

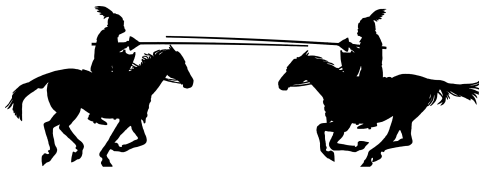
THE ARENA



Mini Issue: America 250

July 4, 2026

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Charlottesville, Virginia
July 4, 2026

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

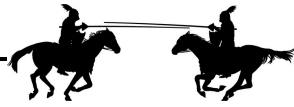
Today marks the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. Although we are enjoying our summer break between semesters at the University of Virginia, we thought it unfitting for *The Journal* to sit idly by during this momentous occasion. Therefore, we have prepared a miniature issue for our readers, whether Loyalists or Patriots. To start, we curated a list of recommended films and television, books, and poetry. Each list selects titles that provide insight into our nation's soul. Three articles follow on different aspects of America: Miss Collins, drawing from *Gone with the Wind*, discusses the proper ends to which the striving American spirit should be guided toward; Mr. Miller explores the moral justifications for the American Revolution; and finally, Mr. Wilcoxon lays out the founding vision for the Electoral College in an effort to improve our current system. *The Journal* does not necessarily endorse every view expressed in this issue. Rather, it is our responsibility and privilege to present the ideas of our contributors in their full authenticity.

Sincerely,



Charles Wilcoxon and Zosia Collins, Co-Editors-in-Chief





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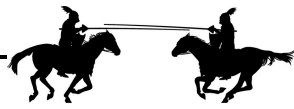
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THE
JOURNAL'S
SUMMER PICKS



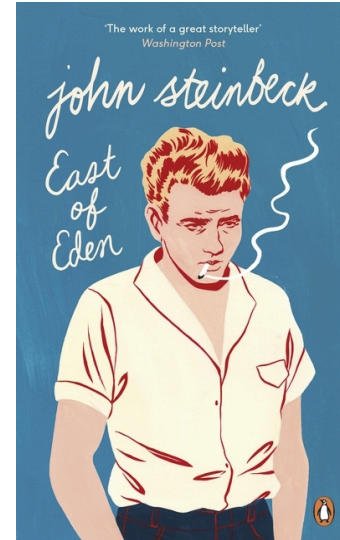
From your editors

The Arena Summer Book List

From your Editors

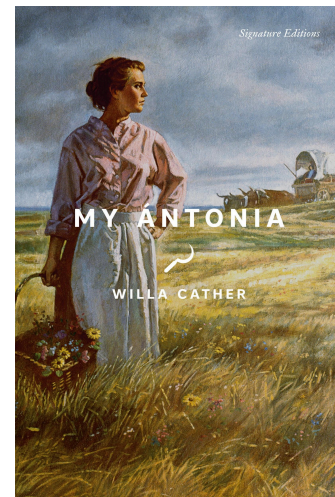
1. *East of Eden* (1952) – John Steinbeck

Steinbeck's masterpiece *East of Eden* is an epic which plants characters in the lush Salinas Valley of California, capturing a bustling, blooming part of our country in an age just as vibrant. More sprawling than Steinbeck's landscapes, however, are the central American questions he grapples with: to what degree are we bound to the sins—and successes—of our forefathers? Are we truly free, and is freedom truly worth pursuing?



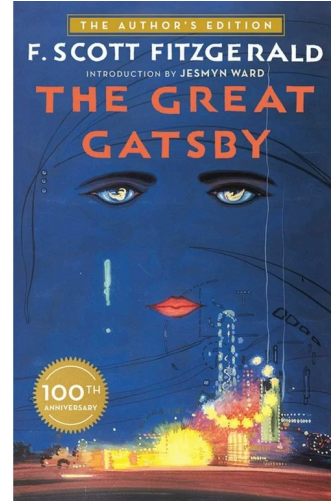
2. *My Ántonia* (1918) – Will Cather

Where *East of Eden* is breathtaking and expansive, *My Ántonia* is humble and unassuming. This is a touching tale told by a boy who watches his friend Ántonia, a Bohemian immigrant, blossom from a caretaker of the land into a nurturer of the next generation. Simultaneously charming and powerful, this is a novel which manages to carry the weight of the West on its shoulders.



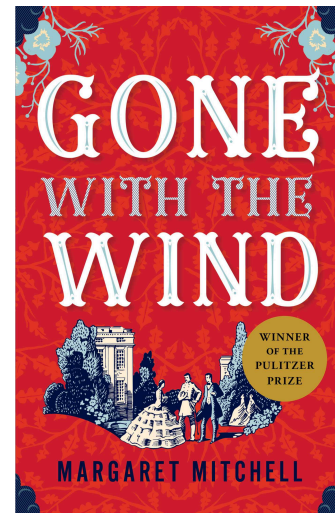
3. ***The Great Gatsby* (1925) – F. Scott Fitzgerald**

You would be hard-pressed to find a novel which is both as short and as powerful as this American staple. Set against the backdrop of the Roaring '20s, the tale of Gatsby's mysterious rise and legendary fall as he pursues the elusive Daisy, and, symbolically, the American dream, is an enduring commentary on the glory and folly of our nation's spirit.



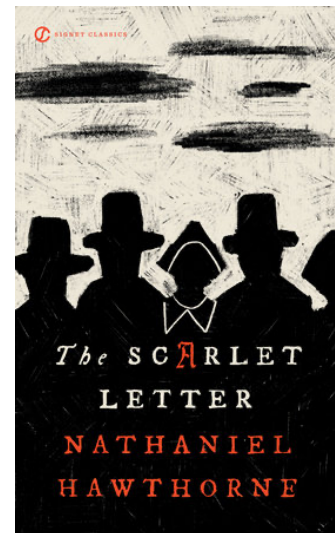
4. ***Gone With the Wind* (1936) – Margaret Mitchell**

This Southern epic, while a work of popular fiction, is also a pressing encapsulation of the spirit of the South and of America as a whole. Part romantic drama, part war novel, part historical commentary, few books so fully capture the scope of a region and the heart of the people within it.



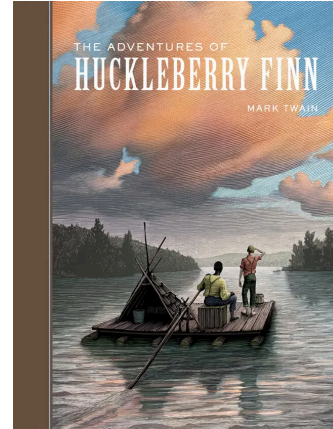
5. ***The Scarlet Letter* – (1850) Nathaniel Hawthorne**

While our books so far have dealt with an America that has a definite, if perilous, national identity, this novel precedes an established America as it peers into a Puritan religious community akin to the ones in which the earliest New England settlers lived. The novel grapples with sin and judgement while also exploring the fundamental American concept of community in uncomfortable, unexpected ways.



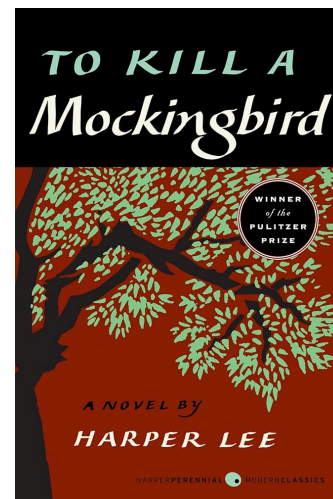
6. *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) – Mark Twain

Twain's novel has recently had a moment in the spotlight for being politically controversial; that's hardly surprising for a book which deals unflinchingly with America's loaded racial and class tensions. Honest and full of adventure, *Huckleberry Finn* wittily appeals to children and adults alike.



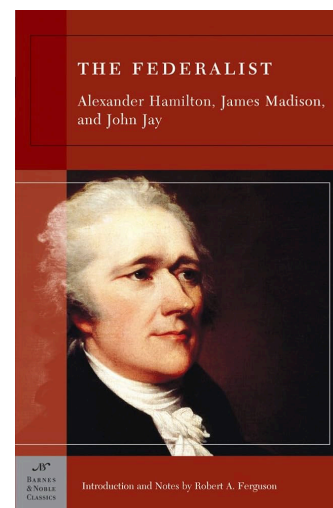
7. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) – Harper Lee

To Kill a Mockingbird may be told through the eyes of a child (Scout Finch), but that does not diminish the gravity of its tale: that of a lawyer defending a black man falsely accused of rape in a Southern town plagued with prejudice. Snapshots of childrens' games are interspersed with scenes of trial proceedings, lynchings, and KKK assemblies. The reality of the tensions being revealed are just as hard for adults to grapple with as they are for Scout.



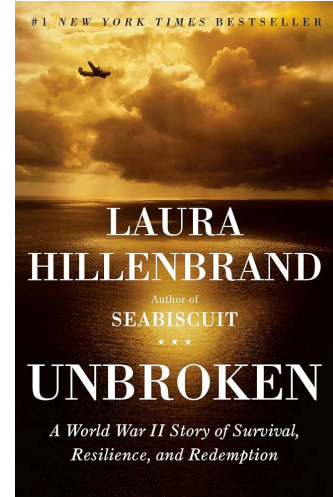
8. *The Federalist* (1787-1788) – Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison

This is not only the essential work for students of American government. It is a wellspring of the political wisdom behind the most enduring national, codified constitution in history. All Americans who are interested in exercising civic virtue would do well to learn about the Founding vision for the United States under the Constitution.



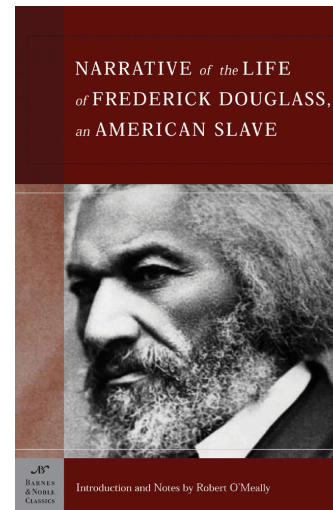
9. *Unbroken* (2010) – Laura Hillenbrand

Times of intense suffering are often the greatest occasions for heroes to arise, and World War II was no exception. Enter Louis Zamperini, American Olympic runner who was destined to survive 47 days on a life raft and over two years in a Japanese POW camp after his plane crashes. These pages contain horrific depictions of torture and brutality, but they also point towards America's distinct endurance, resilience, and hope.



10. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) – Frederick Douglass

Like Louis Zamperini, Frederick Douglass was able to rise up out of unimaginable hardship and achieve personal greatness. In a modern rendition of Plato's Cave, Douglass heaves himself out of the darkness of ignorance that he faces as a slave, grasping at the light of learning which is eventually able to break his chains— both intellectual and physical. This is American grit and determination at its finest.



***The Arena* American Poetry Compilation**

From your Editors

1. “The New Colossus” – Emma Lazarus

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

Famous for its position of honor on the Statue of Liberty, this poem masterfully blends ancient references—the Colossus of Rhodes—with the American dream. Where the Colossus of Rhodes was a testament to military might and economic prowess, the “New Colossus” was a mark of compassion and hope for those that sought refuge in our country. The poem portrays our nation’s foundation in welcoming the poor and humble with a promise of prosperity.

2. “O Captain! My Captain!” – Walt Whitman

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Although this poem takes the center stage in the famous final scene of *Dead Poets Society*, this is much more than a salute to an esteemed leader. Whitman’s famous piece about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln juxtaposes the victories of our nation with the tragedies that accompany them, conveying the bittersweet flavor of America.

3. “Chicago” – Carl Sandburg

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness

In the same way that Whitman displays two contrasting facets of the American soul, Carl Sandburg offers a two-sided America: brutal, bold, and fearless; and yet young, ignorant, and untested. His poem reminds us that America may be powerful, but its existence and success are ever-tenuous.

4. “Paul Revere’s Ride” – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five:
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

This historical poem takes the form of a children’s story; each moment in the drama preceding the shot heard ’round the world is illuminated as the reader gets a real sense of Paul Revere’s night of glory. Longfellow showcases the American storytelling tradition as well as a key moment in our nation’s history.

5. “When the Frost is on the Punkin” – James Whitcomb Riley

But the air’s so appetizin’; and the landscape through the haze
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airy autumn days
Is a pictur’ that no painter has the colorin’ to mock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder’s in the shock.

This poem may be lesser-known, but it is a true delight. Best read aloud, a bouncing and catchy rhythm graces scenes of American farm life that vary from bustling to serene. Whitcomb’s use of rural American dialect is also particularly noteworthy and adds an air of authenticity to the lines.

6. “The Gift Outright” – Robert Frost

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

This poem explores the relationship between settlers and the earth, positing that our nation was not able to achieve greatness until its inhabitants “gave [themselves] outright” to the land, turning from its owners into a people owned by it.

7. “Harlem” – Langston Hughes

“What happens to a dream deferred?”

While one might read this opening line and assume that the question is a purely philosophical one, it is really a pressing civic dilemma. Upon Hughes’ writing, wounds of slavery had festered within the nation; the poem expresses the decay and hardening of relations between races in our country. The hanging question at the end of the poem— “does it explode?” —creates a menacing sense of impending conflict. The lack of idealized American scenes and ideals is fitting for this portrayal of a darker, but still central, part of our history.

8. “The Raven” – Edgar Allen Poe

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
 While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
 Only this and nothing more.”

Thus begin some of the most iconic and immediately recognizable verses of the American canon (as UVA students, we could never pardon ourselves if we didn’t include at least one Poe poem on this list). These grief-ridden, beautiful lines build in intensity as the speaker spirals into delusion.

9. “If” – Rudyard Kipling

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’

Kipling may not be an American poet, but this rousing poem speaks directly to the American spirit of resilience, tenacity, and grit. In a few stanzas, he sums up the Western “ideal man,” the benchmark for Americans generation after generation.

10. “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” – Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

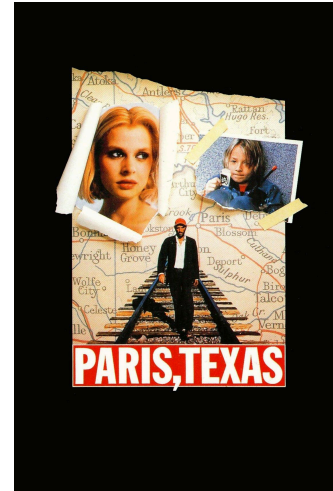
And what could be more fitting than to conclude with this most central of American virtues: hope? Darkneses are ever-looming upon our nation, but Dickinson reminds us of the light which beams upon us all the while.

The Arena Summer Film and Television List

From your Editors

1. *Paris, Texas* (1984) – Wim Wenders

Although he's German, director Wim Wenders consummately captures the expanse and radiance of the American Southwest, the backdrop of his family drama about a broken reunion. The story of Travis, Jane, and their son, Hunter, underscored by a nostalgia for a familial unity long past, simultaneously conveys the wholesome promise of the nuclear family and the heartbreaking aftermath of its unraveling.



2. “Band of Brothers” (2001) – Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, Erik Jendresen

Hanks, Spielberg, and Jendresen give us a series that inspires on multiple fronts: as a historical project that captures the journey of Easy Company in Western Europe with often-visceral accuracy; as a high-budget and thoughtfully acted, written, and produced achievement of early prestige television; and, most importantly, as a testament to the endurance found in true brotherhood—the bond between men dedicated together to a higher cause.



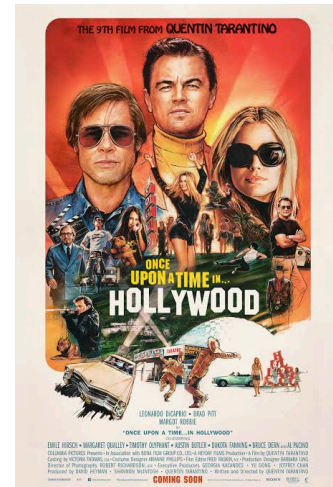
3. ***Forrest Gump* (1994) – Robert Zemeckis**

An emotionally rich portrayal of America, both its triumphs and disasters, in the second half of the twentieth century through the innocent and kindhearted eyes of Forrest Gump. Forrest faces turbulence not only in his run-ins with history but also in his relationship with Jenny, a love interest whose complexity matches that of America.



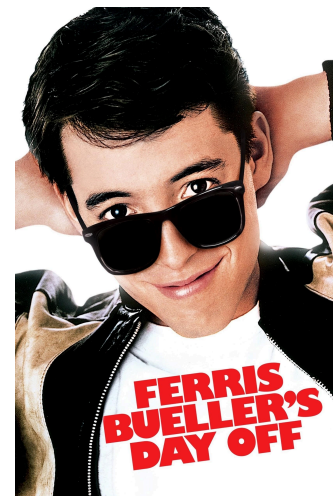
4. ***Once Upon a Time . . . In Hollywood* (2019) – Quentin Tarantino**

Tarantino writes a love letter to Golden Age Hollywood through this film. It revels in the idealized vision of American celebrity before facing the doom of that idealism: the Manson murders. Tarantino is no stranger to rewriting history in his films. When faced with Charles Manson, will Tarantino accept Golden Age Hollywood's fate?



5. ***Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) – John Hughes**

A defining entry of American comedic filmmaking, John Hughes's *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* continues to resonate with Americans today by packaging themes of growing up, anxieties of emerging adulthood, and the absurdity of adult attitudes in a hilarious and adventurous day off from school, brought to life by the charm of Matthew Broderick, Alan Ruck, and Mia Sara.



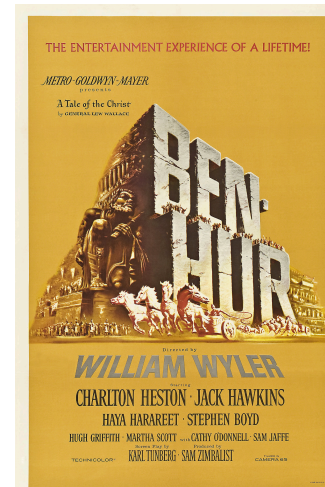
6. *The Breakfast Club* (1985) – John Hughes

Hughes also looks at high school life in 1980s America in *The Breakfast Club*, a film that explores what happens when different high school archetypes spend a day together at Saturday detention. Their day together proves to be a clash between their commonality and the categories imposed upon them by adults, their peers, and themselves.



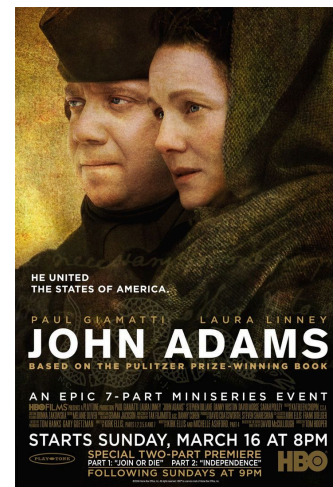
7. *Ben-Hur* (1959) – William Wyler

The blockbuster of blockbusters. Shot on Super Panavision 70, *Ben-Hur* shows its being the most expensive film ever at the time of its release through its scale and larger-than-life practical effects, whether it be naval battles, triumphs, or chariot races. It presents the Roman Empire and the life of Christ through the grand lens of Hollywood's Golden Age.



8. “John Adams” – Tom Hooper

From his principled defense of the accused in the Boston Massacre to reconciling with Thomas Jefferson by letter, “John Adams” presents the life of the Massachusetts Founder who served as our second president. The series gives Adams’s personal life just as much dramatic weight as the founding of our nation, providing understanding of the man himself as much as his impact on America.



9. *12 Angry Men* (1957) – Sidney Lumet

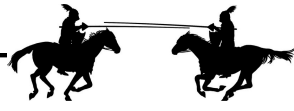
A film that almost entirely takes place in one jury deliberation room so that the enthralling script can take center stage. When combined with controlled performances across the cast, *12 Angry Men* highlights the danger of prejudice in the American jury system and conveys the American's pain and attendant humility upon discovering his personal biases.



10. *Citizen Kane* (1941) – Orson Welles

Welles not only pioneers makeup techniques and unconventional story structure in *Citizen Kane* but explores a fundamentally American tension, pitting the grandeur of abundance and notoriety against the sustaining meaning of simple delights. In exploring the life of Charles Kane, Welles pushes back against the worldly glory that the striving American spirit is often misguided toward.





REFLECTIONS
on
AMERICA



Zosia Collins
Charles Miller
Charles Wilcoxon



Courting Scarlett O'Hara: On Nostalgia, America, and Conservative Love

Zosia Collins

Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago," while technically about the titular city, can also be read as a portrayal of America as a country

with lifted head singing so proud to be
alive and coarse and strong and
cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of
piling job on job, here is a tall bold
slugger set vivid against the little soft
cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for
action, cunning as a savage pitted
against the wilderness.¹

Through Sandburg's words, America emerges as rugged, stubborn, and brimming with life. Similarly gritty and resilient is Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine of Margaret Mitchell's Southern epic *Gone with the Wind*. These qualities set Scarlett apart from the rest of struggling Southern society but also come with flaws—harshness, selfishness, and ambition—which tempt men to fall into the twin traps of idealization and exhaustion as they attempt to court her. The challenge of embracing Scarlett without idealizing her and correcting Scarlett without rejecting her provides a vital model for conservatives struggling to love our lively, restless America.

Gone with the Wind revolves around one of the most famous love triangles in American culture. Scarlett O'Hara, the flirtatious and flighty daughter of a plantation owner, is in love with her genteel and intellectual Southern neighbor, Ashley Wilkes, who harbors a lifelong longing for Scarlett that haunts him throughout the novel. Another man, however, also loves Scarlett: Rhett Butler, a notorious rascal who does business with the hated Northerners and funds the local "bad house." Rhett eventually wins Scarlett's hand; however, he does not manage to win her heart until the end of the novel. Tragically, as soon as Scarlett realizes her love for him, an exhausted Rhett forsakes their relationship and decides to leave her. Scarlett, her usual stubborn, determined self, closes the book resolving to win Rhett back.

Ashley and Rhett present interesting counterpoints to each other in the ways that they love Scarlett. Ashley's love is nostalgic even more than it is carnal. We hear that as he embraces Scarlett, "spring was back again, that half-forgotten balmy spring of green rustlings and murmurings, a spring of ease and indolence, careless days when the desires of youth were warm in his body."² Ashley loves Scarlett's beautiful body like he loves the graceful, stately lines of his family's war-ruined estate. Holding her allows him to return, if only momentarily, to the happy days riding on the lawn and eating freshly-prepared barbecue. However, throughout the novel, Ashley sees Scarlett as better than she actually is, lauding her for "bravery and unselfishness."³ While Scarlett certainly is brave, she is also extraordinarily selfish. Ashley's sense of nostalgia crowds out reality until the Scarlett he sees before him is a mere ideal, more a figment

of his imagination than the flesh-and-blood woman that she is.

Rhett, meanwhile, sees Scarlett as she is—"hard and greedy and unscrupulous."⁴ Yet despite seeming merely sensual and aloof for much of the novel, he claims to love Scarlett on a much deeper level: as he's leaving, he says that "I wanted to take care of you, to ... protect you."⁵ However, this profound love eventually wears thin over the course of the novel. Rhett loses his breath chasing after Scarlett, leading Pat Conroy to conclude in his famous introduction to *Gone with the Wind* that "his one great flaw was making the terrible and exhilarating mistake of falling in love with Scarlett O'Hara."⁶

So, is Conroy right about the danger of loving Scarlett? The key to answering this question—and the key to understanding the whole novel—is to acknowledge that Scarlett O'Hara is much more than a coquettish, selfish, and occasionally vicious woman. Elsewhere in his introduction, Conroy states that "it is Scarlett herself who represents the unimaginable changes that the war has wrought on all Southerners."⁷ In other words, Scarlett is a personification of the South. I agree, to a point. However, I think that Mr. Conroy is far too narrow in his analysis. Yes, Scarlett is the South, with her fierce loyalty to her land that is only hardened by the suffering of war. But in addition, Scarlett has the economic cunning and drive of the North, and the restless, pioneering spirit of the West. In short, like Sandburg's Chicago, Scarlett is emblematic of not one region of America, but of America as a whole.

The one thing that stays consistent within Scarlett despite her wartime transformation into a hardened, calculating woman is a perpetual discontent coupled with immutable

stubbornness. In the idyllic antebellum days, she is not content with the dozens of eligible suitors who fall at her feet; she must have Ashley, although he is the one man who will not have her. She ends the novel in much the same place, this time not content to have Ashley; she must have Rhett, although now he is the man who is out of reach. Scarlett relishes such impossible pursuits; she typically wants what she cannot have and revels in attempting to attain it. This stubborn, spirited discontent is what makes Scarlett so distinctive, and it is also what made the United States, the scrappy underdog that it was, into a global superpower. From the Revolution to the Cold War, America has never been content to sit and wait out a challenge. Thus, I argue that Scarlett's continual restlessness is where she most truly embodies the American spirit.

Scarlett's restlessness is at once her greatest strength and her greatest weakness. The same discontent that drives her to build a successful lumber mill also drives her to marry her sister's longtime beau, Frank Kennedy, on a whim. Scarlett is callous in her drive for success; her steely disposition allows her to stand firm in the upheavals of the Civil War but also makes her hard and cold to the touch. This is the aspect of the American spirit that we do not wish to recognize. The man who works his way from rags to riches is as frequently a self-interested and blindly ambitious individual as he is a caring and grateful one. America's rough side is a moral neutral rather than a moral good; it has a great propensity for excellence and a great propensity for brutality.

Establishing Scarlett as America completely reframes the love of Ashley and Rhett. In this light, Ashley's love is immediately recognizable as one camp within modern conservatism—the side which revels in the past more than it looks

towards the future. This school of thought yearns for a time long gone, a “golden age” of old. Perhaps if we hadn't had Seneca Falls, things wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps if we hadn't had Vatican II, things wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps if we didn't have the internet, things wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps they, too, can attain the “half-forgotten balmy spring of green rustlings and murmurings” by embracing the America they remember from all those years ago, before things went south and life became cruel. Moreover, this subset tends to overlook the faults of America gone by, holding her up as some golden calf. They see huge, welcoming plains instead of the crowded, dingy slums of New York; they see bustling port cities instead of the slaves unloading the ships. Like Ashley, they love an America that exists more in memory than in history.

The Rhett we see at the close of *Gone with the Wind* represents another camp within conservatism. He has fallen out of love with the American ideal; his pursuit of Scarlett's restless, roaming spirit has left him exhausted, and her faults have left him disillusioned. As he tells her: “I've reached the end of roaming, Scarlett. I'm forty-five—the age when man begins to value some of the things he's thrown away so lightly in youth, the clannishness of families, honor and security, roots that go deep.”⁸ No longer does he want the constant exertion of chasing after the deeply flawed Scarlett; perhaps he doesn't need her, after all. In the same way, the disillusioned camp of conservatives questions whether they need our social and moral foundations: perhaps religion isn't so important, after all. Perhaps abortion isn't really so terrible, after all. Perhaps traditional marriages aren't so valuable, after all. This branch of conservatism is a hollow one, divorced from the true American Spirit, more

driven by the blind following of party figureheads and economic power than anything else.

So... who is right? It is a difficult question when presented with two flawed options. Ashley cannot be our model—he is just a fool. As Rhett puts it in a burst of insightfulness, “He’s only a gentleman caught in a world he doesn’t belong in, trying to make a poor best of it by the rules of the world that’s gone.”⁹ We cannot recover a vanished age, nor pretend it was ever perfect.

Could it possibly be that Rhett is the model for conservatives? Beholding him hungover and bloated as he leaves Scarlett, one would be loath to conclude this. In order to accept Rhett, we must necessarily re-evaluate his love for Scarlett. Contrary to what Conroy says, Rhett’s great flaw was not, in fact, to fall in love with Scarlett. Pursuing her may have broken him, but it also transformed him for the better. The Rhett before Scarlett would never have pathetically wept about his faults and his love for his family. But the Rhett before Scarlett would also not have doted on his daughter to a point where he was reduced to shambles upon her untimely death. He would not have waited for hours outside his wife’s room after she miscarried, desperate for her to call on him for help. Loving Scarlett broke Rhett in the most delightful, vulnerable way possible; no longer was he just an aloof, rambunctious blockade-runner with no ties and a dashing smile. Rhett’s greatest fault was to *stop* loving Scarlett. Without his pursuit of her—her spirit, her stubbornness, and her fire for life—he is just an unfavorable, tired, and slightly overweight sensualist. By loving her, he experienced a deep longing which mirrored Scarlett’s perpetual restlessness. Seeking out her best qualities allowed him to share in them.

Rhett sees Scarlett for what she truly is, beholding the brilliant tenacity and resilience which lie under her shallow charms. At the same time, he sees the crippling faults which cling to her throughout the novel. When Scarlett is caught in a compromising situation with Ashley and fears social repercussions, Rhett rebukes her for her cowardice and forces her to go to the evening’s party regardless. Rhett recognizes Scarlett’s aversion to discomfort and pushes her to fight back against it, helping her confront her own faults and root out the imperfections which are inflexibly linked to her virtue.

Conservatives today must be Rhett Butler at the height of his courtship of Scarlett: we need to wholeheartedly pursue the restless American spirit so that we might share in the best America has to offer. Yes, it will be tiring and will tempt us daily to walk away. Yes, our opponents will give us nothing but cold stares and shut doors, much like the matrons of Atlanta society. And yet, without it, we are nothing. Once the “conservative” party permits abortion, gay marriage, and sexual promiscuity, how can it truly be connected to its Christian roots? However, we need to pursue our America without idealizing the past. Our country possesses manifold faults which are intertwined with dazzling virtues; part of loving her, therefore, is correcting these shortcomings. We need to pragmatically see America for what she is, but not stop loving America for what she ought to be.

Gone with the Wind closes with Scarlett resolving to get Rhett back. However, conservatives today cannot rely on America to likewise pursue them. It is up to them to love the wild, reckless, and perhaps unattainable American ideal *for*, rather than in spite of, all its grittiness and restlessness. After all, as

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Sandburg writes in the concluding lines of “Chicago,” “under [her] wrist is the pulse, and under [her] ribs the heart of the people.”¹⁰

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Notes

1. Carl Sandburg, "Chicago," *Poetry Foundation*, originally published in *Poetry* (March 1914), lines 10-12, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12840/chicago>.
2. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Scribner, 2011), 502.
3. Mitchell, 496
4. Mitchell, 953
5. Mitchell, 952
6. Mitchell, 14
7. Mitchell, 13
8. Mitchell, 956
9. Mitchell, 951
10. Sandburg, "Chicago," line 21.



Enlightened Protestantism: How Christians Justified the American Revolution

Charles Miller

Most Americans are familiar with the traditional story of the American Revolution: as the British government grew increasingly tyrannical, they inflicted abuses upon the colonists that compelled the people to throw off the yoke of tyranny, eventually creating the freest and most prosperous country in the world. Although this simplified story of the Revolution conveys certain truths, it is woefully incomplete. To start, only about forty-five percent of the colonists actually identified as Patriots—that is, in opposition to the Crown of England—with the rest roughly split between Loyalists and noncommittal.¹ Considering these demographics, it is often easy to forget the radical nature of rebellion

against one's mother country for the individual Patriots, especially those intellectuals among them who sought to morally justify the Revolution through Christian tradition and contemporary political thought. Beginning with an analysis of Scripture and Catholic just war theory, I will argue that the justification for the American Revolution's moral legitimacy was not traditionally Christian. I will then trace how Protestant theology, by shaping Enlightened political thought, fundamentally transformed the traditional Christian understanding of authority in the Church and state, furnishing the Colonists with an intellectual justification for revolution.

Authority and Just War Theory

Under traditional Christian thought, which draws from Jesus and St. Paul, those subject to political authority owe deference and obedience to them. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes,

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Rom. 13:1-2, 6-7 Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

Jesus, similarly to Paul, when asked by the Pharisees "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" responds:

"Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:17-21 RSVCE).

These passages form the basis for the traditional Christian understanding that civil authorities possess a divinely-instituted legitimacy and that people therefore owe obedience, honor, and respect to civil leaders.

This principle does not imply unconditional submission as it was recognized that rulers could forfeit their legitimacy through manifest, grave injustice. Nevertheless, because authority is traditionally understood to come from God, rebellion requires extraordinary moral justification.

Not only is rebellion a rejection of leaders who have been "established by God," it also entails violent warfare and thus must meet the requirements for a just war. Recognizing the horror of war and informed by the warning of Christ to Peter that "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52 RSVCE), the Church has historically been highly cautious about what is deemed to be a just reason for going to war. In synthesizing and developing the ancient writings of Augustine and Aquinas, the Catholic Church teaches that a just war must meet the following conditions:

The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain; - all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; - there must be serious prospects of success; - the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.²

All these conditions must be met to justify a military pursuit. So, in regards to the American Revolution, we must ask: do the high taxes experienced by the colonists justify military rebellion? Were all other means of avoiding the armed conflict exhausted? Was the threat of Britain lasting, grave, and certain? From a global perspective, was Britain as tyrannical as claimed by the Founders? For

centuries, historians, theologians and scholars have debated these very questions, all of which would require a much longer piece to settle. What I argue in this essay is not that the revolution was necessarily unjust but that traditional Christian doctrine was not the source of the Founders' justification for revolution. The traditional Christian presumption is in favor of obedience to political authorities, a hurdle that must be cleared in discerning the morality of rebellion.

The Protestant Revolution

If traditional Christian political theology placed such a strong presumption in favor of obedience to civil authority, how did the overwhelmingly Protestant Colonies come to regard the revolution not only as politically expedient but as morally justifiable? The answer lies in the profound transformation in the role of authority brought about by the Protestant Revolution. While the reformers did not reject political authority, their understanding of the relationship between the individual and Church fundamentally altered the way that authority itself was understood in Christian Europe, leading to the Enlightenment, which laid the political foundation for the intellectual justification of the American Revolution.

When analyzing the relationship between the Church, the state, and the individual, the fundamental nature of the relationship boils down to authority. What authority is an individual morally responsible for submitting to? Do authority figures have a divine right to rule, or is their rule contractually based? For context, it is important to realize how intrinsically linked Church and state were in Medieval Europe. Bishops and kings ruled

together. While both ruled different domains of public life, their authority was intrinsically linked, both ultimately coming from God. Even after the Protestant Revolution in England, English kings and nobles chose not to abolish the Bishopric in the Anglican Church for fear that it would inevitably undermine their own authority. Kings had a divine right to rule, just as ministers of the Church had a divine right to guide the faithful in religious matters.

When Luther published his 95 Theses in 1517, he began the greatest political and religious upheaval since the fall of Rome. While many forms of Protestantism swiftly arose, they all had one thing in common: they rejected the traditional authority of the Catholic Church in its doctrine and rule. This change fundamentally reshaped the way that European intellectuals thought about authority. Spiritual authority was no longer in the hands of an infallible Church that was appointed by God to guide the faithful, instead resting upon Scripture alone, particularly, the individual's interpretation of Scripture. It is hard to overstate how dramatic this shift is. Although Protestant Churches arose in Protestant countries, the infallible authority of Rome rejected by Protestants created a void in religious life. If the supposed divine authority appointed by God in the spiritual life (the Catholic Church) can lead the faithful astray, then the people have not only the right but the duty to reject this authority. If this is true for the spiritual, it is not hard to see how this could be transferred to the political.

Later Protestant traditions—including John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Samuel Rutherford—continued the development of Protestant religious and political thought, questioning the role of political and religious

authority and increasing the scope of when it was permissible to reject the authority. If spiritual authority is negotiable, then so is political authority. If political authority is negotiable, there must be systems of thought that guide the relationship rulers have with the people. Enlightenment thinkers, particularly John Locke and his social contract theory, arise out of this tradition. The social contract theory rests on the principle that the people and the civil authority exist in a contractual relationship where civil authorities must uphold the freedoms of the people in exchange for the submission of the people. If the government breaks this contract, it has abdicated its responsibility and become a tyranny, and the people have the right to throw off the government and establish another. This is seen directly in the opening words of the Declaration of Independence: "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them."³ The Founding Fathers justified the Revolution on the grounds that authority had been abused, and thus they were entitled to rebellion. Authority is conditional, and if it violates its purpose, it loses its legitimacy. As Americans, it's tempting to take the default position that this is a legitimate moral justification for Revolution, but this is not a justification that would be provided by traditional Christian thought. As Paul writes, "Whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Rom. 13:2 RSVCE).

Some readers may argue that I focus too much on the role of religion when there were many other important intellectual justifications for the American Revolution. I do not deny that other reasons played a role, but this objection risks viewing history through the lens of modernity. Because religion does not play a significant role in contemporary American politics, it's easy to project that this was the case 250 years ago. But for centuries, religion was a primary force behind politics and political thought. The question I have sought to examine is not whether this was the only factor, but rather how revolution went from something nearly unjustifiable for Christians to an idea intellectual Christians in the Colonies could justify in relation to Britain—one of the freest societies the world had ever seen.

The answer I propose traces back to the Protestant Revolution. Protestantism destabilized the medieval understanding of authority by denying Rome's universal spiritual authority. In response to the conflicts that followed, Protestant thinkers developed increasingly sophisticated theories of conditional political authority and lawful resistance. These intellectual conditions led to the emergence of Enlightenment theories of popular sovereignty and contractual authority. While he may not have intended it, Luther changed the assumptions about authority that later thinkers developed into the political philosophy that could morally justify the creation of America.

The question of whether the American Revolution is justified under just war theory and Scriptural passages on civil authority is one that would need a few more articles—and maybe a history degree—to settle. But, at the very least, the Lockean Enlightenment justification that was given by the Founders was

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not on the grounds of traditional Christian views of authority and just war theory. The war's justification is downstream of the seismic shift in the role of authority that follows the fracturing of Christendom after the Protestant Revolution. The war we celebrate this July 4th is a culmination of two centuries of Protestant political and spiritual thought. This is a Protestant war grounded in Enlightenment principles.

Maybe you are a Protestant, and you rejoice in this; maybe you are a Catholic, and this

reality unsettles your inner patriot. But what matters these 250 years later is what America has become. As Paul writes, "We know that in everything God works for good" (Rom. 8:28 RSVCE), so let us take comfort in the providential hand of God, to whom all things are present, who holds reality in the palm of his hand, and who has blessed this country with abundance and prosperity. May God continue to bless this great country and work all things for our good.

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Notes

1. “Five myths about the start of the Revolutionary War,” National Constitution Center, April 19, 2024, <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/five-myths-about-the-start-of-the-revolutionary-war>
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), sec. 2309.
3. U.S. Continental Congress, Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>



Where Have We Gone Wrong With the Electoral College?

Charles Wilcoxon

If I were teaching a high school AP U.S. Government class, I would have my students read much of *The Federalist* over the summer, certainly more than the mere four essays required by the College Board. From those four are great defenses of increased executive agency, judicial independence, and the separation of powers, among other things. But in stopping at those four, students miss out on so much of what the Founders had to say about other institutions. One such institution is the Electoral College, which has become a sort of constitutional pariah as of late. It is hard not to

balk at the theoretical minimum of the popular vote by which a presidential candidate could secure the presidency under the current system: twenty-two percent. The current Electoral College also leaves voters who live in states securely controlled by their relative opposition resigned in the face of the discouraging at-large apportionment of electors. Forty-eight of the fifty states apportion their electors based on an at-large, winner-take-all system. The core of the problem is that the system is too federal, meaning that the system treats the United States too much like a confederation of

sovereign states and too little like a nation made up of individual Americans. In other words, the system is not national enough. I am using "federal" and "national" here in the way that Madison employs them in *The Federalist*. Even worse, the system is federal in a populist way, subjecting the winner-take-all result to an electorate that a candidate with a commanding personality could blow in one direction or another. Originally, many state legislatures chose electors themselves, but by 1832, "the popular selection of electors was established and real discretion on the part of electors in choosing a President and Vice President [had become] a legal fiction."¹ Once we see this problem, it is easy to blame the Founders; after all, they're the ones who put the Electoral College in the Constitution. But when you expand your reading of *The Federalist* to include the Founders' discussion of the Electoral College, you see that they would not be satisfied with this system either. Looking at "Federalist no. 39" and "Federalist no. 68" in particular reveals that they wanted the College to incorporate both the federal and national character of the United States by creating a body similar to Congress but different in a couple of important ways.

First of all, let's look at "Federalist no. 39." In this essay, Madison argues against the claim that the Constitution abandons the federal character of the United States in throwing out the Articles of Confederation. Part of Madison's response gives us a nice characterization of the College in terms of "federal" and "national":

The house of representatives will derive its powers from the people of America So far the government is *national* not *federal*. The Senate on the other hand will derive its

powers from the States, as political and coequal societies So far the government is *federal*, not *national*. The executive power will be derived from a very compound source. The immediate election of the President is to be made by the States in their political characters. The votes allotted to them, are in a compound ratio, which considers them partly as distinct and coequal societies; partly as unequal members of the same society. ... From this aspect of the Government, it appears to be of a mixed character presenting at least as many *federal* as *national* features.²

The "compound source" of electoral votes that Madison refers to is the number of electors granted to each state based on their two senators and number of representatives. And because the House, a directly elected body, is national in character, and the Senate, an indirectly elected body (being originally elected by the state governments), is federal in character, the Electoral College mixes national and federal characteristics. So, if the College today were reflecting the Founders' vision for it, we would see such a mix. But as I have already said, what we see today is almost completely federal because of the at-large votes that occur in forty-eight of the states. One way the current College falls short is by not achieving this balance the Founders were aiming for, one that would have given the College some national character by selecting some electors in a way that indicates their correspondence to House representatives.

Turning to "Federalist no. 68," which focuses on the merits of the College, we see that the current College lacks three measures that would ensure the prudential election of the president. Hamilton first describes what

kind of people should be directly electing the president, who should be

men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station A small number of persons, selected by their fellow citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to so complicated an investigation.³

We can see that the current College fails on this front because, just looking around, we don't have any idea who the electors are. They are not distinguished men whose merits and wisdom have been recognized by their communities. In almost every state, their identities are practically irrelevant because they have pledged to vote a certain way and are only chosen as electors upon the victory of their preferred candidate in the at-large popular vote. There is no evidence that our electors today have the "discernment" necessary for the complex and important task of choosing the next chief magistrate. Hamilton continues his discussion of the College's strengths, illuminating two more bulwarks that the College was intended to have against imprudence:

The choice of *several* to form an intermediate body of electors, will be much less apt to convulse the community, with any extraordinary or violent movements, than the choice of *one* [president]. And as the electors, chosen in each state, are to assemble and vote in the state, in which they are chosen, this detached and divided situation will expose them much less to heats and ferments ... than if they were all to be convened at one time, in one place.⁴

The first guard against irresponsibility in electing the president is ensuring that voters elect "*several*" electors rather than one president, which makes the electorate less prone to manipulation by a singularly charismatic candidate. One must only recall the Trumpian upheaval of political propriety in 2016 to see how popular reaction can work symbiotically with a singular personality. The current College feeds into this dangerous symbiosis, in practice giving the electorate a choice between the actual presidential candidates rather than candidates for electors. Second, the Founders imagined a gathering in each state where the electors were free to deliberate and have their minds changed but were also free from the random and snowballing bandwagons that could easily occur at a national assembly. There certainly are not any "heats" or "ferments" in the current deliberations of the electors, for there is no deliberation at all. Thus we see two more failures of the current College: the popular electorate is electing one, not many, and the electors are not given an environment in which they can prudently deliberate.

You might object that I contradict myself in criticizing the current College for being too federal on one hand and too national on the other. But what the Founders were aiming for was a particular blend of federal and national characteristics that was most conducive to electing reliable presidents. They wanted to recognize the nation's national character while resisting populism, which is why they apportioned most electors based on House representatives but worked to protect against an excited, short-sighted, popular election of the chief magistrate. They wanted to recognize the nation's federal character but not to a degree where the individual voter felt irrelevant

as he may today. What the current College needs is an adjustment of both how it speaks toward our national nature and how it speaks to our federal nature, the former being a restoration of electors' autonomy within an indirect election, the latter being the replacement of winner-take-all with more localized apportionment of electoral votes.

I earlier described the College the Founders intended as like Congress but importantly different in some ways. The College was supposed to bear more similarity to Congress than the mere number of electors matching that of elected congressional officials. As we have seen, the electors were conceived with the same autonomy that congressmen and senators enjoy today. In fact, the relationship between a constituency and both the former and latter was to be founded upon the same republican ideal by which the people entrust decision-making to distinguished individuals who know and have earned the trust of their constituents. And while there are more granular differences between the institutions as conceived by the Founders, such as the electors meeting in each state rather than at a national assembly, the crucial difference is that the Electoral College is not itself Congress. Hamilton explains later in "Federalist no. 68" that having Congress elect the president would tempt the president to "sacrifice his duty to his complaisance for those whose favor was necessary to the duration of his official consequence."⁵ The Founders favored the republican structure of Congress for electing the chief magistrate, but they were wary of making Congress itself elect the president on separation-of-powers grounds, so they made a body similar to but not itself Congress.

With the Founding vision of the College in mind, I will now sketch some changes we could

make to the College today. Such reform should aim to give the College a mixture of federal and national character while ensuring the selection of electors capable of prudent deliberation and voting. To make the College both federal and national, I propose that instead of holding popular elections for the president in each state, individual voters instead vote for one elector each: the elector corresponding to their congressional district. These "representative electors" would be elected in the same way their respective representatives are elected. There will also be two electors elected by each state corresponding to their senators. However, these "senatorial electors" are to be elected according to the procedure from before the Seventeenth Amendment: the state governments will elect them. They will meet in their respective states as they currently do, but they shall be given due time to deliberate (I would stipulate at least a few days to a week). The presidential candidate remains victorious upon receiving a majority of the electoral votes. This kind of reform is achievable at the state level, as the Constitution provides that "[e]ach State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct," their electors.⁶ So, students at UVA can start working toward this kind of reform in Virginia. Meanwhile, I encourage readers in other states to advocate for similar reform. Whatever state first makes their electoral system more true to the Founding vision will be a shining example for other states to follow.

This proposal takes a long-term view of the issue. The reformed system in practice may initially see electoral candidates who promise votes for particular presidential candidates and an electorate that largely votes only with presidential candidates in mind. But my hope is that changing the system of the College may

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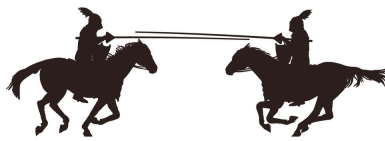
open the doors to reintroducing a truly republican view of government into mainstream political thought that recognizes the merits of indirect elections. Eventually, as some electors use their autonomy to subvert their constituents' expectations, voters may consider their electoral candidates more than

presidential candidates, trusting their local elector with the decision of whom to trust next with the highest magistracy. You may call this wishful thinking, but systemic change toward republicanism makes a parallel change in voting attitudes more likely.

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Notes

1. Ruth C. Silva, "State Law on the Nomination, Election, and Instruction of Presidential Electors," *The American Political Science Review* 42, no. 3 (June 1948): 523, <https://doi-org.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/10.2307/1949915>
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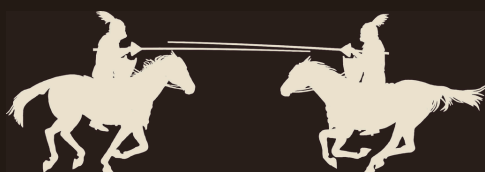
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