

# American Ideas

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In April, William H. Goetzmann, a Pulitzer-prize winning historian at The University of Texas at Austin, told the *Austin American-Statesman* that as a boy his family had rented an apartment in St. Paul, Minnesota where John Dillinger had once lived. The enamel surface of the bathtub had spots eaten away by the acid that Dillinger's gang had used to erase their own fingerprints. Touching the tub gave Goetzmann a feeling for history, a knack for seeing human beings for what they were when they were. Goetzmann likes to take his readers into that kind of American past and "get them used to living there."

This is a real trick to try in *Beyond the Revolution*, an intellectual history of the creation and evolution of the idea of "America" from the Revolutionary War to the end of the 19th century. The subject cries out for commentary from today's perspective on what has happened to original ideas, and where positions taken up during old controversies have led. A less accomplished historian and storyteller would not have pulled it off. But Goetzmann does, using the skillful misdirection of a professional magician.

In *Beyond the Revolution*, Goetzmann gets us deeply absorbed in the lives of intellectual figures, famous and obscure, who contributed to what each of us believes, thinks or feels America is—and we all have different ideas depending on region, social class, education, religion and our lives' roads taken and not taken. Meanwhile, almost magically, Goetzmann makes us see why the concept of

America had to be constructed in the first place. He examines what it has meant to Founding Fathers; to practitioners of public education in the crucial 50 years after the Declaration of Independence; and to scientific explorers from the 1820s through 1850s. He considers its meaning for black intellectuals in the immediately antebellum South; to “scribbling women” in the 1800s whose “domestic novels” made women the center of attention and put men in the place where women wanted them; and to thinkers, writers and statesmen from Tom Paine to William James and John Dewey.

For all these Americans in the first 125 years of our country, America was defined by what it wasn't. It wasn't Europe. It wasn't a decadent aristocracy. It wasn't social or political conformity. Most of all, as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it, while “France was a land, England a people, America always had about it the ‘quality of an idea.’” It was an idea Americans could believe in because we never were forced to settle on a single definition.

Goetzmann may strike some readers as high-mindedly off-putting in his introduction, where he rejects the notion that American intellectuals from 1776 to 1899 were “mere custodians of knowledge,” and describes them, borrowing from Henry James, as “hard core creators of culture” who “feel ‘cultural anxiety’ or a compulsion constantly to redefine the context of reality in which they find themselves.” He even borders on the jingoistic with claims that America was the world's first truly cosmopolitan civilization and allusions to Whitman's description of our country as a “‘nation of nations’ ... with the ‘course of universal being’ flowing through it.”

But right from page one we meet figures like Paine in their own times and on their own terms. When Paine declared, “The Birthday of a new world is at hand” and, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again,” we feel how personally important this was to him, as a former “half-starved corset maker” whose first wife had died “amid London’s squalor.” We see him as a “stout, ugly, habitually unshaven, dirty man with ‘twisted eyes’” who came to America “in 1774 bearing a crumpled letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin.” He brought with him his life’s wounds, his wits, and not much else. No wonder he viewed the American “melting pot” as an “asylum for mankind.” It surely was for him and other “lovers of civilization and religious liberty” who escaped the “monster” civilization of Europe and England.

The sense Goetzmann gives his readers of that monster reaching across the Atlantic to the New World is like acid on enamel or skin. Goetzmann learned as a child about history by imagining what it must have been like, the pain and horror of gangsters pouring acid over the tips of their fingers. Likewise, Goetzmann’s vivid descriptions make us feel what living must have been like in periods that we usually just read about. Never have I really felt the tyranny of the Stamp Act, the atrocity of the Boston Massacre, what forcible quartering of Hessian mercenary troops entailed, or the corruption that pervaded the British Parliament and “the Crown’s men on the spot” in the colonies. America during the revolution was saying no to these forms of oppression.

Goetzmann's lifetime immersion in American history enables him to convey the feelings of the moment with just the right quotations from contemporary sources.

If you cannot imagine at a distance of 23 decades what it was like to be an exploited colonist, try this from *London Magazine* in 1776: "[T]he American is apparelled from head to foot in our manufactures. He scarcely drinks, sits, moves, labours or recreates himself without contributing to the emolument of the mother country." American intellectuals educated in Greek and Roman classics compared the "venality and immorality" in Britain's ruling class with the Roman empire heading towards its fall. Thus, Goetzmann reminds us that Patrick Henry opposed the Stamp Act by declaring, "Caesar had his Brutus—Charles the First, his Cromwell—and George the Third may profit by their example."

In discussing how black slaves experienced America in the South, Goetzmann quotes poignantly from a letter written by a former black slave to his Tennessee hillbilly mistress before the Civil War. It gets across the inhumanity of slavery better than the word "inhumanity" itself: "You say you have offers to buy me, and that you shall sell me if I do not send you \$1,000, and in the same breath you say, 'You know we raised you as we did our own children.' Woman did you raise your own children for the market?"

Once the always subtly changing set of ideas of America had been created, it needed to be transmitted, reinforced and revalidated again and again and again. Education, Goetzmann stresses, played a big role. Nineteen colleges came into

being between 1782 and 1802. Public education bills were passed in six of the original colonies before 1800. Land grants for pioneer schools, which would eventually equal millions of acres, were established by the Northwest Ordinance. By the late 1850s, our country had about 250 colleges, aimed at “convert[ing] men into republican machines” (Benjamin Rush), “rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens” (Jefferson).

Meanwhile Noah Webster “sought to safeguard the purity of American English by writing a dictionary and speller.” British English, in Webster’s opinion, had been corrupted beyond repair by foreign words and “foppish court usage.” In our very language, America was defined by what it was not.

Goetzmann gets carried away in a few places when he violates his own dictum to stay in the past he is re-creating. In his discussion of the problem, seen clearly by writers from James Fenimore Cooper to Henry James, of “establishing an American literary tradition and of raising it to a level of high achievement,” Goetzmann argues that American writers had done so “within approximately sixty-five years,” by 1855. By then Cooper’s Leatherstocking was a New World cultural hero—we essentially had our Odysseus—and three writers (Cooper, Poe and Irving) “commanded world attention.” Goetzmann goes on to claim: “Greece, Rome, France, Germany, Italy, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, even Britain itself took far longer to reach such maturity.” Actually, the first democracy, classical Athens, by the end of its seventh decade had invented the genres of tragedy and comedy.

We do not need pissing contests between historical cultures of the sort Goetzmann invites to take the measure of what American intellectuals accomplished in defining, at different times and places in our first 125 years, what America means. We now have Goetzmann's life of learning distilled into what may be the capstone of his career to help us understand who we were.

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