For generations, the United States has served scholars as either the exemplar of "modern" society, the prototype toward which other societies were evolving, or the "exceptional" nation, the society that seems exempt from the normal laws of Western cultures. It is in reality, of course, neither all one nor the other, but a mix. Most striking, however, are the many ways that American society—the largest, richest, and most culturally powerful in the West—stands apart from other Western societies as distinctive. We focus on that distinctiveness.¹

Comparative scholars have detected and sought to explain contrasts separating Americans from Europeans. Tocqueville set the standard with his 1830s commentary on American individualism, egalitarianism, and democracy. Sombart asked why the socialist movements so common to Europe had failed in the United States. Max Weber wrote about the importance of Protestant religious organizations to American culture. More recently, Seymour Martin Lipset described in a series of books the many ways that Americans systematically differ from other modern peoples. He offered several explanations, favoring the argument that Americans' distinctiveness was rooted in the particularities of the American Revolution (1775–1783).² Historians, too, have explored American exceptionalism. Fredrick Jackson Turner famously stressed the role of the open frontier in calling forth an aggressively egalitarian and promethean people; Louis Hartz emphasized the lasting effects of the nation's founding by Lockean liberals; and David Potter argued that Americans' early affluence bred a culture of individual striving and optimism. More recently, historians and sociologists have rejected the theme of exceptionalism, focusing instead on the internal diversity and complexity of America. As in many debates, the choice of emphasis depends on the task at hand. Our task here is to highlight the traits shared by Americans that make its society distinct.³

When examined in a broader comparative perspective, "American" features such as a vibrant associational life and an emphasis on individual initiative often turn out to be shared by the affluent British settler colonies of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and by the United Kingdom itself. Nevertheless, the United States often appears as an extreme member of even this group. Through a successful revolution from the mother country, the United States implemented a particularly pure version of Enlightenment liberalism in its founding institutions and myths.

American culture is fundamentally western European in origin and character, sharply contrasting with non-European cultures. That is, America shares in the Judeo-Christian—but especially Protestant—understanding of man's place in the universe; in the Enlightenment elevation of reason and science; and in the individualism advanced by the Reformation. Similarly, America is institutionally rooted in the nation-state-citizen system which emerged in 17th-century Europe; in European commercial capitalism; and in the nascent defenses of individual rights pioneered in Europe (e.g., legislative representation, abolition of torture, rule of law, property rights, etc.). Yet, separated by an ocean, uprooted from old-world arrangements, facing new circumstances, and politically independent, European-Americans shaped a distinctive society. Ironically, much of that distinctiveness entails extrapolating the most individualistic and capitalistic features of Western culture and society.

We presume, if it is not yet clear, that contemporary American society is heavily determined by its history as transmitted to the present through enduring political and social institutions, collective memories, and cultural preoccupations. Hence our emphasis on America's early, foundational conditions, even ones that no longer prevail, such as the institution of slavery. This presumption may be less appropriate for most societies, which have been repeatedly remade by colonialism, natural and economic catastrophes, war, mass migrations, and the like. One notable feature of United States, in fact, has been its immunity—some use the term "innocence"—from such reshaping cataclysms, thanks to its distance, size, and wealth. The key breach of American immunity was the Civil War (1861–1865), which restructured much of
the society. Crucially, that war ended the “peculiar institution” of slavery, eliminating the major contradiction to social egalitarianism and political liberalism in American life.⁴

Geography
European settlement of the American mainland started in earnest in the 17th century. The settlers left behind in Western Europe a region of limited resources and depleted lands; they encountered one of forests rich in wild game, rivers teeming with fish, and endless acres of fertile soil. A familiar climate enabled them to easily transplant native European species and to farm in their accustomed manner. For generations, Americans ate better than even the rich of Europe did. Although the epidemiological isolation of the indigenous people from the microbial hothouses of Eurasia made them vulnerable to European diseases like smallpox, the settlers enjoyed a more healthful environment than they had left behind. The new Americans were born in greater numbers and grew taller, healthier, and longer-lived than their cousins back home. European observers commonly described early North America as an Arcadian garden of plenty.⁵

This bounty enabled great agricultural (and, later industrial) economic growth. That in turn drew millions of immigrants both as free settlers and as indentured servants. The great majority of European American men became independent landholders. These conditions fostered, as Tocqueville and others described, feelings of individual self-reliance, populist egalitarianism, material striving, and high expectations.⁶ Natural bounty alone was insufficient to yield these outcomes. As Louis Hartz notes, imperial Russia enjoyed an even larger frontier, but never generated egalitarian democracy (Hartz 1991 [1955]). In Central and South America, small, colonial elites harnessed pre-existing complex societies and moved development in another direction. Thus, the rich American frontier did not create liberal models of economic and political organization; rather, it allowed British settlers to extend and purify them.⁷

Importantly, the early national government unified the individual states, purchased and conquered territory, and imposed a common law, creating a continental society. The Constitution prohibited tariffs on trade between the states and the resulting unified market multiplied the natural economic advantages of the land. Political unity gave Americans two centuries of internal peace after 1815,⁸ seriously interrupted only by the four years of the Civil War and mildly disturbed only on the frontiers by wars with Indian tribes, Mexico, and Spain (in which the USA vastly outmatched its adversaries). This remarkable stability stands in stark contrast to the repeated turmoil of western Europe through 1945. Similarly, the scale of this single nation, protected by oceans east and west and bordering sparsely populated societies north and south, made it impervious to foreign intervention and able to pursue its own internal development unhindered.

Early Society
Given the continuities of American society, its early history is fateful. We examine here four key features that characterized the settlement period (roughly 1600–1800) in the British colonies. The French, Dutch, Spanish, and (later) Mexicans also colonized large parts of what became the United States. But the British settlement was larger and, more importantly, British-American society ultimately absorbed and transformed the other settlements. The four features are: the leading role of dissident Protestants, the absence of a feudal system, ethnic and religious diversity, and slavery.

Dissident Protestantism
Although the British colonies were settled by many European national and religious groups (see below), the British Protestant sects, such as the Puritans, who settled largely in the northeast, exercised disproportionate influence in numbers and in cultural and political power. Their religious culture was later reinforced by Protestant settlers in other regions, notably by highland Scotch-Irish in parts of the South.⁹ These groups emphasized radical theological individualism, a congregational form of church organization built around lay leadership and hostility toward state power—all challenges to the official, hierarchical, Anglican Church of England (and certainly to the Catholic Church). Anglicans predominated elsewhere, notably among elite landholders in the South. But over the long run, the dissident Protestant religious sensibility and its congregational form dominated American culture. This included the notion that no one but God Himself can intervene to protect the individual from damnation. As we discuss below, Protestant notions