

THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN IDEA

On learning of plans for a new American magazine, the scholar Charles Eliot Norton wrote in June 1857 to its first editor, his friend James Russell Lowell. He wanted to offer help but also to supply an inoculating dose of reality, to caution that “such things are never permanent in our country. They burn brightly for a little while, and then burn out.” He continued, referring to the 18th-century British editor Edward Cave by his pen name, Sylvanus Urban:

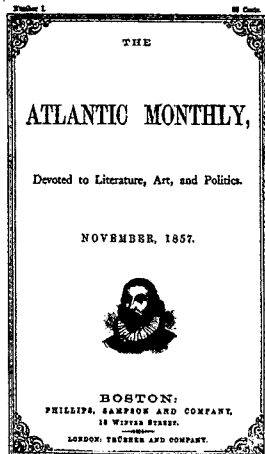
It would be a great thing for us if any undertaking of this kind could live long enough to get affections and associations connected with it, whose steady glow should take the place of, and more than supply, the shine of novelty, and the dazzle of a first go-off. I wish we had a Sylvanus Urban a hundred and fifty years old. I wish, indeed, we had anything so old in America; would give a thousand of our new lamps for the one old, battered, but true magical light.

With this issue, Lowell’s magazine turns 150—declining, with respect, the “battered,” still aspiring to the magical. What, beyond the patient commitment of its owners, can account for this longevity? Consider *The Atlantic’s* passage: through a permanent revolution in technology, from the telephone, to the practical fountain pen, to the radio, to the note pad, to the television, to the Internet; through financial crises, beginning in 1857 with what *The Atlantic* called a national “flurry” over credit (or *liquidity*, to use the present flurry’s term); through national arguments over slavery, suffrage, evolution, immigration, prohibition, anti-communism, civil rights, feminism, gay rights, evolution and immigration (again); through the international contests of ideology that defined the last century and into the new contest that so far is shaping this one. How has *The Atlantic* endured? More to the point, why?

We may be able to spot a clue in the arguments. Unlike other publications, *The Atlantic* wasn’t created to track a particular identity found on a map—Hollywood’s glamour, New York’s sophistication, Washington’s power, Silicon Valley’s imagination. It wasn’t yoked from birth to a particular industry or technology, like the automobile or the computer. *The Atlantic* was created in Boston by writers who saw themselves as the country’s intellectual leaders, and so its scope from the start was national, if rather theoretical. It was founded on an

encompassing abstraction, expressed in the words that appeared in the first issue and that appear again on the cover of this one: In politics, it would “honestly endeavor to be the exponent of what its conductors believe to be the American idea.” That sounds pretty good. But those first conductors—among them Lowell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—did not explain what they meant, not exactly. What or which “American idea”? The answer must have seemed obvious to them: In literature, they wanted to provide a platform for an emerging American voice; in politics, they had a cause—abolition—that gave granite definition to the American idea as equality, at least among men. One can easily imagine that beyond abolition, agreement would quickly break down. Only reluctantly did Lowell finally agree, in 1859, to publish an essay called “Ought Women to Learn the Alphabet?”

Today, our national facts would seem radically strange to Lowell—machines that can listen in on millions of telephone conversations, city-killing weapons that can fit inside satchels, tools that can pluck cells from embryos and hone them to fight disease—but the reference points for debate would seem quite familiar. What American faction, what American, doesn’t embrace both the revolutionary message of the Declaration of Independence and the restraining message of the Constitution? Our endless quarrels are over what these messages mean, over how the ideal should be made real. It is the endlessness of the quarrels—the elusiveness of the American idea, the tantalizing possibility of its full realization—that has sustained *The Atlantic*. Through the decades, *The Atlantic* has argued; over time, its writers have been found on both sides of some questions, as, without regard for party or clique or convention, the magazine has struggled with the great perplexities of the day. (This by turns fractious, forceful, and witty history is anthologized in a new collection of *Atlantic* pieces—called, as it happens, *The American Idea*—that Doubleday has just published.) Only a magazine devoted to understanding change could have thrived through so much of it. Only a magazine that constantly questions its own assumptions about the American idea could remain true to that idea’s potential. That, surely, was the founders’ original intent. (The image they selected for *The Atlantic’s*



first cover, pictured on the preceding page, is of John Winthrop, he of the "City upon a hill.") While we celebrate the magazine this month with glances back at the archive, we honor it more by continuing to turn our gaze ahead, with pieces like Walter Kirn's romp through the multitaskers' labyrinth, Robert D. Kaplan's report on the decline of American might, and Caitlin Flanagan's essay on Hillary Clinton.

To mark this anniversary, we also invited an eclectic group of thinkers who have had cause to consider the American idea to describe its future and the greatest challenges to it. We provided little more charge than that, beyond asking that they accomplish this feat in 300 words or so. (It should be noted that Judith Martin—Miss Manners—delivered precisely 300, one of them *whoops*. Her old colleague Tom Wolfe, who happens to differ with Martin on one point of historical interpretation, returned again and again to the library, revising his piece

until it reached 2,100 words.) We asked artists to perform the same feat with a drawing or a photograph.

In the pages that follow, George F. Will rings an alarm over the danger inherent in embracing a singular American idea, but many of the contributors agree on a rough definition of the idea itself—the easy part, as John Hope Franklin suggests. Yet has this idea been put into practice or not? Is it more threatened by Americans' faith in God or by their secularism? By Islamic fundamentalism or by our response to it? By poverty, racism, celebrity, the gobbling up of natural resources? Will science and the entrepreneurial spirit carry us through? Should we rejoice on this anniversary, or should we be angry? What follows is a wise, amused, pained, and impassioned cacophony, and, in sum, a statement of the sustaining value of *The Atlantic*, its commitment to the open mind in pursuit of an idea whose realization was partial and fragile 150 years ago, and still is.

—THE EDITORS



JOHN UPDIKE *The Individual*

The American idea, as I understand it, is to trust people to know their own minds and to act in their own enlightened self-interest, with a necessary respect for others. Totalitarian governments promise relief for deprived and desperate people, but in the end are maintained in power by terrorism from above rather than the consent of the governed. Empowerment of the individual was the idea in 1857, and after a century and a half of travail and misadventure among human societies, there is no better idea left standing. The idea of individual freedom, undermined by a collectivist tide in the first half of the last century and disregarded by radical Islam today, now spreads through an electronic culture of music, television, and the Internet, even under governments fearful of losing control.

Not only are ordinary citizens to be trusted, in the American idea, but leaders of government, too. Those who have lost the people's trust can be voted out. To be sure, there is a lag in the process, but a process more immediately responsive to the people's will might have ousted Lincoln and Washington in their unpopular moments. A certain

trust in a nation's overall soundness and stability is implied in the contract between the governed and the governors. American democracy speaks not just in votes and policies, but in the buoyancy, good nature, and mutual tolerance of its people. These qualities persist even in difficult times—and what times are devoid of difficulties, of contention and conflict and challenge? The American idea builds them in, creating not a static paradise but a productively competitive section of the Earth's humanity.

The challenges ahead? A fury against liberal civilization by the world's poor, who have nothing to lose; a ruinous further depletion of the world's natural assets; a global warming that will change world climate and with it world geopolitics. The American idea, promulgated in a land of plenty, must prepare to sustain itself in a world of scarcity. ■

John Updike has published more than 20 novels, as well as many collections of short stories, poetry, and criticism. He has twice won the Pulitzer Prize for his fiction.

RAY KURZWEIL *Frontiers*

The American idea is to push beyond frontiers, whether in geography (Manifest Destiny), science (splitting

the atom, DNA), invention (the telephone, the lightbulb, the airplane, the Internet), industry (mass production), music (jazz, rock and roll), or popular culture (Hollywood).

The means of creativity have now been democratized. For example, anyone with an inexpensive high-definition video camera and a personal computer can create a high-quality, full-length motion picture. A musician in her dorm room commands the resources once available only in a multimillion-dollar recording studio. Just a few years ago, a couple of students at Stanford University wrote some software on their personal computers that revolutionized Web searches and became the basis of a company now worth \$150 billion. Individuals now have the tools to break new ground in every field.

These information tools are more than doubling their power in terms of price-performance and capacity every year, which means multiplying by a thousand in less than a decade, by a billion in 25 years. Every decade, according to my models, we are also shrinking the size of these technologies by a factor of about 100. Today you can e-mail movies and sound recordings and books. In about 20 years, you will be able to e-mail

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