

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### Racism in the United States

George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2002)

Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

James E. Westheider

One of the paradoxes that have long intrigued American historians is how a nation could be founded on Enlightenment beliefs of individual freedom and natural rights and yet simultaneously embrace the virtual antithesis of these ideas in the form of racism and religious bigotry. Two new books, George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, and Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, look at the issue from different vantage points, but both help illuminate this seminal and often disturbing conundrum.

Fredrickson, the dean of comparative history, examines the origins of racism and the rise and fall of what he terms “overtly racist regimes,” in the American South, Nazi Germany, and post–World War II South Africa. The term “racism” itself only dates from the 1930s and its exact definition is often hazy and unclear, but it involves more than just traditional xenophobia or religious intolerance—phenomena which Fredrickson terms “culturalism.” For the purposes of the study he defines racism as “when differences that might otherwise be considered ethno-cultural are regarded as innate, indelible and unchangeable,” and expressed in the practices and institutions of a given culture. He argues that no true equivalent of modern racism existed in the classical or early modern Christian world, and that it is a relatively modern development dating from the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries and originating “mainly if not exclusively” in the West. Its historical roots were first religious—Christianity—and then secular in the form of the Enlightenment.

Anti-Judaism was endemic to Christianity before the fourteenth century, but it was bigotry based on religious not biological differences. Jews were not considered inherently inferior because the "stigma" could be erased through conversion. But this began to change in this era in Spain regarding the Jewish "*Conversos*" to Christianity and the belief that these "New Christians" were incapable of truly becoming Christian due to blood and heritage. This was illustrated for example, in the doctrine of "*Limpieza de Sangre*" or "purity of blood," where only those of "pure" Christian ancestry could become conquistadores or missionaries in the New World.

Religious bigotry may have laid the groundwork but the rational thought of the Enlightenment was a necessary precondition to the rise of a racist ideology based on physical typology. Its egalitarian ethos created a problem, but also a solution for those wishing to exploit or scapegoat a particular group; if equality is the norm, then the "other" needs to be proven to be an exception to the norm and unworthy of full equality. The scientific principles of the Enlightenment also provided their justification. If plants and animals could be classified and placed in a hierarchal order, so could human beings. As early as 1776 Friedrich Blumenbach placed human beings in "races," but the father of anthropology was more interested in scientific order than in justifying racism, and it was not really until the emergence of, first, Social Darwinism, and then eugenics that racists had seemingly plausible and acceptable explanations for racial inferiority.

It was in the twentieth century that both color-coded and anti-Semitic racism reached their fullest ideological and institutional development and produced these "overtly racist regimes." What distinguished these regimes from societies that also tolerated or fostered bigotry was an official, state sanctioned and enforced ideology that was explicitly racist. All had laws banning interracial marriage, legalized social and economic segregation, and exclusion from public office, and voting if the state in question was formally democratic. Moreover, racism in these societies is always "nationally specific" in that it is linked to a search for national identity and cohesion. Designating blacks as inferior and "other" helped foster a sense of unity and nationalism among whites in South Africa and the American South, for example, whereas Jews played the same role in a newly created German Empire in the 1870s and 1880s. Fredrickson

also asks why overtly racist regimes developed in only three nations despite the prevailing racist and bigoted notions present throughout the world. He has found strong historical roots and a persistent belief in established stereotypes to be two key underlying factors. Interestingly, in all three the racialized “other” were scapegoats and blamed for national defeat and humiliation: African Americans for the demise of the Confederacy, Africans for the Boer War, and Jews blamed for Germany’s loss in World War I.

The Enlightenment principles of equality did eventually help undermine these racist regimes, as did the horrible excesses of the Holocaust. Hitler, Fredrickson remarked, gave racism such a bad name that future neo-Nazis would deny that the “Final Solution” ever occurred rather than attempt to justify it. Following World War II the emerging cold war and decolonization did much to hasten the decline of racially based discrimination in the American South and finally in South Africa. The fall of these overtly racist regimes suggests to Fredrickson that they may be a thing of the past, but racism itself obviously remains an active force.

In *American Crucible* Gerstle argues that in the United States the Enlightenment principles of equality, individual rights, and representative government are embodied in what Michael Ignatieff has called “Civic Nationalism,” and claims that the impact of Civic Nationalism in promoting freedom and democracy are indisputable. But this belief has clashed with another “potent ideological inheritance” that of “Racial Nationalism,” which sees America in ethno-racial terms: a people bonded together by common ancestry, skin color, and with an inherited predisposition towards representative self-government. Both of these creeds are imbedded in America’s most crucial documents such as the Constitution and both have been powerful forces in shaping the United States in the twentieth century, influencing everything from the Progressive movement to immigration reform. Symbolic of the interaction of these two forces is the American “crucible” or melting pot, which offers the opportunity of assimilation and inclusion to some but historically has often limited it to those of European ancestry.

Gerstle’s focus is on twentieth-century liberals because they were the “most influential architects” of that century, and while committed to the core principles of Civic Nationalism also incorporated Racial Nationalism into their political philosophy and policies. The most



*Franklin D. Roosevelt with Walter Lippmann  
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)*

important were Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt whose presidencies reshaped the United States into the “Rooseveltian” nation.

The Spanish-American War in 1898 marked the birth of this new nation. The United States in the 1890s was a nation

deeply divided along ethnic, racial, religious, and class lines, and many, such as a Theodore Roosevelt, argued that war would be the crucible that united a fractious nation into an “American Race.” Indeed, Roosevelt’s “Rough Riders” appeared to be the living embodiment of the melting pot, with native born and immigrants, urbane New Yorkers and rough hewed cowboys, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all serving together in the same regiment as Americans. Gerstle argues that war in fact would serve as a crucible transforming immigrants and their children into Americans as illustrated in both World War I and II. But this expression of Civic Nationalism would also embody aspects of Racial Nationalism in that even in the liberal Rooseveltian nation, full inclusion was reserved largely for whites.

The melting pot was just part of Theodore Roosevelt’s “New Nationalism,” his program for a new United States announced in 1910. Borrowing the term coined by journalist Herbert Croly, he envisioned a nation bound together by collective ideals of liberty, equality, and justice and not necessarily bonds based on ethnicity or religion. It also would need a more powerful federal government to promote and protect these values and if necessary “discipline” its enemies. It was Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism that became the basis for modern



*Franklin D. Roosevelt  
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)*

liberalism, a “key episode” in the history of Civic Nationalism and one that would influence three generations of liberal reformers for the next fifty years.

Theodore Roosevelt’s intellectual and political heir was his distant cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt; FDR’s “New Deal” would embody the very essence of the Civic Nationalist creed, and in the process, complete the creation of the Rooseveltian nation. The Great Depression and then World War II would allow FDR and his New Dealers—many of whom cut their political teeth as “Bull Moose” Progressives—to construct a powerful liberal state that could regulate capitalism, provide for the poor and disadvantaged, and still build a military capable of defending it from aggression and competing ideologies.

The rise of Civic Nationalism and liberalism and its dominating influence throughout much of the twentieth century was in many respects a reaction to a series of perceived threats to national order, such as the rise of modern corporations, a new tide of immigrants largely from eastern and southern Europe, and radical ideologies such as socialism and communism. In dealing with these issues, however, the specter of Civic Racism often influenced the answers. Beginning with the Immigration Act of 1917, the immigration “problem” was solved by a series of laws that reduced immigration into the United States by 85 percent and virtually eliminated immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe. The regulatory state that protected the principles and goals of the liberals would at times become the disciplinary state and seek to root out and suppress its detractors, as it did during “red scares” after both world wars. But even these triumphs would also ironically prove to be a boon to Civic Nationalism. Many ethnic groups whose loyalty at times was questioned would embrace it and the melting pot to combat Civic Racism and to show their commitment to being Americans—often at the expense of their own ethnic heritage. The cartoon hero “Superman” was created in 1938 by two Jewish artists, Jerry Siegal and Joe Shuster, but is emblematic of Civic Nationalism. Superman is an immigrant but he is “Americanized,” with an Anglo-American name, Clark Kent, and lives in Kansas, the rural heartland that stands for “truth, justice, and the American way.”

The elimination of racist immigration restrictions and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the American South in the 1950s

represented triumphs and a high watermark for Civic Nationalism. Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D. C., in 1963 was replete with its dogma and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 destroyed the legal foundations on which Racial Nationalism rested. But at the height of its success, the Rooseveltian nation was beginning to crumble. A rising group of black militants who rejected Civic Nationalism and conformity for Black Nationalism and cultural diversity, and a morally ambiguous war in Vietnam undermined its core beliefs and led to its demise by the 1970s. The late 1970s and 1980s were a time of drift and anxiety for the United States, and since then, both conservatives, in the form of Ronald Reagan, and liberals have sought to revitalize America with two bold but radically different programs. The left has attempted to re-establish the earlier sense of community by embracing multiculturalism, and the right by promoting "family values," religion, and a confrontational foreign policy. This has led to a culture war that Gerstle predicts could bitterly divide America for years to come. He also contends that the emergence of Bill Clinton and his presidency in the 1990s has provided yet a third hybrid alternative, drawing on the values of equality and diversity of the left, and the patriotism and sense of national obligation of the right. Ultimately it may produce a new liberal state, but one fundamentally different from the old Rooseveltian nation.

*American Crucible* is based largely on previous scholarly work and contains little in the way of primary research. Its value is in Gerstle's intriguing and ambitious new interpretation of the so-called "American Century" and the place of these two conflicting principles—equality versus inequality—in Western society. The book, along with Fredrickson's *Racism: A Short History*, will likely take its place next to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, and, a handful of others as the key works on such an elusive and provocative topic.

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# The Paper Chase

Tom Wells, *Wild Man: The Life and Times of Daniel Ellsberg* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 692 pp.

Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), 498 pp.

Stephen J. Whitfield

Little more than three decades ago, the Constitutional friction between security and liberty had to be resolved when the front page of the *New York Times* headlined material from a secret “Vietnam archive.” The result of the revelations that were disseminated on June 13, 1971, was a First Amendment crisis: was the press permitted to disclose top secret documents about a war that was still raging? The affirmative answer provoked so many furtive but brazenly illegal reactions by the Nixon administration that it flamed out three years later. Daniel Ellsberg instigated these extraordinary events, and has retraced them in an engrossing personal account, published within a year of Tom Wells’s mammoth, acerbic biography. It is a story that cannot be separated from the noteworthy role of Jews in American public life.

By taking seriously the ideal of popular sovereignty, Ellsberg denied that statecraft is the monopoly of the executive branch; and the release of classified information was his way of preventing the nation’s leaders from lying about what they were doing. Exposure to the hidden motives for the intervention in Vietnam was a duty that Ellsberg did not want the public to duck. That meant using the press. The decision to publish excerpts from the Pentagon Papers belonged first to Arthur Ochs (Punch) Sulzberger, the scion of the Jewish family that had invented the most influential and admired of twentieth-century



Adolph S. Ochs (1858–1935).  
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

American newspapers. In 1971 the bravery of the young publisher of the *Times* proved to be as impressive as anything done by the Flying Wallendas. Had Sulzberger submitted to the demands of the Department of Justice to suppress the Pentagon Papers, however, managing editor A. M. (Abe) Rosenthal intended to resign in protest; and other top editors might well have joined him. By fighting a Federal injunction in the name of an independent press, Rosenthal's boss enhanced the meaning of the Bill of Rights—thanks to a Supreme Court case that was strikingly entitled *New York Times v. the United States*.

Neither *Secrets* nor the biography of Ellsberg has much to say about this part of the story. But the Constitutional victory of the *Times* was due to the tactical adroitness of a law professor at Yale named Alexander Bickel. He had been born in Bucharest, the son of an eminent Yiddish literary critic, and had arrived on these shores at the age of fourteen (picking up English as his fifth language). During one legal wrangle over the Pentagon Papers, the U. S. assistant attorney general glared so fiercely at Bickel that he whispered to a colleague: "I think he wants to have me deported." Bickel conceded that Congress could make a law abridging freedom of the press, but insisted that the circumstances of 1971 did not warrant such suppression. By abandoning an absolutist standard, he got the Court to let the *Times's* own editors ascertain what is fit to print; and eventually they ran fifty pages on the Papers.

Jews were also conspicuous in the political struggle against the intervention in Indochina, and Ellsberg gave copies of the Papers not only to newspapers but also showed or gave documents to antiwar academics like Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. When Ellsberg was prosecuted for disclosing unauthorized material, he was represented by progressive attorneys like Leonard Boudin and Leonard Weinglass; and Barbra Streisand's willingness to sing for the defense fund would place her on the White House "enemies list." But how Daniel Ellsberg himself became worthy of inclusion on such a list, and indeed of placement near the top, is a destiny that could not have been foreseen; and that experience—the path of political opposition—is the subject both of *Secrets* and of *Wild Man*. Once so hawkish on Vietnam that he would call himself "a possible defendant in a future war crimes trial," Ellsberg converted himself into a dove who gave seven thousand highly classified pages to nineteen daily newspapers.

By xeroxing the Pentagon Papers, the forty-year-old specialist in decision theory made a decision that altered the course of American history.

All four of Ellsberg's grandparents had immigrated from Tsarist Russia by the end of the nineteenth century, but his own parents deviated from the historic pattern—familiar to readers of this journal—by becoming Christian Scientists. Their family was still Jewish, Harry Ellsberg assured his son, except for religion; and therefore the faith that Daniel Ellsberg would grow up to repudiate was not Judaism but Christian Science, which he found too bizarre to accept. As a Harvard undergraduate, he did attend Sunday brunches at the Hillel Foundation, but (according to Wells) the primary motivation was to maximize encounters with the opposite sex. No evidence of any further connection to formal Jewish life has surfaced. A first marriage began with Episcopalian vows to a bride whose father rose to brigadier-general in the U. S. Marines (the outfit whom Lenny Bruce labelled “heavy goyim”). Ellsberg's second wedding ceremony was Presbyterian, even though his new father-in-law was Louis Marx, a Jew who had made a fortune in toys (most famously the yo-yo). Burnishing a reputation for brilliance, Ellsberg reached the top of the national security nomenclatura in the 1960s.

From figuring out more efficient ways to win the Vietnam war, he underwent a transformation, articulating the moral resistance to the war. That made Ellsberg something of a pariah outside the boundaries of legitimate dissent; and the result was a trial that was in itself unprecedented. Never before had anyone ever been prosecuted for a leak; administrative penalties had previously been applied to indiscreet bureaucrats. Never before had anyone been indicted under the Espionage Act for passing along classified documents to a newspaper, and not to a foreign power. But Nixon was furious at “that son-of-a-bitch Ellsberg,” who, if convicted, could have been sentenced to 115 years in prison (later reduced to 105 years). The hostility that the defendant endured was bipartisan; what Ellsberg did, former President Lyndon B. Johnson opined, was “close to treason.” Even Louis Marx believed that his son-in-law deserved jail, and refused ever to speak to him again, or give a penny to his defense. Ellsberg's own father was by contrast supportive of his son, despite loyalty to the GOP so ingrained that Harry Ellsberg voted for Nixon in 1972.

That ballot was in fact cast for a crude bigot; Nixon was the only

occupant of the White House ever to lace conversations with persistently anti-Semitic remarks (taped for the benefit of posterity). When first told that Ellsberg might have leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*, Nixon preferred to call him "Ellstein," and wondered: "Well, we don't know. It's either Ellstein or [Morton] Halperin or [Leslie] Gelb." The last two, the chief authors of the secret study, were possibly the only Americans who, besides Ellsberg, had then read it in its entirety. Nixon, who once conjectured that Alger Hiss must have been half-Jewish (he wasn't), warned two aides in the Oval Office that the administration was "up against an enemy, a conspiracy," which required the "use [of] any means. Is that clear?" So in 1972 Cuban thugs were hired to turn an antiwar rally in Washington into violence by beating up both Ellsberg and radical attorney William Kunstler, but were prematurely hauled away by the police.

To plug the leaks that Ellsberg had exposed, the White House created an illegal "special investigations unit," which G. Gordon Liddy proposed to name ODESSA (for the secret Nazi organization formed to keep the S. S. intact after World War II). Called the Plumbers instead, these operatives were so eager to play hardball that they burglarized the office of Ellsberg's former psychiatrist, hoping to find incriminating material. But so elaborate a cover-up for the Plumbers was needed that justice was obstructed. By 1974 Nixon had to resign to avoid impeachment, and soon nearly all the President's men were jailed. Were there an Italian edition of Ellsberg's memoir, its title would be literally translated as *Segreti*, a reminder of who disrupted the Democratic primaries in 1972 so that the weakest winner—Senator George McGovern—would be left standing to face Nixon. Donald Segretti gave even dirty politics a bad name. In 1973, when John Ehrlichman, a key Nixon aide, was caught trying to bribe the judge in Ellsberg's trial, it was abruptly terminated.

Even though Ellsberg can't really be classified as Jewish, the intense faith that he exhibited in literacy is. The RAND analyst who had scored a perfect 800 on his verbal SAT's in high school gambled that a war might end if the words of the Pentagon Papers—all 2.5 million of them—were properly deciphered. In the summer of 1971, he and Sulzberger and Bickel were invoking the same right—the right of the people to tackle a dense, long, demanding text. And just as Edmund Wilson had once remarked on "the very strange work" compiled as the Talmud, so that "there seems to be no other way of

really finding out what is in it" except to "settle down to reading it through," Ellsberg wanted his fellow citizens to plow through the forty-three volumes and to perform an act of critical interpretation. Although the Bantam edition of the *Times* reports and selected documents sold close to one-and-a-half million copies, it is doubtful whether most of the purchasers accepted Ellsberg's challenge; nor was the rampage in Indochina notably decelerated. But a besieged President did strike out wildly at a "conspiracy" in which "the sonofabitching [*sic*] thief is made a national hero. . . . and the *New York Times* gets a Pulitzer Prize for stealing documents. . . . What in the name of God have we come to?"

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