

we would be well advised to pause, get our historical bearings, and pose what is, at least on the face of it, a factual question: What, specifically, did the founding generation achieve? Why are they accorded such iconic status? What, in short, is all the fuss about? My own answer, offered with as much historical detachment as I can muster, is that there were five core achievements.

First, the revolutionary generation won the first successful war for colonial independence in the modern era, against all odds defeating the *most powerful army and navy in the world*. Washington liked to call the American victory "a standing miracle," a phrase that suggests some kind of supernatural intervention on America's side. As we shall see, the French were more important than the gods, and the strategic decisions that made victory possible also made miracles unnecessary. Nevertheless, Washington's phrase correctly captures the improbable character of the outcome as perceived by most informed observers at the outset of the war and the all-or-nothing gamble that the most prominent revolutionary leaders were prepared to take.⁹

Second, they established the first nation-sized republic. Until then it was presumed that republican governments based on the principle of popular consent could function only in small areas like Greek city-states or Swiss cantons, because the inherent weakness of republican government made it incapable of decisiveness or the management of a far-flung population. This presumption was proven wrong, and in the process the very definition of what it meant to govern a people was transformed forever in ways that put all coercive forms of political authority on the permanent defensive.

Third, they created the first wholly secular state. Before the American Revolution it was broadly assumed that shared religious convictions were the primary basis for the common values that linked together the people of any political community, indeed the ideological glue that made any sense of community possible. By insisting on the complete separation of church and state, the founders successfully overturned this long-standing presumption.

Fourth, they rejected the conventional wisdom, agreed upon since

Aristotle, that political sovereignty must reside in one agreed-upon location, that sovereignty was by definition singular and indivisible. The Constitution defied this assumption by creating multiple and overlapping sources of authority in which the blurring of jurisdiction between federal and state power became an asset rather than a liability, thereby making the very idea of sovereignty itself problematic and its rhetorical depository, "the people," an elusive and ever-shifting location.

Fifth, they created political parties as institutionalized channels for ongoing debate, which eventually permitted dissent to be regarded not as a treasonable act, but as a legitimate voice in an endless argument. Although British political parties foreshadowed the American party system, and although the founders themselves found it difficult to embrace the notion of a legitimate opposition, the framework they created allowed ongoing dialogue to become a hallmark of the modern liberal state.

Though not a separate achievement per se, a corollary triumph that merits mention is the ability to reconcile two competing and, in several respects, contradictory political impulses. There were really two founding moments: the first in 1776, which declared American independence, and the second in 1787–88, which declared American nationhood. The Declaration of Independence is the seminal document in the first instance, the Constitution in the second. The former is a radical document that locates sovereignty in the individual and depicts government as an alien force, making rebellion against it a natural act. The latter is a conservative document that locates sovereignty in that collective called "the people," makes government an essential protector of liberty rather than its enemy, and values social balance over personal liberation. It is extremely rare for the same political elite to straddle both occasions. Or, to put it differently, it is uncommon for the same men who make a revolution also to secure it.

These are considerable achievements that continue to glow even brighter with the passage of time, most especially as we witness the extreme difficulty many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East experience in trying to re-create them. But while basking in the reflected