Inventing the "American Way"

The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement

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Introduction

In May 1947, an illustrious group of business and advertising executives, Hollywood moguls, labor leaders, and heads of religious, civic, and civil rights organizations gathered at the White House to put their stamp of approval on one of the most ambitious ideological campaigns ever undertaken in the United States: the Freedom Train. Later that year, a train carrying over one hundred *original* documents—among them, Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence, Washington's copy of the Constitution, and Lincoln's scrawled Gettysburg Address—left on a sixteen-month journey through 322 cities in all forty-eight states. The Freedom Train's passage was coordinated with hundreds of local celebrations, dubbed patriotic "revival meetings," and a nationwide media blitz. Newsreels, newspapers, and national magazines gave the train extensive coverage; Freedom Train messages were worked into popular radio programs such as *Fibber McGee and Molly*; Irving Berlin composed a song in the train's honor; and four million schoolchildren received copies of the comic book *Captain Marvel and the Freedom Train!* An estimated 3.5 million Americans boarded the train during its travels, and as many as one in three participated in Freedom Rallies, Freedom Fashion Shows, and other events staged to celebrate the train's arrival in their towns.[1]

Both the train and the media barrage were ostensibly designed to remind Americans of their shared heritage and values. Comments made by the train's organizers, however, suggested that the project was designed to instill, rather than simply reflect, those common mores. Attorney General Tom Clark, whose office originated the idea, argued that "indoctrination in democracy is the essential catalytic agent needed to blend our varying groups into one American family."[2] Paramount Pictures president Barney Balaban, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants and the man who helped transform the train into a major extravaganza, saw in the Freedom Train "a wonderful vehicle for creating good will among various racial and religious groups."[3] Thomas

D'Arcy Brophy, the advertising executive who ultimately orchestrated the entire project, hoped to defuse class tensions and head off "state socialism" in the U.S. by "re-selling Americanism to Americans."[4]

Each of these individuals had a slightly different agenda, and their voices were not the only ones shaping the project. Indeed, the façade of consensus surrounding the Freedom Train concealed an ongoing contest involving many different groups. Behind the scenes and occasionally in public, corporate and advertising executives, Truman administration officials, civil servants with New Deal loyalties, Communists, pacifists, ardent segregationists, and southern blacks fighting to end Jim Crow vied to control the message and meaning of the train. Controversy erupted over the documents that would be included in the exhibit and over the interpretation ascribed to each: Were the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution—those guaranteeing "due process" and the right to vote—really the "*common* heritage of *all* Americans"?[5] Were pictures of immigrants, artifacts documenting the rise of the labor movement, or even FDR's 1940 speech declaring America to be the "arsenal of democracy" sufficiently noncontroversial to be displayed aboard the Freedom Train? How much attention should be paid to Alexander Hamilton, a favorite of economic conservatives, as compared to Thomas Jefferson, the founding father beloved by New Deal Democrats? The issue of race—specifically, whether whites and blacks should board the train and view the documents together—proved particularly troublesome when the train headed into the South. Indeed, the controversy over segregation became so heated that train organizers instructed advance workers operating below the Mason-Dixon Line to refer to it in telegrams simply as "Problem D." In this charged environment, even a word as seemingly central to America's national identity as "democracy" was ultimately deemed too controversial to be used in slogans and press materials. Under the banner of "freedom," Americans with widely divergent interests used the Freedom Train to reinforce the corporate order, shore up support for the cold war, and campaign for religious tolerance and civil rights.

The story of the Freedom Train highlights the politics of consensus in America in the middle decades of the twentieth century. At first glance, these two notions—"politics" and "consensus"—may seem at odds. After all, "consensus" suggests a fundamental agreement on values—in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* "the collective unanimous opinion of a number of persons."[6] Certainly, American pundits and scholars writing in the two decades following World War II tended to downplay political battles and to stress the values their fellow citizens shared. In 1949, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.,

optimistically declared that most Americans, in the North and South, accepted the basic tenets of civil rights, while "liberals have values in common with most members of the business community."[7] Eleven years later, the political scientist Clinton Rossiter agreed: "In this favored country we have almost always found more things on which to agree than to disagree," he wrote in a report commissioned by President Eisenhower. The early 1960s, he added, "appear to be a time of broad consensus on fundamentals."[8]

Our view looking back has been strongly shaped by such pronouncements. For nearly half a century, both scholarly and popular commentators have depicted the postwar years, and especially the 1950s and early 1960s, as a time of unusually deep and well-grounded national unity, a time when postwar affluence and the cold war combined to produce a remarkable level of agreement about the nation's core values.[9] Observers on both the left and the right compare the fractiousness and polarization of politics today to the presumed harmony of those earlier decades.

In recent years, some scholars have challenged this picture of ideological cohesion, pointing to evidence of grassroots resistance on both the left and the right.[10] Their approach, however, begs a central question: If Americans remained divided on many issues in the postwar years, why did a tone of unity and accord so pervade the writing and politics of the era? Why did a "veneer of consensus and civility" reign?[11] After all, the combined effects of affluence and anti-communism did not produce even the appearance of consensus in other epochs of U.S. history—the 1920s or the 1980s, for example. What made the postwar decades different?

This book tackles that question. It begins with the premise that America's mid-century "consensus" can best be understood not as a "natural" development but as a political project. Broad societal trends may have contributed to the "centripetal impulse" of postwar political culture, but that culture was strongly shaped by the conscious activities of multiple groups.[12] Business and advertising executives, interfaith activists, government officials, and other cultural elites seized on the notion of a unifying and distinctive "American Way" and sought to define it in ways that furthered their own political and social agendas. All of these groups had a strong interest in cementing national cohesion, and all promoted the notion of "consensus," even as they differed on the specific values and attributes that their fellow citizens shared. The compromises they made—and the alliances they forged—did much to produce the consensus culture that marked the public arena during the postwar years.

The roots of this consensus culture can be found not in the cold war era, as previous historians have suggested, but in the turbulent decade that

preceded U.S. entry into World War II. Americans of diverse backgrounds and divergent agendas were alarmed by the chaos of the Depression years, as well as by the rise of fascism and communism abroad. To conservative industrialists and left-liberal intellectuals alike, these "alien" ideologies seemed to threaten the U.S. not only externally, but internally as well. To counter such threats—to shore up their vision of American democracy or the nation's economic system—diverse groups articulated their version of a unifying national ideology and sought to convince their fellow citizens of its merits. The resulting "cultural conversation" lasted nearly three decades and spawned Broadway plays, film shorts, comic strips, movies, radio shows, advertising blitzes, and cold war letter-writing campaigns.[13] It shaped cultural productions ranging from the Freedom Train to the radio serial *The Adventures of Superman*. Its legacies include terms that remain central to American political life—terms such as "free enterprise" and the "American Way," both of which were popularized in the late 1930s.

Two key struggles lie at the heart of this story, overlapped by a third. The first revolved around the shape and place of capitalism in American life. The economic collapse of the 1930s undermined the political and cultural authority of the nation's business community and called into question rarely challenged assumptions about the stability and course of U.S. society. In this context, President Roosevelt and his New Dealers promoted an "American Way" built around the twin pillars of majoritarian democracy and economic security for all Americans. Freedom from want, FDR argued, was a vital underpinning of democracy and something that could only be ensured by an activist government. Industrial unionists and those on the left wing of the New Deal coalition pushed FDR's vision even further, calling for an extension of majoritarian democracy from the political into the economic realm. In practice, such "industrial democracy" could take many forms, ranging from the spread of consumer and industrial cooperatives to a greater role for labor in corporate decision-making.

Corporate leaders and their allies responded to this challenge by launching an all-out campaign beginning in the late 1930s to reassert their authority and to shore up what they often referred to as the "American economic system." Regrouping after the initial shock of the Depression—and increasingly convinced that their problems lay not with New Deal "radicals" but with the American people as a whole—business groups launched a series of advertising and public relations campaigns designed to reeducate the public. They promoted a version of the American Way that celebrated individual freedom rather than majoritarian democracy and that posited a harmony of

interests among classes. Replacing the beleaguered term "private enterprise" with the more resonant "free enterprise," they responded to New Deal and labor efforts to link Americans' economic and political rights with a linkage of their own: without economic freedom, they argued, Americans' political, civil, and religious liberties would disappear. Although business groups made only marginal headway in the late 1930s, they introduced themes and terms that would resonate through discussions of American political culture into the 1950s and beyond.

If debates over political economy formed one axis of the conversation on the American Way in the late 1930s, debates over the cultural definition of America formed another: How would a nation that elites had long defined as white and Protestant incorporate a diverse citizenry into its national identity and social fabric? The Depression took hold just as millions of "new immigrants" and their American-born children—and black Americans who had joined the Great Migration out of the South after World War I—were making a bid for greater political and social inclusion. The New Deal coalition welcomed many of these newly enfranchised Americans, but the Depression and escalating tensions abroad also produced a surge in anti-Semitism and other forms of ethnic and racial intolerance. Meanwhile, the successes of Fascist and Communist regimes abroad underscored both the possibilities and dangers inherent in cultural diversity. Many American opinion molders equated totalitarianism with enforced homogeneity and came to see diversity as a defining feature of democracy. The American Way, they argued, was the ability of diverse individuals to live together harmoniously. Yet such celebratory proclamations were often tinged with fear—fear that unbounded diversity could produce venomous hatreds that would ultimately tear a democracy apart. What was needed, many believed, was a broadly shared civic consensus capable of producing a stable and unified, yet tolerant and variegated, nation.

Responding to such concerns, diverse groups of Americans—liberal intellectuals, government officials, "new immigrant" and civic leaders, assimilated American Jews, and others—worked to blunt domestic intolerance and to broaden the bounds of national inclusion by promoting both cultural pluralism and a unifying American Way. They hailed America's demographic variety, even as they celebrated values that they argued were broadly shared by their fellow citizens. Those offering such prescriptive visions, however, defined the parameters of diversity and consensus in markedly different ways. Some cast America as a "nation of immigrants" or a "nation of nations," a collection of ethnically diverse individuals united by secular Enlightenment

values. Others emphasized religious rather than ethnic diversity, suggesting that America was above all a "Protestant-Catholic-Jewish" nation. Advocates of this approach generally contended that religion was also a key unifying force. Americans, they proclaimed, were united by shared "Judeo-Christian" beliefs such as "the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man" or the "sacredness of the individual."[14] Black Americans struggled with both paradigms since neither entirely acknowledged their unique history or the depth of the challenges they still faced. Still, some saw in this prewar impulse an opportunity to pursue "a politics of inclusion."[15]

A third axis of debate—the precise nature of America's foreign foe—overlapped with the other two. Beginning in the late 1930s, leftist intellectuals and artists, government officials, interfaith activists, conservative businessmen, and many others argued that an external enemy sought to turn Americans against one another—in short, to "divide and conquer" the nation. Liberals and leftists generally saw that enemy as fascism and tried to unite Americans in an antifascist consensus. Many defined fascism expansively, using it to condemn evils ranging from racial inequality and economic exploitation to red-baiting.[16] Other Americans, including ardent defenders of free enterprise, cast the nation's chief enemy as "totalitarianism," a term that encompassed communism as well. Many in this camp warned against *any* division that might sunder Americans. In their view, disgruntled workers or protesting blacks were as or more likely to provide an opening for the tactics of "divide and conquer" as were oppressive employers or purveyors of racial intolerance.

As these contrasting views of America's external enemy suggest, a central divide cut across all discussions of a unifying American Way. Many government officials and private elites—including influential voices in both the business and "intergroup" communities—used the language of consensus to promote *civility* across class, racial, ethnic, and religious lines. Denying or minimizing economic and power imbalances, they stressed the harmony of interests among various groups in American society and sought to shore up the status quo. Other Americans, however, put *equality* rather than comity at the center of their consensual vision. Civil rights activists, left-liberal intellectuals, and some advocates of the rights of labor tried to unite Americans around a set of values that they believed would ultimately lead to social change. Rather than ignoring power imbalances, they tried to use the language of consensus to correct them.[17]

These overlapping struggles over the precise nature of the American Way were ultimately reshaped by the politics of World War II and the cold war. The war against the Axis powers brought the federal government fully into the act of promoting national cohesion and produced an infrastructure

of institutions devoted to publicly defining for Americans their common ground. It also forced groups on both ends of the political spectrum to curtail the vitriolic rhetoric they had sometimes used during the 1930s. In the postwar years, communism quickly replaced fascism as the nation's principal enemy. Many of those who had benefited most from the rhetoric of unity during World War II launched cultural programs designed to extend and reshape the wartime emphasis on common ground. The very energy that proponents of consensus devoted to their various campaigns, however, suggests that whatever consensus existed was fragile at best.

Inventing the "American Way" attempts to restore a sense of struggle and uncertainty to the emergence of a postwar consensus. At the same time, it sheds light on shifts at the center of U.S. political culture in the mid-twentieth century. Between the mid-1930s and the end of World War II, the focus of American liberalism—and of American politics more generally—moved from class-based concerns to a preoccupation with pluralism and individual rights.[18] This book suggests that the politics of consensus in the late 1930s and 1940s both spurred and reinforced that transformation. Many liberals who had previously worried about the dangers posed to the nation by economic inequality and an oppressive business elite became increasingly concerned that internal divisions of any sort might tear a democracy apart. Abandoning the language of progressive struggle, they promoted "tolerance" and "individual dignity" as core American values. At the same time, some in the business community sought to clothe their defense of American-style capitalism in the language of tolerance, pluralism, and national unity. In the postwar years, campaigns launched by intergroup activists on behalf of religious and sometimes racial tolerance garnered support from members of the business community who sought to burnish their image. Meanwhile, corporate leaders worked to discredit labor militancy by extending the message of social harmony and consensus at the core of such campaigns to cover class relations as well.

The relationship between religion and American public life also changed dramatically in the period covered by this book. Despite the nation's stated commitment to religious freedom contained in the Bill of Rights, virulent anti-Catholicism marked American politics into the 1920s and beyond. Anti-Semitism, too, surged after the turn of the twentieth century, assuming particularly venomous forms during the Great Depression. As late as 1931, a majority of the Supreme Court declared Americans to be a "Christian people."[19] Yet during and after World War II, the long-standing equation in public discourse of "Americanism" with Protestantism gave way rapidly, if

incompletely, to the notion that the U.S. was a Judeo-Christian, "tri-faith," or broadly "God-fearing" nation.[20] This book links that transformation to the politics of consensus. To elites who were trying to define the nation through a contrast with Fascist or Communist enemies, the "interfaith idea" proved particularly useful. Both Fascists and Communists were said to embrace coercive homogeneity and to reject any religion other than that of the state. In this context, ecumenical religion could serve simultaneously as a symbol of American pluralism and American consensus.

In exploring such issues, this book seeks to illuminate the "myths, languages and arguments" that "serve[d] at least some Americans *as Americans*."[21] At the same time, it highlights the culture wars of mid-century—wars that have generally eluded our hindsight for two reasons. Many elite participants took pains to hide their differences in public and to suppress grassroots evidence of open dissent. At the same time, Americans have long shared a rich political language and a common set of motifs and historical references. "Vying for control of a common vocabulary, stealing each other's terms in hopes of investing them with radically altered meanings, political opponents have often left behind an illusion of consensus," Daniel T. Rodgers writes in his pioneering work *Contested Truths*.[22] Of no period of U.S. history is this truer than of the decades immediately following World War II: the meaning of terms such as "freedom" and "democracy" were bitterly contested during those years, even as the terms themselves were widely used. The ways in which Americans' common language and iconography both divided them and drew them together comprises one of the central themes of this book.

The conversation on consensus was carried on in many different registers and by many different voices. Because the dynamics of national identity in this period have only recently begun to attract attention from scholars, this book takes an inclusive approach—encompassing groups as diverse as left-liberal intellectuals, conservative manufacturers, interfaith activists, foreign policy strategists, and black Americans pressing for civil rights. This approach underscores the scale of the shift in American political culture at mid-century and suggests that the usual classifications applied to U.S. history in this period—political, racial, religious, labor and economic, cultural-intellectual, and diplomatic, among them—don't hold up when national identity is the subject under consideration. It also highlights connections between subjects and actors that are often considered in isolation. Finally, since the language of consensus concealed widely differing priorities, this approach helps reconcile invocations of consensus with the reality of conflict. Nevertheless, this book

cannot hope to do justice to all of those involved in these debates. It focuses most heavily on individuals and institutions that were well positioned both to be heard and to contain dissenting voices.

More often than not, those with money and influence "won" the cultural battles of the 1940s and 1950s by shaping the terms of public debate. Not all Americans accepted their varied messages on the value of American-style free enterprise; the dangers of class, religious, and racial antagonism; and the need to combat first the Fascist and later the Communist threat. Nevertheless, they helped to forge a shared public vocabulary and to establish the framework in which many social and economic issues were ultimately addressed. That framework privileged individual freedom, national unity, and a shared faith in God above all else. In constructing and reinforcing this linguistic framework, they helped create a cultural reality.

While many established elites benefited from the nation's long-running conversation on consensus, they were not alone. Campaigns on behalf of religious, ethnic, and even racial "brotherhood" helped reshape American identity and reframe the boundaries of acceptable discourse, allowing many working-class ethnics and others to feel "at home" in America. Efforts to mobilize immigrants and their children into cold war propaganda campaigns often reinforced the nation's corporate order; but they also allowed first- and second-generation Americans to position themselves not as members of a threatening and alien minority, but as U.S. ambassadors and the staunchest of American patriots. Time and again, the issue of race proved a stumbling block for proponents of consensus. Still, the discourse on shared national values allowed black Americans to make limited gains. The language of individual freedom, faith, and national unity used pervasively by interfaith proponents, economic conservatives, and cold warriors was reclaimed and recast by southern blacks battling for de jure civil rights. In short, efforts to define a unifying national consensus gave religious, ethnic, and racial "outsiders" a powerful lever with which to pry open *some* doors of America's mainstream culture.

If the era's civic education campaigns helped open the door for certain kinds of social change, they slammed the door on others. Economic inequality didn't vanish with the end of World War II, but it was effectively taken off the table in the late 1940s and 1950s as a political issue. One reason for this was the widespread equation of the American Way—in sermons and civics lessons, movies and political speeches, public service advertising and press accounts—not with majoritarian democracy or egalitarian economic values but with *individual* freedoms, rights, and opportunities.[23] The focus on individual freedom proved a

powerful tool in the fight against anti-Semitism, national origin quotas, and de jure racial segregation, but it made efforts to address institutionalized economic inequality politically difficult, if not untenable.[24]

The politics of consensus fractured in the upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the era of Vietnam, youth protests, resurgent celebrations of ethnicity, and widely publicized urban riots and anti-busing violence, the varied elites who had worked for several decades to nurture and shape an illusory national consensus were no longer able to channel or contain dissenting voices. Many racial and ethnic outsiders who had once embraced the notion of shared American values and tried to shape the language of consensus to their own ends now rejected an idiom rooted ultimately in American patriotism. The economic productivity and affluence that had once seemed to succor national harmony and consensus now sparked sharp denunciations of American materialism and the maldistribution of wealth. The processes of fragmentation and polarization that first surfaced during the Johnson and Nixon administrations have only accelerated in recent decades, spawning debates over multiculturalism, the public role of religion, and, most recently, "red vs. blue" America.

The legacy of the consensus era survives, however, in institutions, political rhetoric, and assumptions about that past that continue to inform discussions of national unity and public values. Competing attempts to define core American values—to find common ground capable of uniting increasingly estranged groups of Americans—often take this period as their implicit backdrop. Proponents and critics of affirmative action, abortion restrictions, gay marriage, welfare and immigration reform, and a host of other issues invoke phrases and ideas popularized during this era. At a time when America seems more polarized than ever—yet when politicians and commentators continue to call for national unity and a return to the "vital center"—it is instructive to know how and why a fragile national consensus was shaped in the past, what it did for American political discourse and values, and what it inevitably could not do.[25]

CHAPTER 1

"Are We a Nation?"

In the spring of 1937, *Harper's* magazine announced a $1,000 essay contest to define a phrase that had suddenly begun to appear in newspaper headlines and on billboards across the nation: the "American Way." The term was not entirely new to America's political lexicon; but in the mid-1930s, it exploded into popular use. In the eighty years preceding Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election in 1932, the phrase appeared some 725 times in the pages of the *New York Times*, generally in either the negative ("not the American way") or the plural ("American ways and customs"). In the ten years following, it made some 2,230 appearances in the newspaper's pages and was frequently capitalized. Books began to appear entitled simply *The American Way* or *The American Way of Life*. Before 1933, only two volumes had used the phrase in their titles; one of these was *The American Way of Playing Ukulele Solos*.[1]

Those who wrote about the "American Way" were a diverse lot: a conservative economic columnist and an expert on adult education, representatives of what was then called the National Conference of Jews and Christians and the famous playwriting team of George Kaufman and Moss Hart. Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's progressive Secretary of Agriculture, weighed in on the topic with an article entitled "The Search for an American Way." So too did the liberal journalist and commentator Elmer Davis, librarians and bankers, the National Association of Manufacturers, and compilers of a reading list for Harvard College students.[2]

By early 1937, the phrase was being invoked so widely that the editors of *Harper's* felt it was time for clarification. The magazine invited its readers to help "restate" and "reinterpret" American traditions and ideals in light of the Depression at home and threatening ideologies abroad. "Words and

phrases like 'democracy,' 'liberty,' 'the pioneer spirit,' 'equality of opportunity,' 'self-reliance,' 'local self-rule,' and 'constitutional government' mean different things to different people," the magazine's editors acknowledged. "We should like to see the essential American traditions and ideals separated from the unessential and the outdated, so as to form a credo adapted to present and future needs." The need to articulate such a credo had never been greater, *Harper's* editors suggested. "The doctrines loosely known as communism and fascism have to-day virtually the emotional force of religions," they wrote. "It might be a good thing if those American ideas and ideals which many of us take for granted . . . could be formulated anew so that men and women of diverse political and economic views might join in accepting them with a will, feeling that they offer not only a link with the past but a guide to action." The magazine urged contestants to present the American creed in such a way as to "rally enthusiasm."[3]

The *Harper's* contest eventually attracted 1570 essays; but if the magazine's editors hoped it would reveal a widespread agreement on the nation's core values, they must surely have been disappointed. The contributions varied "from arguments for communism" to "arguments for old-fashioned aristocratic ideals," the editors later wrote, "from arguments for all manner of specific economic programs, such as systems of co-operatives or changes in the currency, to fervid defenses of the status quo; from up-to-the-minute discussions of the alleged glories or the alleged abominations of the New Deal to careful analyses of the backgrounds and principles of the early Colonists, the Constitution-makers, the Founding Fathers."[4] Ultimately, *Harper's* editors reprinted four essays. A construction engineer turned New Deal planner argued that "liberty has to be founded on security," while a Hollywood screenwriter equated the American Way with "economic democracy . . . a redistribution of income from the propertied to the propertyless." A German émigré also invoked democracy but defined it as "political equality" and "social peace." An editorial writer for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* rejected all three formulations, arguing that neither democracy nor liberty was fundamental to Americanism. Rather, he declared, both were "logical outgrowths" of the "genuine" American principles: belief in "the dignity of the individual" and "a reasonable measure of respect for reality in politics." As *Harper's* columnist Bernard DeVoto noted dryly, "Anyone can shout 'American Way' in furtherance of his own interests and nearly everyone does."[5]

The *Harper's* essay contest—and the emergence of the term "American Way" more generally—testified to the urgency with which U.S. citizens turned to the question of America's national identity and shared values in the late 1930s.

American intellectuals and political leaders had wrestled with such issues since the earliest days of the Republic; but in the latter half of the Depression decade, domestic and international pressures converged to produce a particularly intense, self-conscious, and wide-ranging "cultural conversation" on the nation's collective identity.[6] "American Way" was not the only resonant phrase to appear at that historical moment. The historian James Truslow Adams introduced the expression "American dream" in his 1931 tome *The Epic of America*. By the end of the decade, playwrights, educators, journalists, ministers, and individuals ranging from Herbert Hoover to the immigrant writer Louis Adamic were employing the phrase to indicate an ideal or aspiration shared by all Americans.[7] Other writers discussed the "American creed" and the "American idea," both terms that also appeared far more frequently than they had in the past.

As the *Harper's* essay contest suggested, however, the widespread invocation of a common American way, dream, idea, or creed did not indicate the dawn of an era of harmony and consensus.[8] On the contrary, the proliferation of such terms in the late 1930s attested to a profound sense of anxiety—an anxiety shared by Americans across the political spectrum—about national identity and unity in an increasingly threatening world. The collapse of the national economy undermined long-standing power structures and called into question rarely challenged assumptions about the stability and progress of American capitalism. The maturation of "new immigrant" communities and the migration of thousands of blacks out of the South raised questions about the terms on which ethnic, religious, and racial "outsiders" would be incorporated into a society that had long been defined by elites as Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Above all, the political triumphs of fascism and communism abroad—combined with fears that those ideologies were gaining ground in the U.S.—intensified concerns about America's core values, prompting those on the left as well as those on the right to try to define an alternative ideology cast in "American" terms. All this was reflected in the question posed by James Truslow Adams at the end of the decade: "Are we, as some have said, merely a hodgepodge of minorities? Or are we a nation with a common background and, despite our political battles, a continuing national ideal?"[9]

"Buried Under the Ruins"

The "crisis of Americanism" began in October 1929, when the "Great Bull Market" of the Twenties collapsed, wiping out in a matter of weeks almost 40 percent of the value of U.S. stocks.[10] Financial commentators initially

dismissed the downturn as a speculative panic, but the crash was merely the portent of the Great Depression to come. Plunging stock prices helped upend the nation's overleveraged economy, causing thousands of banks and businesses to fail. Within five months, 3.2 million Americans were out of work; and two years later, unemployment had climbed to nearly 13 million, some 25 percent of the national workforce. By early 1932, the nation's industrial production was less than half what it had been just three years earlier.[11]

The economic catastrophe fundamentally challenged the way Americans conceptualized their nation. For the previous 150 years, most Americans had believed that, whatever one's individual fate, the nation as a whole was growing ever more prosperous. America's experience in the opening decades of the twentieth century had strongly reinforced this faith. Between 1900 and 1930, the nation's manufacturing output quadrupled, thanks in part to widespread factory electrification. The advent of mass production, consumer credit, and advertising produced in the U.S. the world's first mass consumer economy. Rural Americans for the most part did not share in this economic bonanza; but for those in the nation's urban centers, the prosperity was tangible. Middle-class families acquired washing machines, refrigerators, telephones, and automobiles, while urban workers bought canned foods, radios, and tickets to motion picture theatres.[12] "We thought American business was the Rock of Gibraltar," recalled E. Y. (Yip) Harburg several decades later. "We were the prosperous nation and nothing could stop us now."[13]

By the early 1930s, this national narrative of capitalist-driven growth and abundance seemed questionable at best, a monstrous delusion at worst. In Chicago, men fought over the contents of restaurants' garbage barrels and teachers fainted in their classrooms for want of food. In Stockton, California, people scavenged the city dump looking for half-rotten vegetables. In Appalachia, families subsisted on "such weeds as cows eat," and siblings sometimes alternated meals. Millions of Americans were evicted or lost heavily mortgaged houses and farms, and at least one million took to the road.[14] Millions more lost jobs or bank accounts, pared spending to the bone, or dropped out of school to help support their families. Yip Harburg lost his business, became a lyricist, and penned the song that would become the anthem of the decade: "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"

American society sometimes seemed on the verge of disintegration. In 1930 and 1931, food riots broke out in cities across the country, while rising frustration fueled mass marches of the unemployed. The following year, police and Ford Motor Co. security guards battled some three thousand hunger

marchers outside the company's River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan; four marchers died in the "Battle of River Rouge," and more than six thousand people joined the subsequent funeral procession, marching through downtown Detroit to the strains of the Communist Party's anthem, the "Internationale." By 1933, Midwestern farmers were dumping milk, blockading roads, and using vigilante justice to disrupt foreclosure proceedings. Meanwhile, cotton workers in California's San Joaquin valley joined in the largest agricultural strike in U.S. history. In 1934, general strikes paralyzed Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco, and some four hundred thousand textile workers scattered from New England to the southern piedmont walked off the job.

To some, it seemed that capitalism itself was imperiled. "Not so many years ago in Russia all the sufferings of poverty . . . conceived a child . . . and its name was Bolshevism," a woman from Oil City, Pennsylvania, warned the director of President Hoover's Emergency Committee on Unemployment in 1930. "Right now our good old U.S.A. is sitting on a Seething Volcano," she continued. "In the Public Schools our little children stand at salute and recite a 'rig ma role' in which is mentioned 'Justice to all.' What a lie, what a naked lie."[15] Rexford Tugwell, a Columbia University economist and a member of Roosevelt's Brain Trust, agreed with at least part of the woman's assessment. "I do not think it is too much to say," he confided to his journal, "that on March 4 [1933, the day Roosevelt was inaugurated] we were confronted with a choice between an orderly revolution—a peaceful and rapid departure from the past concepts—and a violent and disorderly overthrow of the whole capitalist structure."[16]

Most Americans did not join in or put down strikes, engage in riots, or pursue vigilante justice. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the Depression, the scale of the social unrest, and the reaction of government and industrial leaders to both called into question the wisdom and authority of the nation's reigning elites. No episode did more to focus public attention on the failures of U.S. capitalism and its defenders in government than the fate of the "Bonus Army." In the spring and summer of 1932, thousands of unemployed army veterans converged on Washington D.C. to demand early payment of a bonus they were owed for their service in World War I. By June, as many as twenty-five thousand had arrived in the capital, some with their families. The Senate, however, refused to accede to their demands. In late July, when the "Bonus Marchers" failed to disperse, District of Columbia police tried to evict them from empty government buildings downtown (figure 1.1). A riot ensued and President Hoover ultimately sent in federal troops. Led by General Douglas MacArthur, the troops turned tanks and tear gas on the veterans and torched their encampment.[17] The fires burning in Anacostia spewed a smoky pall over

Figure 1.1. Bonus Marchers battle Washington, D.C. police in July 1932. Episodes like this reinforced a growing sense of unease in the United States and focused public attention on the failures of U.S. capitalism and its defenders in government (National Archives 111-SC-97560).

the nation's capital, as the dispirited veterans straggled back to a camp in nearby Johnstown, Pennsylvania. "I used to be a hundred-percenter," a man with a tear-streaked face said, referring to the arch-patriots of World War I. "Now I'm a Red radical. I had an American flag, but the damned tin soldiers burned it. Now I don't ever want to see a flag again. Give me a gun and I'll go back to Washington."[18]

The image of U.S. troops turning tanks and bayonets on unarmed veterans unsettled even many conservatives. In the country at large, it reinforced a growing sense of unease. "There is a feeling among the masses generally that something is radically wrong," Oscar Ameringer, an Oklahoma attorney, told a House subcommittee in 1932. "They say the only thing you do in Washington is to take money from the pockets of the poor and put it into the pockets of the rich. They say that this Government is a conspiracy against the common people."[19] The historian Gerald Johnson argued that few middle-class Americans—the midlevel bankers, insurance solicitors, and family practitioners who lived on his block—"cherish[ed] any serious doubts about capitalism." Even they, however, had developed a "new and decidedly critical attitude"

toward certain aspects of the capitalist system "as it has been developed in this country." "It will be many a long day before Americans of the middle class will listen with anything approaching the reverence they felt in 1928 whenever a magnate of business speaks," Johnson explained. "The whole pantheon of their idols has been demolished. The Big Business Man, like Samson, has pulled down the pillars of the temple...and he is pretty well buried under the ruins."[20]

Thus, by the early 1930s, the authority of business and the equation of Americanism with laissez-faire capitalism were under siege on many fronts. These developments helped propel Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Dealers into office. The resulting ideological battle, however, was not fully joined until the second half of the decade. In 1933, industrialists and other economic conservatives were shell shocked and demoralized, and some believed they might be able to work with the new president. Within two years their views had changed. In early 1935, FDR introduced a sprawling package of legislation—dubbed by historians the "Second New Deal"—that effectively pulled the New Deal to the left. Developments in the second half of the decade also strengthened the hand of organized labor and spawned the Committee for Industrial Organization (later the Congress of Industrial Organizations). In the late 1930s, industrial unionists sought to extend FDR's vision, even as conservative industrialists regrouped and launched an all-out defense of laissez-faire capitalism in general.

The nation's traditional elites, white and heavily Protestant, took a leading role in these debates. Increasingly, however, they were joined by the ethnic, religious, and racial "outsiders" who made up the majority of the nation's working class and whose political aspirations were just beginning to be recognized by the New Deal. These new, or newly enfranchised, Americans helped fuel the debate over the nation's political economy, while raising questions about the scope and shape of American pluralism and the nature of the nation's binding values.

"The Foreign Element in This Country"

The Great Depression struck at a very unusual moment in American history—near the start of what one scholar has called "the great immigration interregnum."[21] For nearly 150 years, immigrants had poured into the United States from all parts of the world, with twenty-seven million arriving between 1880 and 1930 alone.[22] This era of mass immigration came to an end in 1924 when

Congress passed legislation banning all immigrants from Asia and slowing the influx of people from Southern and Eastern Europe to a trickle. In the late 1920s, migrants continued to arrive from impoverished regions of Mexico and Francophone Canada; but with the collapse of the U.S. economy, even those streams evaporated. Refugees, displaced persons, and individuals from the Western hemisphere filtered into the U.S. during and after World War II, but immigration did not again approach the levels reached during the early twentieth century until after the overhaul of the nation's immigration legislation in 1965.

The virtual cutoff of immigration to the U.S. inevitably shaped discussions of America's national identity and core values. Believing that a chapter in U.S. history had closed, some scholars in the late 1920s and 1930s turned their attention to America's immigrant past, finding there a source of national exceptionalism.[23] Meanwhile, the restrictive legislation of 1924 hastened the acculturation of immigrant communities and shifted political debate from immigration per se to the terms on which the U.S. should incorporate the new arrivals. Many first- and second-generation Americans sought full political and social enfranchisement—even as they sought to define an America broad enough to encompass them. Some "old stock" Americans chafed at this notion, clinging to visions of the nation rooted in "tribal" attributes such as whiteness, Anglo-Saxon or Nordic descent, or Protestantism. Others, recognizing that the new immigrants were destined to become a potent political and cultural force, tried to shape the values and political beliefs of these newest Americans.

The stakes in these debates were heightened by the nature of the immigrants themselves. The overwhelming majority of those who arrived in the U.S. between 1890 and 1924 came from Southern and Eastern Europe, although hundreds of thousands of Japanese, Armenians, Mexicans, Syrian Christians, and others also joined the immigrant stream. Diverse as these newcomers were, they shared several characteristics. To a far greater degree than earlier immigrants, they settled in the nation's manufacturing centers, where they were quickly absorbed into a newly industrialized working class. Moreover, unlike the elites who had long shaped public conceptions of "America," relatively few were Nordic or Protestant. The vast majority were Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Jewish, although some practiced Buddhism, Islam, Shintoism, and assorted other religions.

Although the "new immigrants" posed the most obvious challenge to America's national identity, they were not the only new arrivals in U.S. cities. Blacks had been trickling out of the rural South since the end of Reconstruction,

but the outbreak of World War I launched what became known as the "Great Migration." During the war, half a million southern blacks journeyed north to take newly available jobs in the metalworking shops, automobile plants, and packing houses of cities such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit. Black Americans occupied the lowest rungs on the industrial ladder. Still, the urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest offered an escape from the economic peonage, disfranchisement, and lynch mobs that shaped black life in the rural South. By the end of the 1920s, another million blacks had moved north.[24]

Both the new immigrants and southern blacks were rapidly incorporated into America's industrial workforce, but they were not welcomed with open arms. Scores of prominent intellectuals such as the Progressive labor economist John R. Commons argued that Southern and Eastern European peasants belonged to "an inferior race that favors despotism and oligarchy rather than democracy."[25] Blacks were similarly scorned. Meanwhile, the American Federation of Labor invented the notion of an "American Standard of Living" and used it to link high wages to national identity. Union activists argued that Asian and some European immigrant groups should be barred from the country because of their willingness to work for "slave wages."[26]

With the U.S.'s entry into World War I, the focus of this cultural animosity shifted briefly to German Americans. When the war ended, however, many white Protestant Americans again targeted the new immigrant groups and racial minorities. Intellectuals and civic leaders pictured these groups as fomenters of labor unrest, threats to American jobs, catalyzers of "race suicide" among "old stock" Americans, and subverters of democracy itself. Race riots erupted in Chicago and other cities in 1919, while the Bolshevik Revolution helped spawn a domestic red scare with nativist overtones. In the early 1920s, a reincarnated Ku Klux Klan denounced Catholics and Jews as well as blacks. Meanwhile, a eugenics craze swept the nation, spawning scores of local and national societies, a eugenics "catechism" and sermon contest, and "Fitter Family" competitions at state fairs.[27] Such fears about "national division and the consequent destruction of American social cohesion" culminated in 1924 with Congress's passage of the Immigration Restriction Act.[28]

Ironically, the triumph of a culturally and racially restrictive definition of America in the 1920s set in motion demographic and cultural trends that would gradually erode that definition. By limiting the influx of foreigners to America's ethnic communities, the 1924 act accelerated the process of acculturation. The economic collapse of the early 1930s extended this process to those few immigrant communities unaffected by the legislation of the previous decade. The Mexican-American community in Los Angeles, for instance,

was reshaped by harsh repatriation campaigns in the 1930s; over the course of half a decade, a community that had been comprised largely of immigrants was transformed into one dominated by their second-generation children.[29] Throughout the nation, this process of acculturation was further hastened by the intense attention that corporations, patriotic associations, settlement house workers, and others devoted to "Americanizing" immigrants during and after World War I.

One marker of the transformation occurring within immigrant communities was voter turnout. Large numbers of urban ethnics did not vote through the mid-1920s, either because they were not citizens or because they did not register or come to the polls. Rigid citizenship requirements deterred some, but many "simply did not find national party politics relevant to their lives." The combined impact of demographic shifts, prohibition, and the Great Depression changed that calculus. In some Chicago districts, the number of foreign-born *citizens* more than doubled between 1920 and 1930. During the same decade, many in the American-born second generation came of age. These new Americans increasingly concluded that they had a stake in the policies of the federal government. In 1928, they turned out in record numbers to vote for Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith. Four years later, they formed the backbone of the electoral majority that swept Franklin Delano Roosevelt into office.[30]

If new generations of Americans were increasingly taking their places in the voting booth, they were also starting to make their voices heard in the cultural arena. In 1930, most non-WASP Americans remained confined to comparatively low-paying jobs in the industrial working class. A growing number, however, had worked their way into positions of influence in the new culture industries that emerged in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Much has been written about the prominence of Jews in the movie industry during the 1930s and 1940s, but the Hollywood honor roll also included the Irish-American director John Ford, the Italian-American director Frank Capra, and Spyros P. Skouras, the son of an impoverished Greek shepherd who helped turn Twentieth Century-Fox into one of Hollywood's most powerful studios. Louis Adamic, a Slovenian-American who had immigrated to the U.S. at the age of fifteen, became a best-selling author in 1934 with the publication of his memoir, *The Native's Return*. Public relations and advertising, two comparatively new fields that produced much of the material heard on radio in the 1930s, also counted large numbers of Jews and Catholics among their staffers. So, too, eventually did the federal culture agencies established by the New Deal.[31]

Black Americans too made limited breakthroughs during the 1920s, although they faced even greater barriers to political and cultural incorporation than did the new immigrants. In the late nineteenth century, blacks had been effectively disfranchised throughout the South; but by 1930, roughly one in five lived in areas of the country where they could vote. Black Americans felt a deep-seated loyalty to the party of Lincoln, a loyalty that held through the presidential election of 1932. In 1934, however, black Americans threw their support behind the Democratic Party and Roosevelt's New Deal coalition, a permanent political shift that would shape U.S. politics for the rest of the century.[32]

If their exodus from the rural South gave blacks limited political clout, it also fueled rising expectations and a new spirit of cultural resistance. During the early 1920s, Marcus Garvey mobilized millions of black Americans into his Universal Negro Improvement Association by preaching a message of "race pride" and economic self-sufficiency. Garvey was profoundly cynical about the possibilities for black inclusion in white American society, but other black Americans harbored more hope. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been founded in 1910, but it attracted broader public awareness in the 1920s with its campaigns against segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching. Although relatively few blacks made inroads in Hollywood or Madison Avenue, the writers, artists, and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance attracted white patrons and an audience that transcended racial boundaries. Most Harlem Renaissance artists sought to define a distinctive black culture that could be a source of ethnic pride; many also stressed the contributions that blacks had made to American culture more broadly.[33]

Thus, by the mid-1930s, America's "new immigrants" and racial minorities were making a bid for greater political, social, and cultural inclusion. Their strong support for President Roosevelt was rewarded: the New Dealers went further than members of any past administration to incorporate Jews, Catholics, and blacks into the ranks of government and to administer federal programs evenhandedly.[34] The "new immigrants" and blacks also made up the backbone of the industrial labor movement that emerged in the late 1930s—a movement that, as Lizabeth Cohen has pointed out, was anchored in a multiethnic and multiracial "culture of unity."[35]

The generally inclusive ethos of the New Deal and the CIO has tended in historical accounts to overshadow a contrasting trend: the rise toward the end of the decade of virulent forms of intolerance.[36] Xenophobia waned after 1924, but it never disappeared; and the Depression fanned the banked embers

of prejudice to life. As industries collapsed and unemployment soared, resentments between groups intensified. "In many places the foreign-born and those of their American-born children whose names had a so-called foreign sound were laid off first, before old-stock workers, sometimes even before the Negroes," the labor journalist Louis Adamic reported.[37] The decade's labor surplus allowed many employers to specify "WPX" (for "white, Christian, Protestant") in job advertisements and notices placed with employment agencies.[38] Finally, New Deal programs that put Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds on the same footing drew venom from some quarters. A "disgusted American" wrote Roosevelt aide Harry Hopkins in 1936 to complain about the individuals assigned to a Works Progress Administration sewing project in New York City. "Did you forget that there are still a few 'white Americans left,'" the anonymous letter writer asked. "Its the worst thing as far as placing is concerned. Nothing but colored, Spanish, West Indies, Italians + a hand ful of whites.... [I]f you don't see a race riot there it's a surprise." A Chicago man extended this sentiment to many other immigrant groups. "They should kick them all back to Europe as the majority of them are absolutely nogood," he wrote. "The foreign element in this country are allowed entirely to much leeway in practically every respect."[39]

Simmering economic resentments sometimes erupted into racial violence. On the West Coast, white men threatened those who hired Filipino laborers and threw dynamite bombs into the laborers' encampments.[40] Officials in Southern California and elsewhere repatriated thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans—in some cases forcibly.[41] In 1936, newspapers across the nation filled with stories about the secretive Black Legion, a Michigan-based vigilante group that, among other things, sought to help its members get and keep jobs. Members of the Legion flogged, kidnapped, and killed, and particularly targeted communists, Jews, Catholics, and blacks. While some argued that the Black Legion was an offshoot of the KKK, others saw it as "a modern forerunner of an American brand of fascism."[42]

If America's non-WASP minorities were frequent targets of ethnic, religious, or racial animosity, they could also be sources of such hostility. As the 1930s wore on, strains and warfare around the globe reverberated in the U.S. as well. Many Italian Americans hailed Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, seeing it as a sign of the resurgent glory of Rome. In response, black Americans in New York and Chicago boycotted stores owned by Italian-American merchants. American Catholics and Jews had long differed on a variety of social and political issues, but tensions between the two groups soared as a result of the Spanish Civil War.[43] Hitler's annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia,

the German and Soviet invasions of Poland, Stalin's conquest of Finland and the Baltic states, and the Nazi blitzkrieg across Europe in the spring of 1940 all rekindled dormant loyalties within immigrant communities.[44] Such developments threatened to turn Americans of diverse backgrounds against one another and fueled fears—even on the part of some liberals and leftists—that immigrants and their children could become conduits for various "alien" ideologies.

The Fascist and Communist Threats

The Depression and demographic change thus destabilized long dominant notions of "Americanism," opening the door to new voices and competing definitions of the nation. As the *Harper's* essay contest suggested, however, it was the successes of communism and fascism abroad—combined with fears that both doctrines were winning sympathizers in the U.S.—that gave efforts to define America's core values in the late 1930s new urgency. Taken together, communism and fascism provided Americans across the political spectrum with a fearsome ideological "other" against which the nation could and should be defined.[45] Those Americans who most feared communism and those who saw fascism as the greater danger rarely agreed on their concept of an ideal society; but in the late 1930s, both groups cast their visions in *American* terms. So too did many refugee intellectuals from other parts of the globe. By articulating and promoting an American idea, creed, or way of life, U.S. and foreign intellectuals, government officials, pundits, and business and civic leaders sought both to set the limits and possibilities of U.S. political culture and to provide a normative example to the world.

Communism had been on Americans' radar screen since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, but global developments in the 1930s added greatly to the sense of alarm in some quarters. Despite dire warnings, the Soviet Union had remained a political and economic pariah through most of the 1920s. Meanwhile, American corporations flourished virtually unchecked. That balance changed with the Great Depression. While capitalist economies everywhere ground to a halt, the Soviet Union engaged in forced and rapid industrialization, an achievement that impressed many foreign observers. Moreover, in August 1935, Stalin responded to the rise of Hitler by adopting the policy of the Popular Front; this allowed communists around the globe to ally themselves with socialists and "bourgeois" democrats in antifascist coalitions. The success of this policy was immediately evident in such countries as Spain and

France. In February 1936, Spaniards elected a Popular Front government, overthrowing a coalition of centrist and rightist parties and setting the stage for the Spanish Civil War. In France, too, the strategy transformed the communists into a mass party, and a Popular Front coalition triumphed in the 1936 elections. With a Socialist prime minister at the helm, the government limited work weeks and nationalized both the armaments industry and the Bank of France.

Fascism had gotten a later start than communism—both Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler built their movements in the 1920s—but it too benefited from the cataclysm of the Depression. As Germany's unemployment rate soared in 1930, so too did support for the Nazis among voters. The party, which had polled just 809,000 votes in 1928, garnered 6.4 million votes in 1930. Two years later, the Nazis won a plurality of seats in the German Reichstag; and in January 1933, Hitler was named chancellor. Liberals and leftists around the world watched in horror as the Nazis seized dictatorial power, abolished the German federal system, dissolved trade unions, burned books, and commenced the persecution of Jews. By early 1938, Italy had conquered Ethiopia, Japan was ravaging China, and Franco's forces seemed to be winning the civil war in Spain. Before the year was out, Hitler had annexed Austria and seized the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland.

These developments alarmed Americans on both the right and the left. Adding to their unease were signs that "communism" and "fascism" broadly defined might be gaining a toehold in the U.S. as well. Economic conservatives, who were keenly aware of what was happening in France, attacked the industrial union movement and decried the New Deal as "creeping state socialism." (A minority also likened the New Deal to fascism.) At the same time, they eyed with concern the emergence of a broad and multifaceted left-wing movement in the U.S. with strong ties to the CIO and Roosevelt's New Deal coalition and tangential connections to the Communist Party. At a political level, this movement encompassed such varied groups as New York's American Labor Party, Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party, Wisconsin's Progressive Party, Washington's Commonwealth Federation, and the End-Poverty-in-California campaign of muckraker Upton Sinclair. Culturally, the movement counted numerous authors, critics, actors, screenwriters, musicians, and other intellectuals among its members. The U.S. Communist Party itself remained small, but it too capitalized on the Popular Front strategy, doubling its membership between 1936 and 1938 and billing communism as "twentieth-century Americanism."[46]

American industrialists and others in the business community worried in part about the appeal of "state socialism" to members of the middle class

who had become disillusioned with the country's economic leadership. They were also deeply concerned about the views of first- and second-generation Americans. Because immigrants and their children clustered in the less skilled echelons of the working class, they were heavily represented in the industrial labor movement. As Michael Denning has shown, these groups also played an important role in the "cultural front."[47] Not surprising, when business groups launched their counterattack against the New Deal in the late 1930s, they aimed both to contain and to convert the nation's newest Americans.

If the specter of American socialism haunted economic conservatives, fears of domestic fascism had a similarly galvanizing effect on liberals and those on the left. Americans ranging from the activist lawyer Carey McWilliams to the prominent theologian Reinhold Niebuhr warned of a fascist menace within the U.S. with escalating urgency as the decade wore on. Articles reflecting such fears appeared not only in left-leaning magazines such as the *New Republic,* the *Nation,* and *American Mercury*, but also in publications such as the *Christian Century*, the *American Scholar*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1935, America's first Nobel laureate in literature, Sinclair Lewis, published *It Can't Happen Here*, a novel that envisioned the fascist takeover of the U.S.[48]

Leftists such as McWilliams saw evidence of fascism in phenomena as diverse as union busting, militarism, red-baiting, and vigilante justice.[49] Even those who defined the fascist threat more narrowly, however, were alarmed by the rise in ethnic and religious scapegoating during the decade, and particularly by the surge in anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism was by no means a new phenomenon in America; but in the late 1930s, it appeared to take a far more virulent form. More than one hundred anti-Semitic organizations were created in the U.S. between 1933 and 1941; by one estimate, this was twenty times the number formed in the country up to that point.[50] In the past, domestic anti-Semitism had primarily taken the form of social or economic discrimination, but many of the new organizations—which boasted names such as the Silver Shirts, the American Nationalist Federation, Defenders of the Christian Faith, and the Knights of the White Camelia—resorted to violence. Some benefited from foreign support, even as they wrapped themselves in the mantle of Americanism.

One such organization was the German American Bund. Founded in 1936 by a Detroit autoworker, Fritz Kuhn, the Bund held mass rallies marked by uniforms and histrionics that eerily resembled those found in Munich and Nuremburg. The Bund had close ties to Hitler's Nazi party, yet Kuhn cast it as "a great American movement of Liberation" seeking to break the dictatorship of a "Jewish international minority." Bund meetings and marches featured

American flags, portraits of George Washington (whom Kuhn equated to Adolf Hitler), invocations of the Revolutionary War general Baron Von Steuben, and rousing renditions of "The Star-Spangled Banner" (figure 1.2). When the Bund held what it billed as a "mass-demonstration for true Americanism" in Madison Square Garden in February 1939 to celebrate George Washington's birthday, some twenty-two thousand Bundists and other sympathizers attended.[51]

Despite the Bund's direct ties to Nazi Germany, the individual who most alarmed many liberals was Father Charles Coughlin. In the early 1930s, the charismatic priest attracted an audience of millions to his weekly radio show, in which he attacked communism, railed against the gold standard, and called for the nationalization of the U.S. banking system. Coughlin also founded a political organization, the National Union for Social Justice, and launched a weekly newspaper. By 1934, he was receiving more mail than anyone else in the United States, including the president. Coughlin had long blamed the Depression on "money changers" and "international bankers"; but in 1938, he

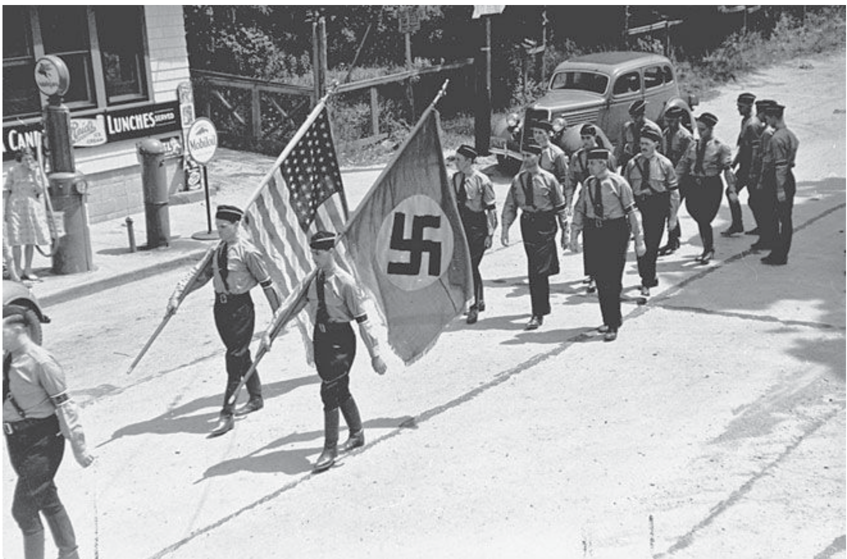

Figure 1.2. Members of the German American Bund march in Yaphank, New York in 1937. Although this gathering was small, a Bund rally at Madison Square Garden on Washington's Birthday in 1939 drew more than twenty thousand people. The surge in virulent anti-Semitism in the United States during the Depression fed fears on the part of many liberals and leftists that Americans too could succumb to fascism (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images).

turned openly and stridently anti-Semitic. He repeatedly assailed "communistic Jews" and in one editorial lifted wording directly from a speech by Hitler's chief propagandist, Joseph Goebbels. By the end of the decade, Coughlin no longer attracted the huge and adoring audience he once had; still, a Gallup poll conducted in early 1938 showed that 10 percent of all American families with radios tuned him in regularly and that 83 percent of those who listened weekly approved of his message. Meanwhile, the Christian Front, a movement of Coughlin supporters formed at his urging, drilled its members in military tactics and stockpiled weapons. In cities such as Boston and New York, roving gangs of Christian Fronters smashed the windows of Jewish-owned stores and "engaged in open, Nazi-like brawls with Jews."[52]

The Black Legion limited its membership to native-born white Protestants, but the Christian Front flourished in Catholic immigrant neighborhoods in the urban Northeast. The founder of the German American Bund was a German immigrant, and the support of Italian Americans for Mussolini was well known. All this prompted some to view recent immigrants—those who had not yet been fully Americanized—as particularly susceptible to fascism. Staffers for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, for instance, argued that the organization should work more closely with organized labor as it tried to combat religious prejudice and particularly anti-Semitism. "This group," they explained, "includes a large percentage of foreign-born who have brought false beliefs into this nation."[53]

The Search for an "American Way"

Confronted with economic collapse and ideological threats both at home and abroad, a growing number of intellectuals, public officials, civic leaders, and others agreed with the literary scholar Howard Mumford Jones. "In a period of intense social strain," he declared in December 1935, "the country needs [the] steadying effect of a vital cultural tradition."[54] The poet and Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish chastised his compatriots for "morally disarming" America by elevating European over homegrown values. American intellectuals, he alleged, had "irresponsibly undermined the nation's historic principles and ideals," leaving it weakened in the face of the fascist threat.[55] Gilbert Seldes, the film critic and book reviewer who in 1932 produced the biting *The Years of the Locust*, charged four years later that writers were far more dangerous to the nation than industrialists or financiers. The former "merely ravaged the country's environment and resources," he wrote, while the latter

imposed “an alien system of ideals upon America” that “prevented us from understanding ourselves.”[56]

Such views only intensified as the decade drew to a close. The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, the German blitzkrieg in the spring of 1940, and particularly the fall of France that June gave the appeals of U.S. and émigré intellectuals a note of dire urgency. “One cannot counter the religious faith of fascism unless one possesses a faith equally strong, equally capable of fostering devotion and loyalty and commanding sacrifice,” declared architectural critic Lewis Mumford in his 1940 call-to-arms *Faith for Living*. “If our democracy is to save itself,” warned progressive educator George S. Counts in his presidential address to the American Federation of Teachers, “it must assert itself as a positive and aggressive social faith.”[57]

Some commentators worried particularly about the threat to national unity and resolve posed by American ethnics. Such views were common on the right but extended in a rather different vein to many liberals and some on the left. In a 1938 article in the *Atlantic*, for instance, Howard Mumford Jones warned of the danger America would face if it allowed ethnic isolation and hostility between groups to undermine Americans' sense of common ground. Fascist and communist “dictator countries” posed a “serious . . . menace to political democracy” precisely because they had succeeded in making “patriotism glamorous,” he argued. Americans needed a “patriotic renaissance,” but one that would encompass *all* Americans, not just descendents of the *Mayflower* and “one-hundred-per-centers.” “It is precisely the children and grandchildren of the millions who ‘came over' some centuries after these earlier immigrations who need to have their imaginations kindled by American mythology,” Jones wrote. “The gulf between the Boston Brahmins and the Boston Irish, old Detroiters and the swarming thousands of automobile workers . . . is not . . . going to be bridged by a bright recital of the French and Indian Wars.” Jones concluded that “no race or religion or group or nationality can be permitted to assume that it has a monopoly of American history, and no race or religion or group or nationality can be permitted to feel it is excluded, if political democracy is to survive.”[58]

Although some intellectuals and civic leaders focused on American ethnics, others concluded that even those with deep roots in the nation—and firm footing in the middle and upper classes—needed a tutorial on their own culture. For years Harvard University had largely ignored American topics in its curriculum; but in the late 1930s, it took a series of steps to rectify this imbalance.[59] Among other things, it published an extensive reading list on American history and culture, which it distributed to students, alumni, and

interested members of the public. The preface lamented the fact that Americans' knowledge of their past often peaked in high school and faded thereafter. "One result of this ignorance and indifference is the lack of resistance of even well-educated persons to various forms of propaganda which would have them conceive 'Americanism' in terms of class, party, sectional, racial, or religious affiliation," the preface warned. It admonished readers against "a mere passive reading" of the books listed since that would "not make anybody a more intelligent citizen." Instead, readers should "be prepared to make [their] own syntheses, and answer [their] own questions. What is the American way of life? The American way of thought? How does it differ from European or Oriental ways of life and thought?"[60]

The compilers of the Harvard reading list urged readers to develop their own understanding of the "American Way"; but in the late 1930s, intellectuals, political leaders, and an array of civic organizations rushed to define this concept for all. Much hinged on the outcome of their efforts. At stake was the place and shape of capitalism in U.S. society. Would the power of labor unions and the federal government be strengthened? To what degree would business be regulated? Would the welfare state be expanded or forced to contract? At stake too was what might be called the cultural definition of America—the terms on which the nation's new immigrants and racial minorities would be incorporated into the U.S.'s national identity and social fabric. Would they be equals or second-class citizens? Would they be forced to shed their separate ethnic and racial identities, or would those identities be reconfigured? Would America continue to be seen as a predominantly white and Protestant nation? Behind these two groups of questions lurked a third: What role would the U.S., as actor or exemplar, play on the world stage? Among those eager to answer these questions were New Dealers, industrial unionists, and their foes in the boardrooms and press offices of corporate America.