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The Case for the Enlightenment: George Washington's False Teeth

We live in an age of inflation: inflated money, inflated grades, inflated letters of recommendation, inflated reputations, and inflated ideas. The general puffery has affected our understanding of the movement at the beginning of modern political culture, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, because it too has been blown up to such a size that it would not be recognized by the men who first created it. Having been floated at first with a few bons mots in some Parisian salons, it became a campaign to crush l'infâme, a march of progress, a spirit of the age, a secular faith, a world view to be defended or combated or transcended, and the source of everything good, bad, and modern, including liberalism, capitalism, imperialism, male chauvinism, world federalism, UNESCO humanism, and the Family of Man. Whoever has a bone to pick or a cause to defend begins with the Enlightenment.

We scholars have added to the confusion because we have created a huge industry, Enlightenment Studies, with its own associations, journals, monograph series, congresses, and foundations. Like all professionals, we keep expanding our territory. At last count, there were thirty professional societies on six of the seven continents (Antarctica is still resisting), and at our last world con-
gresses we listened to papers on the Russian Enlightenment, the Romanian Enlightenment, the Brazilian Enlightenment, the Josephinian Enlightenment, the Pietistic Enlightenment, the Jewish Enlightenment, the musical Enlightenment, the religious Enlightenment, the radical Enlightenment, the conservative Enlightenment, and the Confucian Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is beginning to be everything and therefore nothing.

I

I propose deflation. Let us consider the Enlightenment as a movement, a cause, a campaign to change minds and reform institutions. Like all movements, it had a beginning, a middle, and, in some places but not others, an end. It was a concrete historical phenomenon, which can be located in time and pinned down in space: Paris in the early eighteenth century. Of course it had origins. What movement does not? They extended back to antiquity and covered the map of Europe. Cartesian doubt, Newtonian physics, Lockean epistemology, the cosmologies of Leibniz and Spinoza, the natural law of Grotius and Pufendorf, the skepticism of Bayle, the biblical criticism of Richard Simon, the toleration of the Dutch, the Pietism of the Germans, the political theories and freethinking of the English: One could list philosophical sources at length, and many historians have done so. But to compile the sources is to miss the point, for the Enlightenment was less than the sum of its philosophical parts, and few of the philosophes were original philosophers.

They were men of letters. Only rarely did they develop ideas undreamed of in earlier generations. Compare Voltaire with Pascal, Condillac with Locke, Diderot with Descartes, Laplace with Newton, d’Holbach with Leibniz. The philosophes worked variations on themes set for them by their predecessors. Nature, reason, tolera-
tion, happiness, skepticism, individualism, civil liberty, cosmopolitanism: All can be found, at greater depth, in the thought of the seventeenth century. They can be found among eighteenth-century thinkers unconnected or opposed to the philosophes, such as Vico, Haller, Burke, and Samuel Johnson. What, then, set the philosophes apart?

Commitment to a cause. Engagement. The philosophe was a new social type, known to us today as the intellectual. He meant to put his ideas to use, to persuade, propagandize, and change the world around him. To be sure, earlier thinkers had also hoped to modify the world. The religious radicals and the humanists of the sixteenth century were devoted to their causes. But the philosophes represented a new force in history, men of letters acting in concert and with considerable autonomy to push through a program. They developed a collective identity, forged by common commitment in the face of common risks. They were marked as a group by persecution, just enough to dramatize their daring and not enough to deter them from undertaking more. They developed a strong sense of “us” against “them”: men of wit against the bigots, honnêtes hommes against exclusive privilege, the children of light against the demons of darkness.

They were also an elite. Despite the leveling tendency inherent in their faith in reason, they aimed to take over the commanding heights of culture and to enlighten from above. This strategy led them to concentrate on the conquest of salons and academies, journals and theaters, Masonic lodges and key cafés, where they could win the rich and powerful to their cause and even gain access, by back doors and boudoirs, to the throne. They reached a broad public among the middle classes, but they drew a line above the peasantry. Better not teach peasants how to read, said Voltaire; someone had to plow the fields.

This view, I realize, is heresy. It is politically incorrect. Although
it allows for the influence of royal mistresses and grandes dames in the salons, it concentrates on men. It is elitist, Voltairean, and incorregibly Parisian. What about the famous cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment? And the great thinkers not merely outside Paris but beyond the boundaries of France? Although I consider Paris the capital of the Republic of Letters in the eighteenth century, I agree that the Enlightenment spread from many sites: Edinburgh, Naples, Halle, Amsterdam, Geneva, Berlin, Milan, Lisbon, London, and even Philadelphia. Each city had its philosophers, many of whom corresponded with the philosophes, and quite a few outdid them. If one measures depth and originality of thought, it is difficult to find a Parisian who compares with Hume, Smith, Burke, Winckelmann, Kant, and Goethe. Why then concentrate on Paris?

That is where the movement came together and defined itself as a cause. In an earlier phase, one that I would call the pre-Enlightenment, philosophic writers like John Locke, John Toland, and Pierre Bayle crossed paths throughout England and the Low Countries. They shared itineraries and ideas, including Bayle’s vision of an international Republic of Letters. But it was not until their intellectual heirs, the philosophes, set up camp and began campaigning that the Enlightenment emerged as a cause, with partisans and a program. Its adherents forged their collective identity in Paris during the first decades of the eighteenth century. As their movement gathered force, it spread, and as it spread, it changed, adapting itself to other conditions and incorporating other ideas. But it did not reach everywhere and cover everything in the spectrum of intellectual life. To equate the Enlightenment with the totality of Western thought in the eighteenth century is to get it badly wrong. By viewing it as a concerted campaign on the part of a self-conscious group of intellectuals, one can reduce it to its proper proportions. This perspec-
tive does justice to its character, for the *philosophes* concentrated less on developing systematic philosophy than on mastering the media of their time. They excelled in witty conversation, letter writing, manuscript bulletins, journalism, and all forms of the printed word, from the massive tomes of the *Encyclopédie* to the pamphlet *pâtés* served up by Voltaire.

The diffusionist view also allows for the spread of the Enlightenment to other parts of Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century and to the rest of the world thereafter. By 1750 like-minded philosophers in other sites had begun to think of themselves as *philosophes*. Paris drew them like a magnet, and the Parisians enlisted them in the cause, delighted to find reinforcement from original thinkers like Hume and Beccaria. But the foreign *philosophe*, with his imperfect French and incorrectly curled wig, felt his foreignness in Paris. He often returned home determined to strike out on his own. (Despite the lionizing in Paris, Beccaria hustled back to Milan as fast as his coach would carry him and turned from criminology to aesthetics.) The *philosophe en mission* in London, Berlin, and Milan also discovered alien sources of thought, many of them distressingly Christian. Fissures opened; divisions developed; branches stretched out in new directions. Such is the nature of movements. They are always in motion, multiplying and dividing.

An emphasis on diffusion does not imply indifference to ideas, either among the *philosophes* or among the historians studying them. Nor does it imply passivity on the receiving end of the messages sent out from Paris and from other transmission points along the circuits of intellectual exchange. On the contrary, the foreigners talked back. Backtalk, personal interaction, mutual exchange of letters and books kept expanding “the Church,” as Voltaire called it. And the cause carried conviction because the ideas of the *philosophes* were *idées-forces*, like liberty, happiness, nature, and nature’s laws.
But they were not particularly original. Thinkers in Stockholm and Naples did not need to read Voltaire in order to learn about tolerance and natural law.

Those ideas belonged to the common stock of concepts accessible to the educated classes everywhere. Philosophers worked them over in new ways without any need for nudging from Paris and often without any alignment with the Enlightenment. What Voltaire and his coconspirators provided was not original matter for thought but a new spirit, the sense of participation in a secular crusade. It began with derision, as an attempt to laugh the bigots out of polite society, and it ended with the occupation of the moral high ground, as a campaign for the liberation of mankind, including the enserfed and the enslaved, Protestants, Jews, blacks, and (in the case of Condorcet) women.

From deflation to diffusion and diffusion to the study of a spirit, this approach to the Enlightenment may well seem suspect. For if we are not to make an inventory of ideas but rather to take the pulse of a movement, will we not be forced to rely on groping in the dark for a Zeitgeist? I prefer to think that we can pursue a more rigorous historicity. Movements can be mapped. One can follow them in space and time, as groups cohere and messages flow through communication systems.

The Enlightenment grew out of a great crisis during the last years of the reign of Louis XIV. For a century the power of the monarchy and the prestige of literature had grown apace, but after 1685 they grew apart. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, the persecution of Jansenists and Quietists all came to a head while France suffered through a series of demographic, economic, and military disasters. With the state on the verge of collapse, men of letters attached to the court—Fénelon, La Bruyère, Boulainvilliers, Vauban, Saint-Simon—questioned the basis of Bourbon absolutism and the reli-
gious orthodoxy it enforced. *La ville* went its own way as *la cour* succumbed to paralysis, waiting for the death of the aged king. A new generation of *esprits forts* and *beaux esprits* took over the salons and breathed new life into the libertinism developed during the seventeenth century. In 1706 a twelve-year-old prodigy, François-Marie Arouet, later known as Voltaire, made his debut in the libertine society of the Temple. By the death of Louis XIV nine years later he had established a reputation as the sharpest wit in town, and the town, or the wealthy, worldly part of it known as *le monde*, had given itself over to witticisms, most of them at the expense of the Church and whatever passed for dignity in the governing circles of the Regency.

The Enlightenment at this stage remained confined to a narrow elite and also to word of mouth and manuscript. *Bons mots* and libertine tracts passed from salon to salon, but they rarely appeared in print. The first great exceptions were Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1721) and Voltaire’s *Lettres philosophiques* (1734). Both works showed an advance from wit to wisdom, for both authors mixed libertine impieties with serious reflections on despotism and intolerance. Having been beaten up by the lackeys of the chevalier de Rohan-Chabot and imprisoned twice in the Bastille, Voltaire had learned to appreciate the weakness of independent writers in a world dominated by protection networks of wealth and birth.

The next great publishing event, the appearance of *Le Philosophe* in 1743, provided an answer to that problem. Writers should conform to an ideal type: neither a scientist nor a savant, but a new phenomenon, the *philosophe*, part man of letters, part man of the world, and entirely engaged in using letters to rid the world of superstition. This little tract, later incorporated in the *Encyclopédie* and in Voltaire’s *Évangile de la raison*, served as a declaration of independence for the intellectual and at the same time provided him
with a strategy: He should work within the power structure, promoting an alliance of *gens de lettres* and *gens du monde*, in order to advance the cause of *philosophie*.

The *philosophes*, as the group now began to be known, found their greatest ally in C. G. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, the director of the book trade from 1750 to 1763. Thanks to his protection, the Enlightenment burst fully into print. Despite persecution from clergymen and magistrates, the most important works, from Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* (1748) to Rousseau’s *Émile* and *Du contrat social* (1762), circulated safely through the arteries of the publishing industry. The *Encyclopédie* (seventeen volumes of text, 1751–1765, followed by eleven volumes of plates, the last published in 1772) redefined the world of knowledge for the modern reader, infused it with *philosophie*, and identified it with a coterie of *philosophes*, the *société de gens de lettres* named on its title page. The *Encyclopédie* caused a scandal and nearly went under; but by 1789 it had become the greatest best seller in the history of publishing. Despite some hard knocks, or rather because of them, particularly during the political-intellectual crisis of 1757–1762, the *philosophe* had emerged as a new social type and a force to be reckoned with, the phenomenon that we now identify as the intellectual.

The rest of the story need not be related here. It has plenty of complexities and contradictions (not the least of which was Jean-Jacques Rousseau), and it can hardly be reduced to a tranquil process of diffusing light by selling books. After the 1750s most of it took place outside France, especially through the recasting of autocratic power in the form of enlightened absolutism. But everywhere—in the Prussia of Frederick II, the Russia of Catherine II, the Austria of Joseph II, the Tuscany of the archduke Leopold, the Spain of Charles III, the Portugal of Joseph I, the Sweden of Gustavus III—sovereigns and ministers looked to the *philosophes* for guidance or legitimation. Nearly all of them read French; nearly all
consulted the *Encyclopédie*, and so did the most important of their subjects.

The point of taking this detour through historicism is not merely to reduce the Enlightenment to manageable proportions but also to address the next question, its relevance to issues that arose after the eighteenth century. The inflated Enlightenment can be identified with all modernity, with nearly everything subsumed under the name of Western civilization, and so it can be made responsible for nearly everything that causes discontent, especially in the camps of the postmodernists and anti-Westernizers.

II

Whatever our success in shrinking the Enlightenment down to its true size as an eighteenth-century phenomenon, we cannot deny that it produced a set of values that remained alive through the centuries that followed and that set some societies apart from others. The nomenclature varies—modern vs. medieval, bourgeois vs. aristocratic, liberal vs. traditional, capitalist vs. feudal—but taken together, the contrasting terms point to a dividing line that has long existed in the collective consciousness. Like most boundaries, it has provoked conflict. Some have wanted to move it; some, to wipe it out. Now, however, it may simply disappear without a fight because a new line has been drawn: 1989, the demarcation of two eras—before and after the Cold War. We have come to the end of a short century, which extended from 1914 to 1989, but we do not know what century we have entered.

The age of postmodernism? The term means different things to different people, but however unsatisfactory it may be, it conveys a sense of rupture from a time when the terms were clear or at least clearly strung out along a set of opposites. One was for or against
liberalism, conservatism, capitalism, socialism, individualism, collectivism, and so on. Now we talk, or rather discourse, about representing, remembering, inventing, negotiating, construing, constructing, and deconstructing. Having taken the linguistic turn, we feel free to reedit reality and to pronounce the Enlightenment dead. But reality refuses to behave like a text, and the Enlightenment seems to have life in it yet, because it is still a whipping boy, and one doesn’t whip cadavers. The attacks have changed, however. In place of the old accusations—shallow positivism, naive optimism, bourgeois ideology—postmodernists have arraigned the Enlightenment under a new set of headings. The indictment goes as follows:

1. The Enlightenment’s claim to universalism really served as a cover for Western hegemony. The rights of man provided legitimation for the destruction of other cultures. Example: Captain Cook.

I would not minimize the damage wrought by Westerners when they came into contact with other parts of the world, nor would I dispute Cook’s reputation as a prototypical man of the Enlightenment. But Cook showed much respect for native customs, far more than the conquistadors of the sixteenth century and the imperialists of the nineteenth. Tragedy could not be avoided in the West-East and North-South encounters, but it was driven by trade, disease, and technology rather than by philosophy. Mutual incomprehension certainly compounded the damage. Its cultural dimension was crucial; but the Enlightenment was not the same thing as Western culture, and the philosophes made laudable efforts not only to understand other peoples but also to improve their lot: thus the Histoire philosophique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes, a radical and widely diffused tract by the abbé Raynal, which contributed greatly to the abolition of slavery.

A related accusation goes somewhat differently:

2. The Enlightenment was cultural imperialism masquerading as
a higher form of rationality. It provided Europeans with a "civilizing mission" and a way of constructing "natives" that led to their silencing and subjugation. Example: Orientalism.

This argument draws on Foucault, literary theory, and anthropology to emphasize the epistemological and cultural ingredients in Western hegemony. No one who has read through those sources would deny that individuals are always construing others. In cross-cultural contacts, "othering" (as the jargon would have it) can be fatal. It leads to "essentialism" (another current pejorative)—that is, the projection of qualities on others in a way that reifies them in the eyes of the beholder and sometimes in their own eyes as well. In this respect Enlightenment thought can look "culture-bound" and "nondialogical" (two more taboos in postmodern social science). But every culture has boundaries. Western notions of individualism may indeed be incompatible with the notions of selfhood developed in China and India. But the Enlightenment opened the way to an anthropological understanding of others. It was deeply dialogical and provided an antidote to its own tendency to dogmatize: Witness Diderot's Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville and all his dialogues.

Orientalism certainly provided the Westerners with stereotypes that they visited on the East, and the philosophes contributed their share to this tendency. Montesquieu and Voltaire may have put their sympathetic Persians and philosophical Chinese in a positive light in order to project criticisms back on France; but positive stereotyping is stereotyping, nonetheless, and it may close off receptivity to any genuine give-and-take with other cultures. But other ages, in contrast with the eighteenth century, were nearly all take and no give. Imperialism is essentially a nineteenth-century phenomenon, and it took its inspiration from the Romantics rather than the philosophes. Byron and Kipling, Delacroix and Ingres, Verdi and Puccini outdid the artists of the eighteenth century by
far in creating exotic Orientals. Moreover, the exoticizing began long before the Enlightenment, and it often took the form of demonizing. Cruel Saracens, Oriental despots, and têtes de Turcs have proliferated in the Western imagination since the early wars against the Ottoman Empire. Older prejudices date from the Crusades. They developed over centuries, accompanied, it must be said, by Eastern prejudices against the West. (After I heard a paper on the reception of Rousseau in Japan, it seemed to me that we should consider "Occidentalism" as well as "Orientalism.") To pin Orientalism on the Enlightenment is to confuse the thought of a few intellectuals in the eighteenth century with the entire course of Western civilization.

Finally, it must be stressed that the Enlightenment lacked the most poisonous ingredient of imperialism—namely, racism. There is no getting around Jefferson's support of slavery or the biological speculations by Lord Kames and Lord Monboddo on the nature of Amerindians, Africans, and Orang Outangs. But for more typical views, one should turn to the passionate denunciation of slavery by Voltaire in Candide, Chapter 19, which was inspired by the radical egalitarianism of Helvétius's De l'esprit. Race was not a fundamental category in the thought of the philosophes. The world had to wait for the likes of Gobineau to arrive at that level of philosophy.

3. The Enlightenment pursued knowledge so fanatically that it undermined ethics. Ultimately that fanaticism fed into fascism, because it armed the state with superior technology and destroyed the moral barriers to the all-pervasive exercise of state power. Newton's natural law became reduced to matter in motion, despite his faith in an interventionist, Christian God. Kant's "dare to know" became "dare to reject the promptings of the conscience" despite his attempt to provide a rational basis for the Golden Rule. The philosophes did not merely damage organized religion; they also
sapped all morality, which ultimately rests on the irrational: faith and Revelation. Example: the marquis de Sade.

Sade has indeed been presented as the ultimate philosophe, the one who put d'Alembert's "experimental physics of the soul" into practice in the darkest corners of cruelty. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno aligned Sade with Kant and Nietzsche in a "dialectic of enlightenment" that stretched from Homer to Hitler. Faced with the disasters of totalitarianism and world war, they questioned the assumed wisdom of the Left, which associated Enlightenment with revolution. Instead they argued that the Enlightenment led by a negative dialectic to what might seem to be its opposite, fascism.

One can see their point: Rational demystification of the eighteenth-century sort might be understood to produce its dialectical opposite, a modern mythology of science and technology, which opened onto a moral wilderness. But can one take it seriously as an account of the Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno do not discuss the work of a single French philosophe. Instead of considering the Enlightenment concretely, as a phenomenon located in time and space, they let it disappear from sight while speculating on the entire sweep of Western civilization.

The blind spot in their speculations has serious consequences because the Enlightenment provided the main defense against the barbarism that they deplored. Montesquieu's attempt to shore up liberty against the inroads of despotism, Voltaire's campaigns against the perversions of justice, Rousseau's plea for the rights of the dispossessed, Diderot's questioning of all authority, including that of reason itself: Such were the weapons left by the intellectuals of the eighteenth century for their successors two hundred years later. Horkheimer and Adorno refused to make use of them.

Instead they drew on another philosophical tradition, the one that leads from Hegel to Heidegger. Not that they subscribed to Heidegger's Hitlerism. But by viewing Hitler from the perspective
of German dialectics, they were incapable of making sense of the supreme evil that overcame Germany. That evil stands condemned by the standards of human rights developed in the Enlightenment and proclaimed in the founding charters of democracy, notably the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. There may be inadequate evidence for the "self-evident truths" of the American Declaration. They are articles of faith, not facts. But one must put one's faith somewhere—better, I believe, in the normative tradition of the Enlightenment than in the dialectics designed to refute it.

4. The Enlightenment had an excessive faith in reason. By relying on rationalism, it failed to erect defenses against the irrational. Its naive cult of progress left humanity helpless before the horrors of the twentieth century.

Faith in reason is indeed a faith, and it may not be adequate to sustain men and women confronted with the violence and irrationality of the twentieth century. But rationalism does not distinguish the Enlightenment from other schools of thought, such as Thomism or Cartesianism. The pertinent distinction, as Ernst Cassirer explained, sets apart the esprit systématique of the eighteenth century from the esprit de système of the seventeenth. The latter carried reason to extremes by using it to construct all-embracing theories. The philosophes challenged theories. They dared criticize everything, but with very few exceptions—d'Holbach, Quesnay—they did not erect systems.

What is the alternative to the critical use of reason? Embracing the irrational? Freud relied on reason in order to explore the irrational. He followed the lead of Diderot, whose Neveu de Rameau provides a clinical case study of a man without morality, who wanted to kill his father so that he could sleep with his mother. Nietzsche celebrated the Dionysian ingredient in culture, but he admired Voltaire and did not provide a rationale for his postmod-
ernist followers to abandon the Voltairean struggle against tyranny and social injustice.

The most typical of the postmodernist attacks on the Enlightenment, John Gray's *Enlightenment's Wake*, invokes Nietzsche in urging us to abandon faith in normative principles and to accept the necessity of taking up stands in a landscape shorn of meaningful markers. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Gray does not pause to consider what the French *philosophes* actually wrote. Instead he offers a vague and unsubstantiated description of something he calls the enlightenment project and proceeds to condemn it for its failure to meet the standards set by postmodernist philosophy. Aside from its anachronism, the argument seems to assume that political culture derives from political theory, as if a wrong turn or a twist in the logic of a philosopher could determine the way ordinary mortals orient themselves in the world. Gray sets them straight. Armed with arguments from Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Adorno, he slashes away at what he takes to be the Enlightenment world view, leaves it in tatters, and challenges his readers to accept their "historical fate"—that is, the world according to Gray, a world without enlightenment, "the postmodern condition of fractured perspectives and groundless practices."

The philosophers of the Enlightenment probably would fail that test if Gray administered it after considering their work. Condorcet—distracted, no doubt, from an understanding of historical fate by his efforts to free slaves, enfranchise women, and stop Robespierre—probably would get an F, for what could look more groundless, when viewed from this side of Hitlerism and Stalinism, than his theory of progress: reason driving out falsehood with help from the printing press? But it may not be absurd to envision progress with a lowercase *p*, of which more later. Meanwhile what should we make of the combination of reason and Terror, which drove Condorcet to suicide?
5. The Enlightenment belongs to the origins of totalitarianism. It provided the theoretical basis for the Terror of the French Revolution, which in turn pointed the way to the terrors of Hitler and Stalin. The common element in all three was the attempt to force the social order to conform to an ideological blueprint.

True, in making his case for the Terror, Robespierre drew on Montesquieu and Rousseau. Like many other Jacobins, he tried to redesign France in accordance with political theory. But he also smashed the bust of Helvétius in the Jacobin Club and railed against the Encyclopedists, reserving his praise for the one *philosophe*, Rousseau, who made a break with the Enlightenment and opened the way to Romanticism. Rousseau's notion of forcing men to be free by making them conform to the dictates of an organic General Will undercut the notions of liberty developed by the other *philosophes*. But Rousseau never envisaged anything like the Terror, and the Terror had nothing in common with the ideologies of fascism and communism. The crimes committed by twentieth-century states violated basic principles of the Enlightenment: respect for the individual, for liberty, for all the rights of man.

But rhetoric about the rights of man exposes the Enlightenment to a further critique: It says nothing about the rights of women. And what about animals, the environment, and other causes that command the attention of the post–Cold War world? Those questions lead to a final accusation.

6. The Enlightenment is outdated and inadequate as an outlook for coping with contemporary problems. The *philosophes* championed an instrumentalist view of reason, which led to ecological disaster, and a masculine view of civic life, which relegated women to the private sphere.

True, the Enlightenment was time-bound as well as culture-bound. It took place in a world where some causes of the twentieth century remained unthinkable. It therefore failed to think great
thoughts that later changed the boundaries of culture. To defend the Enlightenment is not to reject the poetry of T. S. Eliot, the painting of Picasso, the physics of Einstein, or even the grammatology of Derrida. Nor is it to reject the rights of women. Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft actually owed a great deal to the example as well as to the ideas of the *philosophes*, even though some speculations of Diderot and Rousseau seem retrogressive when compared with the earlier notions of Poulain de la Barre. The point is not to make an inventory of ideas, crossing some off the list and adding others. It is to adopt an intellectual stance that will serve when lines are drawn and one’s back is to the wall. When challenged to condemn torture in Argentina, war in Vietnam, or racism in the United States, where can we make our stand if not on principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen?

Having come to the end of the indictment, I realize that I have fallen into the role of an advocate and abandoned that of a historian. Historians often succumb to such slippage when they belong to the culture they study. Why not throw professionalism to the wind and slide all the way into sermonizing?

III

If I may add some observations of my own, I would stress the refusal of the *philosophes* to respect boundaries, either of disciplines or of nations. Despite their Parisian origins and their proclivity for French, they lived in a Republic of Letters that was truly cosmopolitan. It had neither borders nor police. It was open to ideas from everywhere. Yet no one in it, or anywhere else, conceived of the idea of nationalism. That barbarism began with the wars of 1792 and the fatal notion of “My country, right or wrong!”
I recently strayed out of the eighteenth century in order to do some research on the British Raj in the archives of the India Office in London. Before long my ears were ringing with a refrain that appeared in all the documents. *Bande Mataram! Bande Mataram! Bande Mataram* ("Long live the Mother!"—that is, India) was the ralying cry of the Indian revolutionaries who wanted to throw off the *Feringhees* ("foreigners") at the beginning of this century. It was their Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. It moved them to tears, occasionally even to suicidal bomb attacks. And its fascination, to a *Feringhee*, is its unthinkable. What is *Bande Mataram* to me?

And Liberty, Equality, Fraternity? Two centuries of bad weather have nearly worn the words off the faces of most town halls in France. I doubt that they resonate inside the souls of many French today. You hear them, if at all, in parody: "Neither Liberty, nor Equality, nor Fraternity, but a little more mustard, s’il vous plaît." The last time I noticed a patriotic lump in a French throat was at a screening of *Casablanca*, when Humphrey Bogart got the crowd to sing the "Marseillaise."

Yet only yesterday men were killing one another for a few square kilometers of Bosnia. To die for Greater Serbia? Another unthinkable thought. For a United Ireland? Only recently has the IRA agreed to stop throwing bombs. The ETA bomb throwers still kill in the name of the Basque Fatherland. Kurds assassinate in Turkey, Palestinians in Israel, Israelis in Palestine, Tamils in Sri Lanka, all for rearrangements of the map. The same thing is going on in Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Chechnya. . . .

No need to recite the entire list. We all know it well enough. What we do not and cannot take in is the passion that drives men to kill for such causes. For us, the tiny minority of well-fed, well-educated Westerners, Robert Graves said it all at the end of World War I: "Goodbye to all that." Our fathers fought in World War II to extinguish nationalism, not to unleash it. Yet every day it explodes
before our eyes on the screens of our television sets. How can we make sense of the drive to die for fantasies like Mother India?

Here is Ajit Singh, a passionate nationalist, haranguing a crowd at Rawalpindi in 1907, according to a police agent who secretly took down his words: "Die for your country. We are 30 crores [300,000,000]. They are a lakh and a half [150,000]. A puff of wind would blow them away. Cannon are of no account. One finger can easily be broken. When five fingers join to make a fist, no one can break it. (This was given with great emphasis, and flowers were thrown.)"

One gets the point. But can one "get" the gale of flowers, the stamping of bare feet, the songs bursting from chests, the small boys rushing to take oaths in blood, the old men with tears in their eyes, the lumps in all the throats?

The words remain, the music has gone—at least for those of us who respond to Graves and would add: "Goodbye and good riddance! May nationalism die a thousand deaths and never rise again." Yet there it is, alive and howling all around us, practically within hearing distance of London, Amsterdam, Paris, and Rome. Is there any way we can pick up the beat, if not in sympathy, at least with enough empathy to understand the force that drives it?

One way lies through a reconsideration of our own traditions. We may be appalled at the patriotic gore spread throughout our past, but even the most sophisticated of us, at one time or other, has felt that peculiar lump in the throat.

I underwent an attack of lumpiness myself, I must confess, during a guided tour of Independence Hall in Philadelphia a few years ago. There sat Washington, the guide explained, in that very chair, in this very room. It was a handsome Georgian chair with an emblematic sun carved on its back, and Washington was presiding over the Constitutional Convention of 1787. At a particularly difficult moment in the debates, when the fate of the young republic
seemed to hang in the balance, Benjamin Franklin, sitting here, asked George Mason, sitting there, "Is the sun rising or setting?" They got through that deadlock and a dozen others. And when at last they had completed their work, Franklin pronounced: "It is rising."

"What great men they were," I said to myself, the lump growing in my throat. "Washington, Franklin, Madison—and Jefferson, at that moment advising Lafayette during the first phase of the French Revolution. How much greater than our politicians today. They were men of the Enlightenment."

I cannot comprehend the rising sun of Japan, and I doubt that Washington's sun meant much to the Japanese tourists at my side in Independence Hall. Seen from abroad, the cult of the Constitution and the Founding Fathers must look like an alien folklore. To be sure, Washington himself no longer stirs much emotion in American breasts. Unlike Lincoln and Roosevelt, he looks too stiff, propped up in those Gilbert Stuart portraits, jaw firm, lips pursed, brow ponderous, more an icon than a human being. Icons are for worshiping, but the iconic Washington worshiped in the United States is the one that looks out at us from the dollar bill.

Now, the cult of the dollar may not be all bad. Its emotional range is limited but not lethal. Unlike nationalism, it inspires self-interest rather than self-sacrifice, investment rather than bomb throwing. And for all its crassness, it is ecumenical; one man's dollar is as good as another's. That principle also derives from the Enlightenment, the branch that runs through Mandeville and Adam Smith. Enlightened self-interest may not be as lofty as Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; but it made a new life possible in the New World for millions of immigrants, and it may ultimately renovate Russia, where the dollar has become the effective currency.

This line of thought has a respectable ancestry. It passed through French physiocracy, Scottish moral philosophy, and English utilitarianism. But it takes us Americans far away from the passions that
inspired our ancestors in the early nineteenth century, when they
carved, painted, sewed, and spun images of Washington into every-
thing they produced. If we cannot share that emotion, we may
nonetheless learn something by catching a glimpse of the man
behind the icon.

Once, on a visit to Washington’s estate at Mount Vernon, I ran
across what must be one of the strangest relics ever displayed in a
national shrine, stranger than all the bric-a-brac in the Lenin
Museum of Moscow and the Wellington Museum of London, Wash-
ington’s false teeth. There they sat, under glass and (as I then
believed) made of wood! The Father of Our Country in wooden
choppers! So that was why he looked so grim in the portraits. The
man was in constant pain. He couldn’t get any juice from his meat
without sending shock waves through his gums.

People often ask me, as a specialist in the field, Would I like to
have lived in the eighteenth century? First, I say, I would insist on
being born well above the peasantry. Second, no toothaches,
please. While reading thousands of letters from people in all walks
of eighteenth-century life, I have often encountered toothaches.
The pain cuts through the archaic language, and the writer looms
up in your imagination, waiting in dread for an itinerant tooth
puller to arrive in town and, by a brief bout of torture, to put an
end to the long weeks of agony.

Today we have less toothache and more mustard, much of it
first-rate, from Dijon. Can we call this Progress? That is another
eighteenth-century idea that looks dubious when seen across two
centuries of suffering. But some familiarity with what humanity has
suffered in the past may help us appreciate the modest, incremen-
tal gains of pleasure over pain or progress with a lowercase p. It may
also help us sympathize with those who took a stand for human
rights in the face of inhumanity. I am thinking of Voltaire, not the
young libertine but the angry old man, who threw all his last
energy into the fight against fanaticism. If he seems too foreign for postmodern America, why not summon up the central figure in our own political culture? When the crunch comes, we may be able to face up to the injustices around us by gritting our teeth and remembering how hard it was for Washington to grit his.