

in opposite directions in oil-rich “petrolist” states. “The higher the average global crude oil price rises, the more free speech, free press, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, the rule of law, and independent political parties are eroded,” he writes.

A petrolist state is a country whose economy rests on oil and has weak national institutions or an outright authoritarian government. Among the examples are Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela. Friedman tests his theory by comparing oil prices to citizen freedoms.

Take Venezuela. When oil was in the \$10-to-\$20-a-barrel range, the country’s oil industry was reopened to

foreign investment and a coup failed. But as the price rose to \$50, freedom shrank, according to an analysis by the research organization Freedom House.

Or Nigeria. When oil was hovering around \$23 a barrel, there was a boom in independent newspapers. As oil rose toward \$30, local elections were postponed indefinitely.

To explain the phenomenon, Friedman draws on work by UCLA political scientist Michael L. Ross. The oil bonanza relieves governments of the necessity of taxation that otherwise breeds popular demands for representation. It gives rulers plenty of cash for patronage, police, internal security, and other dangerous indulgences. It reduces pressure on citizens

to attain higher levels of education or to specialize in needed occupations—pursuits that can produce a more articulate, economically independent public that can keep the heat on an authoritarian government.

The tide of democracy and free markets that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall is now running into a countercurrent of petro-authoritarianism, Friedman writes. This gives some of the worst regimes in the world extra cash with which to cause mischief.

And all of these negative impacts could poison global politics. Cutting oil consumption, he says, should not be the goal only of high-minded environmentalists. It is a national security imperative.

## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

# What Kind of Nation?

**THE SOURCE:** “The Founding of Nations” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *First Things*, March 2006.

TODAY’S SWIRLING DEBATES OVER fundamental issues such as immigration, religion, and spreading democracy abroad have sparked a fresh crisis of identity in the United States. Forced “to think more deeply and clearly about who and what we are,” writes historian Wilfred McClay, Americans have looked instinctively to the past.

But what past will they find? For a century, historians and intellectuals have been busy hacking away at the “myths” of the Founding and at

the very notion that it exists as a unique historical moment. (For an example, see “Tom Paine’s Myth,” p. 80.) In this view, as McClay summarizes it, the Founding was the work of “flawed, unheroic, and self-interested white men [that] offers nothing to which we should grant any abiding authority.” It sees the Constitution as “a mere political deal meant to be superseded by other political deals.”

In attacking founding “myths,” historians are taking sides in the age-old tension between the respective roles of creed and culture in the making of American national identity. It’s a tension between “on the

one hand, the idea of the United States as a nation built on the foundation of self-evident, rational, and universally applicable propositions about human nature and human society; and, on the other hand, the idea of the United States as a very unusual, historically specific and contingent entity, underwritten by a long, intricately evolved, and very particular legacy of English law, language, and customs, Greco-Roman cultural antecedents, and Judeo-Christian sacred texts and theological and moral teachings.”

In attacking the legitimacy of the Founders, historians attempt to erase the cultural side of the equation, reducing American identity to all creed and no culture. That would leave nothing, according to McClay, but “abstract normative ideas about freedom and democracy and self-government that can flourish just as



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 &amp; 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-