Robert Bellah has written that the key ingredients of America’s legitimating myth include a civil religion and a highly utilitarian secular ideology. The civil religion consists of Judeo-Christian symbols and values that relate the nation to a divine order of things, thus giving it a sense of origin and direction. The utilitarian ideology, emanating from Enlightenment political philosophy, provides the nation with a sense of proper governmental procedure, as well as fundamental guiding values such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Together, these cultural traditions have at various times in the past legitimated great national crusades. Periodically, they have combined to check the excesses of political expediency by subjecting the nation’s programs to the harsh light of transcendent values. But they have also contended with one another for political supremacy.

Civil religion continues to serve as an extremely visible dimension of American culture. In recent election campaigns presidential candidates have often appeared to stumble over one another in their haste to demonstrate loyalty to some branch of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Inaugural addresses, now as in the past, pay ritual obeisance to the divine judge; prayers at all major political functions invoke God’s presence and blessing; and, despite constitutional restrictions, much mixing of religious and political symbols continues on major holidays. America’s civil religion portrays its people, often in comparison with people in other countries, as God-fearing souls, as champions of religious liberty, and in many instances as a nation that God has consciously chosen to carry out a special mission in the world.

American civil religion is, nevertheless, deeply divided. Like the religion found more generally in the nation’s churches, it does not speak with a single voice, uniting the majority of Americans around common ideals. It has instead become a confusion of tongues speaking from different traditions and offering different visions of what America can and should be. Religious conservatives and liberals offer competing versions of American civil religion that seem to have very little of substance in common.

On the conservative side, America’s legitimacy seems to depend heavily on a distinct “myth of origin” that relates the nation’s founding to divine purposes. According to this interpretation of American history, the American form of government enjoys lasting legitimacy because it was created by Founding Fathers who were deeply influenced by Judeo-Christian values. Although their personal convictions on occasion may have strayed from this standard, men like Washington, Franklin, Witherspoon, and Adams knew the heart of man from a biblical perspective so that they understood what kind of government would function best. Francis Schaeffer wrote of the Founding Fathers in his book A Christian Manifesto:

These men truly understood what they were doing. They knew they were building on the Supreme Being who was the Creator, the final reality. And they knew that without that foundation everything in the Declaration of Independence and all that followed would be sheer unadulterated nonsense. These were brilliant men who understood exactly what was involved.

Like many other evangelicals, Schaeffer had become actively involved in New Right politics, and therefore held strong views about the ills confronting American culture. But these ills were, in his view, a byproduct of the nation’s abandonment of the Judeo-Christian vision, a result of the subversion of this vision by a materialist-humanist worldview, not any fault in the basic principles on which American government had been founded. America’s conformity, even in principle, to biblical ideals was a lasting source of legitimacy.

The idea that American government was founded on biblical principles actually represents a somewhat more temperate view of the relation between America and God than the one often heralded during the nineteenth century and that is still voiced by some evangelicals. That earlier view tended to picture America in millenialist terms, in Ernest Lee Tuveson’s apt phrase, as a “redeemer nation.” America was not only called of God, but existed as a “chosen people,” brought into being for the final fulfillment of God’s purposes on earth. As the strength and size of the nation grew, and as its farms and cities prospered, writers could scarcely hide their conviction that the kingdom of God was indeed coming to pass and that it was happening in America. Melville’s much-read novel of the mid-nineteenth century, White-Jacket, described Americans as “the Israel of our time” and the nation as a “political Messiah” sent as an advance guard to “bear the ark of the liberties of the world.” Whitman’s epic poem Passage to India, extolling the natural beauties and human accomplishments of the American continent, drew an even more direct connection between the nation’s wonders and God’s purposes:

Passage to India!
Lo, soul, seest thou not God’s purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann’d, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage, the oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near, the lands to be welded together.12

The new realities of the first half of the twentieth century, in which nearly every decade was blemished either by war or economic depression, dampened much of the enthusiasm that religious and secular writers had once expressed about the millennial future of America. Yet, as America increasingly found itself at the forefront of world military and economic leadership, some of the traditional zeal continued to be voiced. A favorite theme was the slogan “One Nation Under God,” which carried more than one level of meaning, connoting both a unified nation and an “only,” “best,” “leading,” or “special” nation under God. Norman Vincent Peale, in a book with this slogan as its title, argued that America had received a unique calling from God at the beginning of its history which continued to be expressed in the special zeal and spiritual quality of its people.13 In another book by the same title, evangelical writer Rus Walton arrived at the conclusion that even the American constitution had been “divinely inspired.”14

In the late 1960s and 1970s, as the nation’s military involvement in Vietnam inspired a mood of questioning about America’s purposes, defenders of the American way seemed to become even more explicit in their efforts to find divine legitimacy in American history. Edward Elson asserted that America could not be understood except as a “spiritual movement” with God as its source and the Holy Spirit guiding its development.15 Christian businessman George Otis, echoing the same theme, wrote: “God’s hand was in the founding of this country, and the fiber of Christ is in the very fabric of America.”16 With similar conviction, Dale Evans Rogers contended that America “was in the mind of God before it became earthly reality” and that it was still “a part of His purpose for mankind.”17

In emphasizing the close historical connection between America and God, evangelicals and fundamentalists assert the importance of religious values which they themselves still uphold. Their version of American history points to a time when such values were evidently taken quite seriously. By implication—and sometimes directly—the proponents of this interpretation suggest that these values should again be taken more seriously, thus restoring a way of life in America with which evangelicals and fundamentalists could feel comfortable.

The distinction between personal convictions and the religious story of the nation remains sufficiently sharp in evangelical teachings that any kind of militant religious nationalism tends to appear atypical. Priorities generally focus on personal salvation, spiritual growth, biblical knowl-

edge, and the affairs of local religious communities instead of God’s providence in American history. Even Jerry Falwell alludes only occasionally in his books and sermons to America’s collective relation to God. Insofar as conservative civil religion can be associated with evangelicals and fundamentalists, therefore, it appears to consist of a background assumption rather than an explicit object of devotion.

Although America is closely identified in conservative civil religion with biblical faith, spokespersons for this tradition have often been careful not to equate the two. A sharp distinction has been drawn between divine mandate and the material expression of that mandate. Frequently, this distinction has been formulated with reference to the classical theological demarcation between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. As a transcendent ideal, the kingdom of God calls into judgment any specific nation or people. Variously conceived of as a description of heaven, or as a kingdom that will be established on earth only after the present age has passed away, the kingdom of God is above all not to be confused with any currently existing nation, including America. Senator Mark Hatfield emphasizes that the evangelical Christian who opts for a career in politics must be careful to “obey God rather than men” and be weary of any thinking that too readily equates the biblical ideal with political decisions. The problem with confounding biblical faith and national pride, he warns, is that an idolatrous civil religion develops which “enshrines” the political order, and “fails to speak of repentance, salvation, and God’s standard of justice.”18 Jerry Falwell also asserts flatly that “America is not the kingdom of God.”19 Other conservative spokesmen even warn against a too tacit acceptance of the idea that America was founded on purely Christian principles. The evangelical writers Robert Linder and Richard Pierard suggest in their assessment of American political religion that this idea “not only shocks the sensibilities of many believers, but also casts doubt on the infallibility and immutability of divine truth itself.”20

Yet conservative civil religion generally grants America a special place in the divine order. Falwell goes on to say, “The United States is not a perfect nation, but it is without doubt the greatest and most influential nation in the world. We have the people and the resources to evangelize the world in our generation.”21 Tim LaHaye, head of the American Coalition for Traditional Values, makes the same point negatively: were it not for America, he asserts, “our contemporary world would have completely lost the battle for the mind and would doubtless live in a totalitarian, one-world, humanistic state.”22

The idea of America evangelizing the world is in fact a much-emphasized theme in conservative civil religion. God’s purpose for America is to use its advantaged position to preach Christianity to all nations—a task
that in some evangelical eschatologies represents the final work that must be accomplished in order to hasten the "second coming" of Christ to this earth. America’s wealth and power is thought to be God’s supply of resources for carrying out this important task, as well as a token of divine "good faith" to those willing to shoulder the task. This view is particularly prominent among conservative Christian groups with a strong missionary emphasis. For example, Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, writes: "God has given this country unlimited resources and manpower and finances. [He] . . . has called America to help bring the blessing of His love and forgiveness to the rest of the world."23

Despite formal separation between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man, the "two kingdoms" doctrine in conservative civil religion also confers a strong degree of divine authority on the existing mode of government. Although no human government can ever fully conform to God’s ideal, government is nevertheless established by God as a means of maintaining social order. Thus ordained, it should not be questioned or openly challenged, except in those rare instances when it violates the Christian’s right to worship. Kenneth Kantzer, former editor of Christianity Today, explains, "It is imperative . . . that we recognize government’s divinely ordained duty. . . . Dangers can arise from the abuse of these duties, but this does not negate their validity as ordained by God and deserving of our support."24 In the American case this argument generally carries conservative connotations, since evangelicals have been able to point to the freedom of religion they enjoy under democratic government, especially in comparison with other countries.

In addition to its views on government, conservative civil religion generally includes arguments about the propriety of the U.S. economic system. These arguments grant capitalism a high degree of legitimacy by drawing certain parallels between capitalist economic principles and biblical teachings. Economist George Gilder, who identifies himself as an evangelical Christian, has argued, "Give you and you'll be given unto is the fundamental practical principle of the Christian life, and when there’s no private property you can’t give it because you don’t own it. . . . Socialism is inherently hostile to Christianity and capitalism is simply the essential mode of human life that corresponds to religious truth."25 Elsewhere he remarks, drawing a calculated reference to the apostle Paul’s teaching on love, "the deepest truths of capitalism are faith, hope, and love."26

Jerry Falwell has also been an outspoken apologist for U.S. capitalism. He asserts, "I believe in capitalism and the free enterprise system and private property ownership. . . . People should have the right to own property, to work hard, to achieve, to earn, and to win." For Falwell, this is not simply an assertion of personal opinion, but a position that has divine sanction: "God is in favor of freedom, property ownership, com-

petition, diligence, work, and acquisition. All of this is taught in the Word of God in both the Old and New Testaments."27

Others, with perhaps less obvious agendas than Falwell, also assert the existence of a certain affinity between Christian doctrines and American capitalism. Television preacher Pat Robertson draws directly on Gilder’s work to arrive at the conclusion that “free enterprise is the economic system most nearly meeting humanity’s God-given need for freedom.”28 Similarly, Christian writer Ronald H. Nash, arguing against a dangerous leaning toward socialism which he perceives in liberation theology, suggests that capitalism is the preferred system because it is impossible to have "spiritual freedom" without "economic freedom."29

As with arguments about American government, arguments in conservative civil religion about the propriety of capitalism often appear with greater ambivalence than these statements by Gilder and Falwell, in particular, would suggest. Instead of defending the absolute rectitude of capitalism by giving it divine sanction, evangelical spokesmen are prone to argue only for the relative merits of the American system. In such arguments, comparisons with other countries and with other economic systems become especially important. Capitalism acquires legitimacy mainly in contrast to the evils seen in Marxist or fascist systems. Senator Bill Armstrong, a self-proclaimed evangelical Protestant, provides an illustration of this logic: "Our form of government is vastly preferable to Marxism. But that doesn’t prove that Christ would be a capitalist. I think Christ is indifferent to issues of that type, with one exception. I think he would approve of those institutions of government or economy that foster human liberty. So I take it for granted that Christ would not approve of the arrangements in Nazi Germany or in the Soviet Union."30 By this logic, the United States is favored mainly because it takes sides with God against these other systems.

How commonly are these views held by the general public? Although several studies have explored opinions concerning the issue of civil religion, none has been representative of the country at large. Nor has any detailed investigation of the subject been made. Thus any answer to this question is inescapably less than satisfactory. A 1975 survey in North Carolina suggested that civil religion—actually, some questions concerning the tendency to mix religion and patriotism—was relatively widespread in the region as a whole, but especially so among self-identified religious conservatives, members of fundamentalist denominations, residents in rural areas, and persons with lower levels of education.31 A 1981 survey in the Dallas-Fort Worth area gave somewhat mixed results. While a large majority of the residents in this area thought political leaders should believe in God and uphold religion, relatively few (about one in five) considered holidays such as the Fourth of July to be religious as well

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as patriotic. Neither of these studies examined any of the more complex relationships between religious beliefs and beliefs about capitalism or American democracy.

In other studies some indirect evidence has been found that suggests a general tendency for conservative or traditional religious beliefs to reinforce support for American political and economic practices among those who hold these beliefs. For example, a national survey conducted in 1980 that divided the public into five categories ranging from low to high on levels of religious commitment found that those in the higher categories were more likely to agree that the most important national problems, such as energy, inflation, and crime can be solved through traditional American politics. The same study showed the religiously more highly committed to be more supportive of a strong military force and more willing to believe that America offers an opportunity for financial security to all those willing to work hard. Another national poll found that levels of overall satisfaction with "life in this country today" varied positively with membership in conservative religious denominations, holding evangelical beliefs, and attaching high importance to religious and spiritual values.

**With Liberty and Justice for All**

On the other side, few spokespersons for the liberal version of American civil religion make reference to the religious views of the Founding Fathers or suggest that America is God's chosen nation. References to America's wealth or power being God's means of evangelizing the world are also rare and religious apologetics for capitalism seem to be virtually taboo. A liberal version of American civil religion does exist, but it draws on a different set of religious values and portrays the nation in a very different light from the conservative version.

The liberal view of America focuses less on the nation as such, and more on humanity in general. According to this interpretation, America has a role to play in world affairs, not because it is a chosen people, but because it has vast resources at its disposal, because it has caused many of the problems currently facing the world, and because it is, simply, part of the community of nations and, therefore, has a responsibility to do what it can to alleviate the world's problems. Rather than drawing specific attention to the distinctiveness of the Judeo-Christian tradition, liberal civil religion is much more likely to include arguments about basic human rights and common human problems. Issues like nuclear disarmament, human rights, world hunger, peace, and justice tend to receive special emphasis. The importance attached to these issues is generally not legitimated with reference to any particular sacred mandate, but simply on the assumption that these are matters of life and death—perhaps for us all. Nevertheless, religious faith often plays an important part in the discussion, differentiating liberal civil religion from purely secular or humanist beliefs. Faith plays a role chiefly as a motivating element, supplying strength to keep going against what often appear as insuperable odds. The example of the biblical prophets, who spoke out for peace and justice, is frequently mentioned as a source of strength and hope.

The interplay of these various themes is evident in many of the social statements that mainline denominations have promulgated to clarify their position on America's place in the contemporary world. The statement on "World Community: Ethical Imperatives in an Age of Interdependence," adopted by the Lutheran Church in America at its biennial convention in 1970, provides an illustration of the kinds of arguments often employed in these statements. The thrust of the Lutheran statement is to emphasize America's interdependence with the rest of the world and, therefore, the special responsibilities which Americans should accept in working for human rights, international security, and economic justice. Biblical injunctions per se occupy a relatively small portion of the document. The primary assertions with which the argument is legitimated tend to focus on obvious universal concerns. For example: "Men are beginning to sense that if they do not soon devise some means of living together they will surely perish together." Or as the church's accompanying pastoral handbook argues, the task of global reconciliation is "imperative" and "urgent" because "there is no alternative to it short of the extinction... of the 'human experiment.'" Manifestly religious arguments are also included, but in a secondary capacity that reinforces the more universalistic appeals. For example: "Concern for human survival, fulfillment, and community flows from the very heart of the Christian faith. The church has long proclaimed both mankind's natural oneness 'in Adam' and eschatological oneness 'in Christ.'" The remainder of the statement outlines a number of concrete problems and issues that need to be addressed, concluding with a final motivational appeal that the "God-given mandate" to build a world community be given high priority. And the pastor's handbook, which deals at greater length with economic and political proposals, ends by affirming the hope that all branches of the human family "may discover in new and tangible ways their oneness in Him who is the Truly Human."
broader vision of humanity. As Bellah notes in his initial essay on the subject, civil religion in America seems to function best when it apprehends "transcendent religious reality . . . as revealed through the experience of the American people"; yet, the growing interdependence of America with the world order appears to "necessitate the incorporation of vital international symbolism into our civil religion." 47

Perhaps it is not terribly surprising that these twin objectives can be accomplished more easily by two, relatively distinct civil religions than by one. The conservative tradition has in recent decades made clearest use of those symbols which are unique to the American experience; e.g., the mythologies of the Founding Fathers, of God's calling to the nation, of America's heroic accomplishments, and of the unique mission which America has to fulfill in the world. The liberal tradition, in contrast, has often been accused of neglecting these uniquely American symbols, but it has given concerted emphasis to the international symbols that derive from a vision of the commonality of humanity.

The two versions of America also correspond in a general way with the ambivalent character of the American state. On the one hand, the relatively long period in American history during which the nation was able to enjoy virtual isolation from the rest of the world has resulted in the orientation of a segment of the bureaucratic state toward nationalistic concerns. On the other hand, America's rise to global power in the twentieth century has forced the state to act not only on behalf of narrow U.S. interests, but also as a potential contributor to the common good in global terms. These dual functions have sometimes been sufficiently different that particular agencies have come to be identified clearly with one or the other. But more commonly the two have been ambiguous enough that different advisory groups, administrators, and policy proposals have provided their chief manifestation. Under these circumstances, both versions of American civil religion have found proponents within the state who were willing to exploit them for purely political purposes.

In consequence, the two visions of America have been the subject of disagreement and polarization more than they have of consensus and mutual understanding. A few leaders have managed successfully to borrow ideals from both camps. For example, Senator Mark Hatfield has been a leader in the disarmament movement while retaining a religious identity as an evangelical. Jim Wallis has also combined these two orientations, although his outspokenness on the disarmament issue has alienated him from many of his fellow evangelicals. On the other side, writers like Richard John Neuhaus, Peter L. Berger, and Michael Novak have adopted some of the views of the conservative version of American civil religion, while retaining a more liberal theological position than most evangelicals.
would support. But such cases appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

It is more common to find the two camps taking openly hostile positions toward one another. In his Washington address, for example, Jim Wallis minced no words in criticizing New Right apologists:

The new wave of activism in the churches provides a very different image of Christians from that presented to the public by big-time television preachers and their New Right allies. These evangelical nationalists extol America at a time when we need to be humbled. They call for unrestrained economic growth in a world where resources are running out. They extol the virtue of wealth and power when most of the world is poor and powerless. They fanning the national frenzy of fear and hostility by calling for more military spending when we are already on the brink of destruction. As such, they have corrupted the original Gospel message and the radical impulses of Christian movements throughout history.48

In return, spokesmen for the Right have been quick to label Wallis and others sharing his views as “socialists,” “communist sympathizers,” and “radicals.”49

The problem this hostility poses for American religion as a source of national legitimacy is that neither side can claim effectively to speak for consensual values. Each represents a constituency, but holds—especially in the other’s view—no assumptions on which all can agree. Any claim one side makes is likely to be disputed, leaving much of the public in doubt about the credibility of either. Religion, therefore, becomes (as indeed it has often been characterized in the press) “sectarian” rather than providing a basis of unity.

The full import of this propensity becomes apparent in relation to classical understandings of legitimacy in sociological theory. In the Durkheimian tradition, which continues as one of the more important contributions to these understandings, consensus or near consensus on basic societal values gives these values special weight because their plausibility is not likely to be eroded by questioning and debate. They become, as it were, sacred or inviolate. Clearly, the present tendency in American religion is to erode this sense of de facto authority. It is one thing to assert that the Founding Fathers were divinely inspired if everyone assumes this was the case; quite another if such claims, as presented by one religious faction, are disputed by another.

Conflicting interpretations notwithstanding, large segments of American culture continue to presuppose certain shared assumptions about religion and about the place of religion in the democratic process. The competing interpretations of American civil religion actually converge at a number of points. They agree with one another in asserting the importance of religious values to the political process; both assume the existence and importance of transcendent values in relation to which the nation may be judged; they agree on the relevance of certain biblical principles, such as compassion, equity, and liberty (while disagreeing on the priorities given to these principles); and they in fact draw on a common heritage of Judeo-Christian symbols and stories. The sheer existence of differing, even hostile interpretations need not result in total decay as far as the legitimating power of religious symbols is concerned. The Civil War period, after all, appears to have witnessed an empowerment of American civil religion at the same time that religious bodies were subjected to unprecedented division.50 So it has been in recent decades. Were it not for the presence of competing interpretations, civil religion on the whole might well have been considerably less salient than it is.

Where the rub comes is that American civil religion does not operate in a vacuum. In a society which is not only deeply religious but also decidedly secular, other values and assumptions stand as ready alternatives to the civil religion. Faced with conflicting interpretations based on religious premises, spokespersons for the American creed have the option of turning to other arguments on which there may be greater consensus. Indeed, religious leaders themselves may fall back on purely secular values in attempting to find firmer ground from which to launch their religious arguments.

As the debate in American religion has intensified, the different versions of civil religion, therefore, have continued to be voiced as motivational appeals and as alternative stories of America. Among those at either end of the spectrum, these appeals seem to play both a canalizing and an energizing function with respect to specific policies and programs. But in the eyes of many middle-of-the-roaders, both sets of arguments may have lost plausibility by virtue of being too much disputed, leaving room for secular ideologies to play an enlarged role in legitimating the nation.

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

As an illustration of the diminishing persuasiveness of religious arguments in the culture at large for legitimating the U.S. system, it is instructive to consider some of the arguments that in recent years have boldly sought to take their place. Michael Novak’s The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism is particularly instructive because it introduces theological arguments at a number of points and in some ways offers itself as a Christian defense of capitalism.51 At times Novak comes close to providing a biblical apologetic for the American economic system. For example, al-
though he admits that "Judaism and Christianity do not require democratic capitalism," he goes on to assert that "without it they would be poorer and less free." But this statement clearly stops short of suggesting any inevitable connection between Western religion and capitalism. Indeed, Novak acknowledges that capitalism has appeared in areas of the world not under the influence of Christianity and that Christianity has been strong in areas with noncapitalist economic systems. He also admits that Christianity is a universalistic religion that will likely outlast American capitalism or any other economic system.

In the bulk of his argument Novak retreats, perhaps unwittingly, to a purely secular defense of capitalism which suggests only that capitalism has been good for Christianity by undergirding American affluence and freedom. Going a step farther, he actually reconstructs the essence of Christianity so that it becomes a kind of watered-down version of affluence and freedom—which capitalism seems to have upheld. In specific, the Trinity becomes a vision of the importance of individualism over against the constraints of community; the Incarnation becomes a reality principle that warns us against the utopian hopes of socialism; the value of many biblical narratives is that they "envisage human life as a contest"; the doctrine of Original Sin serves mainly to convince us that no economic system can ever be free of some evil; the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms becomes an argument for laissez faire; and the principle of love in the Judeo-Christian tradition mainly suggests that we should respect the freedom of the individual. Novak's theological understanding can perhaps be questioned, but there is clearly a strong component of secular ideology here, perhaps considerably more than there is of biblical tradition.

If Novak has subtly confused civil religion with secular ideology, others have openly denounced civil religion in favor of secular arguments that to them seem more persuasive. For example, the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on economic justice was roundly criticized by defenders of current economic policies. Writing in the New York Times, economist Leonard Silk took explicit issue with the bishops' religious arguments and suggested subjecting these arguments to "higher standards" of efficiency and self-interest. Robert J. Samuelson, writing for the Washington Post, declared that the bishops were simply engaged in an act of "economic make-believe." Echoing the same sentiment, columnist George F. Will charged the bishops with "child-like innocence," "vanity," "flight from complexity," and a "comic sense of moral bravery."

Perhaps equally illustrative of the growing tendency for pragmatic, secular arguments to replace religious values as a basis of legitimation was an episode of competitive graffiti reported to have taken place in deeply religious, but economically strapped, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, during the recession of 1982. On one of the soot-covered stone walls outside the town appeared the familiar fundamentalist slogan, "Jesus Saves." To which another sign a few yards down the road replied, "Shinto Invests." One of the most frequently voiced secular arguments that has been advanced to legitimate America links the nation with the value of freedom. The American system, simply put, is good and decent because it upholds individual freedom. Both democracy and capitalism are said to provide necessary conditions for the survival of freedom. This has been a particularly powerful argument because it focuses on what is popularly regarded as an extremely important value as well as a very common assumption about the nature of reality. Historian David Potter has written in his book People of Plenty:

Americans have always been especially prone to regard all things as resulting from the free choice of a free will. Probably no people have so little determinism in their philosophy, and as individuals we have regarded our economic status, our matrimonial happiness, and even our eternal salvation as things of our own making.

The belief in freedom also provides advantageous comparisons with other countries, and of course relates present conditions to some of the high ideals on which the nation was founded.

As a legitimating value, freedom is often combined with some version of American civil religion. In the conservative view, it is likely to be included as one of the biblical principles that the Founding Fathers built into the Constitution or as one of the conditions which the American system upholds so that religious people may worship as they choose without fear of intervention by any secular authority. In the liberal view, freedom may be colored by other religious connotations, such as freedom from fear or freedom from want, either of which may be interpreted as manifestations of the redemptive process outlined in the Christian gospel. Freedom is a concept sufficiently inclusive to be easily incorporated into these other worldviews.

Clearly the idea of freedom cannot in any way be regarded as a strictly secular ideology in conflict with religious myths of America. Tocqueville's observation a century and a half ago concerning the essential harmony between freedom and religion in the United States still seems apt: "The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other."
point. But one can scarcely understand the legitimating myths of a society so deeply secular as the United States by looking only at specifically religious language. Substantial segments of the population and of its most vocal leadership, as the foregoing has shown, dispute the conservative vision of America, while equally substantial sectors challenge the vision presented by religious liberals. Certainly neither vision of what America is and should be enjoys the kind of de facto legitimization that comes with simply being taken for granted. Instead, secular mythologies seem to be gaining a more powerful position, if only by virtue of being so widely and implicitly assumed in public discourse. Freedom to choose and the expectation of material success that comes with thinking of America as “Number One” probably undergird patterns of social behavior as well as decisions about public priorities at a deep level simply because they are so much a part of the “American way of life” that we often fail to question them. And yet, these myths of legitimation also rest on precarious foundations.

Yet opinion polls consistently show that Americans’ faith in their country depends on the state of the economy and their own position in the economy more than anything else. Implicitly pragmatic, the public expresses satisfaction with the country when the economy is strong, and withdraws that faith when the economy is weak. For example, in 1984, at the height of an economic upswing, 50 percent of those polled in a Gallup survey said they were satisfied with the way things were going in the United States; yet only five years previously, when the economy was at the bottom of a recession, only 12 percent gave this response.33 The same polls also reveal that Americans’ satisfaction with the country depends almost entirely on their own economic standing. Thus in 1984 the same Gallup survey found that professionals and business managers were overwhelmingly favorable toward the country, whereas manual workers were mostly dissatisfied. Similarly, persons with incomes of $40,000 or more were twice as likely to express satisfaction than were persons with incomes of less than $10,000.

If anything, then, the two versions of American civil religion—one conservative, one liberal—have, by virtue of their very tendency to dispute one another, become less capable of providing the broad, consensual underpinnings of societal legitimation that have usually been associated with the idea of civil religion. This is not to say that religious beliefs have no place in the repertoire of America’s legitimating myths. For many Americans, the nation’s effectiveness in promoting religious commitment remains one of the surest signs of its greatness and essential goodness. For many others, even secularized notions of freedom, success, and other high principles, such as equality and democracy, may have some vague understanding of Jewish and Christian theology as their ultimate reference
THE AVENUE TO FREEDOM

Somewhat ironically, given its apparent inevitability, technology is also widely portrayed as the avenue to enhanced freedom, acting both directly and indirectly. Directly, it creates new choices, new possibilities that previously seemed unthinkable—new gadgets, new amusements, new defense systems, new health possibilities, new industries, and new kinds of jobs. We have only to make decisions among the many opportunities set before us. Technology also seems to enhance freedom because it requires, as well as contributes to, knowledge—one of the bases classically thought necessary for true freedom. By this logic, America’s technological contributions mean that it is apparently a society which is free and therefore fosters knowledge and creativity. Indirectly, technology enhances freedom, if by default, because it seems so utterly indifferent or neutral to the kinds of freedoms that the individual enjoys. “He can listen to the music he likes,” writes social philosopher Jacques Ellul, “dress as he likes, take on completely aberrant religious beliefs or moral attitudes; none of these things challenge the technological system.” In other words, technology does not limit our freedom; its development is not contingent on certain life styles or choices—or so it seems.

Once the meaning of freedom has become restricted to the idea of choice, then technology becomes the obvious means of maintaining and expanding our freedom. The images of freedom portrayed on television and reported in the newspapers invariably imply that freedom is ours because we have been given new options by technology: freedom to communicate warmth to loved ones—via the wonders of t/r fiber optic technology; freedom to range the open countryside where all cares fade into a glorious sunset—in a new Datsun 28 Turbo; freedom to enjoy life longer despite heart disease—just around the corner due to the generosity of Humana’s mechanical heart research program; freedom now to give every woman the “right to choose”—by supporting access to abortion technologies; freedom at last from the terrible fear of nuclear holocaust—by spending $24 billion on “star wars” research. Like the historic connections once seen between “liberty” and the American and French revolutions, now freedom is symbolized by the computer revolution, the information revolution, the medical technology revolution, and the video revolution.

In a subtle, but perhaps important, way technology has, therefore, come linked with that most fundamental value—freedom—on which Americans rely to legitimate their way of life. If the marketplace gradually redefined freedom to mean freedom of choice, technology now begins to replace the marketplace as the main source of that kind of freedom. Not simply the modern supermarket, with its panoply of choices, but the Electronic Candy Store, filled with word processors and software, becomes the symbol of our expanded freedom to choose.

This is not to suggest that technology can operate effectively without the market. But increasingly it is not the market as such, but technology, that is recognized as the dynamo driving the American economic system. According to former science policy advisor Harvey Brooks, “Technology is not demanded by the market. The market really does not demand anything that does not exist, and so the market really only begins to act after the technology exists.” Or as one corporation chairman predicts, “The victories which we have to win in the marketplace of the 1980s and beyond are victories which will be won in the laboratories and testing grounds of American science and technology.”

Finally, as if to complete the picture, technology has like other legitimating institutions in the past begun to create its own version of the self—“technological man”—who finds his way of life legitimate because his very identity has been shaped by that way of life. In his book Technological Man, Victor Ferckiss argues that it is high time we simply made peace with technology and consciously adopted this new identity. Our concept of self should, he suggests, incorporate a new naturalism, a new holism, and a new immaneism. With the new naturalism we become part of the natural world, equal with it and its technological creations. With the new holism we become more aware of our dependence on nature and technology. Conceived of as parts of a natural process or system, our lives take on meaning only as parts of that system. With the new immaneism we come to believe that life is ultimately not governed by some creator-god outside the natural world, but by forces within the system of nature itself. “Technological man,” he says, “must so internalize these ideas and make them so much a part of his instinctive world view that they inform his personal, political and cultural life.”

Ferkiss’s notion of what it will take to reconcile ourselves fully with technology may seem extreme. Yet it in part represents the kind of self-identity that other writers have suggested is already characteristic of many in the technological society. Scientists N. Bruce Hannay and Robert McGinn observe that “modern technology has increasingly become an important source of personal identity and self-esteem.” In their opinion, “religion, race, class, sex, and nationality [have] become progressively less able to serve that function in achievement-oriented, post-traditional
church has an urgent responsibility today to help men achieve fuller personal life within the technical society. 108

Critics, even in high places in the political and scientific establishments, have continued to sound the alarm that America may be sacrificing its birthright of freedom and integrity for a mess of technological potage. Senior White House advisor John McLaughlin, for example, has cautioned that “a narrow scientific vision that ignores the holism of human life, the considerations of ecology, and matters not susceptible to empirical measurement is a limiting and potentially destructive way to approach economic and technological questions.” 109 Similarly, David F. Noble, curator of the Smithsonian Institution and historian of American technology, has suggested that the view which regards technology as the only means of achieving progress is in reality “a bizarre and relatively recent Western notion invented to disarm critics of capitalism.” 110

But such voices represent only a minority and appear to have grown fainter as time has gone by. At the dawn of the industrial era, workers optimistically joined the ranks of Luddite machine-wreckers in hopes of regaining some control over the world they had lost. 111 Today, Luddites exist only in the imagination of their novelist creators, appealing to the modern ambivalence toward technology in a way that roams safely within the bounds of fantasy. Like Edward Abbey’s “monkey-wrench gang,” they win symbolic victories in fanciful acts of high-tech vandalism, but ultimately fail to stand in the way of technological change. 112 At a fundamental level, the ability to offer critical opposition to technology is similarly impaired because, as Noble points out, the opposition “suffers from a fatalistic and futuristic confusion about the nature of technological development.” Moreover, he suggests, this confusion “is rooted in, and reinforced by, the political and ideological subordination of people at the point of production, the locus of technological development.” 113

The tendency to legitimate America—to seek ideological security in an increasingly complex and uncertain world—by avowing the urgency of technology and exaggerating the importance of America’s lead in its development promises only to deepen its mythological effects. The ambivalence that is perhaps an inevitable consequence of a force as powerful as technology can lead, under favorable conditions, to a balance between love and hatred, between adulation and fear. It can temper material dependence on technology with a cultural distance which preserves the capacity to raise critical questions about its uses and direction. But the ideological exploitation of technology to justify economic programs and to regain a sense of euphoria about the nation’s supremacy in the world threatens radically to undermine that critical balance. Given thoughtful guidance, technology can serve as a valuable tool; given license for its own excesses, it can become an awesome master.