# *In Search of the Republic* Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner

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# Book Reviews

## RICHARD VETTERLI and GARY BRYNER. *In Search of the Republic*. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987. xii; 269 pp. $32.95 hardback. $14.50 paperback.

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*In Search of the Republic* provides evidence of a remarkable change in American scholarship on the founding of the United States. This study by Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner is all the more valuable in proportion as the change they record has heretofore passed unperceived. Where once scholarship debated the question whether the United States were founded purely on material considerations and a view of human nature as evil or, alternatively, on moral considerations and possibly some particular providence, today the debate is radically altered. That is why this book is able to announce its purposes as to "consider the evolution of the idea of public virtue," "to discuss its central role in the political thought of the founding," and "to describe its relationship with the other political and cultural elements of the American republic" (2). The question now is whether virtue (or morality) constituted a foundation of the United States Constitution, or whether virtue is the goal of that enabling instrument. Superseding all former quarrels, this new debate installs virtue on each side of the equation. Thus the old battle is terminated, though it remains obscure how that came to pass.

Vetterli and Bryner seem to me correctly to have grasped the metamorphosis taking place—as is reflected in the title of Lance Banning's essay "Second Thoughts on Virtue. . . . "[1] Nevertheless, no less recent a production than Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* maintains with considerable persuasiveness the thesis that the founding was radically flawed, Hobbesian, and altogether hostile to the claims of virtue and nobility. This study, on the other hand, situates the founding so squarely in two millennia of concern for virtue that it creates the impression that *The Closing of the American Mind* sprang purely from the brow of Allan Bloom without any foundation in the American past.

Every reader of Bloom's book, however, discovers the familiar face of our own time in his account of the relativity of values (and indeed there are no moral *values* that are not relative!) and an evident decline of moral consensus within the society. Thus, the portrait of moral continuity that Vetterli and Bryner draw serves to set off in stark relief the portrait of moral decline depicted by Bloom. Sometime after 1832 (the period in which Tocqueville visited the United States and up to which Vetterli and Bryner survey) and up to our own time, a dramatic break has occurred—a break of epoch-making significance.

This picture is somewhat ironic. For the accomplishment of a view of the founding in which virtue is no longer problematic resulted partly from a decision to see the Revolution as no decisive break with the past. To the degree, then, that the American Revolution expressed moral continuity with the past rather than a radical departure, it becomes more urgent to discover where America did in fact depart in later years.

I believe, however, that this excellent book errs in downplaying the revolutionary significance of the founding in precisely the opposite manner to that in which Bloom erred in depreciating the moral accomplishment of the Revolution. Of the two errors, Vetterli's and Bryner's is far the more acceptable. For they seem to wish to resist the imputation of man standing alone, cut loose from his moral moorings in the Judeo-Christian heritage. Their insightful discussion of private morality as the foundation of the republic—echoing Washington's first inaugural address—therefore integrates private morality with a moral tradition instead of leaving it to be colonized by value relativism. I submit, however, that the idea of a historical break—indeed, even new revelation—need no more leave man standing alone than did the flight from Egypt leave Israel standing alone. Particular providence generally distinguishes itself by thwarting human plans.

The eight chapters of *In Search of the Republic* chronicle the "conversation about virtue" from the perspective of what American colonialists and founders were likely to have heard and said. In addition to generous reliance on primary testimony, the study demonstrates an admirable command of secondary literature. The account is compelling, as far as it goes, and prepares the way for the next step. That is, from a virtue conceived as subordination to community (chapter 1) to the ultimate identification of virtue with "self-interest rightly understood," the authors carefully maintain their focus on the relationship of virtue to the idea of republicanism.

Vetterli and Bryner are far from the first to have imagined ancient virtue and republicanism to be founded on generous

expectations of human nature, while modern virtue and republicanism purportedly profit from the ultimate recognition of man's fallen nature. The facts are actually the reverse, however. The ancients believed few indeed were capable of true virtue (and thus salvation, later). The great modern breakthrough was the affirmation that the many were capable of virtue—that is, self-government. This is nowhere so evident as in number 51 of *The Federalist,* where Publius argues the need to supply the "defect of better motives" in representatives—but *not* in the people—with "auxiliary precautions." Such a conception would have been incomprehensible in the ancient world. And today folk often misread this language as applying to the people, because that *still* seems intuitive (compare page 187 with 194, where this passage is discussed from both of these perspectives).

The contrivances of American constitutionalism need to be comprehended as aids to facilitate the people's rule rather than merely as checks upon their vices. *In Search of the Republic* helps us to see this truth with clarity. In the last analysis, we discover the need to take virtue seriously at the founding only when we have finally conceded the people's copious authority for social and political institutions.

For that reason the discussion of virtue is the natural pair to the discussion of equality. Virtue is important at the founding *because* equality is the central principle of the founding. There is no foundation for republicanism apart from the consent of the governed, no consent apart from equality, and no equality apart from transcending moral law. The equation is straightforward and simple. *In Search of the Republic* succeeds in the best way a book can: it not only leads the reader to the center of the conversation about its subject, virtue; it also readies the reader for a new search.

## NOTE

[1]Lance Banning, "Second Thoughts on Virtue and the Course of Revolutionary Thinking," in Terence Ball and J. G. A. Pocock, *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 194–212.