

The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope Study Guide

The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope by Andrew Delbanco

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1: God.....	5
Chapter 2: Nation.....	8
Chapter 3: Self.....	12
Characters.....	15
Objects/Places.....	18
Themes.....	20
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	26



Plot Summary

"The Real American Dream" by Andrew Delbanco is a historical work that focuses on the roots of American culture. The author describes and explains the three major factors that have influenced America and that it has existed under. In the first chapter, "God," Delbanco explains the circumstances under which America was settled and founded. The Puritans, who believed in a strict adherence to apostolic tenets and traditions, were suffering from religious oppression in England from the Crown and Anglican Church. Henry VIII had established his own church when the Pope would not grant him a divorce. A hundred years later, the Puritans emerged in growing numbers and their religious beliefs could not co-exist with the requirements of the Anglican Church.

Through a collective need to escape religious freedom, the Crown pushing them to leave, or perhaps a combination of both, a large group of Puritan pastors and their congregations headed to the New World. While the monarchy thought they were heading for a horrid life in the wilderness, the Puritans loved their religious freedom and looked back across the Atlantic and felt that they had left what truly was the wilderness. The Puritans had a great impact on the settling of America and on the consciousness of the new country. And although their stronghold on the new nation eventually lessened and nearly faded away, the seeds they planted in the hearts and minds of the people have endured at least to some extent throughout the history of American culture.

As the Puritanical influence lost its strength, the people were hungry for something to replace "God." They longed for something bigger than itself, something they could aspire to. In the "Nation," section of the book, Delbanco describes the establishment of the new nation, a democracy where men could live free, state their minds, choose their own leaders and attain their dreams. Americans became patriotic and the focal point of their need for something to believe in became the nation itself.

Abraham Lincoln not only freed the slaves, he inspired a nation. Through the efforts and leadership of Lincoln the federal government became the symbol of justice and fairness. The visiting French historian and political observer Alexis de Tocqueville had never seen such patriotism in his life. He found it annoying. But he also noted that with the abundance of freedom and opportunity that America offered its people, also came a dark force that he called melancholy. It was an internal mechanism that stopped a person from attaining that which laid out before them because deep inside they yearned for something else.

Somewhere between the 1960s and 1980s, something died in America. The people lost their trust in their government and in each other. They were left with only themselves. In "Self" the author describes the state of modern American culture which has evolved from the initial Puritanical beliefs the country was founded on and through the struggles for the just and fair nation that Lincoln had envisioned. The country devolved into one of distrust and isolation. The modern culture is suffering under the melancholy that de Tocqueville warned of. When a nation focuses on "self" so much, how long can it survive?

But there is hope that through this melancholy and isolation, that spirit in Americans to reach for more and to return to the "sky's the limit" attitude will serve to seek out and find the next thing that the nation can believe in and that will bring America to new and unimagined heights.



Chapter 1: God

Chapter 1: God Summary and Analysis

To learn about the roots of American culture, the author proclaims in this first chapter that he will delve into its New England beginnings. Perry Miller found that New England culture was energized by religion. While the south suffered religiously early on, the church was the first and last resort of New Englanders. Religion in the south was later invigorated by evangelical revival in the early eighteenth century. The religion of New England was as the source of the purest story of Christianity in the nation.

Derided as fanatics by their fellow Englishmen, individuals known as "precisians" felt Christianity had been tainted by the Anglican Church. They resented the elaborate ceremonies of the Church and wanted a return to simple worship as established by the apostles. These "precisians" came to be known as Puritans. But the demands of Puritanical reform could not co-exist with the standards set by the Church of England. Anglican Church bishops were most inclined to kowtow to the King and his court while Puritans viewed that the power of the church was bestowed upon the pastor from the laity and that the pastor was qualified to be at the pulpit only through adequate theological training.

Puritan theology was derided by the Church. Archbishop Richard Hooker concluded that those who adhered to Puritanical beliefs were not fit to live among men. The harassment by Hooker and other church authorities led to a number of Puritan pastors and their congregations migrating to the New World. Their motives for leaving England were much maligned. Some felt it was because they hated their fellow man; other attributed their move to self-hate.

In a 1630 letter from John Winthrop, first governor of the Bay Colony, to his wife, he described a joyful life of religious freedom in the New World. The Puritans did not consider the new land a wilderness - to them, they had left the wilderness behind them in England. The Puritans relished their rugged life in the New World. Their God was a "glowering" God who tested their faith in the harshest ways. For example, he made them love their little children but created diseases that took so many away from them.

Jonathan Edwards summarized this sentiment at a meetinghouse in his sermon, "Hands of an Angry God." His message was addressed to the sinner in all of the people. It was only by a slender thread, he told the congregants, that they did not fall into the flames of hell. God only saves men by his own whim. There was no reward for good behavior. Any such thought had been destroyed by Adam's disobedience. When God named the Jews as his chosen people, he did so for no particular reason. God saw nothing in Abraham to justify his choice. To the Puritans, man was a ragged directionless mess until God acted to make him acceptable.



French historian Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to develop the concept of melancholy. It was his theory that with the freedom and unlimited potential that a democracy provided, there was a counterbalance within each person that kept him from attaining ultimate happiness and completeness. He termed this psychological limitation as "melancholy." Melancholy was the yin to democracy's yang. Knowing that this internal force existed without being able to vocalize or verify it, it was a natural instinct for man to create stories and symbols which would ward the melancholy off that made man feel that life had no meaning.

In the culture of early New England, most people saw any small and even insignificant sign as evidence of the power of God. Every drought and plague was attributed to God's specific act. An earthquake was a red flag for man to take stock of his sin. There was an enormous disproportion between God and man. The "self" without God was helpless. The Puritans believed that God would present his omnipotence but were never sure where or when. But they were certain that it was more likely to happen in a simple meetinghouse than in an elaborate cathedral - the bone of contention between the Puritans and Anglicans.

The early Puritans listened to thousands of hours of sermons over their lifetimes hoping to glean a shred of hope from them. They sought to gain guidance on how to determine if they had been chosen to have God's mercy. Lay people had to learn between true and false grace - the false grace lifted one up only to send him crashing back down like a flash of lightning that leaves behind more darkness. Despite how grace was granted, the "self" was lost without it. There is documentation of Puritans during early New England years suffering great distress and even emotional collapse over their concern over grace.

Ministers counseled distressed parishioners and there is evidence that they felt the recovery was only possible through self-knowledge - similar to the concept behind modern Freudian therapy. The fear of parental punishment was transferred to the individual's internal voice (or superego) and guided to turn that authority inward (the id). If the transference stopped there, the result was self-loathing but if it continued, the healthy ego emerged. The joy that the melancholy one felt when finally blessed with grace was nothing short of miraculous.

Focus on making profit began to bother the Puritans. New England preachers began to establish economic laws so that earning money was perceived to be sanctioned from on high. Ministers would monitor their congregants to make sure they were not getting overly impressed with themselves and their business acumen. Pride was not a desirable trait. In Milton's "Paradise Lost," pride and despair are presented as the same characteristic. What evolved was that ministers hired by the laity were the ones who would admonish them for their sinful ways. Keeping pride in check was on a level of importance with communion and baptism. While grace was not inheritable, sin was. Therefore, future generations were at risk from the sins of their forefathers. John Cotton wrote that one should not think "you shall be saved because you are the children of Christian parents" (p. 33).



This mindset eventually led to pragmatism, a term that was interchangeable with Protestantism. While truth was derived from the scriptures, to the pragmatist was also attained from experience. An individual's actions were more a sign of grace than his words. The test of grace was how one lived among others. A genuine longing for the love of God was devoid of self-interest. Irony and hypocrisy are always parts of history. The behavior of the Puritans embraced both. Although the Puritans fled England due to intolerance and oppression, they eventually sent those who they deemed to be heretics to their deaths. The Puritans became overly-obsessed with their belief that God was in every aspect of their lives, even the insignificant ones.

During this time, the south may have been culturally advanced. Robert Beverley dared to proclaim that Virginia was not founded by God but by "hucksters and swindlers." In the early eighteenth century, the Calvinist God receded and devolved into deism and even toward destruction. Perry Miller referred to this process as "declension." Christianity had weakened to the point that Puritanism seemed almost quaint. By the nineteenth century, Calvinism was perceived to be too metaphysical to be comprehended by the general public.

What form of Puritanism survived the changing times? Puritanism was a demanding faith - God was responsible for everything from the readiness of weaponry to the ropes and cables on a ship. It was especially difficult to hang on to these archaic beliefs in the Age of Enlightenment when man was just beginning to discover his own power over nature. While Puritanism didn't oppose Enlightenment, it could not accept that man had any hand in anything without God. By 1800, Puritanism left American culture's center stage. It still exists in in America in modern times but to a must lesser degree. Ralph Waldo Emerson predicted that Puritanism was on its way out and that nothing was taking its place.



Chapter 2: Nation

Chapter 2: Nation Summary and Analysis

Emerson said that old time religion was virtually dead. And to put a period at the end of religion in the new nation, Emerson proclaimed that nothing was there to take its place. But perhaps that reality was just in Emerson's head. There were more churches than ever before. Fifty thousand or more were built between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Christians grew in number faster than the population itself. For the visiting French political observer and historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, he disagreed with Emerson's assessment and was struck by the religious atmosphere in the country. In 1843, German theologian Philip Schaff noted that Christianity "had greater power over the mind" (p. 48) in America than in Europe. Frances Trollope, an English visitor on a zoological expedition, thought that women were especially religious.

What everyone noticed and agreed was that government was completely out of religion. Those who wanted government to maintain a grasp on the country's faith and devoutness, were losing politically. The Sabbatrian Movement, which sought to have the government keep the sabbath officially special, lost its steam. The government and church were heading toward an amicable co-existence like the one that in modern times is taken for granted.

During the 1830s there was a surge in the number and variety of religious sects. Every week marked the emergence of a new prophet. The Mormons claimed that an angel named Moroni had brought them the golden tablets of god. Millerites were expecting the end of the world in 1843. A sect established by John Noyes practiced polygamy. Methodists were gaining strength in the South. Emerson commented that the religious scene in the nation had turned into a "circus of crackpots" (p. 50).

Preceding Darwinism, geologist Charles Lyell and naturalist Robert Chambers both threw doubt on the concept of a creator. Writer George Eliot characterized belief in Christianity as only for the gullible. To some, Christianity was becoming on a par with Greek Mythology.

What resulted from this surge of faithlessness, was a spiritual longing among many. Even the skeptical Emerson noted the sadness and melancholy that had overcome even the young. They lost their energy and vitality. Emerson looked for a new faith. Walt Whitman felt that a new faith was coming and that America was the "greatest poem" (52). He was inferring that democracy would have the same impact as religion.

But what was the United States at that time? It collected no taxes until the Civil War and had no conscription in order to build a military. Its capital was small and outdated. De Tocqueville noticed, along with religion, that Americans defended everything about their country. Their patriotism almost annoyed him. In every community, he noted grand plans for the future - buildings and monuments. Historical figures were seen in terms of black



and white. Nathan Hale was a hero and Benedict Arnold was a traitor. As it matured, the nation gained a unique mythology with figures like Davy Crockett, Yankee Doodle and Brother Jonathan. Patriotic verse was created by Longfellow and Emerson. The development of an American literary culture was slowed by fears that storytelling could lead to corruption.

By the 1850s, the new nation produced writers that had literary standing. Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne emerged as standouts. De Tocqueville, Melville and Whitman exemplified a fundamental truth about America. That truth was the real America was not its vast land and terrain but rather that which came forth from the minds and hearts of its people. This force had no boundaries and was powerful enough to conquer the world. Democracy was the new "religion" that had replaced Puritanism as the focal point of its culture.

What had been inherited by the Puritans was the idea that God had "struck in America the spark that would ignite a world-purifying fire" (p. 57). That belief evolved into the belief that to God America was special. Many in modern times believe in American exceptionalism an idea which can be traced back to the Puritans. By 1850, that "fire" had spread and took hold. It consumed parts of Mexico and drove the Indians back. Melville captured the heart of this "manifest destiny" in "White-Jacket" in which he spoke of Americans as new Israelites - the chosen people of their time.

Orestes Brownson defined the American system as the end of artificial distinctions "founded in birth or any other accident" (p. 59) allowing every man to stand on his own two feet and become what God and nature intended him to be. This universalist mentality was a direct link to the old religion which showed no difference between a rich man or a poor man. After an address by a young politician named Abraham Lincoln at the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson compared patriotism with a soul being filled with the spirit of the Almighty. Melville wrote about that "democratic dignity which...radiates from God Himself" (p. 60). De Tocqueville said that to Americans government meant righteousness and they obeyed no man but only justice and the laws. In America, he went on, there was no difference between master and servant. And, the servant was not perpetual but contractual. In America, with just a twist of fate the two could change places.

To Thomas Jefferson, temperate liberty was the key to personal happiness and a community ruled by civility. Temperate liberty, Jefferson explained, was self-government in which practical actions balanced the irrational. With duty and moderation, Jefferson thought of liberty as a natural state that was enhanced by music, art, education and science. A bit of the Puritan or Calvin ideology must have been inherited by Jefferson who thought that not everyone was entitled to a happy and satisfactory life. Jefferson was territorial and was anti-immigration. But Jefferson wasn't the only leader who ascribed to nativism. James Madison and John Jay were of the same mind and supported the idea of a national identity. The purity of the idealistic nation was tainted with racism and as the nation matured political and moral pressures mounted against slavery. Racism and nativism begged the question when does an American become an American? For an immigrant in due time and for the slave, never.



Slavery violated the very notion of democracy. De Tocqueville wrote that the "exceptions" that America made in its democracy made it lose its reason. Conservatives were drawn to de Tocqueville's belief in the absence of centralized government and liberals liked his idea of fair distribution of wealth. De Tocqueville had a personal attraction to America. He was haunted by visions of his father who had been imprisoned during the revolutionary years in France. A friend noticed that the old man would nap every afternoon at a certain hour. Later, de Tocqueville told him that it was at that hour that the guards would come and select someone for the guillotine during his years of incarceration. That hour of horror stayed with his father all those years. De Tocqueville wanted to visit America because it was a country where no one could be tormented the way his father had.

De Tocqueville was in America nine months and wrote "Democracy in America" as a result of what he observed and learned during his visit. He made the point that democracy only thrived if it guaranteed an equal distribution of hope. He did not delve into racism in writing about his idyllic vision of America. In Melville's "Moby Dick," the ship, the Pequod, represented the dual nature of an imperfect democracy one that promised hope but killed it for some like the black people and the Indians. Jefferson wrote of the Americans as the chosen people at his desk at Monticello but failed to look out the window and see the slaves working in his fields. In 1854, Frederick Douglass, the first black American and advocate for the slaves called out the hypocrisy of American democracy.

The freedom of the slaves was deferred over and over again until 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was elected president. He vowed to stop the spread of slavery to northern states and to put it on its way to extinction. There is evidence that Lincoln suffered from melancholy. He had retreated from a less than stellar political career but felt compelled to re-enter public life when in 1854 he was stunned by the Kansas-Nebraska Act that opened up new territories for slavery.

Lincoln was not an abolitionist. When he signed the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War in 1863, slavery remained legal in the slave states that had not joined the south. He claimed that the Constitution allowed him only to stop the spread of slavery not end it. Slavery had been a thorn in America's side since its beginnings. Samuel Johnson decried those who fought for freedom during the revolutionary war yet were the owners of slaves. Lincoln did not advocate slavery in fact he had a "natural disgust" for it. Through his words he was able to lead people away from their prejudice about black inferiority to their inner core of outrage. He felt the founding fathers were against slavery ignoring the fact that most owned slaves. Lincoln perceived Jefferson as a just man who penned the words that were the foundation of democracy - "all men are created equal" (73) - despite the fact that he had slaves and held the belief that blacks were emotionally inferior because they couldn't blush or blanch.

Edmund Wilson argued that Lincoln believed he was born to be a great avenger. He sometimes spoke in Calvinistic terms with references to being in the grip of providence. He felt controlled by events as if a force were propelling him toward destiny. Lincoln is not remembered for his vision of a prosperous and advancing nation but rather for his



sense of justice. His was a rags to riches story but there had been others. His story was different in that he felt everyone had the same chance for success that he had - including the black man. A man of melancholy, Lincoln felt a close connection to the Declaration of Independence and once remarked that he would rather be assassinated than giving up those principles. He felt it was fatally dangerous to deny the rights he had to others.

Lincoln felt that building oneself up on another's degradation was a sin. He was not particularly religious; however, he saw Christian symbolism reflected in the nation. He found spiritual reasons to justify the Civil War. In his second inaugural address, he said that slavery was a sin and that God had willed it to be "expiated by blood." He ascribed to Thoreau's words that the greatest miracle is to be able to look through each other's eyes. To Lincoln, the Union was the symbol of transcendence. Defeating the Confederacy would bring the country to a better place. Immediately after his death, he became a martyr and symbol of the universal rights that all men have.



Chapter 3: Self

Chapter 3: Self Summary and Analysis

That America along with the presidency is devolving into ruin is not a modern concept. Henry Adams was convinced over 100 years ago that the the evolution from President Washington to President Grant would upset Darwin. Emerson found that patriotism was weak. In more modern times, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., warned against the disuniting of America. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., announced the "end of loyalty" in American society. Columnist William Safire spoke of the "death of outrage" in the New York Times. America's favorite pastime has evolved into a self-centered event. The designated hitter was devised for the American League to keep over-the-hill baseball players in the game. Astro turf was introduced to make ground outs into singles. Low fences were installed to allow home run hitters to become home run phenoms.

America struggled from Lincoln's assassination to the turbulent 1960s to genuinely become the nation that Lincoln envisioned - a society whose citizens are all free to succeed without limitation despite their parentage or origin. The Fourteenth Amendment was established to guarantee equal rights to all despite state laws and standards. Oddly, women were not allowed to vote until five amendments later. Tocqueville had commented in the 1830s that women were lost in the "bonds of marriage." The Voting Rights Act gave blacks political equality. However, modern blacks lag behind whites by most economic measures.

The struggle to attain Lincoln's ideal was not only man against capital but also worker against worker. An anti-immigration sentiment began to emerge. There was a huge wave of immigration after the Civil War which helped build the country up for the Industrial Age. In "The Nation" in 1915, Horace Kallen coined the word "multicultural" and wrote that the US would become a democracy of nationalities. But Henry Adams in 1905 thought he was in a foreign country when he looked out the window of his New York club.

There was a trend toward "self," which abandoned Pericles' words that at the end of life making money pales in comparison to having the respect of others. John Jay Chapman pointed out the hospitals did not stand for profit alone, they stood for caring and responsibility. A good society, he believed, chose principle over profit. People were living by measure of the marketplace which stringent Protestants and successful businessmen Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller found disgusting.

Why should the government be concerned with the individual? When was this seed of modern liberalism first planted? Some saw it with the anti-trust laws of 1890 while others linked it to federal programs for Civil War veterans. The point at which Christianity and democracy intersect is that both ascribed to the belief that exploitation and abuse leads to the destruction of the genuine need for fellowship and the abandonment of the Golden Rule. It is wrong-headed to think that only the poor needs



this environment. Every person no matter his station in life has a need for what William James termed the "Ideal Power." This power gives them the sense of "being in a wider life than that of this world's little interests" (p. 91). For a Christian, this feeling is represented by God but for others it was found in civic pride or patriotic idealism. Prior to Lincoln, this need was met in the private sector by churches, hospitals and charities. But Lincoln made the US government the source of justice, mercy and hope. In modern days, is the government still capable of providing this sense of a wider belonging and purpose?

The modern culture of America was shaped by Progressivism, the New Deal and the Great Society. Much moral progress has been achieved with the Emancipation Proclamation, Brown v. Board of Education and the establishment of work-place standards. These steps and many more were all leading to a nation that symbolized human rights. There are on-going struggles for gay rights and women's rights. Strides have been made in bringing the disabled into general society.

In 1967, Robert Bellah published an essay in which he claimed that the power of the United States was gained from what he termed a "civil religion." He traced its beginnings back to Abraham Lincoln. To Bellah the symbols of America represented the commitments of Western religious and philosophical traditions and the common beliefs of the ordinary American. The power that came from a need within connected to something larger than self. But did this phenomenon survive the years?

When did the collapse of public trust first begin. Americans have always been disappointed in its public figures. Thomas Jefferson had children with a slave. Andrew Jackson's wife was called a slut by some. Franklin Roosevelt's sons were derided for having desk jobs during World War II. Something in the national image died between the 1960s and 1980s. It was during this time period that the goals of the left and right began to have no commonality. People having advanced views lost respectability. It became difficult to make a distinction between nose thumbing and flag waving. There is no vision real vision on either side of the political spectrum. Graham Green called melancholy the "logical belief in a hopeless future." Has American come to that reality?

The country was first under the power of God, then country and lastly self alone. The philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote that the more man feels isolated the more he compensates with inflated ego and false pride. The liberated man which Tocqueville described as America's gift to the world is becoming marooned in the perpetual present. He has all his baubles and toys to play with but he's alone and is going no where. The melancholy that Tocqueville described as existing in abundance has come home to roost. He warned that the cost of individualism can result in the loss of the nation. The voices of "we the people" have been replaced by a multitude of "I's."

Lincoln's vision of opportunity for everyone is fading as the stretch limos take up four parking spaces a block away from homeless men begging for change. Poverty has never before been so stark in the nation. The rich think the poor are lazy and unfortunate. The poor think there is no hope. What does the future hold for America? Education is deteriorating with fewer graduates and lower SATs. Children are having



babies. The number of households without a father figure is rapidly increasing. The prison population has increased ten-fold over the last thirty years ago. Symbolic of our lack of advancement is the country's number one objective - staying young forever.

Alan Wolfe writes that civil religion still exists but has progressed to a mature state which tempers exuberant patriotism with realism. Antonio Gramsci refers to the life cycle of ideas which represents the time it takes for new ideas to replace old ones. There is lapping-over in this process as evidenced by the fact that the early ideas of Christianity and civil religion are still part of America's culture. It is beneficial and natural for ideas to be incorporated into existing ones rather than completely eradicating existing ideas with a series of new ones. The drive for money has not abated. It has always been a creative as well as a corrosive force.

There is reason for hope. The basic American has maintained a sense of fairness and decency. There is a craving for change and self-discovery. Most contact between people is intimate and cliquish. But man's problems are not intimate and local - they are global. The nation must contend with the global marketplace and global warming. John Dewey predicted the post-nationalism state in the 1920s as one of international disorder.

What new "faith" will emerge to temper America's melancholy and fill the need for change. Could the future be a world federation to which certain nations could cede powers for the sake of the global community? Universal rights are remain theoretical and are not shared by all. To be American has always meant to be something beyond America.



Characters

Alexis de Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville was a famed French political observer and historian who visited America in the 1830s. He was drawn to America to learn more about its democracy. De Tocqueville had personal reasons for his attraction to America. His father had been imprisoned during the French Revolution. Each day, his father would force himself to nap at a certain hour because it was during that hour that the guards would decide to select a random prisoner for the guillotine. So many years after he was freed, his father was still haunted by the horror he had lived through. De Tocqueville wanted to visit America, a place where that kind of abusive experience could theoretically never exist.

De Tocqueville had a love/hate relationship with this new country. While he wanted to observe the free nation first-hand, he probably had a sense that America and democracy wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. But he found that he was wrong. He was surprised that even though the people were touting its ability to live free, there was still a left-over sentiment of God and Christianity from the Puritans. But through the years since its beginning, this faith had merged with a strong love of country. De Tocqueville could not believe how patriotic Americans were. In fact he found it annoying. The people he talked to defended absolutely everything about their country - except perhaps the weather. He was inspired to write his famous, "Democracy in America," after his nine-month stay in the nation.

Although America and democracy impressed De Tocqueville he also observed a dark force. He was one of the first to recognize the natural "melancholy" that exists to counterbalance the happiness and satisfaction that comes from living in a democracy. As de Tocqueville described it, there is an internal mechanism within the man who lives free that prevents him from attaining completeness. He forewarned the country that in abundance comes melancholy - a yearning for something more, something else.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer and mediocre politician when he retired from public life to pursue a private career. But Lincoln was drawn back to public service when he was overcome with melancholy and sadness over the unfairness of the country's practice of slavery. His vision of the nation was that its central government would be fair and just and offer opportunities and equal rights for all.

Lincoln was disturbed with the Kansas-Nebraska Act that would allow slavery in new territories. He felt a strong sense of Providence and a calling that he could not allow the evil of slavery to spread. It was this turn of events that led him to the White House and that ultimately led the country past slavery and toward that nation of universal rights that he had envisioned.



Lincoln was not an abolitionist. He did not advocate slavery and held a "natural disgust" for it. He felt that advancing by degrading another was a sin. But when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 during the war, those southern states that practiced slavery but did not join the Confederacy, were allowed to continue their slave policies. At the time of the war, Lincoln felt that he didn't have the Constitutional authority to end slavery, only to stop its spread. However, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was the first step toward ending it. Through his leadership, he convinced people to abandon their prejudices about black inferiority. Lincoln was not a particularly religious man but he felt he was a man of destiny. He felt that he was not placed in the position he held at such a crucial turning point in America's history by accident. He felt he was there to avenge the down-trodden and hopeless.

Lincoln's vision of America led to a new level of national pride and a goal for those who were hopeless and without purpose. His vision for an America that was a nation of equal rights for all continued into the 1960s when, for a variety of reasons, the spirit of patriotism began to die.

Alan Taylor

Historian Alan Taylor, not understanding the long-lasting impact that the Puritan spirit would have, characterized looking for the roots of American identity in Colonial England as "quaint."

Archbishop Richard Hooker

Archbishop Richard Hooker of the Church of England felt that Puritans were not fit to live among other people because of their rejection of Anglican dogma.

D. H. Lawrence

D. H. Lawrence felt that the Puritans wanted to leave England to "get away from themselves." He saw no compelling reason for them to leave and, like many others, did not believe it was due to religious prosecution.

Richard Sibbes

Puritan Richard Sibbes, when speaking of God's power over man, said that most "men are not lost enough in their own feeling for a Savior." (25)

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson predicted that Puritanism was on its way out and that nothing was taking its place. He felt that old time religion was virtually dead.



Herman Melville

Author Herman Melville emerged as one of the first great American writers. He captured the heart of the concept of "manifest destiny" in "White-Jacket" in which he spoke of Americans as new Israelites - the chosen people of their time.

Thomas Jefferson

Although Thomas Jefferson wrote the words "all men are created equal," he was a slave owner and had sired several children with one of his slaves.

Frederick Douglass

In 1854, Frederick Douglass, the first black American and advocate for the enslaved. He was dedicated to helping the slaves and boldly called out the hypocrisy of American democracy.



Objects/Places

New England

Many historians believe that American culture was born in New England and that its roots can be traced back to the early Puritan settlements.

Religion

Religion was the most important element of life in early New England and had a huge impact on the culture of America. The Puritans who settled in the area from England had fled their homeland due to religious oppression.

Precisionists

Precisionists or precisians were regarded by their fellow Englishmen as fanatics. They believed that the Anglican Church had been spoiled by elaborate ceremonies and wanted a return to the pure form of worship established by the apostles.

Puritans

The precisionists were eventually referred to as Puritans. Due to the religious oppression they suffered under in England, a great number of pastors and their congregants came to America so they could return to an apostolic style of worship.

Melancholy

It was de Tocqueville's theory that part of living in a democracy and enjoying freedom is its elusiveness. When man is about to attain the dream that living free promises, an internal trigger, which de Tocqueville called melancholy, keeps him from attaining complete success and happiness. It is part of a democracy.

Milton's Paradise Lost

In Milton's "Paradise Lost," pride and despair were presented as equals. The same sentiment was part of Puritanical thought.



Ideal Power

William James termed the human need for a sense of "being in a wider life than that of this world's little interests" as the "Ideal Power." Every person no matter his station, James contended, had this fundamental longing.

Kansas-Nebraska Act

Abraham Lincoln had retreated from a lackluster political career but was motivated by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 which, if enacted, would allow for the spread of slavery to new territories. Lincoln was appalled and returned to public service which led him to the White House and the country to the abolition of slavery.

Emancipation Proclamation

Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 during the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation put the nation on the road that would bring about the eventual abolition of slavery.



Themes

Melancholy

French historian Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed with American democracy. He was fascinated by it. But he was the first to verbalize a cautionary tone about the perfect and coveted form of government that the Americans had developed. He felt that with the vast opportunity in the land of abundance that America provided its people, that a feeling of "melancholy" might set in that would change the landscape of the country and perhaps even its democracy that the people were so proud of.

It was de Tocqueville's theory that with the freedom and unlimited potential that democracy provided, there was an internal mechanism within each person that would keep him from attaining completeness. It was a natural instinct for man to create stories and symbols that would ward off this morose feeling and the thought that life had no purpose. And de Tocqueville saw the flag, the monuments and the American eagle as evidence that "melancholy" was beginning to set in and that it frightened the people. Their overt pride in their country and the parades and flag-waving were all signs to de Tocqueville that soon the melancholy would lead to a new era for America.

That melancholy was first seen in the Puritans who fretted over whether they would attain a state of grace. Despite their devoutness, the Puritans felt an internal nagging that they needed more. Eventually, these feelings of incompleteness led to the Puritan religion's decline and opened the country to a new something to believe in which was belief in the nation and democracy.

Abraham Lincoln suffered from depression and dark moods, certainly a form of melancholy. It was these stirrings that led Lincoln to return to public service. The combination of his melancholy with proposed new laws that would allow slavery to spread to new territories sparked a feeling of destiny within Lincoln that led him to the White House and the country on the way to ending slavery. Lincoln, felt a connection to the Declaration of Independence and remarked that he would rather be assassinated that give up those principles.

The modern American culture is in a state of melancholy that has caused gridlock among our legislators and caused our collective patriotism to be diminished. Something died in America that was at least in part brought on by man's melancholy. But that same melancholy is poised to awaken something in America. It will urge Americans to look for that next great something that will propel America to pursue new dreams.

Democracy

What does it really mean to be free? The dreams, happiness, satisfaction and success that living free provides for man in a democracy is surely the ultimate existence. In a democracy, there are leaders but those leaders are beholden to the people. Of course,



in the days of yore in a monarchy like that in England where the Puritans hailed from, the people were beholden to the king and the people's happiness and success and welfare were all dependent upon the whims of a merciless king. In a democracy, like that that ultimately emerged in the New World, people began to realize that they held their own destinies in their hands.

The democracy that was founded on the religious freedom that the Puritans sought grew and evolved. The sentiment that man could worship as he chose to in the New World was expanded to other dreams and hopes that dwelt in the minds and hearts of the American people. In this new country, this odd organization that was called a democracy that was structured upon the religious freedom that the Puritans sought, man was beholden only to laws - not other men. That ideology led to the revelation that "all men were created equal" and that in America anyone could succeed. There were no unfair barriers or glass ceilings or cruel monarchs who could stop them. In fact, nothing could stop man but himself.

But democracy meant something more than just fairness and justice for all. It emerged out of an internal need and yearning that was felt in the consciousness of the American people. The faithful still outnumbered the godless but the Puritanical stronghold that had forged the foundation of the country had weakened and been challenged. The people were eager for something else - a something else that was bigger than they were - something that would allow them to reach beyond themselves. They needed something to believe in.

The blending of the faith of the Puritans with the growing love - the patriotism - that people were beginning to have for their nation created that something else. Democracy was the "god" that Americans worshiped once the God of the Puritans had faded. The French historian de Tocqueville said in America, there was no difference between master and servant. Through just a twist of fate, the two could easily change places.

Religious Oppression

As in many conflicts among men, the beginning of American was at least in part the result of religious oppression. Puritans began growing in large numbers in England, the country from which the earliest settlers originated. The Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, in many ways resembled a political organization. The archbishops and hierarchy in the church were most concerned with pleasing their superiors - and in the case of the Anglican Church the superiors of the church were the King of England and influential members of his close circle.

The Anglican Church had been established due to another conflict sometime before the earlier settlers came to the New World. When King Henry VIII could not convince the Pope to grant him a divorce so he could marry Anne Boleyn, he created his own church so that he could devise his own rules about marriage and divorce. From its blatant political nature at its very foundation, the church maintained an allegiance and loyalty to the monarchy.



The Church of England had elaborate and opulent ceremonies - perhaps to disguise the scandal and intrigue upon which it was built - which a sect of Christians disdained. To this group of people, the pastor should be beholden to the laity who chose him and well-trained in the Bible, Christianity and devoted to serving his congregation. These individuals, referred to as precisionists or precisians, were treated with great derision by the Crown and its followers, including the Anglican Church. Eventually, they came to be known as Puritans because of their belief that worship of the Lord should be simple and in the fashion of the apostles. The Puritans were not able to establish the network of their meetinghouses as they desired because it conflicted with the standards of the Church of England.

Eventually, the Puritan pastors and the congregants were either convinced to leave for the New World and chose to go on their own - or probably a combination of both scenarios - and wound up in what many back in England thought was the wilderness. But since the Puritans had the freedom to worship the way they believed in their new settlements, they felt that had been freed and looked back at England and considered that their former home was truly the wilderness.



Style

Perspective

"The Real American Dream" is written in the third-person narrative. It is a historical account that traces the beginnings of a culture that was established based on a life-changing and all-encompassing concept of freedom. The first freedom was that from religious oppression and from that foundation sprung the concept of democracy or a nation of free men who obeyed laws not other men.

In the "Acknowledgments" section of the book, author Andrew Delbanco explains that much of the material contained in the book was taken from lectures he delivered during his participation in the William E. Massey Sr. Lectures at Cambridge.

There is probably no one more qualified than the author, who is a scholar of history and literature, to take on the challenge of writing about and analyzing the nation's history from a cultural aspect. Delbanco is an expert in the history of the Puritans. And he is not only a historian and scholar, he is also a successful writer.

Andrew Delbanco is a Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. He is the author of "The Puritan Ordeal," "The Death of Satan," and "Required Reading," and the co-editor of "The Puritans in America."

Tone

"The Real American Dream" by Andrew Delbanco is written in an unbiased and scholarly tone by historian and author Delbanco who is well-versed in the history of the nation and its culture. Delbanco has been able to take a mountain of history and slice through to its core. The respect and reverence that Delbanco has for America and for its history and culture is undeniable.

Although the last section of the book, "Self," is a description of an America that has abandoned, to some degree, its faith and its patriotism, the book surprisingly ends on an upbeat note. There is hope for the hopelessness that seems to have taken over the American consciousness. Just as de Tocqueville had predicted, the melancholy brought on by freedom and abundance has damaged the nation and sent everyone running to their corners.

But Delbanco does not necessarily think that this is a negative result and that it will be long lasting. In fact, he feels that the country is regrouping and looking for that next big thing that is bigger than themselves and bigger than America - that thing that they can aspire to and have pride in. That last best thing was Lincoln's vision of a fair and just nation with equal opportunities and rights for all. The period has not been put on the end of America's cultural evolution.

The conclusion of Delbanco's work is written with hope and inspiration. America's melancholy will lead to great new heights for America - perhaps achievements that have never been imagined or even dreamed of.

Structure

"The Real American Dream" by Andrew Delbanco is a historical work that focuses on the roots to the American culture. The book consists of three large chapters or sections. The first chapter is "God" which traces the impact of the early settlements of the Puritans in the New World who hailed from England where they suffered under religious oppression from the Crown and Anglican Church. The first chapter describes the influence of the religious sect that had a great and lasting impact on the history and culture of the nation.

The second chapter, "Nation," describes the establishment of a new nation, a democracy where men could lead their lives and worship how they believed and speak their minds. In this new nation, there was no monarchy - the people themselves would decide who would lead them. It was a new concept and one that was scoffed at by Europe. The emergence of democracy came at a time when the grasp of the Puritan religion began to fade. The country needed something new to believe in and something bigger than itself. It became patriotic and the focal point of their need for something bigger than itself became the nation. Through the efforts and leadership of Abraham Lincoln the federal government became the symbol of a justice and fairness.

The third chapter, "Self" describes modern American culture that has evolved from the initial Puritanical beliefs the country was founded on through the struggle for the just and fair nation that Lincoln had envisioned to distrust and isolation. The modern culture focuses on "self." How long can a nation thrive on that foundation?

A prologue in which the author describes the hope and melancholy of our founders and explains why he broke down his book in what he considered the three basic phases of American history: God, Nation and Self. The author has an extensive "Notes" section in which he credits sources and references he used in writing the book. There is also a detailed index for easy reference.

Quotes

"Among democratic nations... men easily attain a certain equality of condition, but they can never attain as much as they desire. It perpetually retires before them, yet without hiding itself from their sight, and in retiring draws them on" (Prologue, p. 3).

"What could be more quaint than to seek the roots of American identity in colonial New England, the land of Puritans, Salem witches, the Mayflower and Plymouth Rock" (Chapter 1, p. 15).

"There is 'not an opinion, not a custom, not a law' that New England origin of American civilization does not explain" (Chapter 1, p. 15).

"Thou hangest but by one rotten twined thread...over the flames of hell" (Chapter 1, p. 21).

"What we know of the culture of early New England suggests that most people believed that even the smallest event were evidence of the power and judgment of... God" (Chapter 1, p. 23).

"To love and live beloved is the soul's paradise" (Chapter 1, p. 36).

"Like many intellectuals, since, Emerson regarded the American religious scene as a carnival of crackpots" (Chapter 2, p. 50).

"The real nation was to be found not in anything external but in the outrushing of the mind by which the American self-discovered it had no boundaries and could consume the world and turn it into a nutrient of the imagination" (Chapter 2, p. 56).

"These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live...How many a man who was lately contemplating suicide has now something to live for" (Chapter 2, p. 75).

"The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin" (Chapter 3, p. 84).

"There is an American tradition in which reform appears chiefly as a form of self-therapy - a tradition crystallized in Thoreau's mordant remark that 'what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress, but...his private ail'" (Chapter 3, p. 89).

"This is what the Puritans meant in insisting that if we fail to contribute to some good beyond ourselves, we condemn ourselves to the hell of loneliness" (Chapter 3, p. 17).



Topics for Discussion

Why did the Puritans leave England? What impact did their beliefs have on America? Did they have a lasting effect even though the religion faded?

What is "melancholy" as perceived by Alexis de Tocqueville? Why did de Tocqueville feel that with abundance there is always this melancholy?

Why was de Tocqueville drawn to the United States? What did he write as a result of his long tour of America?

What were Abraham Lincoln's real views on slavery? How did his "melancholy" help to spawn a new government or one that represented fairness and decency? When did Lincoln's dream of fairness and opportunity for all begin to fade and why?

What is civil religion? After the stronghold that Puritanism had on the new country why was it necessary for another "faith" to emerge?

Why is "self" replacing the "nation" as the focal point of America? What are signs of this transformation? What is the risk of such a trend?

Why is the nation immobilized? What has caused the political process to come to complete gridlock? Why is having something bigger than ourselves essential for America's survival?