to heart enough to live by them and that they have enough self-discipline to do it without being policed.

Early in 2008, Barack Obama's speeches revived such assumptions in a big way, across many of the usual partisan and ideological lines. He seemed to embody certain "American" qualities that fascinate many around the world -- not our immense wealth or power (which can be trashy and brutal, and which we're squandering), but an egalitarianism that still inclines most Americans to say "Hi" to anyone rather than "Heil" to a leader; to give the other person a fair shot; and, out of *that* kind of strength, to take a shot at the moon. Such inclinations don't come from nowhere, and they may not survive.

I don't fear that the American republic is sliding toward fascism, as some on the left think, or that it's sliding toward communist totalitarianism, as some conservatives warn. Far more likely (and just as frightening) is a muddled dissolution of the civic-republican fabric, as happened in ancient Rome. Is that happening? A republican way of life waxes or wanes in what Tocqueville called the slow and quiet action of society upon itself, the little daily interactions that count for as much as high moments of national experience and decision.

Sustaining a disposition to give the other person a fair shot and even to back her up as she tries depends on keeping a balance of values, virtues and body language which the literary historian Daniel Aaron called "ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free." You can see that kind of American civic-republican grace in a team sport when a player closes in on the action, not to show off but to back up a teammate and help him score. You can see it in the ways people who are deliberating in a contentious meeting decide to extend trust cannily, in ways that elicit trust in return, or in the ways that people whose friendships have been strained give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Or maybe you don't see that kind of grace so often anymore; maybe backbiting, road rage, and the growing degradation of public space and prime-time fare prompt quiet heartache or a sense that something cherished but nameless has slipped out of our lives together in society. Without the civic balance I'm hinting at here, this country can't survive as a republican project that, for all its flaws, has nourished seeds of its own transcendence and pointed beyond its patriotism and its borders.

Giving American civic grace a better description than I have so far requires not just hard analysis but also some probing and poetry, some fakery and a lot of faith. You can develop an ear and an eye for it, and maybe a voice for it. I've been at this one way or another since around 1970, when I was 22. Sometimes I get it right, and people tell me so. Sometimes I don't, and people tell me that, too.

This website is culled from more than 2000 columns, essays, reviews, posts and appearances in print and electronic venues, including a few books such as [Liberal Racism](#) and [The Closest of Strangers](#), and a couple of anthologies. The rest of this introductory essay gives you some assumptions and experiences that guide my work. Beyond that, the pieces linked throughout this site will speak for themselves. In some sections I've added additional introductory thoughts -- on journalism, race, conservatism, and the left. But first let me say a little more about what I assume and what I reject, and about how I came to believe what I do.

### **Civic-republican grace in writing and public life**

I mentioned that the spirit of a republic can rise -- as the historian Gordon Wood showed it doing in America in the 1770s -- or recede -- as Edward Gibbon showed it doing in his chronicle of ancient Rome. I've been following the civic-republican spirit's American ebbs and flows since World War II, although I was born two years after that war's end. This website offers some of my soundings.

Much of the writing collected here is journalism, the proverbial "first rough draft of history" when a reporter actually has some grounding in history and some experience in politics and enterprise beyond covering *other* people's politics and enterprise. I worked as a journalist in New York for 20 years, but I'm not mainly a journalist (or a New Yorker). When I do break news (See "Scoops and Other Revelations"), I do it mainly to explore intuitions and ideas which events of the moment are driving or illuminating. More often, I plough my writerly furrows before dawn at the margins of the news cycle, working counter-cyclically and counterintuitively to track republican currents that are moving beneath and sometimes against what's "news".

When the chattering classes are making a cicada-like racket over the latest Big Thing, I try to live by Emerson's admonition not to quit my hunch "that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom." Doing that sometimes yields scoops and insights that others miss. Some of these highlight the fragility of the republican experiment, and some have prompted me to assail public leaders and journalists who I think are increasing that fragility by being heedless of it, losing their civic-republican lenses and the balance of values and habits I characterized with Daniel Aaron's "ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free."

For instance, I upbraided [a TIME magazine writer for his almost-celebratory profile, in 2007, of Rupert Murdoch](#), a man I consider a republic-wrecker but whom too many people respect, for reasons I tried to describe. A different kind of civic-republican scourging came 25 years earlier, in this account of an idealistic, young editor's delicate interactions with an [urban warlord in Congress](#).

Seen through civic-republican lenses, both Rep. Fred Richmond, D-Brooklyn, NY and I were on a dark and slippery slope, but only the young editor (me) recognized it. I do also recognize a cruel streak in some of my past writing. Sometimes writing that *feels* cruel to its target is really a laser beam in its interpretive, truth-telling power, and it's necessary and bracing:

If I ever resumed writing a regular column, as I did for the *New York Daily News* in the mid-1990s, I'd call it "Somebodyhaddasayit." because, as in the two pieces I've just linked, somebody really did have to say it. But saying it can also be scarily and unfairly intrusive, causing hurt and making enemies unnecessarily. Ultimately there's no substitute for good judgment, self-doubt, tact, and compassion. It took me too long to learn that difficult truth.

I do also defend and sometimes celebrate people who bear the American republican spirit bravely and shrewdly against great odds. Here's an example, written "before dawn" in the stacks of Yale's Sterling Memorial Library in 2006, as I looked up the family background of Ned Lamont, who was then making an anti-war Democratic primary challenge to Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman. I wound up writing not about Ned Lamont himself but about [a long-forgotten uncle of his, Thomas W. Lamont II](#), who died toward the end of World War II and whose story I render here as as "a *fata morgana* of the American republic, a fading mirage of the kind of citizenship we're losing not at terrorists' hands but at our own."How's that for countercyclical?

Actually the story, in *The American Prospect*, pdf'd here with a photo of Tommy Lamont in 1941, was widely linked, and I spun part of it off as a *New York Times* op-ed column that linked in the *Prospect* story itself. Being an American like Tommy Lamont is an art and a discipline. Most people do it only half-consciously or intermittently. The American republican spirit is pretty exceptional, which is why it's often in trouble. You can't run American civic grace up a flagpole and salute it, but you shouldn't tear it down and cast it aside as merely a bourgeois mystification of oppressive social relations or something worse.

When the Vietnam War's brutality and folly were at their worst, the perennial socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas urged young protestors of my generation "not to burn the American flag but to wash it." I took his point, and I work with it. Americans who think themselves too sophisticated for it strike me as naïve. For one thing, the American republican spirit keeps them out of prison, but there is a lot more to it than that.

One couldn't fairly call the writing collected here "nationalist" or "conservative." Lately I've written in left-of-center sites and journals (*Talking Points Memo*, *The American Prospect*, *The Guardian*, *Dissent*, *The Nation*), challenging much of what passes for "conservative" in American public life. But a civic-republican compass does point rightward sometimes, and in the 1990s I wrote a few times in right-of-center venues (including even *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial pages and, on one occasion each, the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* and *Commentary*) magazines, condemning the racialist "identity politics" that passed for progressive politics at the time.

Long immersion in black inner city neighborhoods had showed me the folly of guilt-ridden or ideological indulgence of ethno-racial flag-waving, whether in multi-culturalist pedagogy or in racial street theater that often passed for "civil rights" activism at that time. I've mentioned here

above that American national identity doesn't rightly express any primordial kinship in ethno-racial claims of "blood and soil" or in a vision of national salvation through Christ or Allah. But more than a few Americans have yearned and fought to make it do those very things. They haven't succeeded, and mostly they've been wrong. But not wholly so.

The American national identity was drawn up self-consciously and irreversibly in Enlightenment terms, as a civic-republican experiment, yet it does rely on something close to religious faith in its citizens even though it can't impose a religious doctrine on them without losing its civic soul. Living with that paradox requires a dark, sometimes acrobatic skill.

Americans are fated "by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government through reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force," as Alexander Hamilton put it. To "accident and force," he could have added, "or on fraud or divine command."

Hamilton's intentions in posing his challenge were tactical and sometimes murky, but what he wrote here does pose a personal as well as political challenge to every American, one that many people slide or slink away from most of the time. Being American really does mean standing up for the civic-republican project, though -- embodying it with easy yet determined grace against exclusionary racial, religious, and economic currents that run right alongside the republican project, within it, and against it.

Think of Rosa Parks on that bus in Montgomery, presenting herself to not only as a black woman demanding vindication against racism but, also as a decent American working woman -- a fellow citizen, too, like any other, boarding a bus and trying to enjoy her rights in a way that should have threatened no one and that. Parks didn't call the bus driver a racist "mo-fo." The way she presented herself in defending her rights lifted up the whole civil society instead of just trashing it as irredeemably racist and evil.

Civic grace like Parks' is heroic, and rare: In fact, she had trained for it as an officer of her local chapter of the NAACP. But possibly you've seen something of that disciplined civic-republican grace more than once in other places; certainly if you look for glimmers of it, you find them in school corridors, playing fields, corporate offices and shopping malls. But, again, maybe you don't find them so often. Maybe social epidemics from obesity to road rage act out a spreading, unspoken frustration at the loss of civic grace and neighborly trust.

When Americans stop feeling like fellow citizens as well as self-marketers, we have nothing else to fall back on, no myths of "blood and soil," no firm religious doctrines or dispositions. Tocqueville worried about this even in 1835. I do, too, in several of the articles linked on this site. Whatever becomes of Obama's presidential run, he has embodied something beautiful in becoming an American along the lines Hamilton sketched: Voters of all colors who elevated him through "reflection and choice," not "accident and force," made something achievable that at times transfixes the world: our ability to slip out of race knots, blood feuds, and cobwebs of superstition that equate having a skin color with having a culture.

“It’s not something he’s doing,” Dartmouth Professor Joseph Bafumi said of Obama to the *New York Times*; “it’s something he’s being.” American civic grace has its undertows and other dangers – not primarily the alien terrorists or domestic subversives whom Rudolph Giuliani the neoconservatives consumed themselves in warning us about, but undercurrents within Americanism itself that displace our fears, hatreds and sins onto others, abroad and at home. It may take a second American revolution against new concentrations of power, on behalf of a faith that transcends them, to vindicate what’s stirring beneath our epidemics and acrimony.

Wherever I see people exercising civic-republican leadership, on a streetcorner or in a boardroom, extending trust in little ways that beget trust, I try to describe and explain its revolutionary potential in ways that strengthen it. Most of the essays listed in the "Sleeper Sampler" tried to do that. I mentioned that a civic-republican standard has prompted some ahead-of-the-curve insights about American public life.

Some of those prophecies are linked in “Scoops and Other Revelations”: My republican compass or radar showed me things as trivial as that Joe Klein was the “Anonymous” author of the novel [Primary Colors](#) and that *New York Times* editor [Howell Raines would do that newspaper more harm than good](#), and as significant as that multicultural [“rainbow” politics was going to implode in city after city](#) and that liberals and [leftists would have to let go of racial and other “identity politics” go](#) as the central organizing principle of their politics. Precisely because this country is so diverse racially, religiously, and culturally, we have to work overtime on nourishing the common civic standards and lenses I use.

### **How (and How Not) to Think About Left and Right**

Both left and right as we see them in American public life endorse certain civic-republican truths. Each side has contributed something distinctive and indispensable to governing ourselves through reflection and choice rather than accident, force, and fraud. But each side tends to cling to its own truths so tightly that they become half-truths that curdle into lies, leaving each side right only about how the other is wrong.

The damage this does to the public sphere won't be undone by imposing upon American politics the left-vs.-right floor plan of the French Chamber of Deputies, where such distinctions began. Yes, our economic and social classes make a mockery of expectations of organic community or egalitarian democracy. But we don't have class consciousness or a pursuit of "equality" in the Marxist sense. Marxist analyses are indispensable, I think, but inadequate to engaging American politics.

Much the same is true of almost all of what passes for conservative analysis. See the sections, "Folly on the Left" and "Conservative Contradictions." Ever since James Madison wrote about factions and helped craft a Constitution to channel and deflect them, the republic has needed an open, circulating elite of "disinterested" leaders who rise enough above class origins to look out for self-government by reflection and choice more than by class war. Jefferson sought such an elite in founding the University of Virginia to cull from the populace a natural aristocracy of talent and virtue, not of inherited wealth and breeding.

It's an *open* elite in the sense that, because membership in it has to be ratified both by other members of the leadership group and by voters' common sense in assessing leaders, people can fall out of leadership as well as rise up to it. How this happens matters a great deal. At the same time Madison and Jefferson were imagining the new republic, the great British conservative thinker and Member of Parliament Edmund Burke (a supporter of American independence) pleaded with his constituents in Bristol that they offer to their elected leaders what I would say those leaders should also offer to their followers: If "we do not give confidence to their minds, and a liberal scope to their understandings; if we do not permit our members [of Parliament] to act upon a very enlarged view of things; we shall at length infallibly degrade our national representation into a confused and scuffling bustle of local agency."

D.H. Lawrence made my additional point that "it is the business of our Chief Thinkers to fell us of our own deeper desires, not to keep shrilling our little desires in our ears," he wrote. I am always looking for members of that open elite, however humble, who offer such leadership. They are everywhere, and they need recognition and support.

A Marxist would say that people who try to nurture an aristocracy of talent and virtue in a capitalist society are naïve or lying. But Americans still believe that every citizen should stand up for the civic-republican promise, whether as the moderator of a presidential debate or the umpire in a Little League game, as a participant in a street demonstration or as a board member who says, "Now wait a minute, let me make sure I understand what this proposal is based on and what it entails....," or as [a juror who quiets the ethno-racial voices in his head](#) to join other citizens in finding the truth together. We do this through shared reflection and choice, not through radical pronouncements of the General Will or promulgations of religious doctrine or esoteric philosophy.

In politics, unlike science, the vitality and generosity of our truth-seeking matter even more than the validity of the findings. At any historical moment, the left's claims or the right's may seem the more liberating against the other, dominant side's conventions and cant. In the 1930s, George Orwell sought liberation in democratic-socialist movements against ascendant fascist powers, and his sympathy remained with workers. But at times that required him to stand against workers' self-proclaimed champions as well as against their exploiters, and at times he looked sympathetically into the religious and folkloric interstices of English life as it was, not as he might want it to be.

I've done some of that, too, in controversies turning on race and class, becoming scathingly critical of leftist and black protest politics of the 1980's and 1990's. [As I wrote about Orwell](#), "He never forgot that both left and right tend to get stuck in their imagined upswings against concentrated power and to disappoint in the end: The left's almost willful misreadings of human nature make it founder in the swift, deep currents of nationalism and religion, leaving it pitching between denying their importance, on the one hand, and surrendering to them abjectly and hypocritically on the other: 'Socialism in One Country,' Marxism as a secular eschatology.

Yet Orwell never forgot that the corporate-capitalist state and its political leaders and apologists posed Nineteen Eighty-Four –ish dangers, too. He remained conservative enough to look sympathetically into nationalism, patriotism, and religion and to savor life in their interstices. He

was always on the left enough to seek solidarity in struggles against capitalist overreach without losing an irreducible personal dignity and responsibility that sometimes balk at solidarity itself. “

The balance I hold out for against ideologues and partisans of "the left" and "the right" is analogous to that of a healthy person who walks on both a left foot and a right one without having to notice that in many instants all his weight is on one foot or the other. What matters is the balance and the stride. A society needs a "left foot" of social equality and provision – without which the individuality and communal bonds which conservatives cherish couldn't flourish – and a right foot of irreducibly personal responsibility and autonomy, without which any leftist social provision or engineering would reduce persons to passive clients, cogs, cannon fodder, or something even worse.

A walker with a balanced stride doesn't notice when all his weight is on just one foot rather than the other. So, too, with a society. But in a society, each “foot” – the left foot of common provision, and the right foot of irreducibly individual freedom – isn't really a foot but a constellation of interests and powers, each with its partisans (and parasites?) certain that their opponents have made the other foot too strong. If such claims aren't modulated as much as Madison wanted, the side that gains dominance hobbles society's stride. The balance itself is always contested, of course.

Even if we could ordain equality and moral clarity, the irreducible differences among individuals and the divisions between the sociable and the selfish inclinations in every heart would upset the balance. A republic anticipates this. It sustains an evolving center without succumbing to hatred and violence. Doing that requires vigilance against concentrations of power, using institutional checks and balances; it also requires knowing how to extend trust to others in big and little ways that elicit trust in return.

That's what's ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free, shrewd and generous. It's what requires fakery and faith. It draws on virtues and beliefs that neither the liberal state nor free markets alone can nourish and that armies alone can't defend and wealth alone can't buy. Ultimately, and ironically, our strength lies in the very vulnerability that comes with extending trust.

A republican leader who was gifted in that art, Yale's president of the late 1960s, Kingman Brewster, Jr., put it this way in what is now the epitaph on his grave: “The presumption of innocence is not just a legal concept. In common place terms it rests on that generosity of spirit which assumes the best, not the worst, of the stranger.”

The generosity Brewster prescribed isn't material but “of spirit.” Anyone, however poor, can reciprocate it, thereby winning fuller membership and opportunity. Civil-rights demonstrators did that by crediting racist whites with more good faith than sophisticates were inclined to do, thereby shrewdly shaming everyone into bending. Conceivably, Brewster's generosity of spirit does include a material component. Conceivably, a republic can make itself enough of a community to extend opportunity and support in ways that enhance reciprocity and initiative and thereby speed real “inclusion.”

In the civic-republican way, though, material generosity doesn't precede the spiritual; it responds to it. It's the "hand up" that implies prior mutual recognition, not the hand-out that implies distancing or pacification. Mutual aid doesn't reduce the spiritual to mere sentiment, derided by economic determinists of both left and right. Nor does the republican spirit dismiss material aid as inevitably debilitating of spirit. In an American balance, neither the left foot of social provision nor the right foot of irreducibly personal responsibility gets very far without the other.

### **How I Came to This**

Three cultural currents in my upbringing and early adulthood inclined me to look out for the civic-republican challenge Hamilton described. The first two are Old Testament prophecy and New England Calvinist propriety. I chafed under both of them but took them to heart as a grandson of four Lithuanian Jewish immigrants growing up in a stereotypically New England Yankee town, Longmeadow, Massachusetts, in 1950s and '60s.

In 1986 wrote rather innocently about Longmeadow in a newspaper column prompted by [my 25th high school reunion](#). In 2004 I wrote more knowingly, but still sympathetically, about the larger [civic-republican tradition of Kingman Brewster](#), a direct descendant of the Plymouth Pilgrims' minister on the Mayflower who was born in Longmeadow and who was Yale's president while I was an undergraduate there in the late 1960s.

A third cultural current grew stronger in me around the time I turned 30: Like many New Englanders before me, I took my civic and moral presumptions to New York -- not to literary Manhattan but, for 10 years, to hard-pressed Brooklyn neighborhoods where I ran an [activist weekly newspaper](#) (that's me, in the jacket and tie). I did a three-year stint in city government as a speechwriter for City Council President Carol Bellamy. After that I wrote for the *Village Voice*, *Dissent*, and daily newspapers, mostly *Newsday* and *the New York Daily News*. I made occasional forays into the *New York Times* and the *New York Post*, the latter of which my second-cousin, James Wechsler, had edited in its liberal heyday before Rupert Murdoch bought it in 1977 and transformed it into what it is now, a daily reminder that Australia was founded as a penal colony.

I also became a writerly supporter of the social-democratic left, working for the *Voice* and for the quarterly *Dissent* under its founder Irving Howe. Two essays that carry that current are "[What's Wrong With Fred Richmond?](#)" in the *Village Voice* and "Boodling, Bigotry, and Cosmopolitanism," a sketch of New York in the late 1980s that ran first in a special issue of *Dissent* on the city, "In Search of New York," which was published in paperback by Transaction Books, and again in *Empire City*, a Columbia University Press anthology of 400 years of writing about New York, edited by David Dunbar and Kenneth Jackson.

The social-democratic left I joined has been an *American* left, with a strong civic-republican orientation. Unlike the Stalinist left, it wasn't subversive of democracy and so didn't have to cover many hypocrisies (such as its opportunistic use of civil liberties, civil rights, and democracy itself) with a bombastic patriotism like that of the American Communist "Popular Front" of the 1930s and 1940s. Nor was the social-democratic left drawn irresistibly toward racial identity politics as the "cat's paw" of an advancing Revolution.

In New York I took strong stands against leftist dodgings of Hamilton's civic-republican challenge. One of the earliest was a [harsh assessment leftist identity politics](#) in the wake of the bitter Crown Heights race riots in New York in 1991 and, later, in a *Harper's* essay on [the future of American blackness and whiteness](#). For more on my long experience in and around racial politics, see the "Race" section elsewhere on this site. I've mentioned that essays like these, among others, made me some enemies.

I hope that that's putting it too strongly. The essays on race did anger some activists, liberal and conservative, as did my often-raw criticisms of journalists for betraying their craft's civic-republican *raison d'etre*. (See the section "News Media, the Public Sphere, and a Phantom Public" on this site.) Beyond commending two of my prescient books, [The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York](#) (W.W. Norton, 1990) and [Liberal Racism](#) (Viking, 1997, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), I'll add that I blog occasionally at [Talking Points Memo Café](#) and write occasionally for print journals and newspapers. I'm working on a new book about recent miscarriages of the early Republic's Hebraic and Calvinist currents.