



Americans may tend to romanticize the Founders—as in *The Apotheosis of Washington*, which graces the U.S. Capitol rotunda—but many historians are eager to strip the Founding of all mythic dimensions.

easily in any cultural and historical soil, including a multilingual, post-religious, or post-national one.”

McClay, who teaches at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, is no partisan of a purely cultural view of American identity, and he thinks that American sentimentality about the Founding needs occasional correction, but debunking alone is not enough. Founding myths are not prettified fairy tales, as detractors think, but “a structure of meaning, a manner of giving a manageable shape to the cosmos.” And they are surprising in their moral complexity and capacity to instruct. Consider the often hair-raising creation myths of antiquity, such as the story of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, or the Scriptural

account of the ups and downs of the “feckless” Israelites, who continually broke the laws of their covenant-making God. No American understood the value of the nation’s founding myths better than Abraham Lincoln, who summoned America to fulfill its ideals by invoking the “mystic chords of memory.”

As Lincoln understood, America’s founding myth “does not depend on a belief in the moral perfection of the Founders themselves,” McClay writes. “We should not try to edit out those stories’ strange moral complexity, because it is there for a reason. Indeed, it is precisely our encounter with the surprise of their strangeness that reminds us of how much we have yet to learn from them.”

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Partisan Fire

THE SOURCE: “Theory of Partisan Relativity” by Alan Ehrenhalt, in *Governing*, March 2006.

THE FEROCIOUS PARTISANSHIP in Washington has not stopped at the Capitol Beltway. It has swept state legislatures across the country, creating the same sense of dismay and resentment as the conflicts in the nation’s capital do, and a lot of Americans are saying they aren’t going to take it any more.

Last year, Oregon state senator Charlie Ringo, a Democrat from Beaverton, near Portland, got the Oregon Senate to pass legislation essentially eliminating political parties from state government. The Oregon governor, the attorney general, and all state officials and legislators would run on a ballot without party identification. Party caucuses and party leadership would no longer be needed.

In the end, the bill didn’t go anywhere in the Oregon House, but its Senate passage by a 2–1 margin suggested that Ringo was on to something that resonated with a sizable number of politicians. Then he retired unexpectedly earlier this year, saying, “The blind allegiance to party is killing us.”

In neighboring Washington, state treasurer Mike Murphy tried to get the legislature to make his own office nonpartisan. Murphy’s proposal lost, as did an effort to make county sheriffs nonpartisan officials, but his ideas are alive and kicking in Seattle and the state capital. In Colorado, two dozen first-

term legislators have started a bipartisan caucus to allay growing public resentment of partisan excess. Two California legislators are seeking to create a citizens' commission to reach the same goal. Sentiment that partisanship is out of hand is rife in Wisconsin and Minnesota as well.

There is no question that the past decade has brought a marked increase in partisan unpleasantness almost everywhere in the country, according to Alan Ehrenhalt, executive editor of *Governing*. But the sense that the phenomenon is new and shocking, a departure from a previous golden age of civility and goodwill, is wrong, he writes. Nasty partisanship has been around at least since Thomas Jefferson denounced Patrick Henry as having "an avaricious

EXCERPT

McCarthy's on the List

History is full of leaders—Danton, Trotsky, Nkrumah—who seemed to arrange their own destruction as Raskolnikov arranged his own exposure in Crime and Punishment. . . . The anti-leader type is the man (or woman) who has led and lost. He is that rare individual who can still evoke grand memories even as he now sounds an uncertain trumpet, stimulating a halfhearted and foredoomed charge. Continually flirting with self-destruction, he lives his private nightmares in public places. While winning, he plans his defeat. He suddenly loses his will to prevail at precisely the moment when one lightning-flash stroke would grant all he might have willed.

—ARNOLD BEICHMAN, research fellow at the Hoover Institution and the author of *Herman Wouk: The Novelist as Social Historian*, in *Policy Review* (Feb.–March 2006)

and rotten heart" and urged loyal Jeffersonians to "devoutly pray for his death."

Historically, there was indeed a

brief golden age of partisan harmony between 1945 and 1965. But it was achieved by what Northwestern University political scientist Jeffery A. Jenkins calls a "historical aberration." Much of the country, he said, was operating under a one-party system. Reformers had a solution for this state of affairs. They called, not for less partisanship, but more.

Ehrenhalt thinks that the epidemic of partisanship in the past decade has not been a good thing, but it's unrealistic to banish it from legislatures altogether. He takes his cue from George Washington, who wrote that partisanship is "a fire not to be quenched.

It demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume."

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

Race and Real Estate

THE SOURCE: "The Creation of Homeownership: How New Deal Changes in Banking Regulation Simultaneously Made Homeownership Accessible to Whites and Out of Reach for Blacks" by Adam Gordon, in *The Yale Law Journal*, Oct. 2005.

AMERICA'S MODERN LOVE affair with real estate probably began in 1934, when Congress

created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Even though the nation was then in the grip of the Great Depression, the number of housing starts soared, rising from 93,000 in 1933 to 619,000 in 1941.

Before the FHA, Americans

needed substantial amounts of money—up to a third of the value of a home—to secure a mortgage. And what they got were, in effect, "balloon" mortgages; after five to seven years, buyers had to secure new loans or, in many cases, were forced to sell their homes.

The FHA revolutionized home finance by extending guarantees to qualified buyers, allowing them to borrow from banks at low rates for increasingly longer terms with down payments of only 10 percent.