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On the march

by [Marc M. Arkin](#)

A review of Liberty & Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas, by David Hackett Fischer.

David Hackett Fischer

Liberty & Freedom: A Visual History
of America's Founding Ideas.
Oxford University Press, 851 pages, \$50

In 1843, a young historian eagerly interviewed ninety-one-year-old Captain Levi Preston, one of the last surviving veterans of the battle of Lexington and Concord, hoping for firsthand insight into the origins of the American Revolution. One by one, Preston rejected the historian's standard explanations for the war: the Stamp Act, the tea tax, the ideas of Harrington, Sidney, and Locke. Preston had bought no stamps, drunk no tea, and read no books save the Bible, a few religious texts, and the yearly almanac. Finally, in frustration, the historian querulously asked, "Well, then, what was the matter?" The cantankerous old Yankee replied, "what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we had always been free, and we meant to be free always. They didn't mean we should." This straightforward answer is the starting point for David Hackett Fischer's monumental new study of the meaning of liberty and freedom for ordinary citizens in the longest continuing republic in the history of the world.

Not simply a work of political history, *Liberty and Freedom* is a chronicle of what Professor Fischer calls the "folkways of freedom," the customs, beliefs, and traditions of a free people. Embracing an unabashedly Whig view of American history, Fischer follows these "folk cultures of liberty" from the Revolution, through the early Republic, the sectional conflicts that yielded first the Civil War and then Reconstruction, into the Gilded Age, both World Wars, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, right down to the aftermath of September 11. After surveying it all, Professor Fischer concludes, "[t]hrough the span of four centuries, every American generation without exception has become more free and has enlarged the meaning of liberty and freedom in one way or another."

For those who delighted in Professor Fischer's jewel-box-like narrative histories, *Paul Revere's Ride* and *Washington's Crossing*, *Liberty and Freedom* will come as quite a change. It is an astonishingly wide-ranging work that attempts to realize the ideal of an *histoire totale* by, as Professor Fischer explains, combining the narrative discipline of political history with the empiricism of social history, weaving together the stories of individual people with the words and images of popular culture. Copiously illustrated and beautifully put together, it is associated with a travelling exhibition, "Visions of Liberty and Freedom," produced by the Virginia Historical Society, which closed on May 30, 2005. (The exhibition will also be on view at the Senator John Heinz Regional History

Center, Pittsburgh [July 17–December 31, 2005], the Atlanta History Center [February 4–May 28, 2006], the National Heritage Museum, Lexington, Massachusetts [June 24–October 16, 2006], and the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis [November 18, 2006–March 11, 2007].) Indeed, the sheer scope of the book is at once its virtue and its undoing.

Liberty and Freedom is the second volume to be completed in Professor Fischer's planned four-volume cultural history of America. (The third will be *American Plantations: African and European Folkways in the New World* and the fourth will be *Deep Change: The Rhythm of American History*. Both are in preparation.) It continues the project begun in his 1989 book, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, which traced the surprising persistence of regional cultural patterns from the first British settlement of America to the present. Among its many provocative insights, *Albion's Seed* identified four distinct ideas of liberty and freedom in the New World, corresponding to its four dominant British cultures: Puritan New England, Cavalier Virginia, Delaware Valley Quakers, and North British borderers settled in the American backcountry. As Professor Fischer argues in both books, New Englanders conceived of liberty as a function of community; Virginians perceived it as the realization of hierarchy; Quakers emphasized universalism founded on their belief in "soul liberty"; and borderers viewed liberty as individual autonomy, pure and simple.

In one of the most successful parts of *Liberty and Freedom*, Professor Fischer shows that early in the republic's history, each region's popular iconography embodied these differences: the rooted liberty tree of New England, the universal summons of Pennsylvania's Liberty Bell, the prickly rattlesnakes, hornets, and alligators of the backcountry. (This last explains the name of the Charlotte Hornets basketball team, now the New Orleans Hornets.) The low country south, settled by displaced younger sons, adopted the crescent moon, a heraldic symbol of honor, courage, and chivalry, and joined it with the local palmetto. Only Cavalier Virginia was at a loss for popular imagery, likely because the Roman images dear to planter culture all involved the wand and pileus (liberty cap) of manumission.

During the first phase of the Revolution, these regional symbols rallied the people, from the famous "Don't Tread on Me" rattlesnake flags of the backcountry—revived by the United States Navy and flown by every American warship since 2002—to the crescent moon on Charles Cotesworth Pinckney's First South Carolina Regiment uniform. The Declaration of Independence initiated a search for national emblems, ranging from a red damask battle flag bearing the motto "LIBERTY" to numerous variations on the national stars and stripes design we see today. In these early years, Americans represented themselves—and liberty and freedom—with a dizzying array of symbols from native American men, armed Indian maidens, rustic Brother Jonathan (who was more recognized in the early republic than his cousin Yankee Doodle), to historical figures and an awful lot of animals. All of these were ultimately displaced by Uncle Sam, Lady Liberty, and, of course, the American eagle.

Curiously, a variation on the Indian maiden survives in the famous statue atop the United States Capitol dome. In one of those strange quirks of history, the design was entrusted to Thomas Crawford, brother-in-law of Julia Ward Howe (who wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic") and overseen by the then-Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis. Davis rejected the first plan for the statue, a female Liberty with the symbolic pileus on her head. Livid, he complained that the pileus was an inappropriate emblem for a people born free and never enslaved. Instead, at Davis's behest, she now wears a preposterous bit of headgear which has her peering out from under the head and beak of an eagle, wreathed in a "bold arrangement of feathers suggested by the costume of our Indian tribes." It is as good a symbol as any of the folly of both design by committee and attempting to propitiate the slave power.

As this shows, Fischer has not lost his eye for the telling anecdote, deployed strategically

throughout the book. Take, for another example, Virginia's experience with its first state seal. The chosen design represented Virtue as an Amazon standing on a prostrate man, with the phrase "Sic Semper Tyrannis." On the reverse, however, the goddess Liberty appeared flanked by Ceres with a cornucopia and Aeternitas with a globe, all encircled by the unfortunate motto "Deus nobis haec otia fecit"—"God has granted us this leisure." As Fischer drily notes, "[s]o powerful was the ethic of *otium* in the Ancient Dominion" that the "nearest industrious artisan" who could engrave the medal lived in Philadelphia. The design was duly sent to Thomas Jefferson, then attending the Continental Congress. He showed it to delegates from other states and was "mortified" by their reaction, the gentlest being bewilderment at the link between *libertas* and *otium*. Stung by a ribald comment from John Adams and "raucous laughter" from other New Englanders, Jefferson wrote home that he liked the first side, "But for God's sake what is 'Deus nobis haec otia fecit'? It puzzles everybody here; if my country really enjoys that *otium* it is singular, as every other colony seems to be hard struggling." He concluded in despair, "The device is too aenigmatical, since if it puzzles now, it will be absolutely insoluble fifty years hence."

As a book, *Liberty and Freedom* is so sprawling that no review can give more than a flavor of the treasures tucked away in its pages—all 851 of them. (The volume is weighty in the most literal sense; it tipped this reviewer's bathroom scale at just under five pounds.) In fact, this is a work best dipped into at leisure, not read cover to cover. Only then can a reader fully savor such gems as the source of Uncle Sam, drawn from the nickname of "Uncle" Samuel Willson, who provisioned Union forces during the Civil War (incidentally, the first image was stout and clean shaven) or the real Betsy Ross story. Among the other delights are the origins of the terms Whig and Tory, the physical evolution of Lady Liberty and her transformation into Rosie the Riveter, and a remarkable section on Lincoln's self-conscious use of the new art of photography to manipulate his political image. And this does not even begin to touch on the fascinating discussions of popular songs and literature throughout the book.

Unfortunately, however, when read in a single gulp, the book's limitations come to the fore in a way that I suspect they would not for a piecemeal reader. By the last few chapters, this reader had the gnawing sense of plowing through a college survey text-book, albeit an unusually sophisticated one. The dead giveaway was the caption to the print "We Owe Allegiance To No Crown": "This colorful image, often reproduced in the new nation, combines eight republican symbols of liberty and freedom. Can you find them?" (No, I lost track at five.)

In addition, like many ambitious books, *Liberty and Freedom* grows a little ragged toward the end. The focus on folkways of liberty becomes a little fuzzy and pure political history fills in. Illustrations don't always line up with text. The writing, unusually formulaic for such a gifted stylist, becomes more and more singsong in the last chapters; the word "iconic" shows up with remorseless regularity. There are two chapters on feminism when one might have done, and Betty Friedan plays a strangely central role in both. Part of this, doubtless, reflects flagging authorial energies.

On a broader level, this weakness in the late innings reflects the inevitable difficulty of writing a history of present events, of ordering the vast volume of material, and of achieving something like authorial detachment. Readers of this magazine, in particular, may be put off by the author's sharply critical discussion of the presidency of George Bush and by his open distaste for former Attorney General John Ashcroft and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, "whose records on civil liberties were worse than A. Mitchell Palmer's." Palmer was, of course, the Attorney General behind the Red Scare raids of the 1920s.

I fear, however, there is also a more fundamental question afoot. On a conceptual level, "freedom" and "liberty" seem emptied of core meaning when the author finds popular expressions of both in events ranging from Prohibition ("ordered freedom" and "freedom from") to nativism (tribal liberty) and, even more perversely, southern lynchings (reflecting "hierarchic ideas of hegemonic liberty"). It

may well be that lynch mobs and the Ku Klux Klan appropriated symbols of liberty as part of their popular appeal, as have Temperance movements since the days of the Washingtonians and the Cold Water Army, but is that the same as espousing an idea of liberty? On that reading, National Socialism could qualify as a party of liberty, either tribal or hegemonic. Professor Fischer's answer would doubtless be that to measure these movements by an expansive notion of freedom both is anachronistic and demonstrates how completely the Whig interpretation has swept the field. Nevertheless, if freedom means anything and everything American, then there is less here than meets the eye.

In the end, none of this should detract from what is a monumental achievement and an extraordinary work of history. In the final pages, Professor Fischer resumes his Whiggish optimism. Throughout American history, he concludes, the party that articulates the most persuasive vision of liberty and freedom has held sway; the party that loses sight of this, be it nineteenth-century Federalists or twentieth-century Democrats, loses its grasp on the people. Elsewhere in the world, the American culture of freedom has proved both dominant and adaptable. In this, at least, Professor Fischer agrees with President Bush's most recent State of the Union Address: "Freedom is on the march."

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