

Newt's Clean Slate, or American Exceptionalism in the Information Age

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If we can reform ourselves, there is every reason to believe our best days are still ahead. A renewed and reinvigorated America that educates all its children could compete with any country. An America that has replaced the culture of poverty and violence with a culture of opportunity would be the safest, most prosperous place on the globe. An entrepreneurial America that embraces science and innovation would progress at a fantastic pace, opening a vastly greater range of choices to its people than any civilization in history. Such a revitalized America could sustain its military and diplomatic responsibilities with ease and still find the world eager to be led toward greater prosperity, security, and freedom. Once again, America would be the last, best hope on earth.

Erstwhile history professor and Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich opened his 1995 book, *To Renew America*, with a litany of such appeals to a vision of America as the "last, best hope on earth," fashioning himself as an ardent reformer and a card-carrying American exceptionalist of the first order. The book – for which Gingrich eventually had to turn down a \$4.5 million advance from a publishing company owned by Rupert Murdoch amidst cries of influence peddling and conflict of interest – initially enjoyed twelve weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list, seven of those in the number one spot.

But the erratic speaker fell from his pinnacle of political and popular grace in the fall of 1995 after he publicly blamed the Democrats and the welfare state for the grisly murder of a Chicago mother, her two children,

and her unborn baby, and after he admitted that he had precipitated a shut-down of the Federal government largely because he didn't like the seating arrangements on Air Force One during the 25 hour flight back and forth from the funeral of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Soon thereafter remaindered on the book shelves along with the presidential aspirations of its author (at least for the time being), *To Renew America* has been pilloried by critics, and with good reason. In an article in *The New York Review of Books*, Joan Didion used Gingrich's own clichéd and self-contradictory words to ridicule his thought patterns as relentlessly schematic, largely occult, and pointlessly specific, observing at one point, "we have here a man who once calculated the odds on the survival of his second marriage at 53 to 47."¹

When Didion pounces on Gingrich's advocacy of honeymoons in space, his effusive praise of the uniquely American spirit of companies that have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to his campaign coffers, or his description of how America is a land of opportunity because it might soon be possible to learn over the internet how to make batik you can sell at the mall, her ascerbic glee is infectious. But she herself points out that in his "Renewing American Civilization" video lecture series, Gingrich declares that "there is an American exceptionalism that can be understood through history."² As intellectually and ethically challenged as *To Renew America* may be, then, it still deserves scrutiny as an example of what has become of American exceptionalism, still alive and kicking as the doctrine approaches another millenium.

In the book, Gingrich uses exceptionalist ideology to pillory the very notion of a multicultural approach to American identity as historically suspect, socially detrimental and downright anti-American. In fact, he goes out of his way to commit every heresy Joyce Appleby deplors. For this reason, Appleby's analysis can serve to delineate the contours of Gingrich's particular brand of American exceptionalism. A closer look at Gingrich's book serves to highlight certain blind spots in Appleby's own vision as well.

As David Nye points out in this issue, Appleby fails to discuss the crucial relationship between technology and exceptionalism. Gingrich's

¹ Joan Didion, "The Teachings of Speaker Gingrich," *The New York Review of Books* 42 (August 10, 1995) 8.

² Didion, 7.

exceptionalism, however, pivots on the potentials he perceives behind new information and communication technologies. Mention of technology also points toward a weakness professors Gingrich and Appleby share. They both work from an understanding of American exceptionalism that seems to have sprung full-grown from the eighteenth century and ossified at the latest by the 1830s. Consequently, they both ignore historical pressures that have shaped or altered exceptionalist doctrines since that time.

Although he is clearly the less distinguished historian, Gingrich's static and anachronistic understanding of exceptionalism is the more striking, since his whole book hinges on the great historical/technological transformation he calls "The Third Wave." Gingrich's use of this term (borrowed from his futurist gurus Alvin and Heidi Toffler) is highly simplistic and wracked with technological determinism. But by another name we might call it the shift towards late capitalism, towards a regime of flexible accumulation, or towards a high-tech, postmodern service economy centered on new information and communications technologies. The central irony of Gingrich's book is that he preaches *both* American exceptionalism and the Third Wave at the same time, although the two work at cross purposes. That is, the globalizing and decentralizing tendencies at work within the shift towards this new kind of economic order threaten to dissolve the usefulness of the nation state and further confuse and fragment the already-problematic notion of an American national identity itself.

This contradiction arises in large part from the history of the interaction between exceptionalist ideology and the development of new technologies of communication in the American context. In the first part of this essay I will measure what Appleby would consider Gingrich's oppressively unifying ideology against the three insistent themes of American exceptionalism she outlines – "the autonomy of the individual with its accompanying disparagement of dependency; the clean slate with its implicit rejection of the past; and the concept of a uniform human nature with its ascription of universality to particular social traits."³ Next

3 Joyce Appleby, "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism," *The Journal of American History* (September, 1992) 426.

I will review how these same themes appear as constants within the social construction of new technologies of communication, from the telegraph all the way up to the internet. American reformers have celebrated each of these in turn as a force that would wipe the slate clean of all unjust power relations and simultaneously unify the population, empower the individual citizen, and secure the nation's historical preeminence as an exemplar of democracy. But powerful corporate interests have always also been busy promoting their own vision of a communications revolution with exceptionalist rhetoric. These competing exceptionalisms became fused together during the broadcast reform era of the late '60s and early '70s, when corporate America succeeded in cementing into conventional wisdom the notion that progressive reform and individual empowerment can result only from deregulation and the machinations of an unfettered marketplace. As the heir to this tradition and the premiere contemporary spokesman for this point of view, Newt Gingrich needs to be understood in the context of these historical developments.

To *Renew America* opens in the manner of a jeremiad, describing in the starkest terms possible the moral crisis facing American society. "Either we will pull ourselves together for the effort or we will continue to decay," Gingrich predicts. "There is virtually no middle ground."⁴ He opts for the former path, of course, and declares that the great challenge facing the nation today is the imperative to "renew and reassert American civilization." All such alarmist cries of decline presuppose some former state of grace, and indeed, Gingrich presupposes the existence of one continuous American civilization which he wastes no time in celebrating as "the greatest the planet has ever known."⁵ That greatness, Gingrich insists, rested on one "clear sense of what it meant to be an American," and on the strength of "a set of commonly accepted legal and cultural principles." Those principles had existed "from the arrival of the English colonists in 1607 until 1965," Gingrich states with a semblance of historical precision, and appear crystallized in such diverse sources as de

4 Newt Gingrich, *To Renew America* (NY: Harper Collins, 1995) 5.

5 Gingrich, 25.

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and Norman Rockwell's paintings of the 1940s and 50s.

As Joan Didion has pointed out, Gingrich's thoughts most often arrange themselves according to the self-help, outline form favored by motivational and managerial therapists using overhead transparencies – he is constantly isolating two choices which give way to six challenges, which themselves stem from the five basic principles, all of which relate crucially to three historical "waves" or epochs, and so on. His list of the five basic principles that form the heart of American civilization (in the lectures they appear as "Five Pillars") reads as follows:

1. The common understanding we share about who we are and how we came to be.
2. The ethic of individual responsibility.
3. The spirit of entrepreneurial free enterprise.
4. The spirit of invention and discovery.
5. Pragmatism and the concern for craft and excellence, as expressed most recently in the teachings of Edwards Deming.⁶

Gingrich's list is tautological: the first basic principle that provides the basis for our common understanding we share about who we are is none other than "the common understanding we share about who we are." His list is also fundamentally confrontational, since the only precision his otherwise vague principles exhibit derives from their immediate opposition to some trumped up and demonized other that threatens the continued viability of American civilization. Thus, in his elaboration on the first principle, which he calls "the spiritual dimension," Gingrich pillories the rest of the world for not maintaining the correct relationship to the Creator. "In nearly all countries, power belongs to the state and is occasionally loaned to individuals," he says. "In America, power comes from God to the individual and is loaned to the state.... It would be hard to imagine a greater difference in first principles."⁷ In this manner Gingrich claims divine sanction for "who we are," and also legitimizes the second principle of American civilization, individual responsibility. "Precisely because our rights are endowed by our Creator," Gingrich

⁶ Gingrich, 33.

⁷ Gingrich, 34.

explains, "the individual burden of responsibility borne by each citizen is greater than in any country." Here the countercultural left, contemporary liberals, and pregnant teenagers come under fire for blaming everything on "society," and the modern welfare state receives special mention as a system that subsidizes idleness and violates the ethic that everyone should work hard to improve their own lot without government help. "By blaming everything on "society," contemporary liberals are really trying to escape the personal responsibility that comes with being an American," Gingrich admonishes. "If you are not prepared to shoulder personal responsibility, then you are not prepared to participate in American civilization."⁸

"True Americans" are innately prepared to shoulder the individual responsibility that derives from their special relationship with God, Gingrich continues, because they share in the uniquely American spirit of free enterprise, his third principle. Gingrich credits American entrepreneurial genius, the desire to get up in the morning and "invent a slightly better mousetrap for the world," with the happy fact that at every level of American society, "people can improve their own lot." Again, the flaccid platitude sharpens its rhetorical teeth on its supposed opposite, as Gingrich insists that unlike Europe and other class-dominated cultures, "we have no caste system, no class requirements, no regulated professions, no barriers to entry" to hold us back from entrepreneurial achievement. In France, Gingrich explains, only graduates of the *École Nationale d'Administration* can hold important government positions, but in the U.S. "even a professor from a small college in Georgia can aspire to the highest levels of government."⁹ He concludes:

Generosity, trust, optimism and hard work – these are the elements that drive the American entrepreneurial system, creating the most powerful and vibrant economy the world has ever known. Unfortunately, this isn't as easy as it used to be. Taxes, regulation, and litigation have all thrown a blanket over the entrepreneurial spirit. Elite criticisms of the can-do spirit have undermined that ethic. Credentialing of the professions has raised barriers to entrepreneurial inventiveness. The welfare system has sapped the spirit of the poor and made it harder to climb the first rungs of the economic ladder.¹⁰

8 Gingrich, 39.

9 Gingrich, 41.

10 Gingrich, 43

Although Gingrich insists that a "true American" confronted with a problem will never ask "Who can I blame this on?," a consistent pattern of blame undergirds his book. Every time he cites an American virtue, he immediately indicts an elite cabal of nefarious, left-leaning intellectuals and countercultural special interest groups for conspiring to undermine it. On the very first page of *To Renew America*, he states:

While we as a people were winning our battles around the world, here at home our elites were deserting us. For the past thirty years, we have been influenced to abandon our culture and seem to have lost faith in the core values, traditions, and institutions of our civilization. The intellectual nonsense propagated since 1965 – in the media, on university campuses, even among our religious and political leaders – now threatens to cripple our ability to teach the next generation to be Americans.¹¹

So the problem stems from the 1960s, when the counterculture began to use "situational ethics" and "deconstructionism" to repudiate solid middle-class values and universal standards of right and wrong. "Multiculturalism switched the emphasis from proclaiming allegiance to the common culture to proclaiming the virtues (real or imagined) of a particular ethnicity, sect, or tribe," Gingrich complains, while "traditional history has been replaced by the notion that every group is entitled to its own version of the past" and "moral standards have been replaced by 'role-playing.'"¹² In Gingrich's mind, these heretical kinds of thinking have led to the dissolution of the consensus about what American civilization should be. In the context of his jeremiad, this represents the breaking of the covenant, and the reason why American civilization has to be renewed at all.

Joyce Appleby traces how exceptionalism originated in Europe even before America became a nation, but only began to flourish as a unifying ideology on the other side of the Atlantic in the mid-1790s, when it became a potent weapon in a plebeian radical attack on the aristocratic pretensions of a federalist elite. Exactly two centuries later, Newt Gingrich carries on this legacy of exceptionalist attack politics, painting himself as a representative of the common people, and directing his

¹¹ Gingrich, 3,4.

¹² Gingrich, 30.

animus against the straw figure of a "liberal elite," a cadre of counter culture intellectuals, multiculturalists, and Washington insiders who want to promote teenage pregnancy, raise taxes, increase the size of government and take as much power as possible away from the individual American. By his own design a modern-day version of Appleby's "undistinguished citizen," Gingrich has capitalized on such attack rhetoric to effect a change of personnel within Congress, to defeat venerable traditions of authority within the House of Representatives, and to paint himself as a hero for pulling the responsibility for the national political agenda down the social ladder.

Like Appleby's propagandists of American democracy, Gingrich has achieved this feat by taking full advantage of a "dense new communications network" – in his instance, cable television, satellite delivery systems, and right-wing talk radio – in order to wrest away "the control over information and opinions once exercised exclusively by an elite."¹³ Along the way he has offended even many conservatives with his crass self-assertion and bombastic new form of politics. He also has succeeded, to borrow Appleby's words, in elevating "what might be construed elsewhere as uninterestingly plebeian," to the level of "a new goal for mankind."¹⁴

The three central themes Appleby perceives behind the nascent doctrine of American exceptionalism all resurface in Gingrich's rhetoric. The first of these – the autonomy of the individual with its accompanying disparagement of dependency – crystallizes into Gingrich's second pillar, and motivates his attacks on welfare. "The classic American is an independent, self-reliant, hard working, honest person of no great wealth or social status," Gingrich tells us, but "nothing could be less traditionally American than the modern welfare system," because it breeds a cycle of dependency and "violates the American ethic that everyone should work hard."¹⁵ The certainty with which Gingrich advances these opinions brings to the fore the second theme Appleby isolates. "By construing their own liberty as liberation from historic institutions," says Appleby of

¹³ Appleby, 423.

¹⁴ Appleby, 424.

¹⁵ Gingrich, 39.

the early exceptionalists, "the enthusiasts of democracy made the United States the pilot society for the world." Gingrich likewise universalizes particular American social traits as normative and proscriptive ideals for all humankind, and then proceeds to use this same self-evident universality to turn dissent into deviation and thereby to exclude whole groups of Americans from his definition of American national character altogether. This is how he comes to the conclusion that welfare recipients and those who swear allegiance to a particular ethnicity, sect or tribe are not "true Americans." The real bad apples to be sorted out of the bunch, of course, are the liberal elite who have conspired to pollute and degrade American civilization with their deviant ideals.

The third and most important exceptionalist theme Joyce Appleby highlights is the notion of the clean slate, with its rejection of the past and of all European cultural baggage, and with its vision of a new frontier where all of the old institutions and problems would simply vanish. "The clean slate suggests most powerfully a freedom of choice – the freedom to be the designer of one's own life unaided or impeded by others," Appleby explains. "It also denied the force of history, for it is past actions that clutter up the metaphorical slate." Garry Wills has pointed out that in spite of Gingrich's animus towards intellectual elites, he insists upon his status as a history professor in order to legitimize his ideas ("How many of us have taken a history class," asks Wills, "in which the professor tells you in class, every class, sometimes several times in one session, that he is a professor?"¹⁶) As Wills also points out, Gingrich's approach to American history is "celebratory, based on static symbols for enduring values." Gingrich does away with those bothersome historical realities that do not affirm conservative values by means of his own particular brand of clean slatism. For Gingrich, the slate is wiped clean by technology, and his peculiar posture towards technology bears special mention, as it is the source of his most "occult" ideas.

"Imagine a morning in just a decade or so," Gingrich encourages readers of *To Renew America*. "You wake up to a wall-size, high-definition television showing surf off Maui (this is my favorite island – you can pick your own scene)." As the day progresses, Gingrich tells us,

16 Garry Wills, "The Visionary," *The New York Review of Books* (March 23, 1995) 6.

we never have to go outside, since we can "do Stairmaster while catching up on the morning news," and we can all telecommute to work from home via computer, thus avoiding rush hour traffic. "When you are sick, you sit in your diagnostic chair and communicate with the local health clinic," he predicts. "Sensors take your blood pressure, analyze a blood sample, or do throat cultures." Since medical information systems have become so advanced, we won't really need any doctors, and we can save money by deciding on our own treatment.¹⁷ Legal trouble? No problem, says Gingrich. "you can write your own will, file your own adoption papers, form your own partnership or corporation – all with software programs available in your home." According to Gingrich, these technological developments will cause no great displacement of workers in the medical or legal professions. "Fortunately, since most lawyers were reasonably smart and well-educated people, they have been able to find other lines of work."

Gingrich is clearly in the thrall of a space age, even science-fiction conception of technology and technological change. His formulations are stridently technologically deterministic and naive, sometimes even childlike in the extreme. "Absent an idea that can be sold at Disney World," Joan Didion observes, "he has tended to lose interest."¹⁸ At one point later in the book he suggests that it would not be all that impossible to construct a real Jurassic Park, and that such an endeavor would be "one of the most spectacular accomplishments of human history."¹⁹ Gingrich's romance with technology becomes most literal in his bizaare description of the possibility of honeymoons in space, an idea he recycles from his 1984 book, *Window of Opportunity*:

I believe that space tourism will be a common fact of life during the adulthood of children born this year, that honeymoons in space will be the vogue by 2020. Imagine weightlessness and its effects and you will understand some of its attractions. Imagine looking out at the Earth from your honeymoon suite and you will understand even more why it will be a big item.²⁰

17 Gingrich, 55.

18 Didion, 8.

19 Gingrich, 190.

20 Gingrich, 192.

No commentator can fail to marvel at how ridiculous Gingrich appears willing to sound, but the Speaker's unself-conscious inanity tends to distract attention away from the significant development in the kind of exceptionalist thought he advances. As Tom Byers and James Mendelsohn stress elsewhere in this issue, land, wilderness, and the frontier have often served as the foundational justification for exceptionalism itself. Gingrich's exceptionalism eclipses the natural world altogether. He doesn't invoke the surf off the island of Maui, but rather a wall-sized television image thereof. He dreams of replicant dinosaurs. He is so distanced from the natural world that in his fantasies, even the fertility ritual of the honeymoon itself can only gaze on the earth from space – a great view, no doubt, but a view none the same, and a very distant one at that. There is no direct experience of nature in Gingrich's imaginary future, which leads Joan Didion to describe it as "a kind of endless Delta hub."²¹ Without any intimate connection to the iconic American landscape, we have here an exceptionalism of a very different order.

The concept that replaces the land in Gingrich is the Third Wave Information Revolution, this radical transformation or "discontinuity" as he calls it, that allows him to summarize all of world history in a few short paragraphs and then to chuck it out of the window altogether, since it simply doesn't apply anymore. Citing his friends Heidi and Alvin Toffler, authors of *Future Shock*, *The Third Wave*, and a host of other pop-futurist analyses of technological change, Gingrich explains that "the transformation we are experiencing is so large and historic that it can be compared with only two other great eras of human history – the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution."²² As he elaborates further in his foreword to the Toffler's 1994 book, *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the The Third Wave*:

The Tofflers correctly understand that development and distribution of information has now become the central productivity and power activity of the human race. From world financial markets to the worldwide, twenty-four-hour-a-day distribution of news via

²¹ Didion, 8.

²² Gingrich 52

CNN to the breakthroughs of the biological revolution and their impact on health and agricultural production – on virtually every front we see the information revolution changing the fabric, pace and substance of our lives.²³

The Third Wave functions as Gingrich's New Frontier, clean slate, and deus ex machina, automatically returning America to its important core values. According to Gingrich, for example, contemporary liberalism is an outdated, "Second Wave" phenomenon, and the coming of the Third Wave will discredit liberal ideals once and for all. "While the Industrial Revolution herded people into gigantic social institutions – big corporations, big unions, big government," he explains, "the Information Revolution is breaking up these giants and leading us back to something that is, strangely enough, much more like de Tocqueville's 1830s America." In this "Back to the Future" scenario, every new technological change promotes greater individual autonomy and personal choice, and Gingrich harbors no doubts about where the benefits of the Third Wave Information Age will accrue. Americans should not fear the rush of changes associated with the Third Wave, he insists, since those changes will restore the nation to its rightful preeminence as a world leader. "The coming of the 3rd Wave brings potential for enormous improvement in the lifestyle choices of most Americans," Gingrich predicts. "If we can grasp the true significance of these changes, we can lead the world into the Information Age and leave our children a country unmatched in wealth, power and opportunity."²⁴

In classic exceptionalist fashion, Gingrich attaches such weight to his concept of the Third Wave that his every observation becomes universalized and invested with certitude and inevitability. "Aside from the Third Wave concept there is no effective system of analysis which makes sense of the frustration and confusion which characterizes politics and government virtually everywhere in the industrial world," he asserts in his foreword to the Tofflers' book. "There is no language to commu-

23 Newt Gingrich, "Foreward: A Citizen's Guide to the 21st Century," in Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the The Third Wave* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1994) 14.

24 Gingrich, 57, 7.

nicate the problems we face, no vision to outline the future towards which we should strive, and no program to help accelerate and make easier the transition."²⁵

At first glance, Gingrich's visions of the future may seem downright wacky, but in the context of the history of the reception of new technologies in America, they appear quite familiar. American culture always has made room for those with an almost unswerving faith in technological progress and in the notion that advances in technology translate directly into advances in the perceived democratic nature of American society and in the ultimate triumph of the "American way of life." Enthusiasts of this point of view, especially those within the media industry have reserved their most exuberant praise for the various technologies of communication, promising that those technologies would unify the nation, promote the democratic exchange of ideas, and champion each individual citizen's right to free speech under the First Amendment. Newt Gingrich did not import an enthusiasm over new technologies of communication into American exceptionalist rhetoric himself. Rather, he stands in a long line of American exceptionalists hopeful that some new technological fix will wipe the slate clean of aberrant historical developments and return the nation to the kind of imagined Toquevillian idyll he holds so dear.

For example, as Daniel Czitrom points out in *Media and the American Mind*, the "universal communication" made possible by the advent of the telegraph in the 1850s, was celebrated as a force that would bring the Republic closer together, help fulfill America's "manifest destiny," and in the words of the editor of *American Telegraph Magazine*, allow for "nearly all our vast and wide-spread populations [to be] bound together, not merely by political institutions but by a Telegraph and Lightning-like affinity of intelligence and sympathy, that renders us emphatically "ONE PEOPLE" everywhere."²⁶ Another commentator in an 1858 issue of the

25 Newt Gingrich, "Foreward: A Citizen's Guide to the 21st Century," 15.

26 Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 10. Quoting Donald Mann, "Telegraphing of Election Returns," *American Telegraph Magazine* 1 (November, 1852) 76.

New Englander declared that the telegraph "gives the preponderance of power to the nations representing the highest elements in humanity."²⁷ By 1866, however, Western Union had become the largest firm in American history to that point, and its monopolistic stranglehold on the glorious new technology of telegraphy allowed it to charge exorbitant rates for its use; by the 1880s Bell telephone had done almost the same for telephone communications.

In this climate, Susan Douglas points out in *Inventing American Broadcasting*, hopes for the realization of the democratic potential assumed to lie dormant in communications technology, or at least the rhetorical expression thereof, were transferred to the new technology of wireless telegraphy, which was introduced in 1899. Power-hungry trusts could easily control lines and wires, reasoned many critics of Western Union, but corporations would have a more difficult time monopolizing the airwaves, which were often described in the popular press as a sort of mysterious ether vested with magical powers. When wireless technology itself evolved into the institution of broadcast radio, and individual sets became available for the reception of sound transmissions in the home in the early 1920s, commentators again declared that communications technology would finally spread "mutual understanding to all sections of the country, unifying our thoughts, ideals, and purposes, making us a strong and well-knit people."²⁸ Douglas isolates the pattern according to which new technologies of communication would be introduced again and again:

Radio was portrayed as an autonomous force, capable of revolutionizing American culture. It was a machine that would make history. It was also portrayed as a technology without a history. Rarely, in those heady, breathless articles about the radio boom, was reference made to the twenty-five years of technical, economic, and cultural experimentation that had led to and produced radio broadcasting. Radio was thus presented as an invention not burdened by a past or shackled to the constraining conventions of the established social order, but as an invention free to reshape, on its own terms, the patterns of American life.²⁹

²⁷ Czitrom, 10.

²⁸ Stanley Frost, "Radio Dreams That Can Come True," *Collier's* 69 (June 10, 1922) 18; quoted in Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 306.

²⁹ Douglas, xv.

Not surprisingly, the advent of the ability to transmit not only sound, but images as well, gave rise to a similar flourish of enthusiasm. In a speech in 1931, RCA executive David Sarnoff waxed grandeloquent about the virtues of the next major development in the communications and broadcasting industry:

When television has fulfilled its ultimate destiny, man's sense of physical limitation will be swept away and his boundaries of sight and hearing will be the limits of the earth itself. With this may come a new horizon, a new philosophy, a new sense of freedom, and greatest of all, perhaps, a finer and broader understanding between all the peoples of the world.³⁰

Willard D. Rowland Jr. has stressed the intimate connections between this faith in communications technology as an agent capable of restoring an ideal democratic community and the core beliefs of American progressivism. Some forty years ago Richard Hofstadter isolated the general theme of the progressive movement as "the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine, and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost."³¹ The rationalizing tendencies within the progressive movement, Rowland elaborates, led it to cling to the notion that modern man, possessed of an analytical mind and the latest advances in science, technology and education, could yoke the power of modernization and industrialization to the task of restoring the communitarian ideal. "Underneath the progressive program was an explicit faith in a reconstituted human nature, and an implicit belief in the utility of modern communications," explains Rowland. "That faith in the ameliorative power of communications carried forward with redoubled strength into the coming age of radio and television."³²

This enthusiasm served as a significant shaping force behind Progressive Era communications legislation. The Radio Act of 1927 and the Com-

³⁰ Quoted in Robert B. Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of Telecommunications* (178).

³¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954) 213.

³² Rowland, 8.

munications Act of 1934 started from the notion that the electromagnetic spectrum constituted a limited natural resource owned in common by all the people of the United States. Lawmakers and regulators insisted that since the spectrum could support only a certain number of broadcast outlets operating on certain frequencies, those licensed to use it must act as trustees of that precious resource serving in the public interest. The doctrine of the public interest in broadcasting held up an ideal of a truly democratic broadcast system managed by private companies serving in the public interest according to the community-oriented principle of localism. That principle held that local broadcasters must fulfill their public trustee function by serving their individual communities with programs of local interest and concern and by providing for a broad range of local expression over the airwaves.

Jeffersonian ideals of local broadcasters serving an enlightened citizenry may have undergirded the framing of the earliest federal communications legislation, but as Robert Horwitz stresses in *The Irony of Regulatory Reform*, the power of the communications industry has always been such that federal regulation has done little more than graft these kinds of lofty egalitarian and communitarian principles onto a pre-existing industrial structure characterized by intense concentrations of capital and private ownership.³³ After all, the communications industry had had more than three quarters of a century to grow into a monopolistic and profit-hungry monolith by the time federal regulation began to develop in earnest. In this situation mutually beneficial turf agreements hashed out between the communications giants were presented to federal regulators as done deals. Rather than challenge these collusive arrangements, the state wrote them into federal law in such a way that what had been merely profitable for the interested parties came to seem natural and inevitable.

For this reason, Susan Douglas maintains, the romantic rhetoric applied to technological advances "helped legitimate the private, corporate control of machines as the only equitable and progressive method of management."³⁴ Most of the money spent to explore and develop these

³³ Horwitz, *passim*.

³⁴ Douglas, xxvi.

new technologies (especially television) came from these same corporations, which further pushed the resulting advances in communication into the service of private profit. The federal government also encouraged the development of a private, commercial infrastructure for the communications industry by means of promotion, subsidy, and sanctioning of corporate control. One important example of this is the manner in which the US Navy handed all of its patents for long distance radio communication over to General Electric after World War I, leading to the creation of the Radio Corporation of America, which would dominate radio and television for years to come.³⁵

Committed to a market-based system by the sheer power of the communications conglomerates such as RCA, yet blinded to market realities by the swirl of rhetoric surrounding communications technologies, federal communications regulation failed to address squarely the two most salient aspects of the broadcasting industry itself. The first of these was the fact that money would have to be made, and this would end up being achieved by advertising. The lofty hopes and ideals surrounding broadcasting initially created a situation in which all parties involved agreed that advertising would sully the new media with impure motives and crass moneymaking. None other than David Sarnoff, the president of RCA, originally called for the financing of radio programming by means of a national fund fueled by a percentage of the profits realized by radio manufacturers and dealers. As late as 1924, then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover stated that "the quickest way to kill broadcasting would be to use it for direct advertising."³⁶ But such attacks on the direct advertising of consumer goods had the effect of smoothing the way for the "indirect selling" implicit in commercially sponsored programming, 'which quickly became the norm.

Manufacturers soon became enamored of the effectiveness with which attaching their names to popular broadcasts could help boost sales, and by 1925 nearly half of the 547 radio stations in operation in the United States sold air time to commercial sponsors.³⁷ By 1927, the resistance to

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35 Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, second revised edition (NY: Oxford, 1990) 20-23; Horwitz, 110; Douglas, 285-286, 290-291.

36 *Ibid*, 114

37 Czitrom, 79.

direct advertising had been overcome, and admen like Edgar Felix could exclaim of the practice, "What a glorious opportunity for the advertising man to spread his sales propaganda... American business men, because of radio, are provided with a latch key to nearly every home in the United States."³⁸ Federal regulation "in the public interest" clearly encouraged such a presumptuously invasive attitude. In his work on the broadcast sponsor, Erik Barnouw quotes a 1935 study in the *Harvard Business Review* which concluded that "the Federal Radio Commission has interpreted the concept of public interest so as to favor in actual practice one particular group... the commercial broadcasters."³⁹

The second reality of the broadcasting marketplace was that *lots* of money had to be made, both because broadcasting (especially television) is very expensive and because companies always want to make more money. This was achieved by the creation of broadcast networks. Networking allowed broadcasters to take advantage of massive economies of scale, spreading the cost of production out amongst a number of distribution outlets and offering advertisers blanket coverage in a variety of markets at once during choice hours of the broadcast schedule. AT&T began experimenting with the connection of local radio stations by means of coaxial cables for special events as early as 1922. After 1926, when AT&T got out of the business of owning radio stations in exchange for the exclusive right to interconnect broadcast networks over its wires, RCA, Westinghouse, and General Electric formed the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), which would operate both a "Red" and a "Blue" radio network (the government would later force the latter to break off and become the American Broadcasting Network [ABC]). By the time the Columbia Broadcasting System formed in 1929, less than 20% of all radio stations had affiliated themselves with a network, but those same stations raked in a full 72% of the \$27 million spent on radio advertising.⁴⁰

The preeminence of chain broadcasting flew in the face of the regulatory principle of localism, because it took almost all of the decision

³⁸ Quoted in Czitrom, 77.

³⁹ E. Pendleton Herring, "Politics and Radio Regulation," *Harvard Business Review* (January, 1935), quoted in Barnouw, 28.

⁴⁰ Horwitz, 114, 121.

malting power over programming away from individual, local broadcast licensees and handed it over to large national corporations. Networking ensured that the big money in broadcast advertising would come primarily from national coverage, and this gave national advertisers a strong say over programming content and left local television broadcasters with little incentive to serve the idiosyncratic needs of their own community in any real sense. By the 1960s, then, federal broadcasting regulation "in the public interest" came to protect a centralized system of three advertising-supported, national television networks as the American, democratic system of television. The big three television networks held an oligopoly over what the public saw, and treated television viewers as a mass market. Moreover the Federal Communications Commission used the regulatory principle of localism to justify actions that protected the big three networks – who by their very existence effectively sabotaged any hope of realizing a truly community-based, democratic television system. As Horwitz concludes, the very ideals undergirding federal communications regulation led those who framed it to "misconstrue the nature of a capitalist communications system," while the image of the broadcaster "in the mythic haze of the small-town Jeffersonian public sphere served only to veil the actual practices and consequences of a commercially organized, national system of network broadcasting."⁴¹

It did not take much to recognize that something had gone awry, and the same ideals that undergirded the network system eventually ignited a movement to reform it. Amidst the general climate of citizen activism that characterized the late 1960s, a loose but broad-based and diverse coalition of minority groups and community organizations now labeled collectively as the broadcast reform movement sought to challenge the regulatory status quo on such matters as minority programming and hiring practices, television violence, the nature of children's programming, truth in advertising, and the responsiveness of the networks and their affiliates to community input. These groups pursued three strategies to achieve their goals. The first two were technical and legal attempts to hold the broadcast regulatory process accountable to its own first

41 Horwitz, 194.

principles. Many community groups, armed with the rhetoric of the Communications Act, sought to block the renewal of individual broadcast licenses by filing "petitions to deny" on the basis that the broadcasters had not lived up to their public interest obligations. Other groups argued that the FCC's Fairness Doctrine gave them the right of mandatory access to the airwaves to express their views. Neither of these strategies met with much direct success. The 342 petitions to deny filed between 1971 and 1973 did not result in the suspension of a single broadcast license, and the FCC has only taken away one such license in its entire history. Although attempts to gain citizen access to the airwaves eventually led to a complete ban on cigarette advertising on television, the Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that the public did not have anything like a mandatory right of access to the broadcast airwaves.⁴²

The third front on which the members of the broadcast reform movement sought to advance their various interests ended up exerting the most impact on the industry – although certainly not in the way the reformers themselves may have envisioned – because it returned to the core of cultural beliefs concerning the transformative and beneficent power of technology that had undergirded the formation of federal communications regulation in the first place. The same dissatisfaction with the power of the networks that had inspired the wave of petitions to deny and the many attempts to gain access and equal time also gave rise to a movement to seek out viable alternatives to commercial network broadcasting altogether. This impulse clearly lay behind the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which united struggling educational stations from around the country into the Public Broadcasting Service. The search for alternatives caught fire when it united with the notion that new technologies of television signal delivery could circumvent the traditional broadcasting structure altogether, rendering the power of the commercial networks obsolete and ushering in a democratic communications revolution. Specifically, this "new technologies" rhetoric attached itself to the expansion of cable systems and to the development of satellite communications.

Cable had been around since as early as 1948, but the new enthusiasm

ignored its technical, economic, political and cultural entanglements in the television industry over the past twenty years and treated it as a technology without a history, very much in the manner radio had been celebrated in the 1920s. The new technologies rhetoric seized upon cable's ability to import multiple channels into the home as a means of finally insuring the kind of diversity that would serve the public interest, giving a voice to minorities, the elderly, handicapped persons, and other previously disenfranchised groups through electronic conferences and "town meetings." It also maintained that the technical capability of two-way communication over cable would allow individuals and groups to "talk back" to their television sets, instantly ushering in a democratic communications revolution that would solve the problem of public access.

The grandiose heights to which the new technologies rhetoric could soar is well reflected in Don LeDuc's introduction to his otherwise sober study of cable regulation, published in 1973. Enthusiasm for cable had not arisen because it offered a closed-circuit means of distribution that would allow for selective price discrimination, LeDuc argued, but because of its ability to provide the public with an abundance of viewing alternatives from which to choose. He went on:

The competitive strength of cable, then, seems based upon the same fundamental human urge, an apparently insatiable desire for ever more extensive communications service, which has spurred the evolution of each successive mass medium since the advent of the industrial age in Western society. It may be that industrialization, in diluting the strength of the oral tradition, instilled in modern man a craving for the certitude that was once drawn from countless springs of communal and kinship custom – a thirst no narrow and mechanized message channel has the capacity to quench. In this context the cable medium could represent the first communications force capable of ending man's Tantalus-like quest; its vast array of channels offering the diverse, variant, and thus more human message bonds which mass-produced units of entertainment and news have supplanted but have failed to replace.⁴³

Horwitz points out that this kind of rhetoric was not the exclusive province of idealistic liberals and grass-roots organizers. Free market economists waxed just as enthusiastic about cable in studies funded by

⁴³ Don R. LeDuc, *Cable Television and the FCC: A Crisis in Media Control* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973) vii.

such sources as the Rand Corporation, the Alfred Sloan Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the John and Mary Marltle Foundation.⁴⁴ And the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations all formed task forces and commissions that strongly advocated the development of new technologies, especially cable, as the solution to the problems plaguing broadcasting in the US. These groups helped channel the debate over broadcast reform in the direction of neoliberal economic rhetoric, whereby a free and open marketplace would solve all of the problems of corporate perfidy and public disenfranchisement in broadcasting by effecting the efficient development of new technologies of delivery.

This kind of rhetoric gained a wide hearing because it comported well with the designs of the major players in the communications industry themselves, whose interests lay in quieting criticism of their power while simultaneously opening new markets to increase that power into the future. Other corporate players, chief among them defense contractors that had performed communications and aerospace research for the military, had a vested interest in challenging the regulatory protection of the broadcast networks so that they could move into commercial cable and satellite signal delivery themselves. "The reform movement had done much to focus the attack on the regulatory process as too protectionist of established industrial hegemony and too little concerned about the public service component of the public interest standard," points out Willard Rowland in his study of the broadcast reform movement. "For a much longer period of time, though, the industry had been making assaults on the regulatory process as unnecessarily bureaucratic, economically inefficient and an infringement on its right as an extension of the press, operating under First Amendment freedoms."⁴⁵

The broadcast reform movement ended up realizing its most significant gains when it joined in this chorus of voices calling for the deregulation of cable and satellite technology as a means of achieving content diversity, public access, and free information flow through the good graces of a free and open marketplace. But this turned out to be a

44 See for example, *On the Cable: The Television of Abundance: Report of the Sloan Commission on Cable Communications* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971); "Rand criticizes FCC's CATV approach," *Broadcasting* (October 26, 1970) 46; "Report Ties Profits to CATV Penetration," *Broadcasting* (February 15, 1971) 56.

45 Rowland, 30.

Faustian bargain. "By the time deregulation began to take shape, the reasons for the reform concerns had been forgotten and the longstanding major industrial interests had reasserted themselves," explains Rowland. "Deregulation was to go forward, but public service considerations were ignored – or at best they were assumed to be realizable through marketplace forces."⁴⁶ By the end of the 1970s, the FCC was actively promoting cable as an alternative to the network oligopoly. Under the Reagan administration it moved further to abolish ownership limits, restrictions on cross-ownership, the Fairness Doctrine, rules regarding children's programming and advertising, and almost anything else that stood in the way of unbridled competition and expansion in the media industry.

Of course, all of this deregulation did not really democratize the media. Because financial barriers to full participation in the media economy are so high, it merely opened up the industry to let a few more heavily capitalized players in – such as Ted Turner's Turner Broadcasting System and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. Inc. – and allowed the telephone giants and the film industry to move into television and cable, and vice-versa. These corporations quickly divvied up the spoils of the newly liberalized market, then began looking overseas for even larger vistas. This process has led to the complete abandonment of the public interest obligations formerly imposed on media entities, and to previously unimaginable levels of globalization, concentration and conglomeration in the media industry, as witnessed most recently by the mergers of Disney and Capital Cities/ABC and of Time-Warner and the Turner Broadcasting System.

This media concentration has occurred in the name of empowering individual citizens and promoting greater freedom. Signing into law the Telecommunications Reform Act of 1995, which further dismantled barriers to media concentration and steered clear of imposing any positive public interest obligations altogether, President Bill Clinton declared that it would "stimulate investment, promote competition, provide open access for all citizens to the Information Superhighway, strengthen and improve universal service and provide families with

technologies to help them control what kind of programs come into their homes over television." He concluded, "As a result of this action today, consumers will receive the benefits of lower prices, better quality and greater choices in their telephone and cable services, and they will continue to benefit from a diversity of voices and viewpoints in radio, television and the print media."

The American social construction of new technologies of communication appears permeated with exceptionalist ideology, and Newt Gingrich's flights of technological fancy appear quite mainstream in this context. All three of the insistent themes Joyce Appleby highlights in her analysis of the development of American exceptionalism resurface again and again in the rhetoric surrounding the development of telegraph, broadcasting, cable, and other forms of electronic signal delivery. American lawmakers, regulators, reformers, and industry leaders have greeted these technologies as instruments that would promote individual liberty and personal autonomy. In their enthusiasm, they have made sweeping claims about human nature, interpreting the inevitable culmination of technological and historical developments as the triumph of American democratic ideals. In order to make these claims in the face of often overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they have treated each successive new technology of communication as if it had no history, thereby participating in their own form of clean slatism. The histories wiped off the slate in the process have had little to do with idealized Jeffersonian communities of enlightened and empowered citizens and everything to do with what has been *truly* distinctive in America – which David Nye describes elsewhere in this issue as the centrality of business to American culture and that peculiarly American form of business organization, the private corporation.

As the preceding discussion has shown, for example, the predominance of commerce in American culture meant that almost from the beginning the broadcasting public was effectively synonymous with the competitive broadcasting market. For the vast majority of the population, broadcasting never represented a means of communication, but rather a means of consumption, and the freedom promised by the enthusiasts of the new technology of broadcasting was in reality the freedom to choose from a limited range of programming options. In the context of the

progressive era rhetoric that informed the framing of federal communications legislation, Willard D. Rowland explains, "references to democracy and to audience participation equated consumption with power," and "the myth of audience power, which rested on the myth of consumer choice, became reified and held up as evidence that Americans possessed unprecedented political and economic freedom."⁴⁷ The broadcast reformers of the late 1960s and early 1970s inherited this confusion over the difference between democracy and consumer capitalism, and for this reason sowed the seeds of their own failure. Directing their critique towards the fact that programming options were limited by the network system, and calling for the creation of new options by means of the deregulation of new technologies, they reaffirmed their status as consumers and further facilitated the very concentration of media power that they had set out to challenge in the first place.

Regardless of these failures, the broadcast reform movement did attempt to challenge powerful, well-capitalized interests on behalf of minority groups and individual members of local communities. The fact that the movement seized upon exceptionalist rhetoric to achieve those ends highlights what Tom Byers has called the conscience of exceptionalism, and contradicts Joyce Appleby's characterization of American exceptionalism as an exclusively hegemonic ideology. There have been different strains of exceptionalism in American history, and certain of these have had much to do with movements towards progressive reform. Holding the nation to a democratic and communitarian ideal, exceptionalist rhetoric can produce salient critiques of American society in limited doses. In the case of the broadcast reform movement, however, it also ultimately served to accommodate the reformers themselves to the objects of their own criticism.

Joyce Appleby succinctly isolates both the downfall of the broadcast reform movement and the motivating principle behind Newt Gingrich's exceptionalist rhetoric when she notes that "exceptionalism established a reciprocity between American abundance and high moral purposes."⁴⁸ In the early years of the Republic, this plank of exceptionalist ideology

⁴⁷ Rowland, 35.

⁴⁸ Appleby, 424

undergirded the removal of the Native American population and the settling of the West, since as Appleby notes, "taking up land in the national domain could become a movement for spreading democratic institutions across the continent." In the context of communications deregulation, this has come to mean clearing bothersome regulations out of the way so that private corporations could develop (and profit from) what have become known as "technologies of abundance." Newt Gingrich carries this strain of thought to its logical conclusion, virtually conflating the virtues of participatory democracy with the luxuries of a consumer society and an open marketplace under the aegis of a technological revolution of world proportions. "The coming of the Third Wave Information Age brings potential for enormous improvement in the lifestyle choices of most Americans," he asserts. "There is every reason to believe that this new era will see a revolution in goods and services that will empower and enhance most people." "To achieve this goal, Gingrich advocates an even more thorough program of privatization and deregulation. "If we liberate entrepreneurs and make it relatively easy for them to discover and invent our new world," he says, "we will be rearing a generation that increases our wealth and improves our lives to a degree that we can now barely imagine."⁵⁰ Far from a ranting futurist, Gingrich sounds like his arch-political rival Bill Clinton signing the Telecommunications Reform Act. If the results of the wave of deregulation that began during the broadcast reform movement are any indication, Gingrich and Clinton's deregulatory designs will only carry them further away from the exceptionalist democratic idyll towards which they profess to strive.

49 Gingrich, 55.

50 Gingrich, 61.