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“Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God”: The Providence Myth in American Revolutionary
Literature

by
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Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
Abstract	vi
Chapter 1—Myth Revisited	1
Myth and Symbol Literature Review	3
My Definition of Myth	16
Mythologists vs. Mythologizers	17
Symbols—Constituent Myth Units	20
National Myths	25
A Working Definition of Providence	28
The Providence Myth and Its Constituent Symbols	33
Chapter Conclusion	41
Chapter 2—The Provenance of the American National Providence Myth	43
Provenance	43
The English Providence Myth	43
The Providence Myth in Puritan New England	50
Chapter Conclusion	69
Chapter 3—The Shifting Providence Myth	72
Shifts in Myth	72
The American National Providence Myth Before 1763	76
The Pulpit and the Pre-1763 Providence Myth	77
Adams, Washington, Franklin and the Pre-1763 Providence Myth	87
The American National Providence Myth: 1763-1776	91
Stamp Act	94
Boston Massacre	98
Quebec Act	100
American Reluctance to Complete the Shift in the Providence Myth	103
The Providential Pen of Paine	107
John Witherspoon	111
Chapter Conclusion	112
Chapter 4—Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God	115
The Political Utility of the Providence Myth	115

Jefferson and The Declaration of Independence	119
Franklin and the National Seal	124
Washington, Paine, and the American Crisis	128
Washington, Adams and the Myth at the Conclusion of the War	135
Madison, Franklin and the Constitutional Convention	146
Washington and the Presidency	153
Chapter Conclusion	159
Chapter 5—The Exhumed Liberator	160
Digging Up Washington.....	160
Why Dig Up Washington? The Historical Moment.....	164
The Eulogizing of Washington	170
Weems and Washington.....	177
Chapter Conclusion	195
Chapter 6—The Incorporation of the American National Providence Myth into an Updated Myth and Symbol Pedagogy.....	199
An Updated Myth and Symbol Pedagogy.....	199
The Relationship between Myth and History.....	200
The American National Providence Myth in an American Studies Classroom.....	207
Manifest Destiny.....	208
The Mormon Exodus	211
“The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “God Save the South”	213
Martin Luther King.....	216
Barack Obama Presidential Campaign	219
Modern Classrooms Must Serve as Safe Zones and Training Grounds.....	222
Classrooms as Safe Zones for Mythologists.....	222
Classrooms as Training Grounds for Young Mythologists	225
Chapter Conclusion	229
Works Cited	230

List of Figures

FIGURE 1. PAUL REVERE’S “THE MITRED MINUET.”	102
FIGURE 2. LOSSING'S SKETCH OF FRANKLIN'S 1776 SEAL PROPOSAL.....	125
FIGURE 3. “THE APOTHEOSIS OF WASHINGTON”	195
FIGURE 4. REVERSE SIDE “UNITED STATES ONE DOLLAR BILL”	205
FIGURE 5. 2008 GALLUP POLL RESULTS (QTD. IN SAAD).	218

“Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God”: The Providence Myth in American Revolutionary
Literature

Dissertation Abstract--Idaho State University (2019)

Within American Studies, myth and symbol theory has enjoyed mixed reviews. This dissertation advocates an updated myth and symbol approach to examining a culture's literature, arguing that a culture's myths give meaning and motivation to that culture's myth-participants.

To accomplish its aim of advocating an updated myth and symbol approach, this work examines the American national Providence myth. This myth is the central topic of this dissertation and this work's primary period of study is the American Revolutionary era. This dissertation defines the American national Providence myth and its constituent symbols and examines the myth's use by the Founding Fathers of the United States of America and other key revolutionary figures, showing that the Providence myth was one of the most powerful myths in American culture leading up to and during the American Revolution.

This paper also demonstrates the pervasiveness and perpetuity of the American national Providence myth into the modern era, demonstrating that it continues as a significant myth for many Americans today. The final chapter provides examples of how an examination of the myth might be pedagogically useful in modern English and American Studies classrooms.

Key words: myth, symbol, culture, American Studies, American Revolution, Founding Fathers, Providence

Chapter 1—Myth Revisited

In 2003, President George W. Bush concluded his State of the Union Address with the following words: “The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to humanity. We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know—we do not claim to know all the ways of providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history” (Bush “Address 2003”). Two years later in his 2005 address, he concluded in similar fashion, saying “we live in the country where the biggest dreams are born. The abolition of slavery was only a dream until it was fulfilled. The liberation of Europe from fascism was only a dream until it was achieved. The fall of imperial communism was only a dream until, one day, it was accomplished. Our generation has dreams of its own, and we also go forward with confidence. The road of providence is uneven and unpredictable, yet we know where it leads: It leads to freedom” (Bush “Address 2005”). Bush’s use of the term “providence” on those two occasions intrigued me because of an implied belief in a narrative wherein God—or Providence—had actively directed the affairs of humankind (and particularly those of America). The narrative was complete with protagonists and antagonists and had American freedom as one of its primary themes. My interest in this narrative grew over the next few years as I continued to encounter it in my study of American literature at key historical moments. It eventually became the topic of my doctoral dissertation. I refer to this narrative as the American national Providence myth.

I will briefly discuss each of the four words that makes up the title of this narrative: I emphasize its Americanness because the Providence myth does also exist in other cultures and I wanted to concentrate on the American version. I refer to it as a national myth because myths require a collectivity of participants and a myth becomes a national myth when that collectivity

reaches the national level. Providence is a reference to God *and* his oversight of human events. To the public, the term “myth” is used to refer to an untruth which can be “busted.” Alan Dundes argues, however, “there is nothing pejorative about the term myth,” pointing out that the more traditional definition for myth is a story (1). In fact, the translation for the Greek word, *mythos*, is simply “a story.” But myths are more than everyday stories, for they “are intimately connected with religious beliefs and practices of the people” (Thompson 9). While that definition is incredibly useful, Richard Hughes’ definition more closely approximates the one I will employ in this dissertation: a “myth is a story that speaks of meaning and purpose, and for that reason it speaks truth to those who take it seriously” (2). Because of its meaning, purpose, and ability to speak truth to its adherents, a myth is loaded with power—it impels people to act in response to and in accordance with the myth. In a nutshell, the American national Providence myth is the shared belief story that God has an interest and active involvement in American national affairs. This dissertation argues that the Providence myth—with its cultural power—served to catalyze the American Revolution. While I will concentrate on the myth as it existed and was implemented during the American Revolution, I also assert in the pedagogical section of this work that the Providence myth has been used in American literature to defend or explain American worldviews and events continually ever since the American Revolution.

To lay the foundation for a discussion of the American national Providence myth in this introductory chapter, I will review the literature of the myth and symbol school of American Studies and provide suggestions for an updated myth and symbol approach. Key parts of this updated approach include the distinction between a mythologist and a mythologizer; a discussion of what constitutes a symbol; and an examination of national myths. Once I locate myself within the corpus of American Studies myth-and-symbol theoretical literature, I will then

comprehensively introduce the reader to the American national Providence myth by defining Providence as it is employed in the American national Providence myth and demarcating the five constituent symbols of the myth: the promised land, chosen people, liberator, antagonist, and hand of God symbols.

Myth and Symbol Literature Review

Historically, folklorists have been the primary academics concerned with myth. But around the middle of the twentieth century, myth began to enter academic dialogues regarding American history, literature and culture. Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx were at the center of these dialogues. Smith and Marx—whose works *Virgin Land* and *The Machine in the Garden*, respectively, are considered foundational to myth and symbol methodology. In his preface to the first printing of *Virgin Land*, Smith gives what I consider to be three central tenets of myth when he writes “The terms ‘myth’ and ‘symbol’ occur so often in the following pages that the reader deserves some warning about them. I use the words to designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image” (xi). He further explains that the myths which he examined were “collective representations rather than the work of a single mind” and that myths, whether or not they “accurately reflect empirical fact...sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs” (xi). These tenets of myth will be very important as I discuss the Providence myth in this dissertation. For the sake of clarity and review, the tenets as stated by Smith are: 1) myths and symbols are (larger and smaller, respectively) constructs where concept and emotion are fused; 2) myths are a representation of collective thought; 3) myths—true or not—sometimes exert influence on practical affairs.

Although they are the founders of this theoretical school, even Smith and Marx were building upon a tradition begun by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who became famous for his now heavily-debated Frontier Thesis. His thesis can perhaps best be captured in the following excerpt from his famous 1893 essay entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History:” “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (Turner). As explicitly stated in the essay’s title, Turner saw the frontier as a powerful American symbol and the primary force in shaping American culture. In that essay, he discussed the frontier in terms of politics, economics, race relations, religion and sociology. One sees early glimpses of myth-and-symbol theory in Turner’s frontier thesis due to its interdisciplinary nature and its emphasis on the cultural power of the frontier. The significance of Turner’s theory to Smith and the myth-and-symbol school becomes even more apparent as Smith uses Turner’s thesis to introduce his own theory in *Virgin Land*: “the recent debate over what Turner actually meant and over the truth or falsity of his hypothesis is much more than a mere academic quibble. It concerns the image of themselves which many—perhaps most—Americans of the present day cherish” (4). This statement, without ever using the word “myth,” articulates powerfully the three central tenets of myth. Firstly, Smith’s treatment of Americans’ cherished image of themselves illustrates the fusion of concept and emotion that is always associated with myth. Myth—which cannot just be dismissed offhand as being “an erroneous belief” according to Smith (*Virgin Land* vii)—simultaneously does not concern itself with being empirically provable either. It concerns itself more with belief, meaning and emotion; and it fuses that emotion to certain images and symbols. It is perhaps the

fact that so many people's myths are connected to "the image of themselves" that causes myths to become so rife with emotion. Additionally, Turner's (and Smith's) willingness to see American character as monolithic demonstrates the collective nature of myth. While individuals may or may not independently possess or value the attributes associated with the frontier (and may or may not individually view frontier qualities as American), the frontier was often collectively associated with Americanness. Lastly, Smith's observation that Turner's frontier myth thesis was contested and that the debate regarding its truth or falsity had ramifications beyond academia demonstrates the impact of myth on practical affairs.

Regarding myth's influence on practical American affairs, Smith argues that the American mythological views of the West as the "Passage to India" and later as the "Garden of the World" (the titles to Books One and Three of *Virgin Land*) widely shaped nearly two centuries of American politics. He asserts that the myth of the West shaped views on slavery and the southern plantation; he also argues that it fueled Manifest Destiny and molded attitudes towards Native Americans; he contends that it resulted in legislation like the Homestead Act and fashioned the West as "a refuge for the oppressed of all the world" (203); and lastly, he claims that it painted the West as a limitless source of strength and resources for the American empire. In summation, Smith provides a compelling argument that America's myths have indeed had a powerful influence on its practical affairs (economics, politics, foreign policy). I will build on that idea and seek to demonstrate in this dissertation how the Providence myth has likewise been one of the central myths in shaping American political, economic and historical affairs.

Smith's colleague and fellow myth-and-symbol founding father, Leo Marx, writes the following about his seminal work, *The Machine in the Garden* "

...this is not, strictly speaking, a book about literature; it is about the region of culture where literature, general ideas, and certain products of the collective imagination--we may call them 'cultural symbols'-- meet. To appreciate the significance and power of our American fables it is necessary to understand the interplay between the literary imagination and what happens outside literature, in the general culture. My special concern is to show how the pastoral ideal has been incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction--a way of ordering meaning and value that clarifies our situation today.

(4)

Marx uses the term "American fables," but it seems evident that he didn't mean to differentiate fable from myth (which a proper folklorist would have insisted upon). The American fables he refers to are American myths (like Turner's frontier myth and Smith's Virgin Land myth). And within Marx's words, one again finds the three key tenets of myth: he refers to the collective American imagination, to the fused emotional/conceptual constructs of that collective imagination ("literature, general ideas, and certain products") and the influence exerted on--or "interplay" of myth with--general culture. I consider this notion of cultural symbols to be one of Marx's greatest contribution to American Studies theory. He further defines a cultural symbol as "an image that conveys a special meaning (thought and feeling) to a large number of those who share the culture" (4). One American cultural symbol emphasized by Marx is America as a "land of plenty" which, he states "as we all know, is now stronger than ever." Marx further asserts that some historians view this "'incredible abundance' as perhaps the most important single distinguishing characteristic of American life" (40). Again, I agree with Marx regarding the significant role that a land of plenty plays in American mythology; in my research, I simply examine it in terms of the promised land symbol. Marx chooses to focus on the pastoral image

of the land as the center of American myth. He observes “Beginning in Jefferson’s time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size...This is the countryside of the old Republic, a chaste, uncomplicated land of rural virtue” (141). Marx then reiterates what he’d said in the preface of his book “This symbolic landscape did not exist only on canvas or in books, or, for that matter, in the minds of those who were familiar with art and literature...For more than a century, then, the American people held on to a version of the pastoral ideal not unlike the one that Jefferson had set forth in 1785, investing it with a quality of thought and feeling that can only be called mythic” (142-3). The crux of Marx’s argument regarding the American myth deals with the tension-filled relationship between America’s pastoral ideal—the garden—and “industrialization as counterforce to the myth”—the machine—hence the title of the book (229). Marx opines that the machine began to emerge as an American cultural symbol shortly after the American Revolution— “a token of meaning and value recognized by a large part of the population” (163)—but came of full force by the middle of the nineteenth century. The power of, and competing relationship between, these two myths is summed up by Marx’s words: “The garden image brings together a universal Edenic myth and a particular set of American goals and aspirations. So with the machine” (163-4).

With Smith’s *Virgin Land* and Marx’ *The Machine in the Garden*, the myth and symbol School of literary theory was born; and myth became an influential lens through which to view American culture, history, literature, and economics. Smith and Marx argue that the examination of America’s myths can best be accomplished at the intersection of the disciplines of literature, history and sociology. Smith argues “What is needed is a method of analysis that is at once literary (for one must begin with an analytical reading of the texts that takes into account

structure, imagery, diction, and so on) and sociological (for many of the forces at work in the fiction are clearly of social origin)” (“Method” 3). This myth and symbol approach, while seen by some theorists as passé, should still be viewed as foundational to American Studies and significant to related disciplines. Robert Sklar points out “myth and symbol studies were recognized as important by specialists in fields other than American Studies because they did attempt to link text and context, product and society” (Sklar 258). This is the great value of myth and symbol theory: It emphasizes context (society and culture) to better understand the texts (in the form of myths within literature) which those societies produced and then in turn discusses how the texts affect society. There have, however, been many disagreements or concerns among American Studies academics with the methodology and theory of Smith and Marx; and some have sought to dismiss their work almost entirely.

Brian Attiebery’s “American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method” defends myth and symbol theory as a relevant lens through which to continue viewing modern American culture. Attiebery’s article is particularly useful because of its summation of Smith’s and Marx’ key tenets. He notes that while Smith and Marx were reluctant to concretely define their theory, a review of their writings (Attiebery examined the decades-long correspondence between Smith and Marx) yields a consistent theoretical framework. In other words, Smith and Marx employed a consistent, sound theory; they just hadn’t explicitly articulated it. Attiebery sums up the key premises of the myth and symbol school within American Studies with the five following bullet points:

1. The subject matter of American studies is the American mind or consciousness; this consciousness is variously experienced and expressed by individual Americans but is also somehow collective.

2. The method for studying this subject involves interpreting artifacts, especially verbal texts, in cultural context: this context, however, is not a given but is itself constructed by the researcher through other interpretive acts.
3. The interpreter is himself a product of history: his perceptions are both enabled and limited by the structures of thought given by his culture.
4. Although interpretation starts from the researcher's own culturally acquired values and worldview, a reading of the past can be tested and validated by interdisciplinarity: using psychological insights to probe political positions, reading historical documents with the literary critic's sensitivity, letting artists' images illuminate writers' words, and so on.
5. Literature has a special place in American studies because the literary text articulates its own theory about itself and its time and place; it may not be a reliable guide to what most people were thinking, but it is the best entry into how they were thinking. (Attebery 333-4)

In these five bullet points, Attebery gives an excellent encapsulation of what the myth-and-symbol approach to American Studies accomplishes. And his emphases on collective consciousness, interdisciplinarity, and an influence on practical (political and historical) affairs reinforce the key tenets of myth and symbol theory that I've already discussed.

To continue my review of myth and symbol theoretical literature, I find the metaphor of mining and processing gold useful—perhaps all the more appropriate because so many of the findings regarding myth have centered on the West. Smith's and Marx' assertions and conclusions regarding myths, symbols, images and American culture were the finding of a large nugget of gold. The nugget, in spite of the quantity of gold in it, contained flaws. However, this does not mean that the nugget should have been discarded because of its rudimentary condition.

Refining labor has been necessary for the nugget's real value to become evident. In the next few pages, I will examine some of the work that has been done towards refining the nugget of myth and symbol theory and I will argue that an updated, refined version of said theory is valuable to American Studies. I will do so by presenting further concerns raised by academics regarding the myth and symbol school and then providing theorists' responses.

An early criticism leveled at his methodology came from Smith's student, Barry Marks, who writes "the problems raised by *Virgin Land* all hinge on the relationship between myth and image, on the one hand, and empirical fact, on the other, and they demand attention when Mr. Smith fails to live up to his announced intention not to 'raise the question whether such products of the imagination accurately reflect empirical fact'" (72). Marks substantiated his point by repeatedly showing how Smith juxtaposed myth and fact throughout *Virgin Land*. In my examination of myth in this paper, I do not try to delineate between myth and fact, rather I emphasize the interrelationship between the two as Alan Trachtenberg does when he observes that facts and symbols have "two separate modes of existence: one has a specific location in time and space; the other, its place in the mind, or in the collective imagination of Americans" (*Brooklyn Bridge* vii). This again emphasizes the difference in *modes of existence* between facts and myths. Trachtenberg is not falling into the trap of saying one is reality and the other is falsehood. He is pointing out that one is the occurrence and the other is the perception of the occurrence. Similarly, I will not try to ascertain the truth or falsehood of the Providence myth or any other myth, for as Marks observes, one wonders "whether or not this kind of comparison is one which can logically be made" (73). Instead, I show how—in this place of intersection in culture—myth contributes to history, and history contributes to myth.

Marks also questions Smith's statement that myths are "timeless" (74). I address this concern by arguing that myths are indeed timeless in their continued existence, however, they are not timeless in the sense of being static. Myths are constantly shifting—largely due to the interplay with the culture in which they are found.

Another key critic of the myth and symbol school is Bruce Kuklick. In his article "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," Kuklick makes two key claims regarding Smith's and Marx's work. First, he claimed that Smith and Marx failed to sufficiently assert and establish "their methodological premises." Kuklick then "makes a stab at explicating the premises that guide" their methodology (435). Regarding myths, symbols and images, Kuklick writes "images are really mental entities, different in kind from what in fact exists" (437). Kuklick, like Trachtenberg, is not making the mistake here that Smith did when he placed historical events in opposition to myth; he doesn't say that myths cannot be rooted in fact. Rather, Kuklick says that myths, symbols and images as they exist in the mind are different *in kind* from facts. Images, myths and symbols are the perception of what exists; they may or may not be an accurate perception. Alan Trachtenberg responds to Bruce Kuklick's criticism of the myth and symbol school by pointing out that the "school" never actually declared itself as such. Rather, Trachtenberg points out that the myth and symbol school's coherence really came about as an "effect of the attack launched against it than of any collective program or agenda" (*Myth and Symbol* 668). Trachtenberg continues by acknowledging that while myth and symbol studies have perhaps lacked theoretical or scientific rigor, that really never was the declared aim of Smith or Marx. Instead, the strength of Myth and Symbol studies lies in "the synthesis of historical scholarship and cultural criticism it strove to achieve" (669). Trachtenberg sees the "non-academic origins" (670) not as a weakness but as its strength. Myth and symbol studies are

valuable, in Trachtenberg's mind, not because they are trying to create a coherent past reconstructed from fragments of evidence. Instead, Trachtenberg says

...what needs most emphasis of all, is that 'myth and symbol' rested upon a conviction that the true subject of a critical cultural history, a history guided by a critical political stance, lay in 'culture,' that it was not the specific literary text, for example, which constituted the object of critical attention, but its embeddedness within a system of meanings, a structure of significance, an ideological order represented by charged images and symbols. (671)

The strength, according to Trachtenberg (and this echoes Robert Sklar's supportive statements of myth and symbol theory), was not in the school's contribution to a traditional examination of literature, but in its ability to examine American culture as displayed in literary texts and to provide a social criticism of that culture.

In Brian Attebery's aforementioned article, he set out to demonstrate the value and utility of Smith's and Marx's theories to modern American Studies. He showed that critics of myth and symbol had, in their justified criticisms of myth and symbol theory, also engaged in some unjustified criticisms and thrown out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Attebery took a different tack than Trachtenberg in defending Smith's and Marx's theory. He argued that their methods were—in actuality—scientific. He did so by analogizing the myth and symbol approach to Wilhelm Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften*. Attebery's likening demonstrated that a study or science (*wissenschaften*) of the collective mind or consciousness (*Geist*) of a people or culture as carried out by Smith and Marx was not only possible, but precedented. Attebery demonstrates that there could indeed be a bona fide, scientific “-ology” (systematic study) of a culture's “myths” (expressions of their collective beliefs). In short, he helped to legitimize

American mythology. Smith's and Marx's examination of the collective mind may not have accorded with the precepts of the natural sciences; but it shouldn't be shoe-horned into doing so. Instead, he argues it should be accepted as "a different kind of science" (Attebery 339). Trachtenberg, Smith and Marx may not have described myth and symbol theory as scientific, but I think they would be comfortable agreeing with Attebery that a disciplined, rigorous methodology *does* direct it.

The second criticism offered by Bruce Kuklick regards Smith's and Marx's use of "collective imagination." He observes that "images and symbols are not uniquely occurring entities. They have the capacity to appear in many minds" (437). He then continues "...For images and symbols to become collective is simply for certain kinds of writing (or painting) to occur with relative frequency in the work of many authors" (440). This is a valuable acknowledgement that will be reiterated throughout this dissertation. For an image or symbol to be part of the collective imagination, it does not require complete consensus on its meaning. Myths, symbols and images must be held in the imagination of a significant portion of a culture in order to have power. However, as Kuklick points out, Smith and Marx go too far in their version of collective imagination, which argues "that some symbols and myths dominated all America" (443) and sums up his critique by saying "the imputation of collective beliefs is an extraordinarily complex empirical procedure which ought not to be undertaken lightly." He then continues by pointing out that myth and symbol theorists "are persistently eager to speak of 'the anonymous popular mind,' 'the widespread desire of Americans,' 'the imagination of the American people,' 'the majority of the people,' 'the popular conception of American life,' 'the American view of life' or 'the average American.'" (445). Richard Slotkin makes a similar criticism in *Regeneration through Violence* when he writes "Even scholarly critics who address

themselves to the problem of the ‘myth of America’ have a marked tendency to engage in the manufacture of the myth they pretend to analyze in an attempt to reshape the character of their people or to justify some preconceived or inherited notion of American uniqueness” (4). This observation has served as a warning to me during this project. As one examines America’s myths, great care must be taken not to overstate their collectivity. Ironically, Slotkin makes that very mistake in his overly-comprehensive assertion that “the myth of regeneration through violence became *the* structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5 emphasis added). In his book, Slotkin makes a provocative case for the regeneration-through-violence myth. However, I consider it *a* key structuring myth of the American experience—one of many; it is hardly *the* sole structuring myth. Such a statement falls into the trap of portraying a monolithic, universal American experience and set of beliefs and has exposed myth and symbol theory to intense criticism. It bears reiteration--“collective” belief means that it is a belief held and expressed by many; it does not equal consensus. While I will use the term collective imagination often in this dissertation, I will strive to do so in a cautious manner which acknowledges its complexity.

An important critique of myth and symbol theory from Robert Sklar in “The Problem of an American Studies ‘Philosophy’” regards its elitist inclinations. He points out that American Studies has “concentrated on the products of a small group of thinkers and writers” and that this focus “was founded on their assertion that the study of intellectual and cultural elites provided deeper insights in the culture as a whole than other scholarly methods—that the history of intellectual and imaginative productions *was* the history of American culture.” Sklar then expresses hope that recently there has been a shift to study “society as a whole” (254-5). Sklar’s point has validity. However, I think it is also important to reiterate the value found in literary

texts as pointed out by Brian Attiebery, “Literature has a special place in American studies because the literary text articulates its own theory about itself and its time and place” (334). The literature of an era provides somewhat of a bird’s eye view of the historical moment where an author is observing the culture of that time and place and trying to make a statement about it. Such a view should not be seen as the only lens through which a culture should be viewed, but it is a significant one that should perhaps carry more weight than non-literary texts. As a result, in this dissertation, I will give priority to the writings of traditional, canonical “cultural elites” of the American Revolutionary era. But, in an effort to be true to Sklar’s meritorious observations, I will also strive to look at many non-literary texts and writings from non-elitist sources in order to provide a more comprehensive portrait of American colonial and Revolutionary cultures as I demonstrate the role that the Providence myth played in those cultures.

In summation, four of the key criticisms that have swirled around myth and symbol scholarship are: It operates without an articulated, disciplined methodology; it tends to juxtapose myth with facts; it exaggerates the breadth of collectivity in terms of the collective mind of America; and elitist literature is overused to portray the American mind. In this dissertation, I will attempt to apply a refined myth and symbol examination to the Providence myth that not only refrains from indulging in these practices, but that also demonstrates an awareness of these criticisms and attempts to respond to them. Lastly, Robert Sklar made the following statement aimed at myth and symbol theory “it is also useful to have works in which the dilemma is recognized not by talking about it but by actual scholarly practice aimed at resolving it” (262). I hope that the findings of this dissertation will facilitate changes in praxis. The final chapter of this dissertation models how myth and symbol methodology (with the American national

Providence myth as the example) can be implemented in a modern classroom to help bring about positive political and cultural changes.

My Definition of Myth

I found Attebery's summation of American studies/myth and symbol theory to be a helpful key to understanding myth and symbol theory. Similarly, I will now provide a five-point definition and summation of my own theoretical approach to myth which I believe addresses some of the criticisms and yet still remains true to the key tenets of myth and symbol theory:

1. A myth is a story which is considered true by, and has power for and upon, those within the myth's culture. Those that participate in the myth within that culture are mythologizers.
2. A myth is made up of basic constituent units called symbols. These symbols have power and meaning only through their relationship to the myth and its other symbols.
3. For a myth to exist, it must be a part of the collective mind of a culture. When a myth is held by the collectivity of a nation, it is referred to as a national myth. Collectivity does not imply unanimity or necessarily even majority. It does imply an awareness of the myth, a fluency in myth, and a willingness to mythologize by those within the culture. When mythologizing ceases, the myth dies or shifts.
4. A scientific and structuralist approach to examining myth can be taken by an examination of its constituent symbols. These symbols are artifacts found in the literature and everyday world of a culture. This examination should not be confined to the haute literature of a culture but should also include non-literary texts. Those that engage in examining myth (speak about it) are mythologists.

5. A study of myth should not generally concern itself with the myth's factuality or historicity, only with how history and myth fertilize each other.

These five points will direct me as I discuss the American national Providence myth in this dissertation and provide the reader with some guideposts and definitions. The following three subsections will discuss at length some terms which are central to my methodology and require a bit more explanation: mythologists, mythologizers, symbols and national myths.

Mythologists vs. Mythologizers

I now make a distinction that will be significant to the remainder of my discussion about myth. I referred to those theorists who have contributed to the understanding of myth as mythologists. Etymologically, the words *mythos* and *logos* are of Greek origin and mean “story” and “word, speech, statement, discourse,” respectively. Both of these Greek words, observably, are to be found in the term “mythologist” which I used, but they are also found in “mythologizer.” The endings “-izer” and “-ist” can sometimes be used interchangeably, for example in the case of a eulogizer and a eulogist—both terms refer to somebody who speaks words of praise (generally regarding someone who has passed away). But the “-ist” ending more frequently indicates specialization or expertise, while the “-izer” ending generally connotes “one who engages in the practice of.” Subsequently, in this dissertation I will define a mythologist as one who studies, specializes in and speaks *about* myth. Examples of mythologists are Smith, Marx, Trachtenberg and the theorists I discussed in the myth and symbol literature review, but also Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss and Alan Dundes among others. I will define a mythologizer as a myth-participant or one who *speaks* myth. The mythologizers which I discuss in this work include religious figures like the army chaplains Israel Evans and Abiel Leonard. But I will also examine many of the central political figures of the American

Revolution like John Hancock, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin as mythologizers. So, too, with Washington's biographer Mason Locke Weems. The incredible breadth of the spectrum of mythologizers demonstrates the breadth and collectiveness of the American national Providence myth. By using the terms mythologist and mythologizer in this fashion, we will be true to the etymologies of the words but make a necessary distinction.

Roland Barthes makes a distinction between the roles of mythologists and mythologizers that bears repeating and scrutinizing. First of all, he does not use the term mythologizer; he uses the terms myth-consumer or myth-participant to describe those who speak myth. Regarding these mythologizers, he wrote "the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts" (131). Barthes also wrote "myth has...a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (117). These are the roles of the mythologizer. A mythologizer, by speaking myth, promotes a particular worldview of the current situation (makes us understand something) and prescribes and explains actions in response to that worldview (imposes it on us). Richard Slotkin echoes Barthes' words when he writes "The myth-artist, priest or fabulist uses the artifacts of myth to evoke the 'sense' of the myth and its complex of affirmations in the audience. He may use these artifacts in two ways—either deliberately, in an effort to make propaganda for his cause, or unconsciously, under the compelling association of perceived event and inherited mythology" (8). First of all, I should point out that Slotkin used the terms "myth-artist, priest or fabulist" to describe what I am calling a mythologizer. But Slotkin, too, is pointing out the double function of myth when spoken by mythologizers. Mythologizers include those that speak myth to propagandize and those that speak myth to understand and explain their circumstances. In short, one might say mythologizers are those for whom myth is a reality—they speak myth from within the myth.

Mythologists, on the other hand, are those who speak about myth from the outside of the myth. The following quote from Roland Barthes is lengthy, but by leaving it whole, one gets a better idea of Barthes' contrast between mythologists and mythologizers/myth consumers.

I must, as a conclusion, say a few words about the mythologist himself. This term is rather grand and self-assured. Yet one can predict for the mythologist, if there ever is one, a few difficulties, in feeling if not in method. True, he will have no trouble in feeling justified: whatever its mistakes, mythology is certain to participate in the making of the world. Holding as a principle that man in a bourgeois society is at every turn plunged into a false Nature, it attempts to find again under the assumed innocence of the most unsophisticated relationships, the profound alienation which this innocence is meant to make one accept. The unveiling which it carries out is therefore a political act...his status still remains basically one of being excluded. Justified by the political dimension, the mythologist is still at a distance from it. His speech is a metalanguage, it 'acts' nothing; at the most, it unveils... the mythologist cuts himself off from all the myth consumers, and this is no small matter. If this applied to a particular section of the collectivity, well and good. But when a myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the mythologist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth. Any myth with some degree of generality is in fact ambiguous, because it represents the very humanity of those who, having nothing, have borrowed it. To decipher the Tour de France or the 'good French Wine' is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them. The mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality; for him, to be in society is, at best, to be truthful: his utmost sociality dwells in his utmost morality. His connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm. (156-7)

Throughout this dissertation, I will apply Barthes' use of the term "mythology" as found in this paragraph. He uses it to mean the study of or discussion *about* myth. The work of a mythologist is mythology. In opposition, I will use the term "mythologizing" when I need a noun to explain what a mythologizer engages in as she *speaks* myth. But the main point I'll address from Barthes' comments regards the posture of the mythologist. Barthes felt that the mythologist must be, as I mentioned earlier, on the outside of the myth. Being on the outside is necessitous, according to Barthes, in order to be able to carry out "the unveiling." He is, in essence, saying that just as one experiences a car traveling at 70 miles per hour down the road completely differently as a driver and as a pedestrian bystander, so, too, with the mythologizer and the mythologist. The one experiences the myth; the other observes it. To have an accurate perspective of the power of myth and how far and fast it carries those within the vehicle of the myth, one must be an outsider. While I agree that proper mythology or speaking about myth requires looking at the myth from the outside, I also argue that one can be a mythologist and a mythologizer of the same myth. Proper mythology merely requires that one step outside the vehicle of the myth and pick up the scrutinous clipboard of the mythologist in order to observe and examine our own myths and those of others. Engaging in mythology with an acknowledgement of one's own mythologizing will also contribute to a practical pedagogical theory which aims at resolving societal ills as prescribed by Robert Sklar.

Symbols—Constituent Myth Units

In an attempt to employ a predictable, consistent model of mythology throughout this work, I find it is necessary to spend some time discussing symbols. Henry Nash Smith never really elaborates satisfactorily on his statement about myths and symbols being "larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing." In fact, the very title of his book *Virgin Land: The American*

West as Symbol and Myth introduces all kinds of questions about whether the American West is the myth or the symbol and whether an object or image can indeed be both. While this dissertation will not address Smith's American West myth in large measure, I do hope to provide a more concrete framework of myths and symbols. To do so, I will draw heavily upon Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralist examination of myth.

Claude Levi-Strauss opines in his seminal work, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, that there is a structure or an order to myths. He writes "Since I was a child, I have been bothered by, let's call it the irrational, and have been trying to find an order behind what is given to us as a disorder" (11). Myths, according to Levi-Strauss, were part of the "irrational" that perplexed him; and he made it part of his life's work to find an order to them. This endeavor lies at the heart of his structuralist approach to the analysis of myth. He continues "Mythical stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd, yet nevertheless they seem to reappear all over the world. A 'fanciful' creation of the mind in one place would be unique—you would not find the same creation in a completely different place. My problem was trying to find out if there was some kind of order behind this apparent disorder" (12). Levi-Strauss believed that he could integrate myth "in the field of scientific explanation" (5). He then makes the following keen observation: "what we call structuralism in the field of linguistics, or anthropology, or the like, is nothing other than a very pale and faint imitation of what the 'hard sciences,' ... have been doing all the time" (9). These comments remind the reader of the criticism that the myth and symbol school lacked scientific rigor and Brian Attebery's response to that criticism--bringing one again to the same conclusion regarding science and myth studies: Mythology is simply "a different kind of science" (Attebery 339). Barthes, too, elaborates on mythology's different-kind-of-science: "it is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and

of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form” (112). The study of ideas-in-form is the work of a mythologist. A myth is the expression of a culture’s ideas, beliefs and worldviews. When a mythologist puts a myth under a metaphorical microscope, she finds that myths are composed of a somewhat predictable structure—that they are formulaic.

Levi-Strauss explains that “there is nothing more...in the structuralist approach” than “the quest for the invariant, or for the invariant elements among superficial differences” (8). Central to this quest for invariants in myth is the labeling and identifying of its key constituent parts—what Levi-Strauss called “mythemes.” Levi-Strauss, in coining the term “mytheme,” was borrowing from the notion of phonemes and morphemes as the building blocks of language. Mythemes are perhaps the most significant “invariants” for which a mythologist searches. Just as a physical scientist would look through a microscope to see how the building blocks of life are acting and interacting at the molecular level, a mythologist looks at mythemes to see how they are acting and interacting within the myth. The Oxford dictionary defines a mytheme in the following manner: “In structuralist anthropology and literary criticism: each of a set of fundamental generic units of narrative structure (typically involving a relationship between a character, an event, and a theme) from which myths are thought to be constructed” (“Mytheme” *Oxford Dictionaries*). Two points need to be emphasized from this definition: First, that mythemes are the fundamental generic units from which myths are constructed. If one disagreed and argued that words or objects are the fundamental generic units of myth, the response is that an object or a word is not “mythic” in and of itself. This is what Roland Barthes meant when he said myth is “a type of speech” and then he explained “Of course, it is not any type: language needs special conditions in order to become myth...since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its

message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (109). Barthes gave the example of an arrow. An arrow, in and of itself, is merely an object. But Barthes explained “Myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning: the arrow which is brought in order to signify a challenge is also a kind of speech” (110). Regarding mythical objects, Barthes concludes “Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society..., in short...a type of social usage...is added to pure matter” (109). Any word or object becomes part of myth when, and only when, it is invested with meaning within the myth. At that point, the object or word becomes a mytheme.

Now to the second point from the Oxford dictionary definition—mythemes are part of a set. Levi-Strauss elaborated on this second point when he wrote “the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations” (Levi-Strauss *“Structural Study”* 211). Returning to Barthes’ example of the arrow, the arrow only possesses power to speak within the myth (or is a mythical object) because of its relation with other objects or words within the myth—perhaps a story regarding a deity that involved an arrow or a past event that the sender and recipient of the arrow had in common like the slaying of one’s ancestor by the ancestor of the other with an arrow. The arrow speaks because of its relation to other objects or characters within the myth. I must speak about the significance of the recipient here: As Barthes said, myth is, indeed its own unique type of speech. But what makes it unique is that the speech or communication must be collective or shared with its audience. It is a type of speech loaded with meaning, belief and power that depends upon a larger, collective discourse for its very

existence. Perhaps another way of viewing myth--rather than a type of speech—is as a language, “a system of communication” (Barthes 109) which is understood only by those that are fluent in the discourse of that myth. Ernest Renan, in his work *Life of Jesus* put it in a slightly different, but related, way “All great things are done through the people; now, we can only lead the people by adapting ourselves to its ideas...Nothing great has been established which does not rest on a legend” (loc. 2873). Renan’s use of the word legend in this case should be seen as synonymous with myth. Renan was arguing that “all great things” which have been done in history were motivated by a common belief story shared by the group of people that carried it out. This again emphasizes the collective nature of myth. For speech or communication to become myth, it must be done “through the people”—it must be collective.

Now I’d like to incorporate Barthes’ and Levi-Strauss’ structuralist notions into myth and symbol theory. If one recalls Henry Nash Smith’s comments from earlier in this dissertation about symbols—the smaller units of myth—one realizes that Levi-Strauss’ “mytheme” and Smith’s and Marx’ “symbol” can essentially be seen as synonymous. Remember Marx defines a cultural symbol as “an image that conveys a special meaning (thought and feeling) to a large number of those who share the culture” (4). Symbols and mythemes are both the constituent units of myth. Both—standing alone—do not carry the same meaning as when they are part of a set of symbols or mythemes making up a myth. Alan Trachtenberg said of symbols (and the same can be said of mythemes): “A symbol serves a culture by articulating in objective form the important ideas and feelings of that culture” (*Bridge* vii). Symbols/mythemes are the meaning-laden constituent units of myths which only acquire their meaning upon being bundled with other symbols within a myth. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will henceforth only use the term “symbol” to describe these constituent units of myth. I do so because of my emphasis on the

myth and symbol school as the primary theoretical approach to my examination of the Providence myth. But again, I emphasize that I see the two terms—“mytheme” and “symbol”—as essentially synonymous and interchangeable; they are terms provided by two separate theoretical schools to define the same thing. Further, I feel that an inclusion of Levi-Strauss’ structuralist principles in a dissertation which is primarily myth and symbol in its theoretical approach affords greater clarity on the topic of symbols and provides some of the scientific rigor which is called for by some of the school’s critics. I will endeavor to satisfy Levi-Strauss’ desire to show that “there is some order in the universe and the universe is not a chaos” (Levi-Strauss *Myth and Meaning* 12-13) as I discuss and define the symbols of the American national Providence myth. I will present the reader with the five constituent symbols of the American national Providence myth in an upcoming section of this introduction.

National Myths

The last point I wish to make in my efforts to define myth and lay the foundation for my discussion of the Providence myth regards the existence of myth on the national level. Myths can powerfully affect the timing, nature and extent of the creation of a nation. The folklorist Alan Dundes defines myth as “a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humanity came to be in their present form” (64). While one may be tempted to confine this definition to creation accounts, myths are still used by cultures in their explanations of how the world and humanity came to be in their present forms at the national level as well. Nations frequently use myths to explain and justify their origins and existence. Clifford Longley observed in his book, *Chosen People*, “Nations need myths, and look to historical events for the raw material to create them. The creative process is in the hands of poets and storytellers, whose skill lies in capturing the imagination, not in their command of dry facts. Myths work best, however, if those accepting

them believe them to be factually true” (129-130). This reiterates an earlier point that I made: In order for a story to be a myth, it must be a belief story held by a collectivity. The “viability of myth...depends upon the applicability of its particular terms and metaphors to the peculiar conditions of history and environment that dominate the life of a particular people” (Slotkin 14). Myths depend upon a collectivity for their survival.

Richard Slotkin wrote at length about national myths in his book, *Regeneration Through Violence*. Slotkin makes this astute observation which articulates very nicely the essence and function of a national myth:

The narrative action of the myth-tale recapitulates that people’s experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision to a paradigm. Reference to that myth or to things associated with it—as in religious ritual—evokes in the people the sense of life inherent in the myth and all but compels belief in the vision of reality and divinity implicit in it. The believer’s response to his myth is essentially non-rational and religious: he recognizes in the myth his own features and experience, the life and appearance of his ancestors, and the faces of the gods who rule his universe, and he feels that the myth has put him in intimate contact with the ultimate powers which shape all of life...It draws on the content of individual and collective memory, structures it, and develops from it imperatives for belief and action. (6-7)

A nation generally comes into being because of a commonly-held myth amongst the members of that nation. The very thesis of *Regeneration Through Violence* is that Americans have on many occasions (including the American Revolution) felt compelled enough by their national myths that they were willing to do violence in order to carry out what they felt was their divinely-

appointed duty in the myth. Thus one sees how myth was a significant determinant in the nature of the creation of the United States. The violence of America's beginning was justified by Americans because of the way that they viewed themselves as God's chosen people who were being oppressed by evil antagonists—King George III and Parliament. That is how they were portrayed in the literature of the day. I will elaborate upon these ideas further as I discuss the constituent symbols of the American national Providence myth. Slotkin adds “As American society evolved through years of historical experience, the differentiated literary forms were gradually drawn together by writers who more or less deliberately sought to create a unified and compelling vision of the total American experience—an American myth” (Slotkin 19). This dissertation asserts that the American national Providence myth is just such a compelling vision of the total American experience before, during and since the American Revolution.

Regarding nations and national myths, one would be hard-pressed to find many nations that were organized by an external force or forces which determined arbitrary boundaries for the members of that nation. Usually a nation is formed by a collective of individuals who see themselves as adherents to the same paradigm or myth and who recognize in that myth their own features and experience. For that reason, Benedict Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community” (6). The myth of a nation compels them to beliefs, worldviews and actions in accordance with that myth. National borders are, to a degree, reflections of mythological borders. Borders are not boundaries drawn arbitrarily by cartographers but reflections of the extent to which a myth holds power with a people. In other words, nations find their limits (and boundaries are drawn) as the participants of one myth find conflict with imagined adversaries of a neighboring region who participate in an opposing myth. The boundaries to a nation are drawn where people no longer share the imaginative or mythological vision of that community. These

people, who don't share the first culture's national myth, become an "other" and often symbolize an antagonist in the myth of the nation.

The United States of America, with its current borders, can largely be seen as the extent to which its national myths (the regeneration through violence myth, the Providence myth and others) had power to compel its people to act according to those myths. I would argue that the expansion of the United States of America which resulted from Manifest Destiny is also an example of the Providence myth at work (Slotkin similarly appropriates Manifest Destiny as an iteration of the regeneration through violence myth). Likewise, we see myth dictating borders today in Texas' movement to secede from the United States in order to establish the "Republic of Texas" and the movement in Northern California to break from Southern California because they don't feel their ideologies or beliefs match up. A similar mythical phenomenon has occurred over the last few decades as former Soviet-bloc countries have declared themselves independent and distanced themselves from Russia because of mythical differences. Benedict Anderson speaks to this phenomenon when he says "many 'old nations,' once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by 'sub'-nationalisms within their borders – nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this sub-ness one happy day" (3). These movements serve as additional examples of myths clashing against myths and myth-participants striving to reshape boundaries which accord with their paradigms. The extent of a nation, then, is often determined by the size of the collectivity participating in the national myth.

A Working Definition of Providence

Building upon the groundwork laid by my review of myth and symbol, this dissertation will now make a case for the Providence myth as a lens through which to view the American Revolutionary period and the literature of that era. In fact, I would argue that the Providence

myth has been one of the most influential and significant myths in the literature, culture and history of the United States. Providence was a very common theme in early American literature. The Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter OED) provides three definitions of the term “providence” which were in use during the American colonial and revolutionary eras and are pertinent to this dissertation.

The first pertinent definition which the dictionary supplies refers to providence as “The foreknowing and protective care of God (or nature, etc.); divine direction, control or guidance.” (“Providence,” def. 2). This first definition can best be summed up as the general superintendence of events by Deity.

In its second applicable definition of the term “providence,” the OED provides a definition which points to the person of Deity, explaining that Providence can be “God or nature as exercising prescient and beneficent power and direction” (“Providence,” def. 6a). This use of “providence” as a proper noun to describe God should be viewed as an expression of his attributes—a perception that God provides for and oversees his creations. It is a name-title that expresses a characteristic of Deity—much like the terms “Almighty” or “Wonderful” (“Providence,” 6.a).

The third relevant definition provided refers to Providence as “an act or instance of divine intervention; an event or circumstance which indicates divine dispensation” (“Providence,” def. 5.a). This usage still alludes to God as the provider and orchestrator of events, but refers to the orchestrated event as a “providence.”

In the following sentence from John Flavel’s *The Mystery of Providence*, one sees an illustration of the second and third usages in conjunction, “I would now press home the sense of providences upon you, in order to a suitable return to the God of your mercies for

them...Consider what you owe to Providence for the protection, by which your life has been preserved to this day... (Flavel 54). It appears to have been common practice to capitalize the noun when referring to Deity and to use the lower case when discussing a providential event. This usage of “providence” to describe providential events was prevalent enough in Puritan culture and lore that a type of tale emerged within that culture which they referred to as “providences” or providence tales. I discuss providence tales at greater length in chapter two. From these three usages, one finds that “providence” in the eighteenth century could be used to refer to the Superintendent, the superintendence, and the superintended—or in other words: Deity, the general oversight, and the event that resulted from that oversight.

Similarly, Webster’s 1828 dictionary defined Providence in the following way:

In theology, the care and superintendence which God exercises over his creatures...A belief in divine *providence* is a source of great consolation to good men. By divine *providence* is often understood God himself. (“providence,” Webster)

Within this definition, one finds several nuances of the notion of Providence. First, it refers to God’s “superintendence” over his creations—the overseeing referred to in the OED. But Webster also wrote that “By divine *providence* is often understood God himself”—which should be seen as a reference to Providence, the Superintendent, as explained in the OED definition. Webster did not discuss the third definition—the overseen, so I will lay it aside for now and discuss it only when I discuss providence tales. But as for the first two definitions of providence, Webster really does not seem to parse them out in the way that the OED does. Instead, he helps the reader to understand that providence is a comprehensive term which refers to God *and* his superintendence over the earth. After being appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army, George Washington departed Philadelphia en route to Boston to take command of the

army. He wrote to his wife, Martha, “I go fully trusting in that Providence, which has been more bountiful to me than I deserve...” (“Letter to Martha”). Webster’s ambiguity is apparent in this usage of providence. The word “providence” could be replaced by “God” or “watch care” without a great deal of awkwardness. The two concepts are fused within Providence. Providence is the Overseer and the overseeing. While this notion may seem a bit nebulous, I think it is important to remain true to its usage by early Americans, and therefore, I will not attempt to make any differentiations between the Superintendent and his superintendence throughout the remainder of this dissertation. The only times that I will use the lower-case “providence” is when I am referring to the event—a providence—where God superintended in the eyes of the myth-participants. When I refer to Providence, I will be using this comprehensive term which refers to God *and* his overseeing of the world—employing the 1828 Webster’s dictionary usage.

To further solidify my broad definition of Providence, I quote John Flavel. In 1678, Flavel—an Englishman—wrote a landmark work for understanding the Providence myth, *The Mystery of Providence*. His words in the preface of that work give the reader a taste of this comprehensive view of Providence and refers to a providence as an event:

O what a history might we compile of our own experience? Whilst with a melting heart we trace the footsteps of Providence all along the way it has led us to this day! Here it prevented, and there it delivered. Here it directed, and there it corrected. In this it grieved, and in that it relieved. Here was the poison, and there the antidote. This providence raised a dismal cloud, and that dispelled it again. This straitened, and that enlarged. Here a want, and there a supply” (6).

Flavel employs the Superintendent/superintendence usage of Providence—seemingly deifying and personifying Providence by capitalizing the word and talking about tracing Providence’s footsteps, yet at the same time using “it” as the pronoun for Providence rather than the traditional “he” which would be used to refer to God by seventeenth-century Christians. Again, by this one understands that Providence is God *and* his watch care. The second time that Flavel uses the word “providence” in that paragraph, he is using the version of the word discussed in the last OED definition—a providence as an event. Another point I wish to make from Flavel’s words concerning Providence will also be very significant for the reader to understand as this dissertation continues: Providence myth participants saw Providence in everything—in the good *and* in the bad, in “the antidote” *and* in “the poison,” in “supply” *and* in “want.” Flavel confesses in his preface that the purpose of the work was not to try and recount all that Providence had done (for he saw that as an impossibility), but to provide a manual and a pattern by which readers could thereafter recognize how Providence was involved in all aspects of their own lives and then “compile the history of Providence for [themselves]” (6-7). Flavel as a Providence myth participant, saw Providence in all things.

Clifford Longley also shares the following thoughts regarding Providence which provide a final example of this comprehensive use of the term Providence:

Providence was actually more powerful than miracles. Instead of being very rare and confined to specific events...the concept of a benign Providence covered almost everything. Every lucky break became divine intervention. Did the wind drive the Spanish galleons on to the rocks in 1588? That was Providence. Did the original Puritan settlers survive the first winter? That was Providence. Did the New Model Army vanquish the King’s forces? That was Providence. Did Washington’s bedraggled army

live though its ordeal in Valley Forge? That too was Providence. In the theology of Providence, God only intervenes in this way on the side of the just and righteous...Being the Chosen People, and having Providence on your side, were all part of the same thing.

(27)

I value Longley's statement on Providence for a number of reasons. First, Longley's version of Providence again is comprised of the Superintendent and the superintendence. Additionally, Longley's words demonstrate the continuous existence of the Providence myth and its appropriation by different groups ranging from the Anglo-Spanish War to the American Revolution. I'll spend more time discussing the provenance and perpetuation of the American national Providence myth in the second chapter. And lastly, I value Longley's statement because of his acknowledgement of one of the symbols of the Providence myth—the chosen people symbol. I now begin my discussion of the chosen people symbol and the other four symbols of the Providence myth.

The Providence Myth and Its Constituent Symbols

In this introduction I have discussed myth at length, and now I have recently provided a definition of Providence. To conclude this introductory chapter, I will merge these concepts in a brief discussion of the Providence myth and its symbols.

Bronislaw Malinowski, in his work *Magic, Science and Religion*, pointed out that many “savage” cultures explain the sustenance of life or the termination of life by “a Providence directly guiding human history” (43). In other words, the Providence myth is one of humanity's most common myths. In fact, the Providence myth, according to Malinowski, is probably a ubiquitous myth because of its attachment to food. “If we thus consider that food is the main link between man and his surroundings, that by receiving it he feels the forces of destiny and

providence, we can see the cultural, nay, biological importance of primitive religion in the sacralization of food. We can see in it the germs of what in higher types of religion will develop into the feeling of dependence upon Providence, of gratitude, and of confidence in it” (25). Seventeenth and eighteenth century Americans may no longer have used “food cults, sacrament and sacrifice” to “bring man into communion with providence, with the beneficent forces of plenty” (34), but the Providence myth remained alive and had simply taken a different shape within American culture. In spite of the ubiquity of the Providence myth within most cultures, this dissertation will focus on the biblical version of the Providence myth, because that is the myth to which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans saw themselves as heirs. For lack of time and space, I will not spend any more time examining versions of the Providence myth outside of the biblical tradition. I merely wished to acknowledge the breadth of the Providence myth’s existence in many cultures throughout history.

I define the Providence myth for the purposes of this dissertation as the belief story that there is a Supreme Being (often referred to as God) which oversees and orchestrates the events of the universe in order to bring about his purposes; Providence is a reference to Deity *and* his oversight of events. Interestingly, in spite of the Providence myth’s biblical roots, the term “Providence,” as it is used in this dissertation and among early Americans, cannot be found in the Bible. But the constituent parts—the five key symbols which I argue make up the Providence myth—can be found throughout the Bible. I would argue that the most concise articulation of the biblical Providence myth is found in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy and I will use passages from that chapter along with other sources to help provide a working definition of each symbol. The five symbols (or what Claude Levi-Strauss called mythemes) of the Providence myth are the chosen people symbol, the promised land symbol, the

antagonist symbol, the liberator symbol and the hand of God symbol. In this introductory chapter, I will provide brief definitions and examples of each of the five symbols, but I will reserve most examples for the main body of the dissertation where I discuss the Providence myth before, during and after the American Revolution. As I define each symbol, I think it is important to remember that Henry Nash Smith saw myths and symbols as “larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing” (xi). For that reason, some mythologists have viewed some of the symbols which I will name as self-standing myths rather than viewing them as symbols within a myth. This should not be seen as problematic or contradictory. Myths and symbols are, after all, the same kinds of things. I simply find the construct which I provide in this dissertation useful because I see each of these five symbols—rather than operating independently—as contributing to the overall narrative of the larger Providence myth.

The first symbol of the American national Providence myth is the chosen people symbol. Clifford Longley writes “God...intervenes...on the side of the just and righteous...Being the Chosen People, and having Providence on your side, were all part of the same thing” (27). According to the Providence myth, God has chosen particular peoples at different times in history to help in the accomplishment of his purposes. The famed mythologist, Joseph Campbell, once quipped “Every people is a chosen people” (xxiii). The idea being expressed by Campbell is that within his theory of the “monomyth” (the theory that the myth of every culture or people is essentially a variation of the same myth), every culture sees itself as the chosen people of its Deity. Central to the chosen people symbol is the notion that God has always had a chosen people and that the participants of the myth are simply the descendants, heirs or successors of this heritage—the current chosen people. Participants in the myth see their story as the next chapter in the myth. Richard Hughes writes “The myth of the Chosen Nation has its

oldest and deepest roots in the Hebrew Bible. According to the author of the Old Testament book Deuteronomy, God spoke to the Jews as follows: ‘The Lord your god has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession’” (19). Hughes continues “In time, the American people would appropriate this very myth regarding themselves and the land in which they lived” (19).

A symbol which is closely related to the chosen people symbol is the promised land symbol. The narrative regarding the promised land symbol is that God has designated specific promised lands over the years as a refuge and stronghold for his chosen people to do his work and to be an example to the rest of humanity. If God has a chosen people, he must have a promised land in which they can grow, prosper, and fulfill their destiny. The promised land symbol is also most easily traced back to a biblical tradition. A key aspect of myth is the notion of inheritance. The Israelites believed that they, as descendants of Abraham, were God’s chosen people and that they were entitled to the land of Canaan. They believed that God had promised Canaan to Abraham and subsequently to them with these words from the book of Genesis: “And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (*Bible* Gen. 17.8). Under Moses’ leadership, the promised land symbol was reiterated to the Israelites when they were told that God would “bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (*Bible* Deut. 28.8). Likewise, early Americans saw the United States of America as the modern-day promised land with all of the same biblical qualities. The promised land symbol is evident in George Washington’s letter to Lafayette at the end of the Revolutionary War,

I wish to see the sons and daughters of the world in Peace and busily employed in the more agreeable amusement of fulfilling the first and great commandment “Increase and

multiply:” as an encouragement to which we have opened the fertile plains of the Ohio to the poor, the needy and the oppressed of the Earth; anyone therefore who is heavy laden or who wants land to cultivate, may repair thither and about, as in the Land of promise, with milk and honey. (“To Lafayette”)

Washington—like most Americans—saw America as the new Canaan, flowing with milk and honey, in which God’s people were to multiply and replenish the earth and to serve God and bring about his purposes.

A natural outgrowth of the chosen people and promised land symbols within the Providence myth is the symbol of an antagonist—an individual, organization or nation that sought to prevent the chosen people from inhabiting the promised land and accomplishing God’s purposes. As fiction-writing often requires a bad guy, so, too, with myth-writing. I will refer to the bad guy in the Providence myth as the antagonist symbol. Clifford Longley observed the following: “The problem is that while...myths exalt the nation they belong to, they often do so by denigrating other nations. Thus myths easily turn into long-standing grievances towards their neighbors, long-standing reasons for prejudice or hatred which may have little or no basis in fact” (Longley 129-130). Benedict Anderson similarly observes “one might go so far as to say that the state imagined its local adversaries, as in an ominous prophetic dream, well before they came into historical existence” (Anderson *Imagined Communities* viii). Longley and Anderson point out that the individuals or nations that occupy the antagonist symbol in the Providence myth may or may not truly constitute a threat. But the viewing or imagining of the antagonist as a threat has a unifying effect for those within the myth. In a nutshell, the antagonist symbol of the Providence myth is occupied by those individuals and nations seen as evil and seeking to thwart the purposes of God and to destroy (physically or spiritually) his chosen people. Perhaps

the best biblical expression of the entire Providence myth is found in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. Within that chapter, the Israelites are promised the following regarding their enemies: “The Lord shall cause thine enemies that rise up against thee to be smitten before thy face: they shall come out against thee one way, and flee before thee seven ways” (*Bible* Deut. 28.7). The Israelites’ views regarding themselves as God’s chosen people and Canaan as their promised land placed the inhabitants of Canaan in the symbol of antagonists (a role which had previously been occupied by Pharaoh and the Egyptians) to their divinely mandated mission. Similarly, within the American national Providence myth, the antagonist symbol was occupied alternately by an oppressor whose yoke needed to be unshouldered and an enemy which needed to be subdued. Native Americans, France, Catholicism, King George III, parliament, and England would all occupy the antagonist symbol within the Providence myth at various moments in early American history.

If a good story requires an antagonist, then of course, it also requires a protagonist. I refer to the protagonist within the Providence myth as the liberator symbol. Because God’s people often find themselves under the oppressive yoke of a tyrant or an antagonist, they also require God’s help in removing that yoke. Liberators are those individuals providentially raised up to defeat the tyrannical antagonists, liberate God’s people, and redeem the promised land. One sees in that last sentence the intertwining of the smaller narratives of the first four symbols to contribute to the larger narrative of the Providence myth. Clifford Longley chose to refer to the liberator symbol as “Moses” as he discussed Britain’s and America’s chosen people myths. He wrote “So the designation of ‘Moses’ as an archetypal liberator is available in Protestantism to be attached to any worthy claimant. Both Oliver Cromwell and Charles II had been likened to Moses, but Washington’s claims were strongest (or so his contemporaries thought)” (Longley

141). Moses is, of course, an apt title for this symbol within the myth, partially because of Moses' own prophecy that "God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me" (*Bible* Deut. 18.15). In that sense, Moses served as a type for all future liberators—including Christ. However, while I will draw heavily upon the Exodus account for my Providence myth discussions, it is not the sole biblical account which I use in my discussion of myth. For that reason, I have chosen to use the more comprehensive term, "liberator" rather than "Moses" for this symbol in the Providence myth.

Mary Douglas, the famous anthropologist, discussed the fifth and final symbol of the Providence myth in the following words: "Zeus's thunderbolts, Apollo's arrows, the floods and plagues of the God of Exodus, when interpreted as punishments, form the distinctively religious part of the local theory of causation...sacred contagion is a moral theory of connections and causes. By its means the members of a community manipulate one another. Sacred contagion serves the oblique objective of making a group of persons into a community; it is a means of mutual moral coercion and is susceptible of analysis in political and social terms" (xvi).

Douglas' point is that natural disasters (and I would add good fortune also) are generally interpreted by myth participants as events caused by Deity. When a group of people interpret natural events as the symbol of God's hand prospering them (or cursing them or their enemies), it has a unifying effect amongst all who are willing to interpret the event in that way. It serves as a means of mutual moral coercion because the community which interpret the event as God's hand also attach to the event certain actions on their part or their enemies' part which resulted in the providential event. The hand of God symbol is very explicitly articulated again in Deuteronomy, with the Israelites being told that if they would be obedient, "the Lord shall make thee plenteous in goods...give the rain unto thy land in his season, and to bless all the work of

thine hand” (*Bible* Deut. 28.11-12). However, they were then told that if they would “not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God...all these curses shall come upon thee” and then the curses are enumerated in verses sixteen through sixty-eight, with the curses including plagues, pestilences, crop failure, conquest by their enemies, with the remark that “these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed” (28. 16-68). Smallpox, for example, was seen by the Puritans as the absolute hand of God when it scourged the native Americans: “The Puritans in Massachusetts had noticed how vulnerable the Indians were to this devastating disease, one of them describing the rapid depopulation it caused as ‘the wonderful preparation of the Lord Jesus Christ, by his providence for his people’s abode in the Western world’” (Longley 230).

The hand of God symbol is, again, inextricably linked to the other four symbols of the American national Providence myth. Clifford Longley writes the following regarding the link between the chosen people symbol and the hand of God symbol: “The point of being the ‘Chosen People’ is not to lord it over others but to be ‘a light unto the Gentiles’ (Isaiah 49:6). God did not and does not choose one people out of all others because, like some vain aristocrat, it pleases him to have favorites. The Chosen People have a duty to use their status and position for the benefit of the whole of humanity...” Longley continued by pointing out that if the Chosen People fail to fulfill that mandate, “God will withdraw his protection and the Chosen People will be plunged into a time of woe...mere wallowing in the privileges of Chosenness is likely to invite God’s wrath” (Longley 147). Perry Miller similarly expresses the interconnectedness between the two symbols: “As a people they are chosen because by public act they have chosen God” and “the relation of God to a community is not internal but external and ‘federal.’ It has to do with conduct here and now, with visible success or tangible failure.” Being God’s chosen

people means you have entered a “contract with the Almighty for external ends. Its obedience, in short, means prosperity, its disobedience means war, epidemic, or ruin” (*The New England Mind* 21-22). Miller further elaborates, that the “physical universe is under the continuous control of providence, so that whatever comes to pass—rainstorm, smallpox, earthquake—is not mere natural law but judgment. Afflictions do not just happen, they are, literally, acts of God” (23). When crops prospered, a healthy child was born or somebody was spared from disaster, it was Providence smiling upon them. When disaster or misfortune struck, it was an indication of the displeasure of Providence.

To quickly recapitulate, I assert that the five symbols of the American national Providence myth are the chosen people symbol, the promised land symbol, the antagonist symbol, the liberator symbol and the hand of God symbol and that each and all of them have power and meaning only through their relationship to the other symbols within the myth.

Chapter Conclusion

As I now move forward into the main body of this dissertation, I will present to the reader an in-depth study of the American national Providence myth, centering my study on its existence during the American Revolution. In order to carry out this in-depth study of the American national Providence myth I will do the following in the remaining five chapters: In chapter two, I review the provenance of the myth and its existence in English and Puritan colonial cultures, setting the stage for my central discussion of the myth. Chapter three will discuss the shifting nature of myth in general and demonstrate how the American national Providence myth experienced a dramatic shift in the years just prior to the American Revolution. The centerpiece of this dissertation is chapter four, wherein I discuss the use of the American national Providence myth to accomplish the political purposes of the American revolutionaries. Chapter five shows

the perpetuation of the myth—in particular, the liberator symbol—during the early years of the nineteenth century; this illustration shows how, historically, the myth continued to have incredible cultural power beyond the American Revolution. Chapter six examines the pedagogical utility of the American national Providence myth, with a discussion and demonstration of how one might incorporate the myth into a modern American Studies classroom.

Chapter 2—The Provenance of the American National Providence Myth

Provenance

Having defined the American national Providence myth and its five constituent symbols, I now turn in this chapter to a discussion of the provenance of the American national Providence myth in order to set the stage for my central discussion of the myth at the time of the American Revolution. The Providence myth was not unique to America, to England or even to Christianity. Rather, as Malinowski pointed out, some version of it is found in most cultures. Nevertheless, I am confining my discussion of the Providence myth to the Anglo biblical Providence tradition because that is the one to which eighteenth-century Americans would fall heirs.

I will shed more light on the American national Providence myth in the next few pages by briefly first reviewing the Providence myth as it existed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and secondly showing its prevalence amongst Puritan American colonists. This will help the reader to understand that the American national Providence myth as it existed during the American Revolution was certainly not created in a vacuum—rather it was inherited. It will also help to demonstrate that the myth did not remain in the same static form in which it existed in England or among the Puritans, but that it (like all myths) was shifting and adapting with each successive group of myth participants.

The English Providence Myth

When discussing any American national myth, Richard Slotkin says one must ask about the “Americanness of its origin,” observing “Myths are human creations, and the people who composed the vast majority of the American population before 1800 were European by ancestry, by language, and by religious and literary heritage” (5). He then points out that “since the Indian

is, from our point of view, the only one who can claim to be indigenously American, it seems important to question whether our national experience has ‘Americanized’ or ‘Indianized’ us, or whether we are simply an idiosyncratic offshoot of English civilization” (6). The American national Providence myth is primarily the latter. It is an adaptation of the British biblical Providence myth. But such behavior is common for myths; they are constantly shifting and being adapted and adopted. Nicholas Guyatt contributes “I reject the idea that providentialism was an American invention. The providential thinking of the colonial period originated in England rather than America, and we can best understand the emergence of American ideas about God’s role in history by exploring their English and British analogues” (Guyatt 3). I agree, so the next few pages will explore those analogues.

In 1678, the Englishman John Flavel first published his work, *The Mystery of Providence*. His self-declared purpose, as I stated earlier, was to demonstrate and discuss the workings of Providence so that individuals would, in turn, acknowledge the workings of Providence in their own lives and record it. In short, he sought to win adherents to—or participants in—the Providence myth. Flavel may have been one of the first to write at length regarding Providence, but he was certainly not the first Providence myth participant/advocate in England.

Richard Hughes points out that William Tyndale is perhaps the starting point for British chosen people myths. With Martin Luther’s writing of the Ninety-Five Theses and Henry VIII’s break from the Roman Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century, progressive religious thinkers began to emerge in England. William Tyndale was one of them. However, Tyndale’s desire to translate the Bible to English was a bit too progressive for Henry VIII and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. As a result, Tyndale fled to Wittenberg, Germany in order to carry out the translation. While performing the translation, Tyndale kept notes.

Hughes observed from Tyndale's notes that "In translating the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, Tyndale was especially struck with the theme of covenant, or an agreement, with [God's] chosen people." According to Hughes, the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy (which I mentioned earlier in the first chapter as the most concise articulation of the biblical Providence myth) "struck fear into Tyndale's heart" (21). Regarding those curses listed in Deuteronomy, "Tyndale exclaimed, 'A Christian man's heart might well bleed for sorrow at the reading of it, for fear of the wrath that is like to come upon us according unto all the curses'" (Tyndale 256). The chosen people and hand of God symbols were taking root in the minds of William Tyndale and sixteenth-century England, for Tyndale saw England as God's new Israel and he worried that they weren't living up to the national covenant. He further expressed the hand of God and antagonist symbols in his notes on the book of Jonah, writing "Christ...is risen yet once again out of his sepulcher in which the pope had buried him and kept him down...And as I doubt not of the examples that are past, so am I sure that great wrath will follow, except repentance turn it back again" (Tyndale 634-5). Although the Anglican Church had not yet been created at the time Tyndale wrote this commentary, he and other Protestant figures had already begun to see the Pope and all things Catholic as the enemies of the truth and the symbol of the antagonist in their lives; it soon became common practice in Protestant England to demonize the Pope and the Catholic Church. The Pope, the Catholic Church (and France) would remain the myth's most common antagonist symbols for the next century and a half in England and her colonies. Hughes observes that "By the time Henry VIII died and Edward VI took the throne (1547), the notion that England was in some sense a chosen people, standing in covenant relation with God, had become a working assumption for many English people" and then asserts "Tyndale's vision of covenant, therefore, was the soil in which the notion of chosenness would

slowly germinate until, finally, it would spring full-blown in the United States” (Hughes 23). A version of the biblical Providence myth with its symbols was firmly taking root in England, but it would transplant smoothly and flourish even more in the soil of the Puritan American colonies.

While the Providence myth continued to grow and have credence among the English in general—becoming as Hughes said “a working assumption for many English people,” the next powerful English expression of the Providence myth came from the Puritans. When Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary) ascended the throne in 1553, she wished to return England to its Catholic roots. Pursuant to that cause, she persecuted and executed many Protestants. Many Protestants sought exile from Mary on the European continent. Those that did so built upon Tyndale’s notion of covenant and asserted that the reason they were being killed and punished was because they, as God’s chosen people, had not kept their covenants with him, and resultantly, the hand of God had come out against them. Mary’s Catholic beliefs helped shoehorn her snugly in with the Pope and the Church of Rome as the antagonist symbol for those Protestant exiles. From those Marian exiles would emerge the Puritans—a group of radical Protestants that would leave an indelible mark on English and American history.

After Mary’s death, her next two successors to the throne leaned much more towards Protestantism. By the seventeenth century, as Protestantism became more firmly entrenched in British society, Mary’s beloved Roman Catholic Church came to be seen almost universally in England as the antagonist of God’s chosen people and the fulfillment of John’s book of Revelation:

What could the seven-headed beast be but Rome, the city of seven hills? Roman Catholicism must be the false prophecy, the religion of the Antichrist, the enemy of Jesus who Revelation predicted would appear to delude people in the final days. Influential

writers such as John Foxe and Joseph Mede explained that Catholics, the Pope, even lordly English kings who were too friendly to Catholics, were the forces of the Antichrist” (Aronson 4).

While Anglicanism had prevailed as England’s state religion and Protestantism had won out over Catholicism, the Puritans—now back in England—felt that the Anglican Church had not gone far enough in its divergences from the Roman Catholic Church. They felt that Anglicanism was still too “popish.” They assumed that the key to escape the judgements from the hand of God was to purify the Church, hence the name “Puritans.”

It is also worth briefly noting that the outgrowth within Anglicanism known as Puritanism resulted in part because of the recently published King James Bible. As a result of its publication in English, more Britons became familiar with the Bible and with the Providence myth principles contained therein. Many Englanders (particularly, the Puritans) began to frame themselves as God’s chosen people within the modern biblical myth; they considered themselves present-day Israel. It had become a commonly held view amongst sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britons that they were God’s chosen people.

Not everybody who held this view departed for the Western hemisphere during the seventeenth century. The chosen people symbol and the other Providence myth symbols continued to play powerful mythical roles for many who remained in England during the next century. While John Winthrop would fill the liberator role for those emigrants headed off to their promised land in New England, British subjects that remained in England would cultivate their own versions of the Providence myth. Perhaps the most powerful and most notable iteration of the Providence myth in English history was the one perpetuated during the English Civil War by Puritans that remained in England. That version of the myth continued to cast

England as the promised land where God would perform his labor. But it featured Oliver Cromwell as the liberator; King Charles (who with his lavish tastes and Roman Catholic wife was seen as “popish” by the Puritans) and all things associated with Catholicism played the part of the antagonist symbol; and the victory in the Civil War by Cromwell’s Puritan New Model Army was seen as the hand of God. Cromwell himself, after his lopsided, decisive victory at the Battle of Preston, recorded that he saw “the great hand of God in this business” (qtd. in Aronson 152). His first Declaration issued as the Lord Protectorate of England is a powerful communication of the Providence myth, with solid expressions of the hand of God, promised land, and chosen people symbols:

That this hath been a nation of blessings in the midst whereof so many wonders have been brought forth by the outstretched arm of the Almighty, even to astonishment, and wonder, who can deny? Ask we the nations of this matter and they will testify, and indeed the dispensations of the Lord have been as if he had said, England thou art my first-born, my delight amongst the nations, under the whole heavens the Lord hath not dealt so with any of the people round about us. (Cromwell 290)

The national Providence myth’s existence with all its symbols in England demonstrates that with nearly every articulation of the Providence myth, there is an alternative, contested version being told. Indeed, during the selfsame English Civil War, yet another variation of the Providence myth existed wherein Cromwell was depicted by the Royalists as the Anti-Christ antagonist and King Charles was the liberator. The myth and its symbols are dictated by the side of history on which the myth participants find themselves.

While the inclusion of the British Providence myth may seem like a deviation from the genealogy of the American Providence myth, I think it worthy of inclusion for the reason stated

here by Nathan Hatch: “Although the [eighteenth-century American] ministers did include the founding of New England among the great acts by which providence had secured their rights as free men, they focused their myth-making on the Glorious Revolution and the accession of the Hanoverians” (Hatch “Civil Millennialism” 426). A very notable example of such eighteenth-century American ministerial myth-making that pointed back to Britain comes from Thomas Foxcroft, who said in Boston in 1747:

Now to single out a few very memorable Times, and not go back beyond the Memory of many yet alive:-Never to be forgotten is that glorious Year 1688, signalis'd as a Year of the Right Hand of the most High, by that most seasonable Interposition of Divine Providence in the wonderful REVOLUTION; delivering us from the Perils we were in of Popery and Slavery, two of the most comprehensive Mischiefs, and securing to us our invaluable Laws and Liberties, the Rights of Conscience, and the Religion of Protestants.-Again, Never to be forgotten is that glorious Year 1714, signalis'd as a Year of the Right Hand of the most High, by the happy and most seasonable Accession of the illustrious House of HANOVER to the British throne. (70)

The two events mentioned by Foxcroft, of course, occurred well after the Puritans had departed England, yet they are central to the development of the American national Providence myth. This illustrates how that rather than being able to trace a direct lineage from Tyndale to the Puritans to the American Revolution, a review of the genealogy of the Providence myth reveals a much more muddled paternity. In this dissertation, it will become increasingly more evident that the Providence myth which the American revolutionary generation inherited was not passed on solely by (and did not exist exclusively amongst) the Puritan New Englanders. However, that is where it is found in its most bold and clearly defined form.

The Providence Myth in Puritan New England

During the early seventeenth century—while some Puritans had sought to purify the Church of England and to play their destined role as the chosen people by staying home and redeeming England—other Puritans felt their role in the Providence myth had to be played out in a different fashion. They felt that England had initially been chosen by God to be the promised land, yet,

England, the land chosen to protect the Protestant cause, did nothing. King Charles could not be trusted, Catholics were reentering the court, and Archbishop Laud was imposing his false religion on the people...England was destined to lead the forces of God...Yet England under Charles was not taking on its fated role as the homeland of the pure Protestant cause. And every day the wrath of God grew stronger.

Those who could read the signs also saw what they must do: leave the land of corruption and guide the faithful to safety in the New World...But they needed a leader, a Moses, a man who could hold them together through the journey...Some important Puritans had noticed such a man: a devout Puritan...He was John Winthrop. (Aronson 32-34)

The Providence myth symbols are all evident in Aronson's recounting of the Puritan emigrants' circumstance. The Puritans considered themselves the chosen people; the Catholic Church (and by association, King Charles and William Laud) were the antagonists; England had failed to live up to its role as the promised land so God had consequently chosen the New World as the new promised land; and they also had themselves a Moses, or a liberator—John Winthrop.

On October 20, 1629, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Company selected Winthrop by a vote to be the governor of the colony. Upon discovering as much, Winthrop

wrote his wife, saying “it hath pleased the Lord to call me to a further trust in this business of the plantation, than either I expected or find myself fit for” (qtd. in Morgan 45). Winthrop saw his election as governor as an act of God rather than of men. While Winthrop (in true liberator fashion) did not consider himself fit for the task, he did not run from his role as the liberator. Rather, he felt that he had been prepared for the task. He saw the various turns of events that had led him to depart England “as a sign” according to Francis Bremer. Bremer also points out “When he made the decision to migrate, John Winthrop saw his future, recognized it as what God had chosen him for, and eagerly embraced it. Now he had arrived. The time for self-fashioning was over. The time for him to take his place on the world stage had come” (170).

At some point near the outset of their exodus (there is disagreement whether it was delivered on board the *Arbella* or in the Church of the Holy Rood in Southampton), John Winthrop delivered a landmark sermon, entitled *A Model of Christian Charity*. Interestingly, it did not cause enough of a stir at the time to even merit mention by Edward Johnson (who made the voyage with Winthrop) in the *Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour*, or later by Cotton Mather in *Magnalia Christi Americana* or anywhere else that one might expect it to be mentioned. In fact, only one manuscript of the address survives. Yet, today it is considered among literary historians and critics as “a kind of Ur-text of American literature” (Delbanco 72). Francis Bremer states that “Probably no other work of colonial literature has been as frequently anthologized” (174). I would argue that one of the reasons that it occupies such a prominent place in American literature is because of its espousal of the principles of the Providence myth—one of the most powerful myths in United States history. Daniel Boorstin expresses a similar sentiment regarding Winthrop's sermon when he writes “No one writing after the fact, three hundred years later, could better have expressed the American sense of destiny” (3-4). That

American sense of destiny is an outgrowth of the Providence myth—particularly, the chosen people and promised land symbols. It is worth taking some time here to point out the symbols of the Providence myth in the text of Winthrop's momentous address.

In the very first line of his address, Winthrop mentioned Providence, saying "God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in submission." With these opening remarks, Winthrop expressed the Providence myth beliefs that God was involved in the affairs of mankind and that he ordered "all these differences for the preservation and good of the whole...that every man might have need of others, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection" (Winthrop). In other words, God has a work to accomplish and he has superintended the affairs of humankind and placed people in various positions historically in order to be able to accomplish those purposes. Winthrop articulated clearly both the chosen people and hand of God symbols when he told his listeners that God "hath taken us to be his after a most strict and peculiar manner, which will make him the more jealous of our love and obedience...Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with him for this work." They were indeed God's chosen people, but that privilege came at a price—they were to be strictly obedient in helping to bring about God's work. If they did so, Winthrop told them "the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with...ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies." If they were faithful, God's hand would be evident in helping the Puritan settlers enjoy unparalleled prosperity. However, if they were recalcitrant and didn't perform God's

work, the symbol of God's hand would be just as evident but in a contrary fashion: "the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged on such a perjured people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant...we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess" (Winthrop).

The Providence myth served its Puritan participants both as an explanation for why they were embarking upon their journey for New England and as a prescription for proper actions and behavior once there. Reiner Smolinski says "...the Mosaic exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea and the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land is seen as the prophetic type foreshadowing its eschatological antitype fulfilled in John Winthrop's Puritan exodus from England through an Atlantic baptismal font into the Wilderness of the New English Canaan" which "instilled in the colonists a sense of purpose" (xii). For Winthrop and his fellow travelers, the similarities were impossible to overlook; and those stark similarities made their mission crystal clear. They were God's modern Israel on a modern exodus.

John Cotton, another very significant figure in Puritan American history, likewise preached the Providence myth to the passengers of the *Arbella* prior to their departure in his farewell sermon *God's Promise to His Plantation*. As Reiner Smolinski said of Cotton's sermon, it is "an ideological justification for engaging in such a risky venture...a typological argument for possessing the wilderness" and "central to the Puritan experiment in the New World" (10). Put another way, myth is powerful for motivating people to action, and Cotton—like Winthrop—was drawing upon the power of the Providence myth to catalyze and encourage the Puritan emigrants to act on their beliefs. I will include only a few of Cotton's Providence myth invocations from that landmark sermon. Cotton took the biblical passage of Second Samuel 7.10 as the text for his sermon, which reads "Moreover I will appoint a place for my

people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more” (*Holy Bible*). To Cotton, the Puritans were the modern chosen Israelites and God was about to plant them in New England—their promised land. Cotton explained that God makes room for his chosen people by casting “out the enemies of a people before them by lawful war with the inhabitants,” by giving “a foreign people favor in the eyes of any native people,” or by making “a country though not altogether void of inhabitants, yet void in that place where they reside,” and he explained “Where there is a vacant place, there is liberty for the sons of Adam or Noah to come and inhabit” (4). Cotton felt that Providence had begun to make—and would continue to make—a place for God’s chosen people in the Americas.

A key part of the ideological justification for their acts included the symbolizing of the Native Americans who inhabited the promised land they were about to possess as the antagonist. Winthrop’s words in a letter to Sir Simonds D’Ewes were consistent with that Providence myth narrative when he wrote “for the natives in these parts, God’s hand hath so pursued them as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by the smallpox,” elaborating in another letter to Sir Nathaniel Rich, “so the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess” (qtd. in Bremer 242). Evidently, the Puritans viewed the Pequot War as an instance of the “lawful war” which was mentioned by Cotton. John Underhill, who led the attack on the Pequots wrote “‘When a people is grown to such a height of blood, and sin against God and man,’ God’s forces must have ‘no respect to persons, but harrow them, and saw them, and put them to the sword and the most terriblest death that may be. Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents... We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings’” (qtd. in Bremer 272). The Providence myth explained why the Native Americans had been nearly wiped out by smallpox and furthermore justified the completion of the task by

the Puritans' swords—the chosen people needed a promised land in which to flourish and fulfill God's purposes. The hand of God was manifest upon those that were the antagonists to God's purposes in sickness and in the sword. Cotton then employed the metaphor of a landlord/tenant relationship to explain their obligations regarding the promised land. Concerning their celestial landlord, Cotton said “thou must feel after him...strive to attain the favor of your Landlord, and labor to be obedient to him that hath given you such a place..., when you have found God making way and room for you, and carrying you by his providence into any place, learn to walk thankfully before him, defraud him not of his rent, but offer yourselves unto his service” (13). Receiving a land of promise at the hand of Providence required paying the rent of righteousness. Here one again observes the inextricable ties between the promised land symbol and the hand of God symbol. Cotton then switched to the agricultural metaphor upon which his address title is based, referring to the Puritans as God's plantation. He told them “If God be the Gardener, who shall pluck up what he sets down? Every plantation that he hath not planted shall be plucked up, and what he hath planted shall surely be established.” They were being planted by God in the promised land but it came with the caveat that “they might wrong themselves by trespassing against God” (16). He concluded by employing the hand of God symbol: “if you rebel against God, the same God that planted you will also root you out again, for all the evil which you shall do against yourselves” (17).

In each of these examples, we see that Cotton, like Winthrop, appropriated and applied the biblical Providence myth and its symbols to the departing Puritans to give them the impetus they needed to make the journey. I mentioned in my definition of myth in chapter one that a myth is a story which is considered true by—and has power for and upon—those within the myth's culture. Cotton and Winthrop—two of the Providence myth's most influential Puritan-

American mythologizers—preached the myth at the outset of their exodus and it helped motivate and bring about the Puritan settlement in New England. Truly, the myth was powerful, if it could cause the Puritans to leave the familiar comforts of England for the unknown perils of New England.

Once in New England, the myth continued to provide the explanation and worldview of their circumstances that would carry them through their hardships. Francis Bremer writes “Winthrop’s view of history was a providential one. New England had entered into a covenant with God, and just as he had found it useful to trace his personal relationship with God in the diary, so too he believed that it was important to trace the course of New England’s covenant relationship” (190). In a letter written back to his wife, Margaret—who remained in England until she migrated with the rest of the family in 1631—John Winthrop explained their difficulties using the hand of God symbol, saying with “much mortality, sickness, and trouble” God “hath purged out corruptions, and healed the hardness and error of our hearts, and stripped us of our vain confidence in this arm of flesh, that he may have us rely wholly upon himself,” he then concluded by expressing his trust in Providence, “the Lord will do us more good in the end...for all the trouble we have endured. It is enough that we shall have heaven, though we should pass through hell to it” (qtd. in Bremer 193-4). Years later, the Providence myth continued to serve as Winthrop’s explanation and justification of their circumstances. In a letter Winthrop wrote in 1644, he looked back on their first fourteen years in New England through the lens of the Providence myth and wrote “the Lord hath still preserved us, and frustrated all councils and attempts against us...The Lord hath brought us hither through the swelling seas, through perils of pirates, tempests, leaks, fires, rocks, sands, diseases, starvings: and hath here preserved us these many years from the displeasure of princes, the envy and rage of prelates, the malignant plots of

Jesuits, the mutinous contentions of discontented persons, the open and secret attempts of barbarous Indians, the seditious and undermining practices of heretical false brethren” (*Life and Letters* 317). As the years passed, Winthrop, Cotton and the Puritan settlers had firmly entrenched the Providence myth as their narrative: They were God’s chosen people; Winthrop, along with his fellow governors, served as liberators; New England was the promised land; Native Americans, Jesuits and anybody else who stood in the way of the settlement were the antagonists; and the hand of God had been manifest in prospering and chastising them over the years.

Another interesting invocation of the Providence myth from the lives of Winthrop and Cotton deserves mention. Between 1636 and 1638, John Winthrop and John Cotton found themselves caught in the middle of a great dispute—the Antinomian Controversy. On the one hand they had Thomas Shepard—a rigid, legalistic Puritan who emphasized works to demonstrate one’s standing before God. On the other hand, was Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson was a brilliant, free-thinking daughter of a preacher who emphasized a personal relationship with Deity and claimed to be receiving revelations. In the end, Cotton and Winthrop sided with Shepard; and after grueling trial proceedings and several unheeded exhortations to get Hutchinson to change her behavior, they chose to excommunicate her and banish her from the colony. Through the proceedings, Winthrop developed a powerful distaste for Hutchinson and labeled her an “American Jezebel.” In the years immediately following the trial, two things occurred which Winthrop explained using the Providence myth, seeing the events as evidence of the hand of God. Not long after the trial, it came to Winthrop’s attention that Mary Dyer—one of Hutchinson’s adherents—had given birth to a deformed, stillborn child. The body of the child had been quietly and discreetly buried. However, when the community leaders learned of it,

...the grave was dug up and the child exposed. It was promptly dubbed a ‘monster,’ a terrible warning of God’s displeasure with those who held and taught heretical opinions. To present-day observers, and even to a few contemporaries, the propagandist exploitation of the birth was a shocking, distasteful episode, although such beliefs were common currency on both sides of the Atlantic at the time. To Winthrop, the ministers, and the magistrates, it was a providential discovery. (Pearl 25)

When Winthrop later learned that Hutchinson also “had given birth to a deformed fetus in 1638, he took this as a providential sign that he and his colleagues had been on God’s side” (Bremer 299). Hutchinson’s woes did not end there. A few years after their exile, she and her family were living in Pelham Bay, New York. There, Hutchinson and her entire family—save one daughter—were killed by Indians. Winthrop, according to Edmund Morgan, “could see too easily the hand of God operating in his favor whenever his opponents met with some misfortune, and he took a morbid satisfaction in such events” (94). The same appears to have been true for more than just Winthrop. The Reverend Thomas Weld, when he heard of the massacre of the Hutchinsons, wrote with a Providence-myth flair “The Lord heard our groans to heaven, and freed us from our great and sore affliction.... I never heard that the Indians in those parts did ever before this commit the like outrage upon any one family or families; and therefore God’s hand is the more apparently seen herein, to pick out this woeful woman” (qtd. in LaPlante 244). “As Revelation had predicted, Jezebel’s children had been killed. A perfect case, the Massachusetts fathers were sure, of divine justice” (Aronson 72-3). The case of Anne Hutchinson demonstrates just how heavily Winthrop, Cotton and the Puritans drew upon the Providence myth to explain their circumstances and to justify their actions. The myth had been powerful enough to warrant their departure from England; now it had been powerful enough to

demand the Hutchinson family's departure from the protection of the New England colony and to explicate their calamitous end.

As time passed, the Providence myth became even more deeply entrenched in New England culture as the lens through which New Englanders saw themselves and their circumstances. Michael Wigglesworth's 1662 poem, "God's Controversy with New England," stands as an absolute monument to the Providence myth. He writes

Beyond the great Atlantick flood there is a region vast,
 A country where no English foot in former ages past...
 Until the time drew nigh wherein the glorious Lord of Hosts
 Was pleased to lead his armies forth into those foreign coasts...
 Where Satan had his scepter sway'd for many generations
 The King of Kings set up his throne to rule among the nations. (42)

The symbols of the myth are clearly marked. America had been a promised land that had been preserved for the Puritans' day when God had martialled his chosen people to inhabit it. The primary antagonists in Wigglesworth's poem are the native inhabitants of the promised land:

And those that sought his people's hurt he turned to decay
 Those curst Amalekites, that first lift up their hand on high
 To fight against God's Israel were ruined fearfully.
 Thy terrors on the heathen folk, O great Jehovah, fell... (43)

In the biblical version of the Providence myth, the Israelites had antagonists in the form of the Egyptians behind them and the Canaanites/ Amalekites before them. Similarly, in the Puritans' myth, the antagonist role was shared by the Native Americans before them and the forces of evil in Europe behind them.

Here was the hiding place, which thou, Jehovah didst provide
 For thy redeemed ones, and where thou didst thy jewels hide
 In perilous times and saddest days of sack-cloth and of blood,
 When the overflowing scourge did pass through Europe like a flood. (44)

New England was the Puritan's hidden, preserved promised land. Wigglesworth then references Winthrop and his governor-successors as liberators who maintain God's cause, along with further examples of the promised land and chosen people symbols:

Our Governor was of ourselves and all his brethren,
 For wisdom and true piety, select and chosen men.
 Who, ruling in the fear of God, the righteous cause maintained...
 God's throne was here set up; here was his tabernacle pight:

This was the place, and these the folk in whom he took delight. (44-45)

Wigglesworth—considered one of the major seventeenth-century American poets—wrote this poem as a jeremiad intended to berate the New England colonists of his day for their sloth in not living up to their ordained puritanical mission. However, in spite of its reproachful nature, the poem was well received—demonstrating the widespread acceptance and approval of the Providence myth narrative in New England.

In the first chapter I shared three possible definitions of “providence” provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. I mentioned that within seventeenth-century English culture, the Providence myth was so pervasive that a type of literature developed referred to as “providences” or providence tales. Providences were very formulaic, in that the characters in the tale acted in accordance or in discord with the will of God. As a result, the characters were providentially protected or smitten (depending on whether they had pleased God or not with their

actions). These tales were used for general moralizing within the culture and were very clear examples of myth. At about the same time that Flavel published his work *The Mystery of Providence* in England, works were also being published in New England to advocate the Providence myth. Whole works appeared recounting the occurrence of providences, or providence tales. The significance of printed literature for perpetuating the Providence myth in New England (and it was also true for England as well) cannot be overstated and is summed up nicely by Richard Slotkin: “Printed literature has been from the first the most important vehicle of myth in America, which sets it apart from the mythologies of the past. The colonies were founded in an age of printing, in large part by Puritans, who were much inclined toward the writing and printing of books and pamphlets and the creating of elaborate metaphors proving the righteousness of their proceedings” (19). Truly the Providence myth benefited greatly and became one of the most powerful American national myths thanks to advances in, and the availability of, printed literature.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of this type of literature is Increase Mather’s *An essay for the recording of illustrious providences: wherein, an account is given of many remarkable and very memorable events, which have happened in this last age; especially in New-England*. The title is incredibly long, yet very typical of that period’s literature. Mather initially published it in 1684. The work is a compendium of the many events which were seen as providences by the “elders” from the various settlements within the colony. Mather’s son, Cotton Mather, would later include Increase Mather’s collection in his own famous 1702 work, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. The best translation of that work’s title from Latin is “The Great Works of Christ in America”—in which one sees a very clear expression of the Providence myth. In the Mathers’ estimation, to tell the history of America was to tell *the* great providence tale.

Cotton Mather included his father's collection in the sixth chapter or book of *Magnalia Christi Americana* and the title (which is again characteristically long) of that chapter is "Sixth Book, The Wherein Very Many Illustrious Discoveries and Demonstrations of the Divine Providence in Remarkable Mercies and Judgments on Many Particular Persons Among the People of New England Are Observed, Collected and Related." I include the title because of what it teaches about the Providence myth. Providence myth purveyors were able to see the hand of Providence in the "mercies *and* judgments." As I was trying to arrive at a name for each one of the symbols of the Providence myth, I debated about which constituent symbols truly were significant to the Providence myth. Within the narrative of the Providence myth, I observed God's punishment for the chosen people's wickedness and prosperity for their righteousness, because, as Mather's title expresses, it is paramount within the myth to see the hand of Providence in the positive *and* negative consequences of their actions. The Puritans saw God's hand in their prosperity as well as in their suffering; Providence was in the birth of a healthy baby and in the destruction of their crops by hail. So, in the end, I ultimately decided upon the "hand of God" symbol, which encompasses both sides of the providential coin.

In the first paragraph of that sixth book, Mather makes a case for recording "Providences," but in doing so, he articulates two symbols of the Puritan Providence myth: "the great governor of the world will ordinarily do the most notable things for those who are readiest to take a wise notice of what he does. Unaccountable therefore and inexcusable, is the sleepiness, even upon the most of good men throughout the world, which indisposes them to observe and much more to preserve the remarkable dispensations of Divine Providence, towards themselves or others" (Mather). Mather observed the hand of God symbol amongst God's chosen people (those who are readiest) and felt it a moral obligation to observe and preserve the

record of Providence's hand in this book, for to not do so would be a failure to recognize the hand of Providence.

I shall discuss only one rather interesting tale from *Magnalia Christi Americana*: "The wonderful story of Major Gibbons." Mather recounts that Major Gibbons had left Boston on a vessel headed to some other part of America, but he had been stranded at sea long enough that he and the crew contemplated cannibalism as a means of survival. The party cast lots to see whom they would eat and the lot fell upon one unfortunate fellow. But then none of them could bring themselves to take his life, so they gave themselves to "zealous prayers; and behold while they were calling upon God, he answered them: for there leaped a mighty fish into their boat." After they had suffered hunger for a few days more, they repeated the scenario. But again, nobody could take the life of their compatriot, so again they gave themselves to prayer. This time a large bird landed upon the ship and they hastily consumed it. A third time they were brought near the point of starvation and a third time were about to indulge in cannibalism, but they again prayed first. As they looked up from prayer, no animals appeared. Instead, they saw a ship and they were rescued by a French pirate who had "formerly received considerable kindnesses of Major Gibbons" (Mather). To Mather and the Puritans, it was no coincidence that only after humble prayer were Gibbons and the crew spared or that the French pirate had a previous acquaintance with Major Gibbons. Instead, these stories reaffirmed the Providence myth to the Puritans and way that God worked with them as his chosen people. In Slotkin's words, one "tests his vision by acting in accordance with the principles of behavior that seem to be demanded by reality as he envisions it. Insofar as that behavior is consistent with the universal order, it will seem to prosper him and acquire the name of virtue" (7). The Puritans readily made the connection

between acts of righteousness and deliverance and the connection between disobedience and chastisement.

The Mathers' decision to collect and relate these instances of the hand of God symbol appears to be an example of what Richard Slotkin was discussing when he wrote "The myth-artist, priest, or fabulist uses the artifacts of myth to evoke the 'sense' of the myth and its complex of affirmations in the audience. He may use these artifacts in two ways—either deliberately, in an effort to make propaganda for his cause, or unconsciously, under the compelling association of perceived event and inherited mythology" (8). It is difficult to tell which of the two motives initially catalyzed Increase Mather to create his collection of providences—probably some of both. While we can assume that Mather was very sincere in his perceptions of Providence, it does not seem disingenuous to view him as a propagandist and as one who capitalized on the medium of print to advocate the hand of God symbol within the Providence myth. It also seems quite evident, as Perry Miller suggests, that the *Magnalia* was written in part to defend the idea that America and specifically New England *was* indeed the promised land, that the New England Puritans *were* God's chosen people and that the hand of Providence *had* been manifest in their endeavor. Back in England, Cromwell's Puritan Army had been victorious—thus providing evidence for English myth participants that the hand of God was in the cause back in England. If that were the case, then the "exodus of saints to found a city on a hill, for all the eyes of the world to behold" might be considered a non-divinely appointed mission, and Mather or the other leaders of that experiment might each be, as Miller puts it "reduced to writing accounts of himself and scheming to get a publisher in London, in a desperate effort to tell a heedless world 'Look, I exist!'" (18). The *Magnalia* then, served to demonstrate precisely what its title expressed—that Christ was doing great works in America.

Mather's *Magnalia* serves as a forerunner to the many examples of American Providence myth literature that would be put into use to accomplish political purposes during the American Revolution and countless times since.

Prior to Increase Mather's publishing of his *Illustrious Providences*, Mather had been party to the printing of another providence tale which was eventually published as the *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Mather's later decision to publish his collection of *Illustrious Providences* may have stemmed from the fact that Rowlandson's captivity narrative enjoyed a lot of commercial success—being printed and re-printed several times—and from the cultural power that he acquired as a result of his usage of the narrative to reinforce Providence myth principles. Kathryn Derounian writes regarding Rowlandson's *Narrative* that Mather “almost certainly sponsored it and wrote its preface” (240), and later elaborated that “Mather was in a position to facilitate the publication of Rowlandson's narrative at the Boston press” and “funded the publication of Mary Rowlandson's work for political [reasons]” (242-3). The narrative had initially been published between one of Mather's sermons and a sermon given by Rowlandson's husband. However, when the “narrative overtook the sermon in terms of sales” (243), it is very possible that Increase Mather saw the publication of providences as a popular and profitable form of religious literature.

Rowlandson's *Narrative* recounts how she was captured by Native Americans during King Philip's War and remained a captive for over a year until a ransom was paid for her release. Rowlandson published her captivity narrative in Boston and later in London. Her narrative serves as a significant Providence myth text, articulating all of the Providence myth symbols but most particularly the hand of God symbol. Rowlandson's narrative is a rollercoaster ride of emotions as it opens with her house being burnt down around her; receiving a bullet to her side;

having the child in her arms shot; and watching as her sister is shot dead. Rowlandson sums up the scene by saying “It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their blood, some here, and some there, like a company of sheep torn by wolves, all of them stripped naked by a company of hell-hounds.” However, (true to Puritan myth-participant fashion), in the midst of all this chaos and terror, Rowlandson sees the hand of Providence: “yet the Lord by His almighty power preserved a number of us from death, for there were twenty-four of us taken alive and carried captive” (Rowlandson). Rowlandson then proceeds to narrate the captivity of the next sixteen months through the lens of the Providence myth, constantly invoking God’s goodness in her preservation: “But the Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of His power”; and acknowledging God’s justification in allowing her to experience the deprivations that she did: “it was easy for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off the thread of my life and cast me out of His presence forever” (Rowlandson). Rowlandson’s language reflects the power of the hand of God symbol in Puritan life. She saw the positive things that happened to her as the results of some degree of righteousness and God’s desire to preserve his people. Yet, she saw the negative things as the result of neglect of Christian duty. To use Winthrop’s words from his *Model*, Rowlandson felt that the Lord had justifiably “[broken] out in wrath against [them].” Richard Slotkin asserts that myth consumers see themselves “fulfilling the social obligations established for the myth and for the priests who keep and ritualize it” (Slotkin 12). The use of the term “fulfilling the social obligations” of the myth does not imply that those myth consumers like Rowlandson are simply going through the motions of the myth. It means that myth participants like Rowlandson see the elements of the myth—as taught to her by the “priests” (Cotton, Winthrop, Mather) within her culture—becoming a reality. The myth was no longer merely something she heard spoken; she had now

experienced the elements of the myth. Richard Slotkin sees Rowlandson's captivity narrative as deeply significant and archetypal to American mythology:

Mrs. Rowlandson's narrative is, in the sense in which I have defined the term, an archetype—that is, the initiator of a genre of narrative within American culture, the primary model of which all subsequent captivities are diminished copies, or types...Certainly the terms of her narrative, its structure and its symbolism, are derived from older European mythologies, which in turn derive from still more primitive biblical and Indo-European myths...Mrs. Rowlandson's narrative functions as an archetype, creating a paradigm of personal and collective history that can be discerned as an informing structure throughout Puritan and (with modifications) in later American narrative literature (102).

Rowlandson's captivity narrative was indeed archetypal, paving the way for the publication of more providences, captivity narratives and later American literature like that of James Fennimore Cooper. But, the points I wish to emphasize from Slotkin's observation are that Rowlandson's captivity narrative had been indeed "derived from older European" and "biblical" myths—namely the biblical Providence myth—and that it created "a paradigm of personal and collective history" that would inform later American Providence myth literature.

The final example of the Puritan Providence myth which I will provide is found in the writings of the seventeenth-century Puritan poet, Anne Bradstreet. She expressed providentialism through the metaphor of a parent dressing a child:

A prudent mother will not clothe her little child with a long and cumbersome garment; she easily foresees what events it is like to produce—at the best, but falls and bruises or perhaps somewhat worse. Much more will the all-wise God proportion His

dispensations according to the stature and strength of the person He bestows them on.

Large endowments of honour, wealth, or a healthful body would quite overthrow some weak Christian; therefore, God cuts their garments short to keep them in such a trim that they might run the ways of His commandment” (Bradstreet 279).

Bradstreet felt that Providence’s withholding of gifts or blessings from his people was analogous to trimming a garment—it was for the benefit of the chosen people. In similar fashion, Washington and other Americans would later see the withholding hand of God as providential and beneficial during the American Revolution. As much as this might mean great paucity and inequality, Bradstreet was willing to subject herself to Providence’s wisdom:

“There is nothing admits of more admiration than God’s various dispensation of His gifts among the sons of men, betwixt whom He hath put so vast a disproportion that they scarcely seem made of the same lump or sprung out of the loins of one Adam, some set in the highest dignity that mortality is capable of, and some again so base that they are viler than the earth...and no other reason can be given of all this but so it pleased Him whose will is the perfect rule of righteousness” (Bradstreet 281-2).

Later, near the time of her death, Bradstreet shared Providence myth (and particularly hand of God symbol) principles with her children as she recounted her youth “as I grew up to be about 14 or 15, I found my heart more carnal, and sitting loose from God, vanity and the follies of youth take hold of me. About 16, the Lord laid His hand sore upon me and smote me with the smallpox. When I was in my affliction, I besought the Lord and confessed my pride and vanity, and He was entreated of me and again restored me” (Bradstreet 241). She saw her bout with smallpox as the chastening hand of God, directing her to return to righteousness. She also told them how she had questioned God’s existence at times and the extent of His participation in the

lives of humankind. She had, however, in the end concluded “That there is a God my reason would soon tell me by the wondrous works that I see, the vast frame of the heaven and the earth, the order of all things, night and day, summer and winter, spring and autumn, the daily providing for this great household upon the earth, the preserving and directing of all to its proper end. The consideration of these things would with amazement certainly resolve me that there is an Eternal Being” (Bradstreet 243). Bradstreet’s writings were peppered with the symbols of the Providence myth, paving the way for its broader use by later American literary figures.

Chapter Conclusion

Winthrop, Cotton, Wigglesworth, the Mathers, Rowlandson and Bradstreet are but a handful of the Puritan Providence myth purveyors. But the American national Providence myth as it would be implemented during the American Revolution had deeply taken root and was now blossoming within Puritan culture. Sacvan Bercovitch said of this development that the New England Puritans “swept away” the distinction between redemptive and secular history. He continues:

In their “special commission,” they proclaimed, redemptive merged with secular history. With an arrogance that astounded their contemporaries, Protestants no less than others, they identified America as the new promised land, foretold in scripture, as preparatory to the Second Coming. They proved from scripture texts that their migration to New England was a flight from another Babylon or Egypt (meaning not only a false religion, but, morally and socially, European civilization); their conflicts with the local “savages” were “Wars of the Lord,” foreshadowed by Joshua’s conquest of Canaan; and the New World would in due time be the site of New Jerusalem, which Mather therefore hailed as “Theopolis Americana.” (Bercovitch xiii)

Puritan culture should be seen as the most powerful early propagating force of the American national Providence myth. Thanks to them, the Providence myth and its symbols had indeed taken shape as one of the predominant American myths: The Puritans were God's chosen people; America was the promised land; Winthrop and the Puritan leaders who led them out of Babylon were the liberators; both the Native Americans (symbolizing the Canaanites whom they were to displace) and worldly European ways (symbolizing Egypt) served as antagonist symbols; and the hand of God was evident in their prosperity or difficulties. Nicholas Guyatt makes a parallel observation about the development of the American national Providence myth: "By the 1660s American colonists *had begun* to develop their own understandings of God's purposes in America and to pay less attention to the providential meaning of English history. This exceptionalism was effectively forced upon the colonists by the political and religious confusion in England, but it provided a template for imagining American history as providentially significant and *divergent from Britain*" (Guyatt 4, emphasis added). A divergent destiny from that of England was, as Bercovitch said, still primarily a Puritan theme. But the Puritans had indeed begun to carve out a distinct destiny from that of England. Bercovitch notes "Having Americanized their rhetoric, they found in America the assurance of their destiny" (109). Of Mather's *Magnalia*, Bercovitch further observes "He speaks of the emigrants' flight from the Old World as an evangelical call, and their ocean-crossing as a spiritual rebirth" (115). For Mather, those who had emigrated to America had answered God's call and consequently were his chosen people. This sense of chosenness and distinction from their English counterparts would become more universal in America and come to full "fruition during...the War of Independence" (Smolinski xii), but during the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries, it remained an almost exclusively Puritan notion.

Again, I strongly emphasize that American colonists in general “had begun” only to see their destiny as divergent from that of Britain. This acknowledgement is important because in the next chapter of this work, I will demonstrate how most Americans were still employing a version of the Providence myth that portrayed England as God’s co-chosen people. The myth which they employed was one which they inherited from the Puritans *and* from an English Providence myth tradition. It was not until the 1760s that the American myth would make a clean break from its English predecessor.

Chapter 3—The Shifting Providence Myth

Shifts in Myth

I have, to some degree, already demonstrated in this work how myths shift. I have also shown how the Providence myth shifted as its participants found themselves faced with different environments, different political goals, and different enemies. Consequently, the places and people represented by the various symbols in the Providence myth changed. Throughout those historical changes however, the Providence myth and its symbols remained largely in place as one of America's guiding myths. As Richard Slotkin describes it, "while the images may readily exhibit changes in response to the play of social and psychological forces, the narrative or narratives which relate them to each other have or acquire a certain fixity of form" (9). Roland Barthes expresses the shifting nature of myth similarly when he writes "Naturally, everything is not expressed at the same time: some objects become the prey of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear, others take their place and attain the status of myth...it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (110). Barthes' comment that myth is chosen by history and Slotkin's observation that the changes come about as a result of social and psychological forces both articulate the forces behind the shifts in myth. As myth-participants have their circumstances change, their myths must shift and be adapted to explain their current circumstances and justify their self-concept, actions and worldviews.

The Providence myth, of course, is no exception. It, too, experiences shifts as its myth-participants' circumstances change. My discussion of the shifting Providence myth begins by building on the words of Nicholas Guyatt. He writes "I argue that providentialism played a

leading role in the invention of an American national identity before 1865 and that its role was neither static nor timeless” (Guyatt 3). There are two important ideas in that comment: first, providentialism has been an American cultural archetype; secondly, ideas regarding providence have not been static or timeless—they have shifted. Bernard Bailyn in his book, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, points out the significance of Puritan covenant theology as one of the major sources of Revolutionary thought. Bailyn also discusses the shifts that had taken place since the Puritan era that made it a more usable myth for Americans in general:

...the elaborate system of thought erected by the first leaders of settlement in New England had been consolidated and amplified by a succession of writers in the course of the seventeenth century, channeled into the main stream of eighteenth-century political and social thinking by a generation of enlightened preachers, and softened in its denominational rigor by many hands until it could be received, with minor variations, by almost the entire spectrum of American Protestantism.

...it offered a context for everyday events nothing less than cosmic in its dimensions. It carried on into the eighteenth century and into the minds of the Revolutionaries the idea, originally worked out in the sermons and tracts of the settlement period, that the colonization of British America had been an event designed by the hand of God to satisfy his ultimate aims. Reinvigorated in its historical meaning...this influential strain of thought, found everywhere in the eighteenth-century colonies, stimulated confidence in the idea that America had a special place, as yet not fully revealed, in the architecture of God’s intent. (32-33)

While Guyatt is speaking regarding providence in general and Bailyn is discussing Puritan covenant theology, I will apply their statements to my Providence myth argument inasmuch as

the myth can be seen as an outgrowth of both. The myth had gone from being a primarily Puritan myth to being, as Bailyn observes “found everywhere in the eighteenth-century colonies.” But, as he points out regarding covenant theology, the myth, likewise, had received widespread acceptance because it shifted to meet its audience’s needs—it “consolidated,” “amplified,” “channeled,” and “softened,” “until it could be received...by almost the entire spectrum of American Protestantism.” Nicholas Guyatt echoes this idea when he says that “To assess the true impact of providentialism, we have to recognize that the idea changed over time.” He then elaborates on that claim by explaining that during the colonial period “providentialism offered a way to assuage anxieties about the brief past and uncertain present of the English settlements.” In contrast, during the Revolution and the years of the early republic, “providential thinking was used to promote the idea of American independence and to debate the place of nonwhite people in the new United States.” Guyatt then sums up this contrast by saying “Although the broad outlines of providentialism endured from the 1600s until the Civil War, the uses of this idea of divine involvement—and the political contexts in which providential arguments were deployed—changed profoundly” (3). Guyatt’s comments further solidify the notion of Providence myth shifts when he says that “the uses of this idea of divine involvement...changed” while “the broad outlines of providentialism endured.” His point about the changing uses or applications of the Providence myth further substantiates the words of Barthes and Slotkin. The central myth—which included a narrative “of divine involvement”—remained in place. But the people which played the roles of the liberator, the antagonist, and the chosen people shifted as did the events which symbolized the hand of God.

I now cite an early (and disturbing) example of a shift in the Providence myth to demonstrate the phenomenon. It has to do with smallpox: “The Puritans in Massachusetts had

noticed how vulnerable the Indians were to this devastating disease, one of them describing the rapid depopulation it caused as ‘the wonderful preparation of the Lord Jesus Christ, by his providence for his people’s abode in the Western world’” (Longley 230). In this version of the Providence myth, the Native Americans symbolized the modern Canaanite antagonists that had to be wiped out of the promised land in preparation for them—God’s chosen people, the Puritans—to inhabit it. Smallpox was seen as the symbol of the hand of God. Later, knowing how susceptible that the Native Americans were to the disease, the “British had tried to spread smallpox among the Indians allied with the French who were besieging Pittsburg in 1763, by giving them smallpox-infected blankets...Smallpox was often referred to as a providential aid to the settlement of Indian lands by white people...And a certain tardiness on the part of the American government in fighting the disease among Indians in the nineteenth century, after vaccination became possible, suggests a reluctance to stand in the way of ‘God’s purposes’” (Longley 230). In this particular instance of a Providence myth shift, smallpox remained static as the symbol of the hand of God; and likewise, the Native Americans remained the symbol of the antagonists of God’s chosen people within the various iterations of the myth; but the chosen people symbol was appropriated by the Puritans, then the British during the Seven Years’ War, and later by the nineteenth-century Americans. The narrative remained essentially the same with only the protagonists changing.

Perhaps the most seismic shift in the American Providence myth occurred in the interval between the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolutionary War. In order to set the stage for a discussion of that shift, however, I will demonstrate first that the Providence myth remained intact after its initial employment among the Puritans and gained more widespread usage until it was, as Bernard Bailyn expressed it, “found everywhere in the eighteenth-century colonies” (33).

I assert in this dissertation that the American Providence myth—by its widespread circulation before and particularly during the Seven Years’ War—facilitated a quick shift in allegiances and message at the time of the American Revolution. This facilitation is expressed aptly by Nicholas Guyatt, who says “Many historians have looked to the Seven Years’ War as an incubator for the providential understandings that would fire the American Revolution” (82). In the span of only a few years, an old familiar myth would take on a new form. The remainder of this chapter will first detail the existence of the American national Providence myth leading up to 1763 (the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War), and then examine the myth as it existed during the interval between 1763 and the Declaration of Independence.

The American National Providence Myth Before 1763

Throughout the Seven Years’ War, and particularly as it came to a victorious close from the perspective of British subjects, a number of providentialist clergymen in England invoked the myth and saw the hand of God in British conquest. The historian Linda Colley observes that Britons saw themselves as “a chosen nation...with a sense of mission” and asserts that “they identified their nation with ancient Israel” (30-33). However, as Nicholas Guyatt points out “While the outcome of the Seven Years’ War persuaded many British observers that God was on their side, a variety of factors blunted the conviction either that God had special plans for Britain in history or that God intended Britons to play a role in triggering Christ’s return” (63). The convictions of many American clergymen about the hand of Providence were not so blunted. As British subjects, many Americans saw the outcome of that war as the hand of God. Although the myth and its symbols (which would drive the Revolution in a few short years) were in place at this time, there was little evidence of revolutionary rhetoric among the colonists in the Americas. “Rather than declaring a special providential destiny for New England, many preachers imagined

the British nation as a single providential unit that spanned the Atlantic and encompassed both Britain and America, even as they credited God with a broader interest in the Protestant cause in Europe” (Guyatt 83). Nathan Hatch similarly points out the powerful tie to Britain in the pre-1763 Providence myth:

Although the ministers did include the founding of New England among the great acts by which providence had secured their rights as free men, they focused their myth-making on the Glorious Revolution and the accession of the Hanoverians. It was King William, ‘the Deliverer of the Nation, and the Shield of its Liberty,’ who more than anyone else protected succeeding generations from popish enslavement. Ministers repeatedly exalted the Glorious Revolution as the fountainhead of the privileges enjoyed by eighteenth-century Britons. In similar fashion the standard myth portrayed the Hanoverians as preservers of liberty and Protestantism. (Hatch 426-7)

Over the next few pages, I will examine the pre-1763 sermons of George Whitefield, Thomas Prince and Samuel Dunbar—three examples of the mid-eighteenth century British-American ministers mentioned by Hatch. My argument is that while their mythologizing unequivocally placed Britain as the liberator, France as the antagonist, the United Kingdom and the Americas jointly as the promised land, and all British subjects as God’s chosen people, the strengthening and spreading of that version of the Providence myth paved the way for a quick shift in the myth after 1763.

The Pulpit and the Pre-1763 Providence Myth

George Whitefield is best known for his role in the Great Awakening. Whitefield, a powerful Providence myth purveyor, was also significant in laying the groundwork for the American Revolution. The fervor with which Whitefield and his religious contemporaries

worked during the First Great Awakening helped to make the Providence myth an American national myth before America was yet a nation. Michael Lofaro argues that Whitefield's "itinerant ministry in the colonies indirectly hastened the break with England by increasing the number of dissenters, and by forming them into loosely affiliated, intercolonial, interdenominational 'congregations,'" which in turn "perceptibly encouraged American independence" (1581). Similarly, Jerome Mahaffey, in his work *The Accidental Revolutionary: George Whitefield and the Creation of America*, asserted "If indeed this priest from the Church of England was instrumental in 'awakening' Americans from the religious doldrums; and if he influenced the way an entire generation understood itself; and if he steered these people toward a certain flavor of religion that embraced the idea of being independent from an overbearing official state church; and if he consistently—over a thirty-year period—told Americans how they ought to respond to political issues...then connecting Whitefield to the Revolution is a very reasonable idea" (ii). These claims are all the more interesting because Whitefield never saw or experienced the American Revolutionary War firsthand. He died suddenly in September 30, 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts where he was scheduled to preach that day in the First Presbyterian Church. I would agree that Whitefield did indeed "indirectly [hasten] the break with England" with his dissent from mainstream Anglicanism and with his democratic, Congregationalist approach to religion. But I would emphasize that one of the most important manners in which "he influenced the way an entire generation understood itself" was in his frequent use and invocation of the Providence myth. Whitefield—and his clergyman contemporaries—were incubating and cultivating providential notions that facilitated a cultural response to the sociological forces of the 1760s and 1770s which ultimately resulted in the American Revolutionary War.

While Whitefield's Providence myth preaching may have laid the groundwork for the Revolution, it, of course, still had the old symbols in place. As Whitefield's version of the Providence myth stood, English subjects clearly symbolized God's chosen people, the Catholic French were the antagonists, King George II and his generals were liberator symbols and the promised land still included all the lands of the British Crown. Whitefield was a close friend of William Pepperell, who led the attack against the French-held Louisbourg fortress on Cape Breton in 1744. Before they embarked and captured Louisbourg, Whitefield preached the farewell sermon to the troops and gave them their motto for the crusade "Nil desperandum Christo duce" (Fear nothing with Christ as our leader). With that sermon, "Whitefield emphasized his role as a supporter of the Protestant British monarchy and as an inveterate foe of Catholic France" (Kidd 183). Regarding his sermon to the expeditionary force, Whitefield recorded in his journal that he was not sure what would "come out of it to the people of God," but that he had prayed "give us Cape Briton. Lord prepare us either for Victory or defeat. But if it be thy will grant it may be a Garrison for Protestants" ("Unpublished Journal" 339). Although uncertain whether victory or defeat lay in store for the expedition, the Protestant English were God's chosen people.

Once that victory at Cape Breton was attained, Whitefield continued his Providence myth invocations in a sermon preached in Philadelphia in 1746 entitled "Britain's Mercies and Britain's Duty." Whitefield spoke about the Cape Breton victory, but he also spoke of the providential suppression of the "horrid plot, first hatched in hell, and afterwards nursed at Rome" to depose George II and supplant him with Charles Stuart (126). Whitefield neatly aligned the Stuarts, France and Rome as the agents of hell and as the antagonists of God's chosen people, saying of the rebellion, "a general massacre was intended. So that if the Lord had not been on

our side, Great Britain, not to say America, would, in a few weeks, or months, have been...a field of blood” (“Britain’s Mercies and Britain’s Duty” 126). Disaster had been averted because British subjects were God’s chosen people, Great Britain and America were the promised land and they had been spared by the hand of God. Thomas Kidd, likewise, observes the chosen people, hand of God and antagonist symbols in Whitefield’s sermon, pointing out that the sermon’s “primary message was one of thankfulness to God for his providential interventions in British Protestant history, and of Whitefield’s confidence in the ultimate destruction of Europe’s Catholic powers” (Kidd 196-197). Whitefield continued in his sermon, singing the praises of the “dread and rightful sovereign King George the Second” saying that all with eyes to see “must acknowledge, that we have one of the best of kings” (“Britain’s Mercies and Britain’s Duty” 124). Whitefield continued, saying of George II “He has been indeed *pater patriae*, a father to our country...a nursing Father of the Church” (125). Whitefield went on in the sermon to extol the Archbishop of York as an English hero, and Colonel Gardiner—who had died in the recent victory over the Catholic Charles Stuart—as an “incomparably brave soldier of the king, and good soldier of Jesus Christ” (132). Whitefield is portraying King George as the primary liberator but the Archbishop and Colonel Gardiner serve as co-liberators in Whitefield’s 1746 myth. He also ensured that his audience viewed themselves as God’s privileged chosen people and as living in a promised land, telling them “We breathe indeed in a free air; as free (if not freer) both as to temporals and spirituals, as any nation under heaven” (125). In his sermons, Whitefield made sure his audience saw events in a light “in which the hand of Providence could be seen” (Sandoz 122), deeply entrenching the symbols of the Providence myth into the worldviews and self-perceptions of pre-1763 British Americans.

In another sermon regarding the capture of Cape Breton, Thomas Prince gave a 1745 Boston sermon that is so bold in its expression of the Providence myth (and particularly, the hand of God symbol) that it must be mentioned and quoted from at length. Prince declared “the sovereign GOD, who ruleth by his Power forever, and does what he pleases among the Sons of Men, has by a surprising Course of Providence led us into a most adventurous Enterprise against the French settlements at Cape-Breton, and...delivered them into our Hands. And this, in a most signal Manner, is the LORD’s Doing” (17). Again, it is unequivocal that the Catholic French are depicted as the antagonists of the cause of God. Prince then proceeded to enumerate the many “signal” ways in which the hand of God was manifest. He mentioned the fact that Louisbourg had been “one of the strongest Fortresses in America if not in Europe” and he pointed out that it was the result of thirty years of labor by the French (18). Prince additionally felt that France’s declaration of war on England was providential and said that Louisbourg was such a threat that it alone would have been “worth the while to engage in a war with France,” but that “without our seeking...the Lord was pleas’d to leave them to precipitate a war upon us” (19). He pointed out that in a “few Weeks’ Time, the sovereign GOD has pleased to give us the Fruits of these Thirty Years prodigious Art, Labour and Expence of our Enemies: and this by Means of so small a Number, less than Four Thousand” (20). Prince also—in true myth-participant fashion—saw Providence in the misfortunes, mentioning that the “taking and carrying so many of our People into their Harbour and City” and the later return of those prisoners, caused the British “to be more acquainted with their Situation and the proper Places of landing and attacking” (21). Prince likewise felt that God had blessed the harvest of the Americans and “cut short the Crops in Canada and the French West India Islands” (21) that season in order to weaken the French situation and strengthen that of the British Americans. He felt that God had delayed the arrival

of needed French supplies (22). Prince also opined that God had tempered the elements: “God was pleased to give us such a constant Series of moderate and fair Weather, as in that Time of the Year has scarce ever been known among us” (23). The American military had also been spared from small pox and dysentery epidemics which had plagued those around them (24, 29). These last three observations regarding the various manifestations of the hand of God are in keeping with Whitefield’s statement that “Not only the sword, but plague, pestilence and famine are under the divine command” (“Britain’s Mercies and Britain’s Duty” 135). Myth participants were able to see the hand of God in most everything. Prince also saw it as providential that so many of the participants in the invasion were believers, observing that “many pious and prayerful persons were embarqu’d in the Cause, which we accounted the Cause of God and his People” (Prince 25). Not only could victory be attributed to the fact that the British were God’s people, but to the facts that the cause was just and carried out by chosen people who were living righteously. Prince told how Commodore Warren had been on his way to Boston, but that he had providentially encountered a fisherman that apprised him of the plan to attack Louisbourg, upon which Warren had tacked about and supplemented “4 Men of War, under God to protect and help” the invasion, defeating and capturing a French gun ship, “without all which...this great Affair had been soon defeated” (27). Prince told how the invasion force, although “the surf ran high,” landed “without oversetting a Boat or losing a Man” and without much opposition from the enemy in spite of having six hundred enemy troops stationed there to prevent a landing (27).

Prince especially couldn’t help but see God’s hand in the taking of the Grand Battery. The American invaders torched several storehouses full of combustible matter as they drew near to the battery, which caused explosions and large clouds of black smoke, to which the French responded by fleeing the Grand Battery and heading for the city, such that

...in the Morning, but 13 of our Men observing there was neither Flag flying, nor Chimney smoaking, nor Person appearing, but the Gates open, ventur'd in and took possession...thus this strong Fortress of 32 great Cannon, 30 of them 42 Pounders, which might alone have maintain'd itself against all our Army, the LORD deliver'd into our Hands, without the Loss of a Man, or Shot of a Gun, and before we demanded it: Whereby he at once fav'd us both Time, Toil and Blood, and surprisingly gave us a great Power over the Harbour, as well as so many of the largest of the Enemies Cannon, with a great Number of their own Balls and Bombs to improve against them. (28)

Thomas Prince also tells a particularly entertaining account of how at one point, the invasion force was digging trenches for the offensive against the city after having taken the battery. They encountered a large rock which they couldn't remove, but that "just as we left it, a Bomb from the Enemy came down in the most suitable Spot, and without any Harm remov'd it for us" (31). God was even digging their trenches for them. Prince concluded his narrative of the invasion by claiming, regarding the untrained American troops, "God so speedily taught their Hands to war, and their Fingers to fight, as presently to throw them with great exactness...and do such Execution as quickly beat them out of this strong Hold they tho't impregnable, and frighten the City to a quiet surrender" (29-30).

I've given a very exhaustive recounting of Prince's sermon. However, I sought to express the incredible sophistication with which a myth-participant can weave the myth into every event. Prince had mythologized every little detail of the siege of Louisbourg. He then finished his remarks by throwing down the proverbial gauntlet at the feet of his congregation members: "And now who can in common Reason deny a particular Providence in this great Affair? ...It was all comprehended in his sovereign View, Design and Providence. ...But let our

Joy rise higher that hereby a great Support of Antichristian Power is taken away, and the visible Kingdom of Christ enlarged” (32-34). Prince had absolutely bombarded his congregation with his avowal that Providence had aided the cause of the British in taking Louisbourg, with all the pre-1763 Providence myth symbols concretely in place: France and Catholicism were the anti-Christian antagonists, Britain and her leaders served as the chosen people and its liberators; and the hand of God was manifestly present in the miraculous conquest of Louisbourg.

Of all the Providence myth symbols, perhaps the most universally accepted and expressed symbol of the American national Providence myth as it existed prior to 1763 was the antagonist symbol as it encompassed France, popery and Catholicism. The Catholic French had been the perennial enemies of the English for centuries. So as British subjects, the Americans had a natural distaste for the French and for Catholicism. But because of the Puritan roots of many colonists, it was yet more exaggerated. As Thomas Kidd wrote “The Puritans of Massachusetts and Connecticut went to America because they feared that England and its official state church remained too ‘popish,’ or tainted by Catholic practices. The Puritans wanted a ‘purer,’ simpler church model, free from elaborate church hierarchy and based on their interpretation of the New Testament” (20). The colonists’ disdain of France only intensified during the Seven Years’ (French and Indian) War. North America was one of the theaters of the Seven Years’ War and resultantly, battles were being fought right on their frontiers—bringing it very close to home. So poignant were the feelings about France as the antagonist symbol that Samuel Davies—a pastor in Virginia where the first skirmishes of the Seven Years’ War took place—exclaimed that the war between Britain and France was no less than the “grand decisive conflict between the Lamb and the beast” and that French defeat would result in “a new heaven and a new earth” (qtd. in Hatch 420-421). Nathan Hatch sums up the Providence myth

sentiments of American colonists as the Seven Years' War came to a conclusion, saying they "translated it into genuinely cosmic categories. Fighting the French became the cause of God; marching to battle hastened the destruction of antichrist." Hatch continues "If there were still some clergymen who in 1760 could not discern the progress of providential history in the French defeat...they were few and insignificant. With rare exceptions the clergy saw the war's end as unequivocal evidence that the kingdom of darkness could no longer restrain the latter-day glory" (422). As this chapter progresses, it will become evident that the antagonist symbol (as occupied by the Catholic French during the decades leading up to the Revolution) was a deeply held notion within American culture that greatly facilitated the myth shift as the American Revolution got under way during the 1770s. When the time came, American myth-makers simply inserted a new villain—the British—into the narrative. The fact that the French would play a significant part as allies to the American colonists in the American Revolutionary War within a few short years makes this Providence myth shift all the more interesting because of how recently the French had been cast as antichrist antagonists within the Providence myth.

Samuel Dunbar provides one last example of a mid-eighteenth century preacher who helped to solidify the Providence myth as a powerful myth and facilitate the subsequent myth shift which took place after 1763. Dunbar's sermon is particularly heavy in its invocation of the liberator symbol. In 1760, Dunbar, a Boston preacher, told how "our gracious sovereign, pitying us, sent brave troops to assist us...and in the battle God was with them by his providence and power" (211-212). The hand of God was evident in battle. The brave troops referenced by Dunbar, that enjoyed God's providence and power, were British troops. Such comments were a far cry from the statements that would be made about British soldiers by Bostonians in ten short years—again illustrating the power of myth shifts to shape public thinking. However, for the

time being, Dunbar still saw them as liberators, saying “The experience which we, the Lord’s people, in this land, have had, of the happiness of engaging and enjoying the presence of God with our armies, should make us careful not to forfeit it by any sinful departure from God. ...The presence of God is as necessary for the success of our arms this year, as it was the last: and if God go forth with our armies, they will be prospered” (213). The American colonists were God’s chosen people in a prospered and preserved promised land and God’s hand would continue to be manifest as long they weren’t sinful. But Dunbar reserved his most powerful myth language for a liberator—the “indefatigable...magnanimous general” Wolfe. Dunbar said that Wolfe had “under the greatest disadvantages, and with the utmost difficulty and hazard...against the vastly greater number of his enemies...put them to the rout,” but “fell in the last and conquering battle.” In spite of Wolfe’s death, Dunbar emphasized: “yet God lives, and still we may have his favorable presence...this made our slain general, such an every way accomplished one: this can raise up, and give us other generals” (213-214). The pronoun “this,” in Dunbar’s last few lines, referred to God. God had raised up the liberator, Wolfe, and made him great; and God would do so again with the next general, because their cause (at this time, the war against France) was the cause of righteousness. This sort of liberator-mythologizing language foreshadowed the kind used for Washington during the Revolution. Providence mythologizers saw their liberators as heaven-raised and protected until they’d completed their missions. In 1760, American colonists still viewed the King of England, his generals, and troops as their providential liberators. Eighteenth-century American colonial sermons were often, as evidenced, powerful articulations of the Providence myth.

Adams, Washington, Franklin and the Pre-1763 Providence Myth

It was also common practice for many Americans to employ the myth in their daily vernacular—perhaps not with the same vigor and specificity as the clergy of that time period, particularly when it came to the symbols of the myth—but nonetheless, the Providence myth enjoyed circulation and use beyond the pulpit during that time. Correspondence and personal journals are perhaps the best places to get additional glimpses at how the myth was used to understand worldviews, explain circumstances and to guide future actions. In the central chapter of this dissertation, I will examine the Providence myth writings of six key revolutionary figures: John Adams, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine and James Madison. To maintain consistency in my choice of mythologizers, I will provide here pre-1763 Providence mythologizing from three of those figures—John Adams, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson and Madison are younger and are not really writing extensively at this point; and Paine does not come onto the American scene until 1774.

John Adams wrote in his journal on 22 July 1756, “The Years of my Youth are marked by divine Providence with various and with great Events.” Adams then told

of 3 Expeditions, to prevent the further, and remove the present Depredations, and Encroachments of our turbulent French Neighbors...The British Nation has been making very expensive and very formidable Preparations, to Secure its Territories against an Invasion by the French, and to humble the insolent Tempers, and aspiring Prospects of that ambitious and faithless Nation. The gathering of the Clouds, seems to forebode very tempestuous Weather...Is it not then the highest Frenzy and Distraction to neglect these Expostulations of Providence and continue a Rebellion against that Potentate who alone

has Wisdom enough to perceive and Power enough to procure for us the only certain means of Happiness? (Adams “July 1756”)

As a young man, Adams was already plugging the French into his mythologizing as the antagonist, referring to them as insolent, turbulent and faithless, and portraying British colonists as the oppressed and invaded people of God; and there was no question for Adams that the hand of God would be manifest one way or another depending upon whether the British subjects ceased to rebel against God.

Washington, too, was mythologizing. One of the three British-French encounters referenced by Adams in his journal was also part of Washington’s mythologizing as he recounted his participation in Braddock’s Defeat in a letter to his brother, John Washington. Washington wrote “by the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability and expectation for I had 4 Bullets through my Coat, and two Horses shot under me yet although death was levelling my companions on every side of me, escaped unhurt” (“Letter to John Augustine Washington”). As much as Washington saw God’s hand in his personal protection, he also acknowledged the hand of Providence in their defeat: “we have been beaten—most shamefully beaten—by a handful of Men! who only intended to molest and disturb our March; Victory was their smallest expectation; but see the wondrous works of Providence! the uncertainty of Human things! ... Yet, contrary to all expectation, & human probability, and even to the common course of things, we were totally defeated, sustain’d the loss of everything;” (“Letter to Robert Jackson”). The hand of God symbol is apparent in Washington’s letter, but his wide-ranging and indefinite references to Providence leave the reader questioning the breadth and depth of Washington’s myth participation. Perhaps, his beliefs did not go much beyond that there was an over-ruling Providence that did oversee and orchestrate the affairs of humankind

and that humankind were not intended to probe the depths of Providence's workings—he would, after all, in a later letter say that “the ways of Providence” are “inscrutable, and the justice of it not to be scanned by the shallow eye of humanity” (“Letter to Burwell Bassett”). Another possibility is that perhaps Washington was not as convinced of the righteousness of the cause during the Seven Years' War as he was during the American Revolutionary War, for he did not hesitate to proclaim the righteousness of the cause in that later campaign and to clearly invoke the chosen people, antagonist and promised land symbols regarding that later conflict.

Franklin's Providence mythologizing is much more general at this point in his life. In his 1757 edition of *Poor Richard's Almanac*—in the midst of a soliloquy about the smallness of earth in the midst of the universe—he writes “our Comfort is, the same great Power that made the Universe, governs it by his Providence” (Franklin *Poor Richard*). Until it became more politically expedient and practical during the American Revolution, Franklin rarely invoked the symbols of the myth. However, one salient instance of Franklin invoking the hand of God symbol during the pre-1763 period occurred in 1751 when he was trying to raise funds for a hospital. It is worth mentioning because it illustrates Franklin's shrewd use of the myth to achieve his purposes. Seeing an opportunity to appeal to the religious moorings of the population in order to achieve his purposes, Franklin resorted to the Providence myth, saying “Since then, our present State, how prosperous soever, hath no Stability, but what depends on the good Providence of God, how careful should we be not to *harden our Hearts* against the Distresses of our Fellow Creatures, lest He who owns and governs all, should punish our Inhumanity, deprive us of a Stewardship in which we have so unworthily behaved, *laugh at our Calamity, and mock when our Fear cometh.*” (Franklin “Appeal”). Franklin hinted that if his readers turned a blind eye to the needs of their fellow man, the hand of God might punish them

for their inhumanity, relieve them of their resources and laugh at their calamity. Franklin, ever the opportunist, was already employing the Providence myth to accomplish political ends.

These three brief illustrations serve to demonstrate that the Providence myth enjoyed circulation and usage beyond the eighteenth century pulpit. The myth and all of its symbols were in place in pre-1763 American society, but the degree to which the symbols were employed varied. However, the usage and belief in the myth by figures like Adams, Franklin and Washington in the early- and mid-eighteenth century helped to set the stage for a wholesale proclamation of the Providence myth as the American Revolutionary War progressed. Thomas Kidd sums up the pervasiveness of the American Providence myth prior to 1763 when he observes that a “salient point of agreement between deists and evangelicals...was the belief that God—or Providence, as deists and others might prefer to deem it—moved in and through nations. This long-held view had flourished in Britain during its seventeenth-and eighteenth-century conflicts with Europe’s Catholic powers, especially France. As recently as the end of the Seven Years’ War with France in 1763, most British American colonists believed that God had shown particular favor to the British Empire, of which they were then still a vital part, and many of them considered the Catholic French to be aligned with Antichrist” (8-9). As the Seven Years’ War came to a conclusion, the American Providence myth was in place—The hand of Providence influenced the affairs of the nations; the Crown and its generals had been the American’s liberators; France, popery and Catholicism were the very symbols of antagonism and evil; the Promised land and chosen people were Britain and its colonies; and the way to continue to favorably experience the hand of God was through obedience to God, king and country. But that would all change in a hurry.

The American National Providence Myth: 1763-1776

William Smith, an Anglican minister, delivered a speech in 1766 at the College of Philadelphia that proved to be prophetic and portentous of the shift that was beginning to take place in the Providence myth. Smith stated “When I review the history of the world and look on the progress of knowledge, freedom, arts and science, I cannot but be strongly persuaded that Heaven has yet glorious purposes to serve thro’ America” (qtd. in Guyatt 54). American independence would not be declared for another decade, but American colonists were already starting to chafe under the weight of several parliamentary acts. Smith’s words—and those of his contemporary clergymen—began to cast America as the new symbol of the promised land and Americans as God’s new chosen people. Nicholas Guyatt wrote “Against the backdrop of imperial mismanagement and the hardening of British policies toward America, Smith and others would recast the historical providentialism of the seventeenth century into a political vision. God had built up the English colonies with a view to making them independent from the mother country, and the promise of an independent America now eclipsed the achievements and potential of Britain” (55). Indeed, the “imperial mismanagement and the hardening of British policies toward America” were just the sociological catalysts necessary to encourage purveyors of the American Providence myth to re-cast its characters and constituent components. As Britain imposed parliamentary act upon parliamentary act to recover the debts contracted during the Seven Years’ War and to bring into submission its unruly children in America, the children responded with a new version of the Providence myth which would give meaning and purpose to the American Revolutionary War. The colonists’ political responses that eventually led up to the Revolutionary War were justified and explained by shifting the symbols of the Providence myth. Of such shifts in symbols and myths, Richard Slotkin wrote “these may change fairly rapidly to

accommodate new perceptions or requirements of the myth-makers and their audience” (9). I will argue in this section that shifts in the Providence myth did occur quickly during the period of 1763-1776.

Bernard Bailyn, however, makes a statement in the preface to his work, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, which—at first glance—seems to suggest that there were no significant changes in American thought during the 1760s and 1770s:

The transmission from England to America of the literature of political opposition that furnished the substance of the ideology of the Revolution had been so swift in the early years of the eighteenth century as to seem almost instantaneous...these ideas acquired in the colonies an importance, a relevance in politics, they did not then have—and never would have—in England itself. *There was no sharp break between a placid pre-Revolutionary era and the turmoil of the 1760s and 1770s.* The argument, the claims and counter-claims, the fears and apprehensions that fill the pamphlets, letters, newspapers, and state papers of the Revolutionary years had in fact been heard throughout the century (xi, emphasis added).

Bernard Bailyn’s observation regarding the literature of the eighteenth century appears to be at odds with my claim that something significant began to take place in American thought around 1763. To reconcile these statements, one must understand that as Bailyn states, there was no “sharp break” in the literature. However, there was a shift. That may seem like a game of semantics, but, as Bailyn states, the “substance of the ideology of the Revolution” was indeed already in place. That is why this quote from Bailyn is so significant. Indeed, the purpose of the last section of this chapter was to demonstrate precisely this point—that the Providence myth and its culture and ideologies were already entrenched in American thought throughout the

eighteenth century. Bailyn later articulates the 1763 “shift” in the following words from the same book:

The intellectual history of the years of crisis from 1763 to 1776 is the story of the clarification and consolidation under the pressure of events of a view of the world and of America’s place in it only partially seen before. Elements of this picture had long been present in the colonies—some dated from as far back as the settlements themselves—but they had existed in balance, as it were, with other, conflicting views...*Then, in the intense political heat of the decade after 1763, these long popular, though hitherto inconclusive ideas about the world and America’s place in it were fused into a comprehensive view, unique in its moral and intellectual appeal.* (22, emphasis added)

As Bailyn states, the “picture” of the Providence myth—along with the other significant American ideological notions he discusses in that book—had indeed “long been in place” and articulated frequently in the literature of the 1700s. But the characters within that picture experienced a major shuffling or shifting, beginning in 1763. John Adams also expressed the shift when he wrote:

What do we mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington. The records of thirteen legislatures, the pamphlets, newspapers in all the colonies, ought to be consulted during that period to ascertain the steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies. (Adams, “Letter to Thomas Jefferson 24 Aug. 1815”)

Adams, in his letter to Jefferson, chose 1760 as the beginning of the ideological Revolution which he felt took place in the minds of the American people. I assert that the Providence myth shift was synchronous to and contributive to that ideological revolution. However, Bailyn's use of 1763 to mark the ideological shift should be considered more correct periodization for the following reasons: 1763 is the year that the Treaty of Paris was signed to conclude the Seven Years' War; it was the year that the Royal Proclamation was issued which prohibited settlement west of the Appalachians; and it marks the beginning of the heightened regulation by England (in the form of the Sugar Act, the Currency Act, the Quartering Acts, the Stamp Act, the Quebec Act and the Declaratory Act) and, consequently, "the colonists responded to the new regulations imposed by England on her American colonies after 1763" (Bailyn 54). Over the next few pages, I will look specifically at the myth responses to three events during the period of 1763-1776: The Stamp Act; the Boston Massacre; and the Quebec Act.

Stamp Act

Benjamin Franklin's February 13, 1766 testimony before the House of Commons also employs the year 1763 as the commencement of the myth shift and illustrates the significance of the Stamp Act since the purpose of his appearance before Parliament was to answer the questions of members of Parliament regarding the American colonies and to argue for the repeal of the Stamp Act:

Q. What was the temper of America towards Great-Britain before the year 1763?

A. The best in the world. They submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament. Numerous as the people are in the several old provinces, they cost you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expense only of a

little pen, ink and paper. They were led by a thread. ...Natives of Britain were always treated with particular regard; to be an Old England-man was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.

Q. And what is their temper now?

A. O, very much altered. (Franklin, "Examination")

Franklin's testimony again demonstrates that prior to 1763, Great Britain was held in high regard in the American myth. The narrative as it existed at that time was that it was a good thing to be a subject of the British Crown. However, as Franklin articulated, in a very short amount of time, the story was "very much altered."

Nicholas Guyatt isolates the Stamp Act controversy as the first key Providence myth shift moment, saying "The crisis over the Stamp Act can be more plausibly identified as the moment at which a distinctively American national providentialism began to emerge with political intent" (84). John Berens, likewise, points out the significance of the historical moment and the way that it was portrayed in the Providence myth with the following observation regarding a poem of the day:

"November! gloomy Month! approaches fast,
When Liberty was doom'd to breathe her last,
All, all her Sons agree to fast that Day,
To mourn, lament and sigh, and hope, and pray
That the Almighty GOD of all below,
Some Pity would to suffering Mortals show."

With these lines an anonymous American poet addressed the first day of November 1765, the date the Stamp Act was to take effect throughout British North America. The hopes of

patriots and lovers of liberty, he argued, rested upon the interposition of God on behalf of the American colonies. If the Lord would look with mercy on his afflicted people and come to their aid, their freedoms could yet be preserved. In assigning the continuation of American liberty to the intervention and protection of divine providence, this patriotic poet employed one of the deepest and most popular strands of American thought expressed during the era of the American Revolution. (308)

Americans, in the eyes of Berens and the anonymous poet, were God's chosen, oppressed people. The Stamp Act was the oppression which they suffered—threatening their liberty. While the poem did not explicitly label the British as their oppressors, the implication is that the enactors of the Stamp Act—members of parliament—were oppressing God's "Sons." The Stamp Act was, of course, repealed within the next year, but, as Guyatt observes, "before Parliament backed down, the crisis encouraged colonists to ponder the exceptional nature of American liberty and to see Britain as a persistent villain in American history" (84). Indeed, a considerable amount of damage to the relationship with Britain had already been done by the Stamp Act—and would never be undone for many Providence myth participants. As Thomas Kidd points out, "to the colonists, the repeal offered only a reminder to be vigilant in their defense of Christian liberty against the tyrannical spirit of this new manifestation of Antichrist" (33). The Stamp Act crisis had commenced the shift in the antagonist symbol from all things French to all things which were perceived as tyrannical—and the Stamp Act as perpetrated by Parliament was the most overt expression of tyranny in the colonists' world at that moment. In its April 21, 1766 issue, a Boston newspaper (while still praising King George and William Pitt for their roles in the repeal) called Parliament's advocates of the Stamp Act "an Infernal, atheistical, Popish and Jacobite crew...who by the kind Providence of Almighty God

are...frustrated in their Diabolical purposes” (*Boston Gazette*). The Gazette neatly tied elements of the old antagonist symbol to the new ones.

Upon the repeal of the Stamp Act, many thanksgiving sermons were offered across the colonies. Some preachers—like Jonathan Mayhew—still cast King George III and William Pitt (the Prime Minister, whom he referred to as “our common father” (vi)) as liberator symbols. Other preachers—like David Rowland—were beginning to carve out a discrete destiny for America from that of England. Rowland, like Mayhew, praises effusively those who were instrumental in the repeal of the Stamp Act, but then employs a heavy-handed version of the Providence myth as he speaks of the Act: “Upon the present occasion, we are called hereunto, by the voice of divine providence, upon the experience of his kind interposition, in our rescue from the most threatening dangers, and a burden similar to that of the Egyptian task-masters” (Rowland 2). Rowland then recounted how various past British rulers had sought to tyrannize the people, labeling them with familiar antagonist symbol terms: “the Romish hierarchy” and “popish emissaries” that sought to “overthrow the English constitution, that they might introduce popish tyranny and superstition.” But fortunately “Divine Providence in these critical seasons, kindly interposed and rescued the nation from the perfidious and cruel designs of such as sought her ruin” (10). Rowland then connects those past tyrants to the current historical moment by saying “...in succeeding reigns, I recollect no stain of this nature...except the parliamentary edict of the unhappy sixty-five; when a...conspiracy was formed for the overthrow of English liberty, by an internal taxation of millions of loyal subjects without the least shadow of representation” (10). And with a final stroke that made crystal clear who occupied the roles of the antagonist and the chosen people in his story, Rowland says of the Stamp Act “its form was odious; its nature poisonous...So detestable was this Hydra, that its hiss, like an electric shock,

instantaneously awakened a whole continent, and roused its inhabitants” (Rowland 11). With such fiery rhetoric, lines heretofore uncrossed had now been breached. Nicholas Guyatt puts it succinctly when he says “Rowland and others may not have intended this rhetoric to culminate in independence, but its effect was to exaggerate America’s autonomy and its claims to a distinct role in God’s scheme” (85-6). Truly, in Rowland’s words, one sees Britain shifting from the role of parent and liberator to the role of oppressor and antagonist in the American Providence myth.

Boston Massacre

If one accepts Barthes’ observation that “myth is a type of speech chosen by history” (110), the next example of history choosing the Providence myth for its explanation and worldview was the Boston Massacre (referred to by the British as the Incident on King Street). The Boston Massacre, which took place on March 5, 1770, heightened the colonists’ views of the British as their antagonists and sparked a number of sermons which argued as much. James Lovell was asked to speak at the first commemoration of the event on April 2, 1771. Lovell, in true myth-maker fashion, gave a Providence-myth spin to the event by pointing out that it had served as somewhat of a wake-up call. He preached that the tragedy was an “advantage providence has given us. The beam is carried off from our eyes by the flowing blood of our fellow citizens, and now we may be allowed to attempt to remove the mote from the eyes of our exalted patrons” (13). Without overtly calling the British the new antagonists of the American colonies, Lovell implied the shift in the antagonist symbol when he sardonically queried “must we fall down and cry ‘let not a stranger rob and kill me, O my father! Let me rather die by the hand of my brother, and let him ravish all my portion?’” (14). In other words, Lovell asked if it was preferable to be killed by those of their own nation as opposed to past antagonists like the French or the Native Americans. The violent event that day on King Street—in spite of the fact

that the British soldiers involved were mostly exonerated from any criminal wrongdoing—became forever memorialized and mythologized as a salient example of British antagonism and tyranny towards the American colonists.

Joseph Warren, who was given the task of commemorating the Boston Massacre on its second anniversary argued that a willing submission to the arbitrary taxations of Britain was no less than an acquiescence to be “absolute slaves” (11) to England. Like Lovell, Warren likewise cast the standing British army as a symbol of antagonism, calling them “the ready engines of tyranny and oppression” (13) and an example of Britain’s “forging chains for this country” (17). Warren’s sermon reached a crescendo as he encouraged his listeners to connect their current circumstance with that of their providentially-aided antecedents. “The voice of your Fathers’ blood cries to you from the ground; MY SONS, SCORN TO BE SLAVES!... If you perform your part, you must have the strongest confidence, that THE SAME ALMIGHTY BEING who protected your pious and venerable fore-fathers—who enabled them to turn a barren wilderness into a fruitful field, who so often made bare his arm for their salvation, will still be mindful of you their offspring” (17). He then concluded by invoking several Providence myth symbols—continuing to mark Americans as the chosen people, America as the promised land, and then subtly hinting at the downfall of the antagonistic British empire along with all other worldly empires: “May we ever be a people favored of GOD. May our land be a land of Liberty, the seat of virtue, the asylum of the oppressed, a name and a praise in the whole earth, until the last shock of time shall bury the empires of the world in one common undistinguished ruin!” (17-18).

With each passing year, the commemoration sermons became more intrepid at portraying the British as the antagonists and America as God’s chosen people. John Hancock, in his fiery 1774 commemoration sermon referred to the massacre as “that dismal night...when Heaven in

anger, for a dreadful moment, suffer'd Hell to take the reins; when Satan with his chosen band open'd the sluices of New-England's blood, and sacrilegiously polluted our land with the dead bodies of her guiltless sons" (9). In his sermon, Hancock aligned the British soldiers with the devil and the British tax collectors with "noxious vermin" which he hoped would soon "be swept forever from the streets of Boston" (18). Hancock resented British rule so vehemently that he called his hearers to action: "I conjure you by all that is dear, by all that is honourable, by all that is sacred, not only that ye pray, but that you act; that, if necessary, ye fight, and even die for the prosperity of our Jerusalem. Break in sunder, with noble disdain, the bonds with which the Philistines have bound you" (18). While war had not yet been declared, Hancock's America was the new Jerusalem and the British which tyrannized them were the new Philistines. Hancock continued to employ the Providence myth as he concluded, expressing "confidence that the present noble struggle for liberty, will terminate gloriously for America...let us play the man for our God, and for the cities of our God" and pleading "let us humbly commit our righteous cause to the great Lord of the universe, who loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity" (20). The new symbols of the American Providence myth were becoming more and more galvanized in the minds and speeches of American myth-makers. America's cities were God's cities. America's cause was God's cause. God would fight in their behalf.

Quebec Act

I will share one more example of the "intense political heat" of the day that sheds light on why the Providence myth symbols shifted so quickly and why Americans felt justified in firing the shots heard around the world in the Battles of Lexington and Concord the following year. Jon Butler observes that the Quebec Act of 1774 served as a powerful climactic catalyst in the break with Britain. Prior to 1763, the antagonist within the American Providence myth was

almost anything associated with France and Catholicism. The Anglican Church had sought for many years to have a bishop installed in the American colonies. Those who argued vehemently against an American bishop were referred to as “Dissenters.” Butler observes that “After 1763 the Dissenters’ argument was joined to the colonial protests against taxes and other English efforts at imperial centralization, and it climaxed in protests against the Quebec Act of 1774, through which the English government recognized the Catholic church in the conquered French territories of Canada...Dissenters consistently linked the bishop question to the English debate on tyranny...The charge of tyranny in the bishop controversy evoked a constellation of images important to the Revolution...The Quebec Act called forth another image: secret Catholicism” (Butler 197-198). The tacit recognition by the English of the Catholic Church through the Quebec Act now created a link within the American version of the Providence myth between Britain, Parliament and Anglicanism and the myth’s long-standing antagonist—Catholicism.

Paul Revere made an engraving which aptly captured the strong anti-Catholic sentiments of many Americans and the shifting antagonist symbol in the Providence myth. In the engraving, four bishops are dancing the minuet over a copy of the Quebec Bill while Lord Bute and Lord North (the two despised members of Parliament responsible for authoring the Quebec Act) are seen on the left looking on approvingly with a devil hovering above them (see fig. 1).



Figure 1. Paul Revere's "The Mitred Minuet."

Alan Heimert further explains the moment in 1774 by saying "There appears to have been a special, and even frenetic, urgency to their efforts to revive ancient prejudices by announcing that the Quebec Act—and it alone—confronted America with the possibility of the 'scarlet whore' soon riding 'triumphant over the heads of true Protestants, making multitudes drunk with the wine of her fornication'" (394). Mythologizers, in the wake of the Quebec Act, were so effective at depicting the British as the antagonist symbol and as a threat to religious and political liberty that the British General Thomas Gage—a present observer of the political moment—felt "*the* turning point in American affairs was the promulgation in 1774 of the Quebec Act... The farmers, Gage observed, were strangely convinced that Britain intended to abolish their religious freedom. Once they could not 'be made to believe the contrary,' he wrote, 'the Flame' of rebellion 'blazed out in all Parts'" (Heimert 387).

Owing to the heavy-handed Acts of parliament and confrontations like the Boston Massacre, disenchanted American colonists had become quite comfortable with invoking the new American Providence myth symbols. As of April 1775 the first shots of the American Revolutionary War had already been fired. However, America was not yet completely committed to the break with England as evidenced by the Olive Branch Petition which was adopted and issued by the Continental Congress on July 5, 1775. The last portion of this chapter will seek to demonstrate that while there was yet ambivalence on the part of most colonists, the new symbols for the American Providence myth were in place and becoming ever more galvanized during the year between the “shot heard ‘round the world” and the ratification of the Declaration of Independence.

American Reluctance to Complete the Shift in the Providence Myth

One of the greatest expressions of the ambivalent Providence myth by Americans in 1775 comes from two significant, and ostensibly contradictory, documents adopted only a day apart by the Continental Congress. Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson played significant roles in writing both of them. On July 5, the Congress adopted the “Olive Branch” Petition, which was to be sent to King George to seek peace with Britain. Jefferson had written the original draft and then Dickinson provided a more mollifying version. The Petition, true to its conciliatory tone, still employed a chosen people symbol which lumped England and America together, speaking of the “union between our Mother Country and these colonies” and the “benefits so remarkably important” which came from that union. Furthermore, the document expressed a desire to keep that symbol within the Providence myth intact, saying “we think ourselves required by indispensable obligations to Almighty God, to your Majesty, to our fellow subjects, and to ourselves, immediately to use all the means in our power not incompatible with our safety, for

stopping the further effusion of blood, and for averting the impending calamities that threaten the British Empire” and assuring Britain that they “most ardently desire the former harmony between her and these colonies may be restored” (“Second Petition”). The colonists hoped that the Providence narrative could continue to include their British brothers and sisters as God’s co-chosen people.

The second document, “The Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms,” was adopted and issued on July 6, 1775. This declaration was also first penned by Thomas Jefferson, but John Dickinson—again—found some of the language not to his liking. Consequently, Dickinson was encouraged by Jefferson to produce a version to which he could ascribe. He did so, keeping the last four paragraphs of Jefferson’s original. While Dickinson may have provided a more conciliatory version of the Declaration, the portion which he chose to retain included Jefferson’s lines which invoked the Providence myth in their behalf:

Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal Resources are great, and, if necessary, foreign Assistance is undoubtedly attainable. We gratefully acknowledge, as signal Instances of the Divine Favour towards us, that his Providence would not permit us to be called into this severe Controversy, until we were grown up to our present strength, had been previously exercised in warlike Operation, and possessed of the means of defending ourselves. With hearts fortified with these animating Reflections, we most solemnly, before God and the World, declare, that, exerting the utmost Energy of those Powers, which our beneficent Creator hath graciously bestowed upon us, the Arms we have been compelled by our Enemies to assume... With an humble Confidence in the Mercies of the supreme and impartial Judge and Ruler of the Universe, we most devoutly implore his Divine Goodness to protect us happily through this great Conflict, to dispose

our Adversaries to reconciliation on reasonable Terms, and thereby to relieve the Empire from the Calamities of civil War. (“Causes and Necessity”)

The Declaration, as seen in the last two lines, still expressed the colonies’ hope for reconciliation and the desire to remain united with Great Britain as God’s chosen people. However, many of the symbols of the shifting myth were articulated as well. The colonists expressed a confidence in their cause and in the fact that Providence had chosen them and brought them up to their current situation. They felt they had been compelled to take up arms by their “enemies”—this, of course, framed Britain as the antagonist symbol. They also expressed a confidence that the hand of God would be evident in favoring their cause if the violence persisted.

The Providence myth expressions in these secular documents (partially at the hands of Thomas Jefferson—who had a strong aversion to organized religion) again demonstrate how widespread the myth had become as the day of the American Revolutionary War dawned.

Another who did not wholeheartedly embrace the shifting symbols of the myth is William Smith, the Anglican minister and provost of the College of Philadelphia whose 1766 sermon had provided a perhaps unintended spark to the fire of American independence. On June 23, 1775, Smith—speaking to the officers of Philadelphia’s militia—gave an address which invoked a version of the Providence myth which still spoke of Britons and Americans as brothers, using the term “British Israel” multiple times and expressing affinity for “our brethren in the parent land” and “adoring the providence that gave us the same progenitors...sons of a protestant and free nation” (9). Smith’s Providence myth still included Britons as their fellow chosen people—their brethren. However, in spite of his adoration of the “parent land,” Smith argued that England had not reciprocated the affections and that since “no Embassy of good or great men ha[d] been raised to stay the sword of destruction” against the American colonists, and

since “a continued submission to violence is no tenet of our church” (13-14), it followed that the taking up of arms by the Americans might be justified. Smith concluded his remarks by reiterating his 1766 claim about America’s glorious purposes as a promised land: “Heaven has great and gracious purposes towards this continent, which no human power or human device shall be able finally to frustrate... If we maintain our own virtue...the GENIUS of AMERICA will still rise triumphant...too mighty for oppositions. This country will be free” (16). It is worth mentioning that even this final statement by Smith should not be seen as an overt declaration advocating independence from Britain. The right to enjoy Lockean liberty under British law and seeking independence from Britain were two different things. The former was the colonists’ esteemed right as British subjects and was worth fighting for; Smith and many other Americans were not yet committed to the latter.

Abiel Leonard was a Connecticut chaplain in Washington’s Continental Army. In 1775, Leonard published a commanding piece of Providence myth literature in pamphlet form entitled “A Prayer, Composed for the Benefit of the Soldiery in the American Army.” The lengthy prayer was intended to be part of their daily devotions. In the prayer, Leonard (and presumably, soldiers in the American army) acknowledge God “as the supreme Governor and Judge among the nations of the earth; who hast in thy wise and good providence divided them, and settled the bounds of their habitations.” Providence dictated the affairs and boundaries of nations and had placed Americans as loyal British subjects, but “sacred bonds have been violated” and “enemies of America have sent over a great multitude to cast thy people in this land, out of thy possession, even the good land which thou hast given them to inherit” (3). The chosen people and promised land symbols are clearly being invoked by Leonard here and he continues to do so, pleading for God to “be the God of the American army” and confessing that only “in obedience to the call of

thy providence, I have engaged myself...acknowledging thy people to be my people” (4). Such language was to serve as an incredible justification for all Americans who took up arms against England. They were God’s oppressed chosen people. This was God’s cause. Providence had chosen America as a land of freedom. Leonard then invoked a conflicted antagonist symbol, by first saying “O Thou, who didst preserve the children of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh and his host...and broughtest them out of the land of bondage into a state of liberty— deliver, I pray thee, thy distressed, afflicted and oppressed people in this land.” British rulers apparently embody the oppressive Pharaoh in the myth, yet the prayer continues “grant, O Lord, that the inhabitants of Great-Britain may arise and vindicate their liberties; and a glorious reunion take place between them and thy people in this land...that the Britons and the Americans may rejoice in the King as the minister of God to both for good” (7). Leonard, like many Americans, saw themselves as oppressed and considered their liberty as a thing worth fighting for, but they still had hopes of having that liberty restored while remaining British subjects. However, while Dickinson, Smith, Leonard and other American Providence myth purveyors may have still been reluctant to overtly proclaim a *fully* shifted Providence myth, there were some who had no such reluctance.

The Providential Pen of Paine

In January of 1776 a piece of Providence myth literature emerged from an unlikely source which would echo even louder than the historical shots heard around the world fired at Lexington and Concord. The pamphlet was *Common Sense*, and its author was Thomas Paine. Paine was an unlikely source because he had only migrated to America in November 1774 from England. But, as I pointed out in my discussion on the provenance of the American Providence myth, the myth was far from uniquely American—rather, it had been the Americans’ inheritance

as British Protestants. Regarding the Providence myth, Nicholas Guyatt writes “...the language and ideas that underpinned it—and made it intelligible to an enormous audience in America and Europe—were as familiar to Britons as to Americans” (90). Paine—in spite of being a recent arrival to America from England—was conversant in the Providence myth and preached it with fervor. Paine’s pamphlet was received with unparalleled popularity. “It has been estimated that a copy of *Common Sense* was read by virtually every literate man, woman, and child in the colonies and was read to a substantial portion of the illiterates. In an era when a popular newspaper might have two thousand readers and a like number of copies of a typical pamphlet might be printed, *Common Sense* raced through twenty-five editions and reached hundreds of thousands in America and abroad in the year it appeared” (Sigelman et al. 374). John Keane likened Paine’s contributions to the Revolution to those of “George Washington on the battlefield and Benjamin Franklin on the diplomatic front” (110-111). Even John Adams—who was not a big fan of Thomas Paine—said, “Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain” (qtd. in Fruchtman 78).

Perhaps no piece of American Revolutionary literature more fully expresses and successfully advocates the dramatic shift in the Providence myth like *Common Sense*. Paine—who was not an orthodox religious man and certainly had no intention of advocating institutionalized religion through his writings—had no qualms about invoking the religious imagery and symbols of the Providence myth to accomplish his purposes in his famous work. Thomas Kidd writes “Paine’s personal religious skepticism did not keep him from appropriating biblical arguments and evangelical rhetoric to mobilize a population that understood that language very well” (88). Kidd also observes “In the pamphlet, Paine set aside political theory and spoke to the people in the language of the Bible and Protestant Christianity. The strategy

worked. Common Sense became a national sensation and turned the tide in favor of independence, which the Second Continental Congress would formally declare six months later” (Kidd 87). In the opening paragraphs, Paine set America apart as a promised land—and the American revolutionaries as a chosen people—when he stated “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have and will arise which are not local but universal, and through which the principles of all lovers of mankind are affected and in the event of which their affections are interested” (3). According to Paine, God had chosen America as the stage where the cause of all mankind was to be fought and the world should pay attention: “The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth” (19). Paine went on to explain how geography and topography were additional providential testaments that America was destined to be a free promised land by saying “Even the distance at which the Almighty has placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other was never the design of heaven” (23) and adding “there is something very absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance has nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet” (26). Paine also asserted that not only were the American colonists God’s chosen people for accomplishing the work of freedom, but the American colonists *of that precise moment* were the ones God had chosen. He cited the current population size, abundance of natural resources, lack of a national debt, and the immediate need to establish religious pluralism all as arguments that Providence had chosen them for the task of independence. He summed it all up poetically with “The time has found us” (34).

Paine seems to have taken particular pleasure in declaring the new antagonist symbol in American Providence mythology. He did so by openly attacking the monarchy and parliament, “the base remains of two ancient tyrannies” (7), whose origins were found in the heathen kings

of the Old Testament (10-11) and by arguing that monarchy had “no divinity in it” (15). In keeping with Old Testament typology, Paine referred to George III as “the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England” (27). And as if those insults weren’t enough in making a case for England’s tyranny, Paine responded to the idea that England was the father country of America by retorting “Even brutes do not devour their young nor savages make war upon their families.” He then put an exclamation point on his argument by linking the new antagonist symbol to the old one and saying the idea of England as a parent country was “jesuitically adopted by the king and his parasites with a low papistical design” (21). The American Providence myth officially had a new antagonist symbol.

But what about the liberator symbol? Who had God raised up to deliver modern Israel? Who would be America’s king? Paine named “the King of Heaven” as their proper sovereign but also cleverly suggested, “that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors” that a crown be placed upon the divine law, the word of God so the world would know “that in America the law is king” (32). Within a year, however, in the first edition of his next revolutionary pamphlet *The American Crisis*, he was speaking of Providence’s blessing of Washington in his role as General of the Continental Army (58). Whether God, Washington or the Law was America’s liberator, one thing was certain, the liberator was no longer a Briton.

Historian Bernard Bailyn says regarding Paine’s pamphlet, *Common Sense*, “One had to be a fool or a fanatic in early January 1776 to advocate American independence. Everyone knew England was the most powerful nation on earth” (67). Yet as Paine biographer Craig Nelson writes “*Common Sense* made Thomas Paine America’s first bestselling author. By the end of that year of 1776, between 150,000 and 250,000 copies were sold, at a time when the American population stood at three million—the equivalent in per capita of selling thirty-five million

copies of a single title today” (92). Paine, who would not be labeled a traditional religionist by any of his contemporaries or by any serious historian since his time, preached the American national Providence myth in such a way that it was able to gain entrance into secular and religious circles alike and deeply influence American culture.

John Witherspoon

On May 17 of that same year, John Witherspoon—the President of the College of New Jersey—delivered a sermon at Princeton that is also a landmark American Providence myth piece of literature. Witherspoon’s address, entitled “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” had less name-calling than Paine’s *Common Sense* and targeted a more religiously orthodox audience, but it likewise caused a great deal of commotion amongst the American public because of its unrepentant justification of the conflict with Britain. Within a month of giving this sermon, Witherspoon was elected to the Second Continental Congress, which would be tasked with drafting a Declaration of Independence from Great Britain.

Witherspoon was the only clergyman signer of the Declaration. Paine’s *Common Sense* appealed to ethos and pathos in his implementation of the revised American Providence myth whereas Witherspoon chose a tack that took personal spiritual experiences and history as reference points to make a case for the revised Providence myth. In the second paragraph of his sermon, he stated “The doctrine of divine providence is very full and complete in the sacred oracles. It extends not only to things which we may think of great moment, and therefore worthy of notice, but to things the most indifferent and inconsiderable” (533). In other words, the scriptures demonstrated that the hand of Providence was in the large-scale events (like the affairs of nations) but also in the intimate details of one’s personal life. Witherspoon hoped to draw upon his audience’s personal religious experiences with Providence as a primary evidence of its reality. He then walked his

audience through a chronology of the hand of Providence working in behalf of their ancestors—citing the destruction of the Spanish Armada; the raising up of Oliver Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution; and most recently, the expulsion from England of the Puritans on religious grounds, leading his listeners historically to the present moment: “From what has been said upon this subject, you may see what ground there is to give praise to God for his favors already bestowed on us, respecting the public cause” (543-4). He then punctuated his argument with a little guilt: “It would be a criminal inattention not to observe the singular interposition of Providence hitherto, in behalf of the American colonies” (546). Witherspoon asked his audience to witness that this sermon was the first time he had ever used the pulpit for political purposes but then explained “At this season, however, it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature” (549). Witherspoon’s final plea was for righteousness and fidelity to the cause: “the sum of the whole, is that the blessing of God is only to be looked for by those who are not wanting in the discharge of their own duty...The cause is sacred, and the champions for it ought to be holy” (553, 555). Witherspoon’s strategy helped his more religious audience to locate themselves as God’s chosen people within the Providence myth and to see that they would not be abandoning God by taking up arms against England; instead, God had abandoned England because of its departure from righteousness. The Americans—not the British—were God’s current chosen people in Witherspoon’s nicely woven historical Providence myth narrative.

Chapter Conclusion

Thomas Kidd describes the historical moment in 1776 with the following words: “With the onset of the revolutionary crisis, a major conceptual shift convinced Americans across the

theological spectrum that God was raising up America for some special purpose. Britain, they believed, had abandoned its providential role, descending into corruption and evil” (9). The conceptual shift of which Kidd speaks can principally be articulated by the shift in the Providence myth. As Kidd also comments, that myth served Americans from across the theological spectrum—from John Witherspoon to Thomas Paine—to explain their current circumstances and worldviews. Truly, “this influential strain of thought” could now be “found everywhere in the eighteenth-century colonies” (Bailyn 33). John Berens, in his article which argues the significance of providentialism to the American Revolution, writes of this period “The sermons, orations, poems, and newspaper essays written and delivered from 1763 to 1789 illustrate that, far from ‘discarding’ providence, a significant number of Americans from all colonies and all levels of society continued to perceive God as the prime mover in human history” (308). But what had been discarded by 1776, by many Americans, was the notion that Britain and America had a shared providential destiny. Truly, as American independence was on the eve of being formally declared, the newly shifted Providence myth had been implemented as a powerful cultural instrument for catalyzing the American Revolutionary War as demonstrated in these General Orders issued from Washington to his troops on July 2, 1776:

...The fate of unborn Millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this army—Our cruel and unrelenting Enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance, or the most abject submission; this is all we can expect—We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die: Our own Country’s Honor, all call upon us for a vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail, we shall become infamous to the whole world—Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the Cause, and the aid of the supreme Being, in whose hands Victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble

Actions—The Eyes of all our Countrymen are now upon us, and we shall have their blessings, and praises, if happily we are the instruments of saving them from the Tyranny meditated against them. (“General Orders”)

On few occasions did Washington wax more stirring and poetic in his language than on this occasion as he spoke of the fate of unborn millions and the watching eyes of the whole world. He invoked the antagonist symbol, the chosen people symbol and the hand of God symbol of the Providence myth as he spoke of the tyranny of the enemy, the goodness of the cause and the aid of the supreme Being. The Providence myth shift was complete: America was the promised land; Americans were God’s chosen people; King George and the British were the antagonists; God’s hand would be manifest to give them victory over England; and George Washington—who had just sent those inspiring words to his troops—was to be their ordained liberator.

Chapter 4—Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God

The Political Utility of the Providence Myth

Beginning with the Declaration of Independence, this chapter will point out the usage of the Providence myth and its five concomitant symbols at six key moments in early American history: at the issuing of the Declaration of Independence; as part of the National Seal discussion; during the American crisis at the end of 1776; at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War; at the Constitutional Convention; and in the first days of the new republic. By doing so, this chapter will make a case for American national Providence myth as the central national myth employed in successfully carrying out the Revolution and laying the foundation for the United States of America.

As the American Revolution gained full momentum, the employment of the Providence myth by secularists became incredibly commonplace. As I examine the six key historical moments mentioned above, I will also detail how six significant secular figures employed the myth (and in some cases were mythologized themselves) during the foundational years of the republic. Those figures are Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, George Washington, John Adams and James Madison. I will focus on one or two particular figures in each one of the historical moments. Prior to discussing the implementation of the Providence myth by these key figures at those significant junctures of the Revolution, I think it is worth discussing possible explanations for this frequent invocation of the myth for secular purposes.

Daniel Shea wrote an essay for an anthology on American literary history which he entitled “The American Revolution as a Literary Event.” In that work he observes that “The central literary manifestation of the American Revolution is generally conceived to be the body of polemical prose that, extending over the decades from the end of the French and Indian Wars

in 1763 to the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, laboriously hammered out the concepts and the language by which the American nation and its polity came to be construed” (139). Indeed, the literature of that day largely consisted of the polemical pamphlets, newspaper articles, sermons, speeches, correspondence, poetry and plays concerning Americanness. For the purpose of this dissertation, I argue that many of those key concepts and language found in that corpus of literature were the language and concepts of the Providence myth. Shea continues “That body of writing is a massive one, occupying thousands of columns of print in the newspapers of the period and hundreds of separately published pamphlets. It was as if the tracts and treatises of religious controversy that form the dominant literary activity of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in America had undergone a secular transformation by which the quest for salvation was translated into the pursuit of liberty” (139). This secular transformation within the literary corpus of that time period spoken of by Shea contributes to a key theme of this chapter. As one examines that body of literature, one indeed gets the impression that God’s primary concern suddenly shifted from individual salvation to freedom for the people of the United States. A new gospel—the gospel of liberty—was being preached. While myth has always had an influence on practical affairs, Mark Noll acknowledges the uniqueness of this incredible melding at the time of the founding:

...the statements of American Protestants differed substantially from those made elsewhere in the North Atlantic world. American Christians, despite substantial conflicts among themselves, took for granted a fundamental compatibility between orthodox Protestant religion and republican principles of government. Most English-speaking Protestants outside the United States did not.

The long American habit of uniting these value systems has dulled awareness of how strikingly original the new nation's "Christian republicanism" actually was. In fact, among a panoply of exceptional things about the American founding, one of the most unusual was the commitment by almost all religious people in the new United States to a distinctly republican vision of public life. This American position was unusual, not only by comparison with English-speaking contemporaries in the late eighteenth century, but also because almost all observers outside the United States assumed that republican thinking contradicted the principles of traditional religion. (53-4)

Providence myth rhetoric had spilled over from sermons and tracts into secular media outlets and become the common political rhetoric. As Nicholas Guyatt writes, "Providential ideas were at work in some of the most important debates in early America" (4). This abundant employment of the myth by secularists causes one to wonder why they would do so. Guyatt articulates that question in his book, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876*:

I have examined a wide variety of materials...histories, newspapers, and political addresses, and sources that search for religious meaning in contemporary events, such as sermons and tracts. Because most can be described as public rhetoric—material written for a general audience and wide consumption rather than for private contemplation—it seems important to acknowledge the questions of audience and intention. What kinds of people wrote and spoke about providentialism in this period, and to whom were their claims addressed? Did these people actually believe what they were saying about God's role in history, or did they use providential language strategically to achieve a desired political or social end? (Guyatt 6).

The answers to the questions are interrelated. First, religious and secular figures alike were taking up the pen and employing providentialist rhetoric to advocate the gospel of liberty. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the advocates of the American Revolution (who, themselves, were quite diverse in religious background) understood their audience. At the time of the Revolution, some Americans (like the secular founders discussed in this chapter) had drifted from the orthodox Christianity of their youth to a more rationalist approach to Deity. Their beliefs had become decreasingly Christocentric. But there were also many Americans with deeply held Christian beliefs. The great writers and rhetoricians of the American Revolution, recognizing the diversity of beliefs in the colonies, sought a way to reach the hearts and minds of as many Americans as possible with their message. The American national Providence myth—simultaneously familiar to orthodox Christians and rationalists (and often not Christocentric in its usage)—provided them with a way to do so. Martin Medhurst, a professor of rhetoric at Baylor University, expresses the political and rhetorical value of Providence myth language for the founders by pointing out that it was “a common language adopted by the revolutionary generation in part to avoid the kind of divisiveness that more specific formulations might engender” (qtd. in Neuman). The proponents of the Revolution wrote and spoke in myth language which cast a wide and nearly all-encompassing net in order to gather and unite those of varied religious backgrounds.

In response to Guyatt’s second question, there is a great deal of compelling evidence that each of the Founding Fathers operated from a place of personal belief in providence. However, my work will focus exclusively on how they deployed the myth for political reasons. I will therefore reserve my thoughts on their beliefs for another time and place. As I discuss each of the six key historical moments in this chapter and examine the Providence myth rhetoric of the

secular figures in each of those moments, I will demonstrate that the Providence myth was a powerful national myth which served their political purposes—catalyzing the independence and commencement of the United States of America.

Jefferson and The Declaration of Independence

The issuing of the *Declaration* was not only significant because of its role in formally breaking with England, but also as an expression of the Providence myth. Nicholas Guyatt observes that “By the time of the American Revolution, Patriots argued that God had given America a special role in history and that independence had been providentially determined” (Guyatt 4). This providential determinism regarding independence is evident in the Declaration itself. In the *Declaration of Independence*, its authors employed a rationalist version of the Providence myth very similar to the one used by Paine in *Common Sense*. Jefferson, in the draft presented to the Committee of Five, asserted that the United States of America had been “entitled” to independence from England—to a “separate and equal station”—by “the Laws of Nature” and “Nature’s God” (Jefferson “June Rough Draft”). Paine had argued that nature, by means of geography, size and distance, had ordained America to be a separate and equal nation to Britain. The Declaration, with these references to Nature’s God, echoed that argument. In a poem entitled “On the Religion of Nature” by Phillip Freneau, (who is referred to by some as the poet of the American Revolution), it says that “Religion, such as nature taught” would cause an end to “vain disputes, and from this source would nations know, all that can make their heaven below.” Nature, in other words, testified of that which was right and good. As Edwin Gaustad notes, for Jefferson and the rationalist founders, when it came to religion and politics “Nature was teacher, guide [and] model” (87). Nature revealed the principles upon which a heavenly

society could be established on earth. Freneau concludes his poem on the religion of nature by saying:

Joy to the day, when all agree
 On such grand systems to proceed,
 From fraud, design, and error free,
 And which to truth and goodness lead:
 Then persecution will retreat
 And man's religion be complete. (548-9).

Jefferson and his American Revolutionary counterparts felt that they had, through nature's religion, found one of these grand systems on which to proceed, and they now appealed to this religion of nature, arguing that reason, historical events and geography all pointed to the heavenly ordination of America as an independent entity. The providential circumstances brought about by nature's God entitled America to its independence.

The Declaration of Independence continues by declaring it a "self-evident" truth that "men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," among which "are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Again, rather than referring to the Biblical tradition in the quest for evidence or truths, the authors of the Declaration called upon reason for evidence that American independence was God's will. It was a self-evident truth (one which was obvious to all humankind) that Americans—being God's creations in a state of equality to Britons—had an unalienable and equal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The bulk of the Declaration of Independence then makes a logical, rational case for independence by listing all of the abuses of the antagonists (King George III and Parliament) against the American colonies. Jefferson's original draft sought to make the case that the

Creator—who endowed humankind with these unalienable rights—would obviously want the Americans to retain those rights.

The third and fourth references to Deity as found in the last paragraph of the Declaration—“the Supreme Judge of the world” and “Providence,”—were not in Jefferson’s original draft which he presented to the Committee of Five (Jefferson “June Rough Draft”). The addition of these two belief phrases came at the recommendation of the Committee of the Whole. As Julian Boyd points out “both numerically and quantitatively, Congress eliminated more and added fewer words to the Declaration than any or all of the Committee of Five,” yet the significance of the addition of these two phrases at the conclusion of the Declaration cannot, in my opinion, be overstated. Boyd continues “Certainly the final paragraph, considered as parliamentary practice, as political principle, and as literature was greatly improved by the changes of Congress” (Boyd 35-36). When examining the Declaration of Independence as Providence myth literature, Congress’ changes had tremendous impact. After the insertion of the two changes into the concluding paragraph, the Declaration goes from being a document based largely on political theory with a light religious undergirding to a significant Providence myth document. The additions cause the Declaration to now be bookended with the hand of God symbol, in essence making the case before England and the world that Americans’ rights originated from God, and that God would support their cause in securing those rights. They appealed “to the Supreme Judge of the world” to determine the “rectitude of [their] intentions” and expressed “a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence” for support in seeking their independence from Great Britain (“Declaration of Independence”).

It is possible that these additions to the Declaration caused Jefferson to have an epiphany regarding the Providence myth. A review of their respective papers reveals that Jefferson used

the term “Providence” with reference to divine supervision less than fifty times while Washington used it nearly five hundred times. However, while it may not have been as much a part of his daily lexicon as it was with other Founders, Jefferson appears to have discovered that the Providence myth was an inclusive yet elusive expression of belief which was very useful for political purposes and he implemented it on subsequent occasions where he deemed it appropriate or advantageous.¹

Jefferson and his fellow-authors, after all, were politicians; and politics are about power. They sought, then, to use expressions which would have power over the hearts and minds of the American people; and myth expressions do precisely that. Jefferson sought to mythologize—to express the beliefs of the American people in a way that would catalyze them to action. “In a broad sense, the author of the Declaration of Independence was the American people” according

¹ In both of his inaugural addresses, Jefferson fully invoked the Providence myth. In his first address, he employed the chosen people and promised land symbols, pointing out that America was “Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high minded to endure the degradations of the others” and “possessing a chosen country.” In that address, Jefferson again employed a Paine-like version of the myth which referred to nature rather than scripture for evidence of divine intervention. He also invoked the hand of God symbol, saying that Americans were “enlightened by a benign religion, professed indeed and practised in various forms, . . .acknowledging and adoring an overruling providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here, and his greater happiness hereafter” (“First Inaugural Address”).

In his second inaugural address, Jefferson again explicitly mentioned Providence, and again expressed the myth in an ambiguous way that could please hearers of various belief backgrounds and yet still be a sincere expression of most American’s beliefs: “I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his providence, and our riper years with his wisdom and power.” In those words, Jefferson makes very familiar and overt biblical and Puritan Providence myth references, depicting America as the promised land and likening Americans to chosen Israel of old. He then concludes the address by invoking the hand of God symbol by asking Americans “to join with [Jefferson] in supplications, that he [that Being] will so enlighten the minds of your servants, guide their councils, and prosper their measures, that whatsoever they do, shall result in your good, and shall secure to you the peace, friendship, and approbation of all nations” (“Second Inaugural Address”).

to historian Julian Boyd, “If, as Jefferson intended, the Declaration was an ‘expression of the American mind,’ he was in this sense, the inspired amanuensis of the American people” (13). Boyd’s comment refers to a statement made by Jefferson in a later letter to Henry Lee. Jefferson was responding to criticisms by Timothy Pickering that he, Jefferson, had contributed nothing new to the Declaration. He wrote: “This *was* the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of...it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right” (“To Henry Lee” emphasis added). Jefferson’s statements are as true for the Providence myth ideologies found in the Declaration of Independence as they are for any other aspect of the American mind. John Locke’s political theory indeed pervaded the literature of the day and in expressing those philosophies in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was indeed capturing and expressing the American mind. But that is equally true of Providence myth ideologies. In expressing Providence myth rhetoric, Jefferson was employing some of the most powerful and key “harmonizing sentiments of the day” which were being expressed in the literature of the late eighteenth century. Julian Boyd aptly expresses the value of including Providence myth phrases in the Declaration of Independence when he says “Embodied in its fire-tested text are the phrases as well as the ideas that stirred the American mind and spirit of that and subsequent generations” (38). Additionally, Ira Chernus observes, a “mythology has the greatest chance of success when it can appeal to the widest range of people” (“Mythic America”). Jefferson and his Declaration of Independence collaborators had discovered in the American national Providence myth a means of expression which had that sort of far-reaching,

rousing appeal, and they would continue to employ it in their political rhetoric to stir the American mind and spirit for years to come.

Franklin and the National Seal

On July 4, 1776—the same day that the Declaration of Independence was approved—Congress passed a resolution. It reads: “Resolved, That Dr. Benjamin Franklin, Mr. John Adams and Mr. Thomas Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America” (*Journals* 5:517-518). Additionally, Pierre Du Simitiere—who specialized in heraldry and later designed the state seals of Delaware and New Jersey—was asked to work with the committee. All committee members submitted ideas, but the committee ultimately recommended Franklin’s proposal to Congress. It consisted of “Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his Hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity. Motto, Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God” (*Journals* 5:689-690). While there was no artist’s rendering completed at the time of the committee’s proposal, Benson J. Lossing later did a sketch of Franklin’s proposal for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in July 1856 (see fig. 2). Alister McGrath sums up the message of Franklin’s seal best in his words “America was to be the Promised Land, the Atlantic Ocean the Red Sea, and England...was the new Egypt. The resonances with the great Biblical account of the exodus of the people of God from Egypt and the settlement in a new land, prepared for them by God, were too obvious to miss” (292-3). Daniel Dreisbach adds the following observation regarding Franklin, Jefferson and the proposed seal: “Now, this is very significant, because here we have two Americans -- we think of them as sons of the Enlightenment, but when called upon to design a great seal for the United States,

what are they drawn to? They're drawn to an image of the children of Israel.” Daniel Dreisbach



Figure 2. Lossing's sketch of Franklin's 1776 Seal Proposal

continues “They, like so many of their more pious countrymen, see themselves as following, if you will, in that example of the children of Israel, led by divine Providence, led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, straight from the provider God himself. This is what they looked to in imagining the American identity.” Franklin, Jefferson and the committee

obviously saw the Providence myth as *the* story of the emerging United States of America.

Dreisbach’s comments further demonstrate that the Providence myth was a commonly-held myth that the children of Puritans and children of the Enlightenment alike could comfortably see as the American story. After Franklin’s seal proposal is spelled out in the congressional journals, no debates are recorded—only the words “Ordered, to lie on the table” (*Journals* 5:691).

Franklin's seal never left the table where it had been ordered to lie. Jefferson, however, liked the motto from the seal proposal so much that he adopted it as the motto which circumscribes his personal seal. In the end, the committee's recommendation for the seal went unused. Six years later, Charles Thomson—signatory of the Declaration of Independence and the secretary of the Continental Congress since its inception—was asked to finish the task of creating the seal. Thomson chose to use other symbols in the seal which he created. However, two remnants of the Providence myth did survive in his version of the seal: the Latin motto “Annuit Coeptis” which is perhaps best translated “Providence has approved the undertaking”; and the “Eye of Providence in a radiant triangle,” which was actually part of the seal proposed by Du Simitiere. Regarding those two elements of the seal, Thomson would explain to Congress on 20 June 1782: “The eye over it and the motto allude to the many signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause” (*Journals* 22:339). Thomson's seal proposal was accepted by congress. Ultimately, although Franklin's proposed seal went unused, much of the mythology which Benjamin Franklin and the committee had envisioned for the new republic remained in place.

Walter Isaacson describes Franklin's beliefs as “a virtuous, morally fortified, and pragmatic version of deism” (85). I wish to focus on Isaacson's observation regarding Franklin's pragmatism.² By labelling Franklin's approach to religion and beliefs as pragmatic, I mean to

² In his essay which he presented to the Junto in Philadelphia, entitled “*On the Providence of God in the Government of the World*,” Franklin concludes that God “sometimes interferes by his particular Providence and sets aside the Effects which would otherwise have been produced...” for Franklin felt that there could “be no reason to imagine he would make so glorious a Universe merely to abandon it” (Franklin *Providence*). In this statement on Providence, one sees Franklin's practicality at work. Why would God create something only to abandon it? But Franklin not only saw his views on Providence as logical, he saw them as useful. As Walter Isaacson observes “Above all, Franklin's beliefs were driven by pragmatism.

express that they were very commonsensical, useful and shrewd. To illustrate Franklin's pragmatism and shrewdness in his use of the myth, I refer to an experience that took place a few years after the seal debate but still in the early days of the republic. Franklin had received a manuscript for an article from an unknown acquaintance and was responding to it (the most popular hypothesis is that it was a 1787 letter to Thomas Paine). The sender's draft evidently railed against a variety of religious principles and practices. Franklin responded by writing "I have read your Manuscript with some Attention. By the Arguments it contains against the Doctrine of a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the Foundation of all Religion: For without the Belief of a Providence that takes Cognizance of, guards and guides and may favor particular Persons, there is no Motive to Worship a Deity." While it is interesting to ponder this statement in light of Franklin's personal beliefs, I wish to emphasize his shrewdness in weighing the political consequences: "the consequence of printing this Piece will be a great deal of Odium drawn upon yourself, Mischief to you and no Benefit to others. He that spits against the Wind, spits in his own Face" ("To -----"). This correspondence is incredibly useful for entrance to Franklin's mind because it demonstrates his very keen awareness of audience and how that would have guided his writings.

It was this pragmatic providentialism—broad, logical, cautious not to offend the intended audience, and without a reference to Christianity or a specific religion—that Franklin had put to work as he crafted the seal. Franklin wanted independence, and he intuited that the most natural and pragmatic way to get Americans energized about the cause of independence was through the Providence myth. Franklin had been Thomas Paine's earliest contact and supporter as Paine

The final sentence of his Junto talk stressed that it was *socially useful* for people to believe in the version of divine providence and free will that he proposed" (87 emphasis added).

arrived in the Americas and embarked upon his revolutionary writing career. Franklin had made suggestions to Thomas Paine as he wrote *Common Sense* (Kidd 87). Now—just as he had astutely encouraged Paine in the use of the Providence myth in his pamphlet to inspire and catalyze the American cause—Franklin politicized the myth in the same manner with the national seal. Franklin’s pragmatism and awareness of audience guided his version of the Providence myth. Franklin understood, as Nicholas Guyatt writes, “that providentialism was not only a component of American identity but also a strategy for achieving concrete political goals” (4). The pragmatic old sage sought to convince Americans of the absolute morality of their cause—that their “rebellion to tyrants” was “obedience to God.”

Washington, Paine, and the American Crisis

On 10 July 1776—only six days after Franklin’s committee set out to create a seal—Washington wrote to John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress. Congress, had, of course, recently approved the Declaration of Independence. In that letter, he expressed his general approval of the Declaration, consenting that “It behooves us to adopt such,” saying that the action “under the smiles of a Gracious & All kind Providence will be most likely to promote our happiness.” He also expressed hope that the Declaration would “secure us that freedom and those privileges which have been and are refused us, contrary to the voice of nature and the British Constitution.” Here one sees Washington employing a similar Religion-of-Nature, rationalist version of the myth to the one employed by Paine and Jefferson. Washington continued “Agreeable to the request of Congress I caused the Declaration to be proclaimed before all the Army under my Immediate command and have the pleasure to inform them that the measure seemed to have their most hearty assent” (“To John Hancock”). The Declaration of Independence, fueled in part by Providence myth language and beliefs, had now been issued and

distributed as a political instrument in order to begin taking its effect on the American people's minds and hearts.

Fired by the Providence myth and a belief in the righteousness of their cause, Americans moved forward with the battle for their independence. As they did so, victories were in short supply and the revolutionaries found themselves in despondent circumstances. Napoleon Bonaparte would observe in a later revolution "It is moral force more than numbers that wins victory...The moral is to the physical as three is to one" (qtd. in Montague 172). The two myth purveyors which I will focus on in this section—George Washington and Thomas Paine—seem to have understood this principle clearly. They employed the Providence myth to give moral force to their cause. They, along with other "patriot preachers and orators used historical providentialism to nudge audiences toward the Patriot cause and to convert Patriot onlookers into active participants in the Revolution: one might discharge one's providential responsibility through the payment of taxes, the purchase of government bonds, or even enlistment in the Continental army" (Guyatt 120).

Washington employed the myth to bolster those around him during those dark days. One of the most powerful ways in which Washington kept Providence myth principles on the forefront of the minds of his soldiery and maintained what Napoleon called "moral force" was through army chaplains. Thomas Kidd writes "During the Revolution, George Washington became the Patriots' most important advocate for army chaplains...The chaplains focused on two primary tasks: explaining the godly meaning of the war and fostering moral, obedient behavior among the troops." Kidd further explains that Washington felt that "the chaplains' work was absolutely essential for sustaining the enormous sacrifices required of the soldiers and for assuring the army that God was on their side." Furthermore, Washington felt that chaplains

would “help preserve virtue and proper deference to authority among his troops” (Kidd 115). In his General Orders of 9 July 1776, Washington encouraged soldiers to “attend carefully upon religious exercises” because the need for the “blessing and protection of heaven are at all times necessary” (“General Orders”) and “Widespread immorality or contempt for authority, in the general’s view, might cause God to withdraw his protective covering from the army” (Kidd 118). Washington understood that his troops—who would have been well-versed in the Providence myth—would have no trouble seeing the symbol of God’s hand in any fortune or misfortune that they experienced in the war effort. In Washington’s reiteration of these myth ideas through army chaplains and general orders, he sought to achieve his political purposes—namely, to preserve order and compliance in the ranks.

Washington also used his correspondence to mythologize and maintain moral force throughout the Revolution. In August of 1776, upon hearing a report from Colonel Thomas McKean of desertions in his ranks, Washington wrote a letter, consoling McKean by saying “that superintending Providence, which needs not the aid of numbers, will lead us I hope to a more fortunate Event” (“To Colonel Thomas McKean”). On another occasion during this time period, he used his correspondence to convey what he considered to be a providential piece of good fortune. When the Continental Army had found it necessary to abandon New York and retreat to Harlem Heights, Washington had requested permission to raze New York in order to deprive the British Army of supplies and housing. Congress refused, but on September 20, a fire broke out in New York, consuming a considerable portion of the city. Washington wrote to his cousin, Lund, on October 6 saying “In speaking of New York, I had forgot to mention that Providence—or some good honest Fellow, has done more for us than we were disposed to do for ourselves, as near One fourth of the City is supposed to be consumed” (“To Lund Washington”). Such

invocations in his correspondence could help maintain morale and help others see the hand of God symbol even in the misfortunes of the Revolution.

As 1776 drew near its end, things progressively grew worse for Washington. The Continental Army was forced to abandon New York. Desertions escalated. Supplies were scarce. Washington's forces were badly outnumbered and undertrained. In a letter to one of his generals, Washington confided "you will have heard of our melancholy situation," elaborating that "With a handful of men, compared to the Enemy's Force, we have been pushed through the Jerseys without being able to make the smallest opposition." He further lamented that the state militias of Pennsylvania had failed to materialize. Yet, in spite of those dire circumstances, Washington again employed the Providence myth to provide reassurance and express hope, saying "I trust under the smiles of Providence, that we may yet effect an important stroke" ("To General Horatio Gates"). Washington's myth invocations in his correspondence were frequent and it seems quite evident that his prolific correspondence was maintained as much to "nudge audiences towards the Patriot cause" (Guyatt 120) as it was to keep others abreast of his circumstances. His letters were largely an effort to keep the moral aspect of the war alive even when the physical aspect of it was floundering. But the moral aspect of the cause would need more than Washington's correspondence if it was to succeed. Washington's army, camped on the banks of the Delaware River, would receive that moral help from Thomas Paine.

Paine, whose *Common Sense* had provided a timely impetus to the Revolution at the beginning of 1776, now again took up the pen to write another landmark Revolutionary work, *The American Crisis*. *The American Crisis* emerged in a series of thirteen essays. The first, which was published the week before Christmas 1776, made a powerful defense for the cause of independence and employed the Providence myth forcefully in order to do so. Washington

found its language so compelling that “At dusk on December 23, 1776, General Washington ordered his officers to gather their men into small squads and read aloud what Paine had written” (Nelson 108). Paine—again, not the devoutly religious type—did not spare in using religious language, reminding his American readers that “Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered.” And while he confessed, “I have as little superstition in me as any many living,” he also believed “that God Almighty will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupportedly to perish who have...sought to avoid the calamities of war, by every decent method.” Conversely, he added “Neither have I so much of the infidel in me, as to suppose that he [God] has relinquished the government of the world, and given us up to the care of devils” (Paine *The Crisis*). Paine implored Americans to see themselves as God’s chosen people and to understand that they had not been abandoned.

Again, just as he had done in *Common Sense*, Paine held nothing in back in his antagonist symbol references to the British Crown: “I cannot see on what grounds the king of Britain can look up to heaven for help against us: a common murderer, a highwayman, or a house-breaker, has as good a pretense as he.” In Paine’s eyes, criminals had as much right to ask God for help in their unlawful endeavors as the King of England did in his pursuits. Americans, on the other hand, could expect the help of the Almighty. Later in the essay, Paine continued his antagonist symbol rant about King George III, saying “if a thief breaks into my house, burns and destroys my property, and kills or threatens to kill me, or those that are in it, and to ‘bind me in all cases whatsoever’ to his absolute will, am I to suffer it? What signifies it to me, whether he who does it is a king or a common man?” (Paine *The Crisis*). Paine was astutely quoting from the 1766 Declaratory Act which was considered unlawful and tyrannical by many Americans. His case for King George as the unrighteous tyrannical antagonist of the American people concludes with

him calling out all Americans who still hoped to mend things with England by saying that he didn't understand "swearing allegiance to one whose character is that of a sottish, stupid, stubborn, worthless, brutish man. I conceive likewise a horrid idea in receiving mercy from a being, who at the last day shall be shrieking to the rocks and mountains to cover him, and fleeing with terror from the orphan, the widow, and the slain of America" (Paine *The Crisis*). At judgement day, Paine foresaw King George having to reckon for his crimes against the American people. Jefferson had plainly portrayed King George III as the myth's antagonist symbol in the list of grievances of the *Declaration of Independence*. Paine now elevated the criticisms against the tyrannical antagonist to the American cause by calling King George a thief and a stupid, worthless, brutish man who would answer to God for his wickedness.

In similar fashion to other myth producers, Paine artfully employed the hand of God symbol as a means to encourage his readers even in that moment of misfortune. He explained that the current American crisis would serve to reveal the true colors of Americans. He wrote that "panics, in some cases, have their uses; they produce as much good as hurt...They sift out the hidden thoughts of man, and hold them up in public to the world. Many a disguised Tory has lately shown his head." Paine then expressed his confidence that all would ultimately work out in favor of the Americans and that their recently revealed enemies would eventually receive their comeuppances, saying "The failures in the Jerseys will have some providential benefits" and "if we believe the power of hell to be limited, we must likewise believe that their agents are under some providential control" (Paine *The Crisis*). Paine's political aim was to assure Americans that while things might look dark at the moment, Providence was still at work.

The final Providence myth employment I wish to mention from Paine's *Crisis* is regarding his use of the liberator symbol. Washington had been criticized for his inability to

produce an American victory as of yet and there had even been talk of replacing him as the Commander in Chief. Paine rose to his defense as the ordained liberator: “Voltaire has remarked that King William never appeared to full advantage but in difficulties and in action; the same remark may be made on General Washington.” Paine felt that the recent hardships had only revealed Washington’s strengths and felt that Washington had been providentially preserved and maintained, saying “I reckon it among those kind of public blessings, which we do not immediately see, that God hath blessed him with uninterrupted health, and given him a mind that can even flourish upon care” (Paine *The Crisis*). Paine, in his *American Crisis* mythologizing, sought to have a powerful positive effect on the moral battle when the physical battles weren’t going so well. Paine continued to employ the Providence myth in behalf of the American cause in his twelve ensuing issues of *The American Crisis* throughout the American Revolutionary War. Additionally, he would never accept any compensation other than the cost of his expenses for publishing these powerful American Revolutionary War tracts. He also did his part by serving as a soldier in Washington’s army in the Jersey campaign. In spite of all that, he is unjustly one of the most heavily criticized figures of the Revolution—mostly because of his unorthodox religious views.

Because of Paine’s unorthodoxy, Nicholas Guyatt queries regarding Paine’s use of the Providence myth “was he merely a rhetorical opportunist? As he prepared his pamphlets *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* for a wavering audience of would-be Patriots, did he employ the language of divine involvement with his tongue firmly in his cheek?” (Guyatt 8). Whether or not Paine spoke of divine involvement earnestly is a topic for another day, but I have sought diligently to show that Paine (and his counterparts) were, indeed, political and rhetorical opportunists. They knew their American audience and they knew what rhetorical buttons to push

to catalyze Americans to action. Washington and Paine addressed the American crisis during the second half of 1776 with powerful Providence myth invocations. Washington did so in his correspondence and through the appointment of chaplains to the Continental Army. Paine mythologized powerfully in his *American Crisis* pamphlets. While it is impossible to measure exactly to what extent their mythologizing affected the war effort, the fact that they and their founder counterparts continued to use the myth for the remainder of the war and during the early years of the republic demonstrates at least a perceived efficacy.

Washington, Adams and the Myth at the Conclusion of the War

American Revolutionary War Providence myth invocations did not always occur in the self-congratulatory form of a pat upon one's righteous back. As the war was in its fourth year and American despondency increased, Congress issued the following reproof and recommendation:

WHEREAS, in just Punishment of our manifold Transgressions, it hath pleased the Supreme Disposer of all Events to visit these United States with a calamitous War, through which his Divine Providence hath hitherto in a wonderful Manner conducted us... AND WHEREAS...too few have been sufficiently awakened to a Sense of their Guilt, or warmed with Gratitude, or taught to amend their Lives and turn from their Sins, that so he might turn his Wrath... *RESOLVED*, THAT it be recommended to the several States to appoint the First Thursday in May next to be a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer to Almighty God, that he will be pleased to avert those impending Calamities which we have but too well deserved. (*Journals* 13:343-344)

The lack of success in the American cause, according to this Providence myth explanation, was not the unrighteousness of the cause, but the unrighteousness of the chosen people. The hand of

God symbol was being manifest *against* the American cause and would continue to be so until Americans learned to “amend their lives and turn from their sins.” Within that same fast day resolution, Congress did not concede in the least that the British were in the right. Instead, the myth-purveying Congress explained British victories by saying that God was using “the Malevolence of our disappointed Enemies, like the Incredulity of Pharaoh...as the Scourge of Omnipotence” to whip the unrighteous chosen people back into spiritual shape. In addition, Congress still stood behind their liberator, Washington, and petitioned that God would “continue his paternal Care to the Commander in Chief” (*Journals* 13:344). Roland Barthes said that myth is “motivated” (126). The spinning of the Providence myth to explain American military struggles is an excellent example of what Barthes meant. If the Providence myth was the justification and explanation for why Americans were in the war in the first place, then why were Americans not enjoying success and why was the hand of God not being manifest in their behalf? Congress—and Americans—needed an explanation. Motivated by the increasing pressure as to the righteousness of the cause, Congress put the myth to work to explain the American milieu. The national day of fasting would serve to remind Americans that the Providence myth was still the national myth directing their course of action. They, as the chosen people, had to elevate their efforts to please God so they could experience his prospering hand. In late 1781, the American armies did again prosper in battle at Yorktown. Upon gaining victory, Washington employed the Providence myth to explain victory and to simultaneously accomplish political purposes. The day after Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown, October 19, 1781, Washington issued General Orders to his army. Interestingly, those “Orders” only contain two very brief paragraphs that actually contained orders. The remainder of the document consists of expressions of gratitude and congratulations. Washington congratulated the army in

general for the victory, but he then turned his congratulations to the French, saying: “The generous proofs which his most Christian Majesty has given of his attachment to the Cause of America must force conviction on the minds of the most deceived among the Enemy: relatively to the decisive good consequences of the Alliances” (“General Orders, 20 October 1781”). These are incredibly interesting words from a man who twenty short years earlier had been fighting against the very same French. During the Seven Years’ War, no self-respecting American would have labeled the King of France “his most Christian Majesty,” either. The King of France would have certainly been aligned with the Pope as the ultimate antagonist symbol in the American Providence myth of that moment. But now, Americans had a new antagonist in their myth (as discussed already in this work as depicted by Jefferson and Paine)—King George III. Furthermore, Washington—whose Providence myth invocations rarely included Christ—recognized the power and significance of using the specific language that he did in his acknowledgement of the French. His words, in essence, expressed the righteousness of the French and the Americans and the cause they had undertaken together. Washington ends the General Orders by encouraging the soldiery to now actively participate in the Providence myth: “Divine Service is to be performed tomorrow in the several Brigades or Divisions. The Commander in Chief earnestly recommends that the troops not on duty should universally attend with that seriousness of Deportment and gratitude of Heart which the recognition of such reiterated and astonishing interpositions of Providence demand of us” (“General Orders, 20 October 1781”).

Washington, recognizing another significant opportunity for the Providence myth’s power to be employed (and doing as he had done throughout the war), put a chaplain to work mythologizing. He requested that his chaplain, Israel Evans, address the troops and offer a

thanksgiving sermon. It was perhaps “the largest assembly gathered in America since George Whitefield’s gargantuan evangelistic meetings of the early 1740s” (Kidd 127). Evans reminded the troops in that sermon, and in a poem which was an addendum to the sermon, of the need to maintain moral rectitude as a show of gratitude for their providential deliverance:

To him who led in ancient days
 The Hebrew tribes, your anthems raise;
 The God who spoke from Sinai’s hill
 Protects his chosen people still.
 Not to ourselves success we owe
 By help divine we crushed the foe,
 In sword or shield who vainly trust
 Shall soon be humbled to the dust...
 Praise him who gives us to repel
 The powers of Britain and of hell,
 With thankful hearts his goodness own,
 And bow before Jehovah’s throne. (Evans 46)

Evans’ poem is a textbook example of Providence myth literature, aligning Britain with hell in the antagonist symbol, acknowledging their deliverance as the hand of God symbol, and projecting upon the American people the chosen people symbol. Evans liberally attributed success to Providence in his sermon.

Additionally, in that sermon, Evans said “after the example of David the renowned king of Israel, it shall be said ‘These be the names of the mighty men’ who led forth the allied troops to subdue our enemies” and then he enumerated the liberators of the Battle of Yorktown,

including Washington. Evans' sermon was, however, most unique because of the incredible emphasis he placed on the role of the Marquis de Lafayette in the victory (having dedicated the entire sermon to Lafayette) and in the effusive tribute he paid to "THE DEFENDER OF THE RIGHTS OF MANKIND, LOUIS THE GRAND MONARQUE" (Evans 43). Again, twenty short years earlier, the French were in the role of the antagonist in the American Providence myth and yet now, Louis, the King of France was the defender of the rights of mankind. Strange as that may seem, Evans, like Washington, should be seen as an adept mythologizer at work, politicizing with his rhetoric. Such language—very similar to that which Washington used in his General Orders of October 20—would wield mythic power for Lafayette and the French. It would strengthen their resolve as they more fully saw the American cause as God's cause and themselves portrayed as liberators in the glorious cause of the American Revolution.

As laudatory and effective as these usages of the liberator symbol regarding the French were, the liberator symbol generally was reserved for Washington. After the Yorktown victory, the Continental Congress recommended that Americans observe 13 December 1781 as a special day of thanksgiving to God for their successes against the British. In a sermon given on that day of fast and thanksgiving, Robert Smith pointed out the wisdom of Washington's appointment and called Washington "the fittest for the service," and acknowledged the "various incidents in providence uniting to prepare him gradually for so high a trust." Smith further pointed out "a reverence for his character our enemies themselves are obliged to express," considering him to "be one of the brightest military ornaments of the age." Smith then encouraged all Americans to "notice and adore the goodness and wisdom of God, who is at no loss for an instrument" in George Washington to perform the great work of leading the Revolutionary Army (13). Smith felt that God could—and God did—raise up a liberator and that Americans should be thankful to

him for doing so. He concluded his adulatory references to Washington with two flattering comparisons:

He [God] drew Moses from the ark of bulrushes, to confound Pharaoh's ancient court, and deliver his brethren from their hard bondage. He called Cyrus, his servant, from the rough mountains of Persia, to overthrow the strongest empire in the world, and restore the captivity of his people. And he hath raised up his servant Washington, one of our brethren, who never saw any country but his own, to humble a powerful and most haughty nation, and save his country from the chains of slavery (14).

George Washington was the modern Moses, the current Cyrus. As is evident in this excerpt from Smith's sermon, Americans generally felt that God had "raised up his servant Washington" to "save his country," and that he was the latest iteration of liberators as prepared by the hand of God to perform his work amongst his chosen people. Many of Washington's contemporaries would have agreed with Saul Padover, who much later wrote regarding Washington, "It is perhaps hazardous to speak of individual indispensability in history, but if there ever was an indispensable leader at a critical moment in history, it was George Washington. In the formative years of the American republic, roughly between 1776 and 1796, the man, the moment, and the crisis coincided" (Padover 7-8). This may seem like a hyperbolic statement which was made only after looking at Washington through the distorted lens of history, however, it is hardly an exaggeration. Washington's myth was growing even before the war began. But as the war wound down, the Washington-as-liberator symbol was beginning to take on monumental proportions.

A humorous and audacious liberator symbol invocation by Benjamin Franklin at this historical juncture demonstrates just how large Washington's myth had already grown. Not long

after hearing of the Yorktown victory, Franklin was attending an event in Paris. At the event, the French foreign minister toasted his king: “His Majesty, Louis the Sixteenth, who like the moon, fills the earth with a soft, benevolent glow.” Next, the British ambassador toasted: “George the Third, who like the sun at noonday, spreads his light and illumines the world.” Franklin, in turn, rose and said “I cannot give you the sun nor the moon, but I give you George Washington, General of the armies of the United States, who, like Joshua of old, commanded both the sun and the moon to stand still, and both obeyed” (qtd. in Boller 13). Franklin was having some fun and placing the United States on equal or superior footing to that of England and France with his toast. But he was also elevating Washington to the place of a heaven-ordained liberator as he likened Washington to Joshua. Seymour Lipset—another Washington biographer—said of Washington “he is the most important single figure in American history. Without him, the Revolution might have failed” (27). It is not, however, his military genius or his political acumen or his moral infallibility that made him indispensable. I argue that it was his symbolic significance within the Providence myth that made him indispensable. Referring back to Napoleon’s observation on war, the myth—as employed by Washington and Revolutionary era Americans—had played a vital role in the moral battles of the American Revolution. Now that physical victory had been achieved, the myth was employed to explain the victory and the liberator, George Washington, was central to that explanation.

As the war wound down, Adams, too, was considered a liberator in the myth. Not long after the victory at Yorktown, a very remarkable Providence myth invocation was published anonymously in Boston. The satirical work—which demonstrates the antagonist symbol of the American national Providence myth as well as any work—is entitled “A Dialogue between the Devil, And George III.” Their dialogue begins with the devil saying “George, hearken to my

counsel,” and with George responding “Thy servant attends” (“Dialogue” 691). The author then walks the reader through a series of interactions between King George and his master, the devil, beginning in 1760 and concluding with the loss at Yorktown in 1781. King George proves himself to be a blundering buffoon throughout the work, with the devil remarking at the time of Yorktown “You have a satanic heart; I wish your head was equal to it. I warn you again to look out for the French and rebels, or they’ll give you an Irish hoist ere long” (“Dialogue” 697). King George, of course, fails the devil in that enterprise, too. In their exchange, King George curses the “rebel general,” Washington (702), but (perhaps as a reflection of a Boston perspective on the Revolution), the devil and King George spend a great deal more time talking about the “rebel Adams” and the harm he is doing to the devil’s plans. George, in his wretched weakness, asks of the devil “Can’t we, my royal master, with our united powers of earth and hell, upset such a being as this Adams?” (699). The author is truly seeking to portray Adams as a formidable liberator. The devil further complains that Adams’ power “even aims a stroke at my domains; not confin’d to earth, he talks that providence divine has pointed out to every land to form a union *with his world*—and that heaven hath set its seal to independence—and said, Amen!” (699). The devil then laments Adams’ significance and growing stature amongst the other nations of Europe, saying “they would not have listened with half the attention to the prophet Daniel they did to Adams; and this frenzy spreads like a pestilence through the nations and fascinates the world. If America is independent, universal ruin follows; therefore, George, hold out to the last and be as obstinate as hell” (701-2). The work’s author, rather uniquely but not incorrectly, depicts Adams as one of the great liberators of the American Revolution.

Adams was, as discussed by the devil in the “Dialogue,” one of the most significant intellectual and rhetorical liberators of the Revolution. Adams was not portrayed as *the* liberator

in the national Providence myth during the American Revolution, but he was certainly *a* liberator in the myth of that historical moment. As I've demonstrated earlier in this dissertation, the myth sometimes has multiple liberators occupy that role at the same time. Moses was a prophet-liberator while Joshua served as a warrior-liberator. Similarly, King George II and General Wolfe served contemporaneously as liberators in the colonial American myth. Adams, of course, would become Washington's Vice-President and later the second President of the United States—and in that sense be somewhat of a Joshua to the Moses, Washington. But it was not necessarily his position or leadership skills that set him apart as a liberator. It was his power as a rhetorician-mythologizer. Adams' papers show that he invoked Providence on more than four hundred occasions in his private correspondence and public addresses (*founders.archives.gov*). Providence myth language was a central part of Adams' private and public rhetoric.

Adams was serving in France as a diplomat at the time that he heard about Yorktown. While serving in that capacity, Adams issued twelve essays entitled "Letters from a Distinguished American," which argued in favor of the American Revolutionary cause and recognition by European countries of the United States of America as a new nation.³ Since

³ Adams had originally written the tracts in July of 1780 and sent them to London so that Edmund Jenings could have them printed there. Because of unknown circumstances, (perhaps a savoir-faire political move by Jenings) the letters were not published until 1782, when Jenings had them published in the *General Advertiser*. John Adams indicated in a letter to Jenings that he was pleased that they were finally printed, but he was concerned with Jenings' editorial changes. Adams had produced the essays "with the Design of being printed as written by a Briton," yet, Jenings now published them as the work of an American and included a dateline which indicated that they had originated in Paris. Adams feared that the retention of his "original pronouns to indicate British authorship in nearly every passage would probably lead to the conclusion that the essays were the work of 'a Penitent Refugee,' rather than a true partisan of the American cause." ("Editorial Note"). In spite of the confusing timing and authorship, it was a fortuitous turn of events that had led to the delay in the publication of the letters since Adams' blunt manner of arguing for American independence would have been considered premature and unsuited to the circumstances in 1780. The Parliament in 1780, led by Lord North, would have turned up its nose at the suggestion of negotiations founded on American independence. But in

historical providentialism was not an uncommon way for Britons and other Europeans to look at events (it wasn't uniquely American), Adams employed the Providence myth to convince Europe of the legitimacy of the American Revolution. Understanding the political power of the myth, Adams used language which would simultaneously legitimize America's governing body and massage the French by saying in the second letter that "The great body of the people in every state revere the Congress... as the voice of their country, the guardians of its right, and the voice of God; and they esteem their Independence and alliance with France, as the two greatest blessings which Providence ever yet bestowed upon the new world."

In that same letter, he used a rationalist argument borrowed from Paine and Franklin to demonstrate that Providence had used nature not only to ordain America's freedom but its possession of the New England fisheries, asking "to whom did God and Nature give them?" Adams then threw in the face of the British the fact that members of parliament had likewise evidently in the past used nature and geography to give a providential explanation for warfare, saying "Ministry lay great stress upon the gift of God and Nature...to justify their injustice and hostility against all the maritime powers. Why should Americans hold the blessings of Providence in a baser estimation" (Adams "II. Letters"). Adams argued that it was only right that Americans now acknowledge Providence's more recent manifest designs in nature. Adams appealed in the sixth essay to inalienable God-given human rights, arguing that "Three millions of people in America, and all the nations of Europe, have as great a right to the common blessings of Providence, as the inhabitants of this island, some of whom wish to lord it over all. The Americans have as good a claim to the use of the earth, air, and seas, as the Britons." Then,

1782, a new ministry under Lord Shelburne had gained power and—sensing that the British public's support of crushing the American rebellion had weakened—was ready for peace talks.

borrowing from Paine the idea that it was providentially unnatural for a continent to be dominated by an island, Adams argued “What right has Britain to shut them up in the prison of a monopoly, and prevent them from giving and receiving happiness from the rest of mankind? Did the Creator make that quarter of the globe for the use of this Island exclusively?” (“VI. Letters”). By including “all the nations of Europe” as deserving recipients of Providence’s blessings and as beneficiaries of exchange and commerce with America, Adams was again using the myth to politically manipulate European readers so that they would see the American cause as their own cause.

Continuing on this theme of nature’s indication of the designs of Providence, Adams wrote in the ninth “Letter:”

Why, then, should we amuse ourselves with unnatural expectations? We shall never have any hold on the love of America, but what we obtain, by making it their interest to be our friends, in a fair and equal commerce, and by favouring their benevolent views of planting freedom, toleration, humanity, and policy, in the new world, for the happiness of the human species in both worlds. They are a people whose feelings are too refined, whose views are too enlarged for us, sunk as we are in dissipation, avarice, and pleasure. They think the cause of their country a sacred trust deposited in their hands by Providence for the happiness of millions yet unborn.” (“IX. Letters”)

Adams, here speaking in a tone that was probably intended to slight the British, used the chosen people and promised land symbols to express the idea that it was unnatural for Americans—with their superior, refined and enlarged views—to be subject to any European power. Americans had a providential mission to plant freedom in the new and old world and to bless unborn millions by securing America as a liberated land of promise.

Acknowledgement of the United States by France and Great Britain as an independent nation was achieved with the Treaty of Paris in September of 1783. The overall role of Adams' "Letters from a Distinguished American" on achieving that independence will never be known. However, the publication of the "Letters" in August 1782 and the subsequent signing of a preliminary peace treaty on 30 November 1782 provide circumstantial evidence that the essays may have played a role in bringing the necessary parties to the table for peace talks. While it is difficult to know the degree to which Adams' Providence myth invocations succeeded in their aims, it is quite evident that John Adams felt that the Providence myth was a powerful rhetorical device for helping to convince Britons and other Europeans of the righteousness and justice of the American cause.

Madison, Franklin and the Constitutional Convention

Once they'd won the American Revolutionary War, Americans had another colossal battle before them—establishing a functioning republic with a foundational charter that could withstand the tests of time. Their first attempt to do so as a group of independently sovereign states under the Articles of Confederation had proven to be a failure. James Madison, being one of the first to recognize the inadequacies of the Articles, proposed a complete overhaul of the founding document in the Continental Congress. The result, of course, was the United States Constitution. As they deliberated, Congress was faced with the question of whether or not to mention Deity in any form in the United States Constitution. The Articles of Confederation had but one mention in the closing paragraph—where the new nation asserted "it hath pleased the Great Governor of the World to incline the hearts of the legislatures we respectively represent in congress, to approve of, and to authorize us to ratify the said articles of confederation and perpetual union" ("Articles"). These lines were a nod at the hand of God symbol in the

Providence myth. In the United States Constitution, however, no mention is made of God. The original seven articles make no mention of Deity and the only reference to religion in the Bill of Rights is found in the First Amendment that reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (“Bill of Rights”). The question then naturally arises as to whether the Providence myth played any role in the creation and ratification of the United States Constitution. The answer is a complex but resounding “yes.” To substantiate that answer, I will look into James Madison’s and Benjamin Franklin’s Providence myth rhetoric surrounding the United States Constitution rather than within its text.

Madison saw “much of western European history as needlessly besmirched and tragically bloodied by the heavy hand of despotic religion” (Gaustad 36-37) and thus, he had an absolute disdain for any state establishment of religion. In his famous “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments,” which was first issued in 1785, Madison enumerated fifteen reasons why Patrick Henry’s bill for the support of Christian teachers should not be passed in the state of Virginia. Madison argued “the Bill is not requisite for the support of the Christian Religion. To say that it is, is a contradiction to the Christian Religion itself...for it is known that this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them, and not only during the period of miraculous aid, but long after it had been left to its own evidence and the ordinary care of Providence.” Madison argued that God providentially sustained his cause and did not need the aid of earthly governments. Furthermore, he argued that a state sponsorship of religion was a lack of confidence “in its innate excellence and the patronage of its Author” and that the sponsorship would also arouse in its enemies “a suspicion that its friends are too conscious of its fallacies to trust it to its own merits.” (Madison “Memorial and Remonstrance”). Madison—although an infrequent Providence myth

purveyor—employed it masterfully to accomplish his political purposes. He addressed an audience steeped in the Providence myth, and he used Providence myth tenets to reason with them. In a circumstance where Madison could easily have been depicted as irreligious for opposing the sponsorship of Christian teachers, he used the Providence myth’s hand of God symbol to oppose state-sponsored religion. According to Madison, state-establishment of Christianity—rather than pleasing Deity—was an insult to God and often impeded his providential purposes. God did not need the aid of earthly governments. Virginians could best please Providence and hope for his patronage, not by supporting the Christian religion with human laws, but by trusting it to its own merits. He then labeled officials who dared to dictate religious beliefs with the antagonist symbol, saying those who are “guilty of such an encroachment...are tyrants” and that any people who submitted themselves to state-dictated religion “are slaves” (Madison “Memorial and Remonstrance”). Americans—who in Providence myth terms viewed themselves as modern Israel recently freed from the tyranny of British Egypt—would not like being told that the acceptance of a new state-established religion was merely accepting a pharaoh of another sort. The defeat of Henry’s bill and the subsequent passing of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom are seen as foundational precursors to the debates regarding state-sponsored religion and the absence of religious language within the United States Constitution. In an ironic twist, Madison’s Providence myth argument against religious establishment in the Virginia debates may have contributed to the exclusion of any mention of Providence in the new nation’s Constitution.

Madison’s most forceful Providence myth invocations are perhaps found in *The Federalist*, wherein Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton sought to convince New Yorkers of the wisdom of ratification of the United States Constitution. In number 37, Madison

described the immense difficulties of the Constitutional Convention—telling of the various debates which had raged and of the seeming impossibility of consensus. Once that he'd drawn a picture in the reader's minds of the monumental task before the Congress, he then employed the hand of God symbol, saying "The real wonder is, that so many difficulties should have been surmounted; and surmounted with an unanimity almost as unprecedented as it must have been unexpected. It is impossible for any man of candor to reflect on this circumstance, without partaking of the astonishment. It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it, a finger of that Almighty Hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution" (*The Federalist* Number 37). Americans were accustomed to portrayals of the hand of God symbol in explanation of American military victories over the British. Madison now made it unmistakable what he was claiming: "*that* Almighty Hand" (emphasis added) which had given them victory in battle had now been equally manifest in the creation of the Constitution. The American people, steeped in the Providence myth, now had the proverbial ball in their court. If they accepted that God's hand had given them victory in battle, it was now being put before them to likewise acknowledge that God had a hand in the Constitutional Convention. According to Madison, God not only wanted them to be free from Great Britain's rule, he wanted them to be governed according to these principles. In tying the one event to the other, Madison had brilliantly put the myth to work to accomplish his political purposes. Like Jefferson and Paine, Madison did not invoke the Providence myth on a frequent basis in his personal correspondence, but he did find it to be a useful instrument in his political rhetoric⁴.

⁴ Madison, too, employed the myth in his first inaugural address by expressing his confidence in "the guardianship and guidance of that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations, whose blessings have been so conspicuously dispensed to this rising Republic, and to

Benjamin Franklin, whom I discussed earlier in this chapter for his proposal of the national seal, also invoked the Providence myth heavily at the time of the Constitutional Convention. Franklin, who would pass away within three years of the convention, may have felt a sense of urgency as he appealed to those involved in drafting and ratifying the Constitution—hoping to see his efforts in the new republic come to fruition. As he experienced frustration with the lack of progress in completing the Constitution, he resorted to the Providence myth in hopes of uniting the delegates. James Madison recorded Franklin asking on 28 June:

...how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the Contest with G. Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection.—Our prayers, Sir, were heard, & they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending providence in our favor. To that kind providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? or do we imagine that we no longer need his assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God Governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? (Franklin, “Motion for Prayers”).

whom we are bound to address our devout gratitude for the past, as well as our fervent supplications and best hopes for the future” (Madison “First Inaugural Address”). Likewise, in his second address—given in the midst of the War of 1812, he expresses his “conviction, that the war...is stamped with that justice, which invites the smiles of heaven on the means of conducting it to a successful termination” (Madison “Second Inaugural Address”). The implementation of the Providence myth to justify war has likewise become an American political tradition.

Franklin, like Madison, saw the value in connecting providential watch care during the Revolutionary War (a widely-held American notion) to providential guidance in the establishment of the new government. If God played a role in the one, it only stood to reason that he would be involved in the latter. Regarding Franklin's suggestion for prayer to the delegates, Walter Isaacson writes "Franklin was a believer, even more so as he grew older, in a rather general and at times nebulous divine providence, the principle that God had a benevolent interest in the affairs of men." But then Isaacson asks "Did he make his proposal for prayer out of a deep religious faith or out of a pragmatic political belief that it would encourage calm in the deliberations?" Isaacson answers his own question by saying "There was, as usual, probably an element of both, but perhaps a bit more of the latter" (Isaacson 451). Franklin the pragmatist was again at work. As Isaacson says, this was quite certainly a political device intended to get the delegates of the convention all on the same page. Franklin saw immense value in trying to unite the members in operating from a common myth—that theirs was a cause overseen and directed by Providence. They had united in prayer during the Revolutionary War. He hoped prayer might serve to unite them again now. Like Franklin's proposed seal, his prayer proposal was tabled.

Franklin's lack of success with the myth to persuade the convention members to his way of thinking did not prevent Franklin from continuing to invoke it. Once the Constitution was drafted and signed, Franklin again employed the Providence myth to blast the Anti-Federalists who opposed its ratification. Franklin did so in a letter to the editor of *The Federal Gazette* entitled "A Comparison of the Conduct of the Ancient Jews, and of the Anti-Federalists in the United States of America." In the letter, Franklin recounted a historical moment in ancient Israel, but made it very clear that he was synchronously telling the story of the nascent United

States. During the Revolution, Franklin had found the biblical Providence myth useful for portraying America's struggle to free itself from the tyranny of its British pharaoh. Now he put it to work to tell the story of the recently-freed, backsliding, ungrateful modern Israel. Franklin complained that "men who had distinguished themselves in procuring the liberty of their nation, and had hazarded their lives in openly opposing the will of a powerful monarch" were not accepted by the people and expressed disbelief "that a constitution framed for them by the Deity himself" had not received "a universal welcome reception." Franklin suggested that with both Israel and the United States, the "Supreme Being had...by continued acts of his attentive providence" raised them up until they "became a great people...having rescued them from bondage by many miracles." In his analogy, Franklin manipulated the enumeration of the original twelve Israelite tribes to later years after Joseph was split into Ephraim and Manasseh in order to perfect his analogy with the thirteen American states, saying "there were in every one of the thirteen tribes some discontented, restless spirits, who were continually exciting them to reject the proposed new government." Franklin then heightened his accusations of the Anti-Federalists by implying continued ties to England in his comparison: "Many still retained an affection for Egypt, the land of their nativity, and these, whenever they felt any inconvenience or hardship...exclaimed against their leaders as the authors of their trouble, and were not only for returning into Egypt, but for stoning their deliverers." Contrarian Anti-Federalists, in Franklin's esteem, were no different than ancient Israel who—poised to inherit the promised land and the government thereof—doubted their ability to do so and sought to stone Moses, Joshua and Caleb. Criticisms of the leaders of the American Revolution were tantamount to hurling stones at God's liberators. At the conclusion of his remarks, Franklin commented that he didn't want to infer that the delegates had been divinely inspired in drafting the Constitution but then subtly

suggested they had, saying “yet I must own I have so much faith in the general government of the world by Providence, that I can hardly conceive a transaction of such momentous importance to the welfare of millions now existing, and to exist in the posterity of a great nation, should be suffered to pass without being in some degree influenced, guided, and governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior spirits live, and move, and have their being” (Franklin, “A Comparison”). Franklin—who is generally considered slippery and difficult to pin down when it comes to his religious beliefs—was not slippery about his use of the Providence myth. He consistently employed it in his political language.

The Providence myth was becoming each day more deeply entrenched as a way for the founders to advance political agendas in a way that was comfortable to those within mainstream Christianity and palatable to those associated with the American Enlightenment. In the end, Madison, Franklin, and the rest of the advocates of the new Constitution succeeded in obtaining its ratification, and it became the supreme law of the land of the United States. The Providence myth had played a significant role in the accomplishment of their political purposes.

Washington and the Presidency

Regarding the newly constituted nation, Edwin Gaustad observed “The last decade of the eighteenth century found Americans searching for a center.” He then further remarked “In such political transition or even turmoil, a body of citizens might turn for strength, comfort, and solidarity to a single pervading church that stood firm above all changes of political allegiance and all crises of war and peace. But Americans had no such national church. What symbolic center drew Americans, qua Americans, together? What oneness could be found?” (59).

Gaustad was right. Americans, by purposeful design, had no national church. But I would argue that they did have a common symbolic center that unified them—the Providence myth. Gaustad

then answers his questions by naming Washington as a symbolic center of American identity in the final decade of the eighteenth century. Again, I agree, but I would add that the position which he occupied at the symbolic center of American identity was in his role as the liberator symbol *within* the Providence myth—the preeminent American national myth at the time. This last section of chapter four and all of chapter five will focus on what Gaustad observed—the symbol of Washington in the new republic. This section delineates Washington’s mythologizing as the President of the United States to give credibility to the new nation while chapter five discusses the mythologizing done about him after his death.

After the smoke of the Revolution had cleared, it became very clear that Washington’s role as liberator was to extend beyond the theater of war. First, he was chosen as the presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention. In that role, “he never spoke or voted” but “it was agreed before, during and after the Philadelphia Convention that Washington’s presence at the sessions, and his subsequent public approval of the Constitution, were necessary to secure its passage” and regarding the office of President that “the expectation that Washington would be the first incumbent played a large role in the creation of this office, and in securing approval for the Constitution generally. No one feared that he would misuse power” (Lipset 31).

As he entered office as the first President of the United States, Washington remained an avid participant in the Providence myth. In fact, his inaugural address contains more references to Providence than perhaps any other individual document in his papers. He began by saying “it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides in the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States.” Washington was confident that

these Providence myth expressions were not uniquely his, but that they were the American mind: “In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own; nor those of my fellow-citizens at large.” He then invoked the chosen people and hand of God symbols, saying “No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency” and acknowledging that “the benign Parent of the human race” had “been pleased to favour the American people.” He also acknowledged that the hand of God would only continue to favor them as long as they were morally upright: “there is no truth more thoroughly established, than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, between duty and advantage...the propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained” (Washington, “First Inaugural Address”). In Washington’s “first official act” he used the myth for the political purpose of assuring the American people that God had ordained them and the American continent for his purposes and that he had providentially prospered the cause of the Revolution. His mythologizing served to assure them they were on the correct path, but that in order to retain providential favor, they must submit themselves to the newly-established government and to the “eternal rules of order and right.” Washington called upon the power of the Providence myth to promote good government and good citizenship in the American experiment.

As Washington’s first term came to a close, Thomas Jefferson sensed that America was still fragile and needed the cohesive symbolic power of the liberator Washington to remain in

place, so Jefferson, too, politicized the Providence myth in his efforts to persuade Washington to run for a second term. First, Jefferson sympathized with Washington: “I am perfectly aware of the oppression under which your present office lays your mind, & of the ardor with which you pant for retirement to domestic life.” But Jefferson then acknowledged the hand of God in shaping Washington for the moment, citing his “eminence of character on which society have such peculiar claims,” simultaneously praising Washington and compelling him into continued service: “this seems to be your condition, and the law imposed on you by providence in forming your character, and fashioning the events on which it was to operate: and it is to motives like these...that I appeal from your former determination and urge a revisal of it, on the ground of change in the aspect of things.” Jefferson knew of Washington’s plans to retire. However, the political scene had taken on enough of an ugly aspect that Jefferson felt Washington’s presence was essential to the continued success of the new nation. Jefferson continued, “I cannot but hope that you can resolve to add one or two more to the many years you have already sacrificed to the good of mankind” (“To George Washington”). Jefferson employed the myth masterfully. An appeal to Washington to remain in office by referencing power or money would have been useless. But by pointing out “the law imposed on [Washington] by providence in forming [his] character and fashioning the events on which it was to operate,” Jefferson was in essence saying “God raised you up for this purpose; and as much as you may want to retire, your work as the liberator symbol is not complete.” Jefferson and those who sought to convince Washington to run again for office prevailed, and the liberator symbol remained in place for another term.

As his presidency came to a close, Washington drew once more from the well of the Providence myth to exert power and influence over the American people. In his farewell

address, Washington made a few uncharacteristic comments regarding religion in connection with his Providence myth remarks. To the people of the United States he said:

...With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles...Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.—In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and Citizens.—The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them.—A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation *desert* the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.

Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure; reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

...Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it? ...Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue? (Washington “Farewell Address”).

Washington—who was not particularly orthodox in his own practice of religion—appears to have been advocating religion in his final address. One asks what Washington may have been trying to accomplish with these seemingly hypocritical comments. As he left office, I would argue that Washington was trying to ensure that Americans felt a cohesive bond amongst themselves. He sought to accomplish this through an unofficial national religion—one which

Washington claimed Americans all already belonged to “with slight shades of difference.” One scholar wrote regarding Washington’s advocacy of religion “These ties--the foremost being the Union, the formal tie being the Constitution--must be cherished as *sacred* and must be *sacredly* maintained. Long before Abraham Lincoln, Washington was calling for a form of political religion” (Spalding 67). This national political religion wasn’t Anglicanism, Unitarianism or Methodism. It wasn’t even Christianity as a whole. Washington saw American Jews as adherents to the national religion, too. In 1790, in a letter to a Hebrew congregation, he wrote “May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose Providential Agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent Nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah” (Washington “To the Savannah, Ga. Hebrew Congregation”).

What then was the national political religion mentioned and advocated by Washington? It wasn’t a particular institutional religion, but one that could be observed while simultaneously being devout in one’s own particular religion; it was a political religion with the Providence myth as its guiding myth. Washington was simply speaking in the national myth and advocating that all Americans buy into it and see themselves as being part of this national religion with its concomitant duties which were “sacredly obligatory upon all” (Spalding 69). In this context, Washington’s comments were not hypocritical at all. He may not have been a traditional religionist but he was a devout purveyor of the American national Providence myth. The myth served very practical political purposes. As Washington wrapped up his public career, he

advocated adherence to the Providence myth in order to “shape a common opinion that would transcend the petty and self-interested differences that divided men” (Spalding 68).

Chapter Conclusion

Washington, Paine, Franklin, Madison, Jefferson and Adams are six of the most significant secular figures of the American Revolutionary period. But in spite of their secular situations (and in some cases, their intense criticism of religious institutions), all of them should be seen as powerful Providence myth purveyors. I quoted this statement from Bernard Bailyn earlier as I discussed the shifting nature of myth, but it captures the centrality of Providence to the American Revolution sufficiently that it bears repeating. These six key revolutionary figures (and many of their contemporaries) brilliantly expressed “the idea, originally worked out in the sermons and tracts of the settlement period, that the colonization of British America had been an event designed by the hand of God to satisfy his ultimate aims. Reinvigorated in its historical meaning...this influential strain of thought, found everywhere in the eighteenth-century colonies, stimulated confidence in the idea that America had a special place...in the architecture of God’s intent” (32-33). These men were *savoir-faire* political figures who understood the power of myth and drew upon its power to achieve political purposes. They had found in the American national Providence myth a very comprehensive myth. The Providence myth and its symbols allowed these six great driving forces of the Revolution to speak to Americans of diverse backgrounds and beliefs in a language that was familiar to them and which inspired and unified them. It served as a powerful mythical instrument to convince and unite the American people in their revolution and establishment of a new government. The United States of America was built on the idea that their rebellion to tyrants was obedience to God.

Chapter 5—The Exhumed Liberator

Digging Up Washington

In 1832 as part of the centennial celebration of Washington's birth, it was proposed in Congress that Washington's remains should be exhumed and transported from Mount Vernon to be placed in a tomb at the base of the United States Capitol Rotunda. A previous congressional resolution to transfer his remains had actually been passed on the twenty-fourth of December 1799 immediately after Washington's death and permission had been granted from Martha Washington to transfer Washington's remains. However, it had never been carried out. In 1832 (in celebration of Washington's 100th birthday), the cause was resurrected and a congressional debate ensued. Both sides of the debate invoked the myth regarding Washington in order to plead their case.

Congressman Mercer from Virginia argued for the transfer of Washington's remains to the Capitol Rotunda by first saying "it was his firm belief that excited as was the hostile feeling of the foe" regarding the destruction of the capitol building in the War of 1812, "had the venerated remains of Washington been entombed in this building, the capitol would have been spared" ("Washington's Remains" 1784). Mercer does not specify whether his firm belief was that Washington was so revered by all humanity that no enemy would dare destroy his tomb or whether he believed Washington's remains to have a mystic, protective power that would have enshrouded the capitol. It seems that he meant the former from a comment about the future of the capitol that followed:

Consecrated by the ashes of Washington, none would be so barbarous as to lay a hostile hand upon an edifice which, while it enclosed the representatives of the people, held, at the same time, the sepulcher of him whom all civilized men united to honor. Long as he

trusted that capitol would stand, he felt assured that it would stand many centuries longer for being known to all the world as the tomb of Washington. (“Washington’s Remains” 1784)

Either way, Mercer felt that Washington’s remains held enough mythical, liberating power to have prevented the destruction of the capitol during the War of 1812 and would continue to protect the capitol in the future. Mercer also opined that the placement of Washington’s body under the rotunda would have the powerful, desirable effect of “next to our beloved constitution itself...to consolidate the Union of these States” (1784). Congressman Burges also argued for the transfer by saying that--although he was from Rhode Island--during his formative years “the very songs of the cradle, were the deeds, the glory, the praises of Washington” (“Washington’s Remains” 1799). He expressed his feelings that the divinely-ordained liberator, Washington, belonged not just to Virginia but to all of America and even to all of humanity with the following words: “This House, [referring to the Capitol building], this mausoleum of one who prospered by Divine assistance, performed more for his country, for the human race, than any other mere mortal, shall be a place of pilgrimage for all nations” (1801).

Augustin Smith Clayton—a congressman from Georgia—argued in favor of keeping Washington’s remains in their current resting place at Mount Vernon. Clayton cited George Washington’s own expressed wishes for his interment there and the desires of the state of Virginia to retain their native son. But he, too, invoked myth to make his case “Mr. Speaker...with the greatest possible reverence I speak it. Mount Vernon and Mount Calvary will descend to posterity with coextensive remembrance. This, then, should be the grave of Washington” (“Washington’s Remains” 1797). Within a generally Christian society, the audacity of this claim can hardly be overstated—Clayton was willing to place the site of

Washington's death on equal footing with the site of Christ's death. The rationale, perhaps, was that just as Christ (within the Christian myth) was the liberator of all humanity from sin and death, so too Washington (within the American national Providence myth) was the liberator of all humanity from tyranny. For as Congressman Mercer had asserted "all civilized men united to honor" Washington—not just Americans. Congressman Johnston from Virginia echoed those same sentiments about Washington's immortality and the sanctity of Mount Vernon to all mankind by adding "...the bones of Washington have canonized even the dust that covers them, and his tomb has been the fane to which pilgrims of liberty *from both worlds* have crowded for thirty years. No one can visit Mount Vernon, without feeling that spot sacred to him. There, every foot of ground has been hallowed by his tread" ("Washington's Remains" 1799, emphasis added). As disciples of Christianity were wont to go to Jerusalem and walk where Jesus walked, so "pilgrims of liberty" went to Mount Vernon to walk in Washington's footsteps. Congressman Cambreleng similarly mythologized the resting place of Washington's remains by likening it to Islam's holy site, proposing "There let it remain a monument to all mankind, a place for the pilgrimage of patriots of all nations—a second Mecca" (1804).

At the end of the debate, the resolution passed with 109 affirmative votes and 76 negative votes. However, Washington's family prevented the move from happening. So once more, congress had agreed upon the transfer of Washington's remains and the concomitant erection of a monument in the capitol—and once again—it never occurred. The debates may have left questions about the proper way and place to honor Washington's remains, however, they only served to more firmly solidify his place in American mythology. As Congressman Howard of Maryland pointed out "...from the first ages of the world, the records of all time furnished only two instances of birthdays being commemorated after the death of the individual: those two were

the 22nd of February and the 25th of December” (“Washington’s Remains” 1808). Howard was again associating Washington with Christ in order to express Washington’s significance. One more occurrence was mentioned in the debates that powerfully expresses Washington’s mythological significance—the failed attempt to rob Washington’s remains. A gardener had plotted to steal and smuggle “to Europe the bones of Washington, and there offer them for sale, as relics to the disciples or the fanatics of freedom in the Old World” (“Washington’s Remains” 1801). The gardener had, however, mistakenly stolen the wrong remains. Nevertheless, the perception of Washington’s bones as a relic worthy of theft because of their value to his “disciples” in Europe demonstrates his profound and widespread mythological significance throughout the world. The 1799 and 1832 congressional debates, the resulting resolutions and the attempt to steal Washington’s remains serve as powerful anecdotal evidences of the truthfulness of what Saul Padover says regarding George Washington: “For more than a century and a half the granite reputation of George Washington has withstood the attentions of his idolizers. Few other national heroes have ever been greater targets of assiduous idolatry, hagiography, iconolatry, myth-making, and breathless patriotic oratory. Washington was made into a graven image for the nation to worship” (1).

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Washington had already attained mythical status while yet alive. However, this chapter will argue that the myth of Washington actually reached its crescendo in the years immediately following his death. To make my argument, I will do the following two things: First, I will examine the historical moment to which those myth-makers were responding. The Early National period of American history was rife with division, discord and doubt about America’s future. The American national Providence myth (and particularly the symbol of Washington as liberator) provided a cultural cohesiveness at a

time of great fracturing. Secondly, I will provide two turn-of-the-century case studies of Washingtonian myth-making: Washington's eulogies; and the popular writings of Mason Locke Weems. By examining Washington's eulogies and Weems' writings in this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Washington's myth in all aspects of American culture—providing examples from politics, religion and literature. In addition to accomplishing these two main objectives, this chapter will—by demonstrating the perpetuation of the American national Providence myth beyond the American Revolution and into the Early National period—lay a groundwork for a discussion of the modern-day pedagogical and historical applications of the American national Providence myth.

Why Dig Up Washington? The Historical Moment

During Washington's lifetime, it made sense that Americans would have mythologized him. As Roland Barthes wrote "the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts" (131). And indeed, the American national Providence myth was Revolutionary America's system of facts. In their minds, the facts were that King George III and England were the antagonists; America was the promised land for God's chosen people; and George Washington had been raised up by the hand of Providence to free them. The American people mythologized Washington as the liberator and America as the promised land in order to justify war with England. Barry Schwartz sums it up by saying "In 1775, Washington's veneration was a product of the 'collective effervescence' and solidarity occasioned by war" (97). After the war, the mythologizing of Washington continued; ostensibly to bring about the same solidarity that the wartime mythologizing did. Schwartz continues "For a quarter-century, the American people's regard for Washington had been the clearest expression of what they had in common" (97). For

twenty-five years, in other words, nothing had wielded the same unifying power within American culture as the Washington-liberator symbol had within the Providence myth.

Washington's death did not slow down his mythologizers. Washington's eulogizers, Mason Locke Weems and the politicians of the early nineteenth century instead increased their Washingtonian myth-making, immortalizing him, and calling upon him to serve as the American liberator for years after his death. This causes one to ask why Americans would have done so. John Adams and Benjamin Rush seem to have been asking themselves the same question. In an 1807 letter to Rush, Adams listed ten talents that Washington possessed to explain the nation's fixation on Washington, including his "handsome face...elegant form...large, imposing fortune" and the fact that he was a Virginian. Adams explained that "Genius, experience, learning, fortune, birth, health are all talents" (*Spur* 107). While all of these things were indeed true of Washington, the answer to the question regarding Washington's continuance as liberator cannot be answered by discussing his "talents." Edward Lengel observes in his work, *Inventing George Washington*, "In reflecting the needs and desires they were intended to fill, these myths often reveal more about us than they do about Washington" (xviii). Washington was a great and talented and gifted man, but the rampant mythologizing of Washington by Americans after his death can be seen as much more of a revelation about Americans and their challenges than a revelation about Washington's persona. For the next few paragraphs, I will examine the historical moment at the turn of the century and what the needs and desires of young America were and how Washington's myth satisfied those needs and desires.

Interestingly, the first need that Washington's myth filled for the American public was not a noble one—the need to make money. This would be an extreme example of what Richard Slotkin observes when he says that a myth-producer uses myth artifacts "in an effort to make

propaganda for his cause” (8). As I discuss Mason Locke Weems, it will become evident that his purpose was—at least in part—to turn a profit; and Washington’s myth was a money-maker. Henry Cabot Lodge says of Weems that he was “ready to take the slenderest fact and work it up for the purposes of the market” (31). Edward Lengel dedicates an entire chapter to the notion that the growth of Washington’s myth was partially driven by money and Lengel entitles it “Washington Turns a Profit” (27-49). With that title, Lengel is not referring to any monetary gains directly made by George Washington. Instead, Lengel shows how Weems, George Lippard, P.T. Barnum and many others used every means possible to exploit the deceased Washington and his myth for financial gain: “By 1850, literary prospectors had found in George Washington their own version of the California gold rush. Weems, Lippard, and their imitators staked their claims in the field of popular biography, while Spring and his ilk wrote and sold fraudulent documents.” Lengel then makes a keen observation “They succeeded because they supplied a demand” (48). While Washington’s myth certainly was lucrative for some, the public’s demand for a Washington-centered, powerful, meaning-giving myth was rooted in three deeper schismatic concerns.

After Washington’s death (and even during his tenure as President), a deep political rift had begun to grow between the young country’s two major parties—Alexander Hamilton’s Federalist party and Jefferson’s Democratic Republicans. The rift is articulated nicely in a correspondence which I quoted on the previous page between John Adams (an avowed Federalist) and Benjamin Rush (whose politics were somewhat ambivalent). The correspondence was maintained from 1805 until Rush’s unexpected death in 1813. Both felt that fame and fortune had overlooked them in favor of Washington, Franklin and Jefferson; and they often commented as much in the correspondence. The correspondence is recorded in a book

edited by John Schutz and Douglass Adair called *The Spur of Fame*. Schutz and Adair paraphrase the sentiments of Rush and Adams by saying “The new generation, living in luxury and holding the reins of power, was challenging the standards of the older generation. Its historians, mythmakers, and propagandists were turning the Revolution into a folk myth to suit its purposes” (18). In their lament over the mythologizing of Washington and Franklin, however, what Adams and Rush failed to acknowledge was that the mythologizing was in part a response to the political divide to which they, the “older generation,” had greatly contributed. Rush felt that Adams, with his Federalists, favored centralized power too much and considered him “an apostate from republicanism” and feared that he “had been corrupted by monarchism” (*Spur* 9). On the other hand, Adams feared that the revolutionary principles would be taken too far by the Republicans. “Unlike Rush and Jefferson, who saw good in the French Revolution, Adams shuddered at the violence and worried about the spread of such influences in America” (15). Fear of the two extremes in American domestic affairs—tyranny on the one hand and anarchy on the other—was driving a wedge through the middle of the young republic. Peter Onuf explains the heavy mythologizing of Washington in that discordant historical moment: “the yearning expressed by Weems and other worshipers at Washington’s shrine is...for an end to the chronic, increasingly bitter conflicts among the children that threatened to destroy a fragile union and the liberties it so tenuously secured. So many readers found the message of Weems’ *Life of Washington* compelling because they recognized the ever-present dangers of disunion and civil war” (xxi).

A second divisive issue that greatly contributed to the historical moment at the turn of the century followed the same party lines. It concerned America’s foreign policy. Adams and the Federalists had misgivings about the French as exemplified by the XYZ affair in 1797 and 1798

(a diplomatic matter gone awry with three French diplomats) and the passing of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 (passed by the Federalist congress and aimed at foreigners). Both instances took place during John Adams' term as president—and even led to an undeclared naval war with France. Rush, Jefferson, Madison and the Democratic Republicans, on the other hand, had a deep dislike for the British—considering all things British to be monarchical and contrary to a republican spirit. As a result, during Madison's tenure, America again found itself at war with its old mother country in the War of 1812. In a matter of 15 short years, America had found itself on both sides of the centuries-old conflict between France and England. America had become embroiled in the very conflicts Washington had feared and warned against in his Farewell Address when he said “Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships, or enmities” (“Farewell Address”). During those early post-Washington years, America had been yanked from one extreme in foreign affairs to the other. It is hard to imagine a foreign policy scenario that could have been more divisive.

The third and final aspect of the historical moment that caused early nineteenth century Americans to fear disintegration and continue invoking Washington as the liberator symbol was slavery. In the Constitutional convention, no issue had been more hotly contested than the issue of representation of slaves in the south. The issue was controversially settled by the infamous “three-fifths compromise.” Washington had expressed concerns about the divisive nature of the slavery issue in his farewell address as well. He wrote “In contemplating the causes which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern, that any ground should have been

furnished for characterising parties by Geographical discriminations—Northern and Southern...whence designing men may endeavour to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views” (“Farewell Address”). Things had come to a head during Missouri’s quest for statehood in 1820, resulting in the “Missouri Compromise,” whereby Missouri entered the union as a slave state while Maine was admitted as a free state in order to preserve the balance of power between the North and the South. Although Washington had warned against divisions along these regional interests, he was invoked by both groups as the father of their cause. The northerners laid claim to Washington in their pursuit of “Washingtonian Federalism,” while southerners climbed on the “dynastic coattails” of “Washingtonian regionalism” (Drexler and White 92). History shows that the southerners were evidently more successful at positioning themselves as Washington’s heirs. After all, four of the first five presidents of the United States (counting Washington) came from the slave-state of Virginia.

America’s mythologizing response to this threatening, divisive historical moment is summed up nicely by Robert Hay who writes:

The nation was beset throughout the 19th century by sectional and partisan squabbles which seemed to threaten the very survival of the Union...Those who faced these challenges also found solace in the notion that America was the modern Israel of the Lord. Always implicit and frequently explicit in any reiteration of this old idea was the belief that Washington had been America’s counterpart of the Jewish lawgiver. Hence the veneration of the American Moses continued to be a vital part of the enduring legend of providential guidance of the nation. (790)

As early nineteenth-century America faced fracturing along political, foreign-policy and slave-policy lines, the Providence myth symbol of George Washington was one of the few things that parties on both sides of all three issues could cling to, providing cohesion and unity for the young republic.

The Eulogizing of Washington

Between his death on December 14, 1799 and the congressionally-appointed national day of mourning (February 22, 1800—Washington’s birthday), over four hundred memorial services were held for Washington. Barry Schwartz writes “The men who eulogized Washington were diverse in social background...despite this diversity, the grounds on which they praised Washington were remarkably similar.” It was “the most concentrated and ostentatious display of veneration that America had ever witnessed” (98). As I have already demonstrated, Americans had grown accustomed to seeing Washington portrayed as America’s liberator and compared to Moses and other biblical liberators. However, at the time of Washington’s death, as Robert Hay writes, the comparisons escalated:

The most serious and sustained effort to draw the parallels between the lives of the American President and the ancient Jewish lawgiver occurred in the ten weeks following Washington’s death on December 14, 1799. In eulogies delivered throughout the land, and especially by New England clergymen, Washington was compared favorably to all the outstanding biblical, classical and modern heroes, but no analogy was so well developed as the contention that the departed leader had truly been a Moses for America. (782)

Truly, at his death, mythologizers went to great lengths to solidify Washington among the pantheon of history’s heaven-ordained liberators. Robert Hay points out that in the eulogies

“religious themes far outnumbered the classical ones. Some contained no classical allusions at all...Rarely, if ever, was an entire oration given over to a comparison of Washington and Caesar or Alexander or Fabius or Cincinnatus or Hannibal. Quite common, on the other hand, were such extended comparisons of Washington and Moses” (782). That is because likening him to the great generals of antiquity would have merely placed Washington amongst the great military leaders of history. It had no mythical value. Placing Washington alongside Moses, however, would be an acknowledgement of Washington as God’s most recent chosen liberator and an endorsement of the American cause as God’s cause.

Much of the eulogizing also focused on Washington’s ability to sacrifice his desires for the good of the American people. Joseph Ellis observes that while the eulogies focus “attention on what Washington was prepared to give up in each instance, we should also notice that all the surrenders paved the way to larger acquisitions: a great fortune; victory in the war; and secular immortality.” Ellis continues by saying “Unlike Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell before him, and Napoleon, Lenin, and Mao after him, he understood that the greater glory resided in posterity’s judgment. If you aspire to live forever in the memory of future generations, you must demonstrate the ultimate self-confidence to leave the final judgment to them. And he did” (274-5). If Washington truly understood this principle as Ellis proposes, it would also suggest that Washington understood the potential power of his myth—that he could be immortalized and continue to serve in his role as liberator beyond the grave.

One of the most effusive eulogies was written and delivered by a Connecticut Baptist minister named Thomas Baldwin. Baldwin stated: “The death of Jesus will be gratefully remembered, and frequently celebrated by Christians to the latest ages of time” and continued by saying that to compare their current grief to that regarding Christ would be “solemn trifling,”

however, he then went on to say “Yet our loss is great indeed. The man who was destined by Heaven to be the instrumental Savior of his country...Alas! We shall see his face no more” (26). While Baldwin had not dared put Washington on the same standing as Christ, he nonetheless saw in Washington a type and shadow of Jesus, referring to him as the Savior of his country. He continued “We humbly hope our Divine Master will not be offended with our mourning for the Man whom we so much loved” (27). Baldwin desired to be as expressive as possible of Washington’s significance without incurring God’s jealousy.

Another instance of interesting mythologizing of Washington occurs in a hymn which was written specifically for his funeral. In the hymn one finds another example of Washington continuing in his liberator role from beyond the grave, but in this case Washington acts as somewhat of a guardian angel to the young republic. The hymn states:

Amongst the dead
Great Washington lies
Forever closed his eyes.
Glorious Hero! may thy grave
Peace and Honor ever have;
...Seated in bliss supreme on high,
O! Spirit dear attend our prayer,
Our Guardian Angel still be nigh,
Make thy lov'd land thy Heav'nly care. (qtd. in *Washingtoniana* 53-56)

After extolling Washington, the author of the hymn speaks of a guardian angel. While it is not unequivocally clear who the guardian angel is, it appears to be Washington. The author addresses Washington in the second-person, saying “may thy grave Peace and Honor ever have”

and then it appears that this form of address continues down through the lines which say “Our Guardian Angel still be nigh, Make thy lov’d land thy Heav’nly care.” If that is correct, Washington is being implored to continue his watch care of America from heaven—to continue to serve (as he had in mortality) as its protector.

Perhaps the most famous eulogy was written by Washington’s close friend and highly regarded cavalry officer, Henry Lee. Joseph Ellis called Lee’s panegyric “the eulogy that has echoed through the ages” (270). Lee wrote:

Desperate indeed is any attempt on earth to meet correspondingly this dispensation of Heaven; for, while with pious resignation we submit to the will of an all-gracious Providence, we can never cease lamenting, in our ‘finite view of Omnipotent Wisdom, the heart-rending privation for which our nation weeps...What limit is there to the extent of our loss?—None within the reach of my words to express; none which your feelings will not disavow. (3-4)

The Providence myth is readily apparent in this sermon. While Lee expressed the deep loss which America felt at the loss of its first president, he also expressed the need for the American people to submit to Providence and carry on in the cause commenced under Washington. Lee continued to invoke the myth and the liberator symbol in the eulogy by saying that Washington was the “man designed by heaven to lead in the great political as well as military events...The finger of an over-ruling Providence, pointing at WASHINGTON, was neither mistaken nor unobserved.” Lee then voiced the words regarding Washington that have echoed through the two ensuing centuries more than any others: “First in war, first peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen...” (14). Washington was America’s beloved, unmistakable, heaven-ordained liberator. A subtle political message becomes increasingly more overt as the sermon continues.

Lee is not content to mythologize Washington merely by praising him. After lamenting Washington's passing, and telling how the finger of Providence had unmistakably pointed to Washington to be the nation's liberator and how all was according to the plan of Providence—Lee then assumes the role of myth-producer as he conjures Washington's ghost:

Methinks I see his august image, and hear, falling from his venerable lips, these deep sinking words:

“Cease, Sons of America, lamenting our separation. Go on...Reverence religion; diffuse knowledge throughout your land; patronize the arts and sciences; let liberty and order be inseparable companions; control party spirit, the bane of free government; observe good faith to, and cultivate peace with all nations; shut up every avenue to foreign influence; contract rather than extend national connection; rely on yourselves only: be American in thought and deed. Thus will you give immortality to that union, which was the constant object of my terrestrial labors; thus will you preserve undisturbed to the latest posterity the felicity of a people to me most dear; and thus will you supply (if my happiness is now aught to you) the only vacancy in the round of pure bliss high Heaven bestows.” (14-15)

Lee's ghost of Washington prescribes a course of action to Americans which includes isolationist foreign policy, religious tolerance, bipartisanship, and the fostering of the arts and sciences.

These actions would secure the blessings of Providence for America and make the now-celestial Washington happy. Lee was a newly elected congressman from Washington's home state of Virginia, and—evidently in a manner which did not seem inappropriate or out of place—had advocated certain political agendas in his eulogy of Washington. The first two eulogistic examples I shared were mildly political in that they provided an endorsement of the American cause by extolling Washington as a heaven-ordained liberator. But Lee used the eulogy to

advance a political agenda! Federalist New Englanders were guilty of similarly striving to advance political agendas as they eulogized and mythologized Washington. Robert Hay observes “The development of the [Washington-as-Moses] theme reveals more than the New Englanders’ Puritan past...The concept also served their current political interests...They found security in their faith that if God had called home their American Moses, He would preserve the American Joshua, John Adams.” Hay then quotes from Ariel Kendrick’s eulogy of Washington “‘May Adams as nearly equal Washington in the grand Council of our Nation, as Joshua did Moses in the camp of Israel’” (Hay 789). This was an obvious Providence myth use of the liberator symbol by a Federalist: Americans were modern Israel; Washington—their Moses—had been taken up into heaven; God had obviously chosen Adams to be Washington’s heir apparent—America’s Joshua. Such mythologizing sought to leave no question in the minds of myth-participants that the familiar Old Testament narrative was playing out before them. Applying the Joshua story to their current situation could appease the anxieties of whether the God of Israel was still with his people. Like Lee, Kendrick used the defunct Washington to accomplish political and cultural purposes. This was a common trope for political, religious and popular culture writers during the Early National period.

Similarly, Samuel Livermore, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate wrote a letter to President John Adams on December 23, 1799 on behalf of the Senate expressing condolences at Washington’s passing. The letter was equally effusive in its praise of Washington, telling how “his fame is whiter than it is brilliant. The destroyers of nations stood abashed at the majesty of his virtue...Favored of Heaven, he departed without exhibiting the weakness of humanity: magnanimous in death, the darkness of the grave could not obscure his brightness...” Then Livermore went down a similar prescriptive path to the one Lee had trod in his remarks:

“Washington yet lives on earth in his spotless example — his spirit is in Heaven. Let his countrymen consecrate the memory of the heroic general, the patriotic statesman, and the virtuous sage: let them teach their children never to forget that the fruits of his labors and his example are their inheritance. (qtd. in *Washingtoniana* 35-37). While Washington’s spirit now resided in heaven, he could best be immortalized by the continuance of his policies and practices by future generations. In his response to the Senate’s remarks, President John Adams continued to dialogue in Providence myth terms: “For his fellow-citizens, if their prayers could have been answered, he would have been immortal.” However, Adams trusted “in the wise and righteous dominion of Providence over the passions of men...as well as over their lives.” Then Adams, too, spoke of Washington’s power from beyond the grave to elicit prescribed, moral, patriotic behavior from the people: “His example is now complete, and it will teach wisdom and virtue to magistrates, citizens, and men, not only in the present age, but in future generations, as long as our history shall be read” (qtd. in *Washingtoniana* 39).

The last eulogistic example I’ll share of Washington comes from the proceedings memorializing Washington in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts House wrote: “To call Washington a hero would be a debasement of him...to call him merely a great soldier, would be injustice...To denominate him simply a great statesman, would be inadequate.” The praise of Washington is again unrestrained. And once more, it becomes prescriptive: “The mortal part of Washington is consigned to the silent cemetery, but he hath bequeathed to his beloved fellow citizens a glorious legacy in his example, his character and his virtues, which ought to render them pure and virtuous in their morals, devout in their religion, fervent in their patriotism, just in the cabinet, and invincible in the field. Four millions of freemen, with melancholy hearts, are living statues to thy memory, thou sainted Patriot! (qtd. in *Washingtoniana* 86)

Once again, the memorial was not only incredibly laudatory of Washington—but mythic—mere praise was insufficient. Washington’s excellence in every capacity had provided an unimpeachable legacy for America. Washington—the “sainted Patriot”—though physically dead, would continue to live as America’s liberator. The only praise that would suffice was to emulate him and carry on his legacy; he was to live on in the American people. Four million “living statues” molded in Washington’s image were to be virtuous, religious, patriotic, just and zealous in defending the American cause.

While the political message in the other eulogies was not as overt or as partisan as that of Lee or Kendrick, their mythologizing was just as prescriptive of a desired behavioral response—to be supporters of the fledgling republic and trust that they were still God’s chosen people. The eulogies substantiate Joseph Ellis’ assertion which I quoted earlier in this section. Washington had laid aside the satisfaction of his desires and passions in life; he was being rewarded with mythical immortality in death. The liberator lived on, accomplishing political and revolutionary ends even after death.

Weems and Washington

A discussion of Washington as the liberator symbol within the Providence myth would not be complete without an examination of the writings of Mason Locke Weems. He was perhaps Washington’s most significant myth-producer. In a letter written to Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey not long after Washington’s death, Mason Locke Weems wrote “Washington, you know is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him. I am very nearly primed and cocked for ‘em. 6 months ago I set myself to collect anecdotes of him.” (qtd. in Lengel 20). Weems was, as Edward Lengel writes, “a superb storyteller,” that “knew his audience—and gladly collected its money” (19). However, Weems’ motivations were not

wholly pecuniary. Weems continued the explanation of his plans to Carey: “My plan...I accompany him from his start, thro the French & Indian & British or Revolutionary wars, to the Presidents chair, to the throne in the hearts of 5,000,000 of People. I then go on to show that his unparalleled rise & elevation were due to his Great Virtues” (qtd. in Lengel 20). Weems’ work was intended to provide a didactic recounting of Washington’s life for the American public. However, many of Weems’ anecdotes regarding Washington have since proven unverifiable—particularly those from his youth. Mary Thompson writes “Given the dearth of substantial information about George Washington’s childhood, including his religious training, myth has tended to substitute for hard evidence” (18).

Thompson’s statement is worthy of some elaboration. Thompson did not say “given the dearth of substantial information, *falsehood* has tended to substitute for *truth or fact*.” She wrote that *myth* had substituted for *hard evidence* (emphasis added). I only pause to point out this difference because of the many definitions of myth which are in usage—the most common of which associates myth with falsehood. But as I have argued and will continue to demonstrate, myths are shared belief stories that explain worldviews and actions. Mythologizers are not rigidly concerned with factuality, and therefore, a juxtaposition of documented historical facts to the myth is really not a fruitful exercise for mythologists. Cast-iron historical certainty is more the concern of the historian. This lack of concern for factuality in myth, however, does not mean that myths are falsehoods. Myth may or may not coincide with facts and historical events. I will argue later in this dissertation that myth is largely derived from history and history is largely derived from myth. But myths—by their very nature and purpose—are not concerned with a perfectly accurate recounting of facts as they occurred. Thompson appears to be saying then that

a concern with inspiring American hearts superseded concerns about fact-finding in the telling of Washington's story.

Mason Locke Weems' *Life of Washington* has been heavily criticized over the years. In fact, many of Washington's biographers begin their work by presenting Weems' Washington as somewhat of a foil for a more bona fide Washington which they then introduce to the reader (Ellis xi; Lodge 8-10; Schwartz 2; Brookhiser 5-6). Henry Cabot Lodge, for example, calls Weems' book "a brief biography of Washington, of trifling historical value" (8). He further says of Weems, "The worthy 'rector of Mount Vernon,' as he called himself, meant no harm, and there is a good deal of truth, no doubt, in his book. But the blameless and priggish boy, and the equally faultless and uninteresting man, whom he originated, have become in the process of development a myth." Lodge then refers to this image of Washington as created by Weems' writings as "utterly and crudely false" (9). Lodge errs first in classifying Weems' *Life* as biography. Weems does declare that he is writing a "history" of Washington (Weems 1), but he makes it very clear from the outset that his purpose is to moralize—which is not expressly the task of biographers. Secondly, Lodge indulges in the common trap of speaking of myth condescendingly—as if he is part of an enlightened elite above myths and mythologizing. Lodge comments "Washington has become in the popular imagination largely mythical...for mythical ideas grow up in this nineteenth century, notwithstanding its boasted intelligence, much as they did in the infancy of the race" (8). Peter Onuf provides a much more appropriate perspective of Weems' mythologizing in his introduction to the 1996 edition of Weems' *Life of Washington*: "Skeptical readers may—and should—quarrel with Weems' version of Washington. But they should also recognize that, for all its errors and excess, *The Life of Washington* serves its subject well" (xxi). What Onuf means when he says that the work served its subject well is best

expressed in another statement he makes: “Neither Weems nor his readers were particularly interested in ‘humanizing’ the great man, in bringing him ‘below the clouds’ and down to earth. Quite the contrary, the heart of the *Life* is the inspired and inspiring rhetoric that marked key passages in Washington’s—and Weems’—conception of American nationhood” (x). That is precisely my point—while Weems’ writings are not esteemed highly in the historiography of George Washington, they have immense value in the mythologizing or hagiography of George Washington. They constitute an important portion of the shared belief stories regarding Washington and his role as liberator in the American national Providence myth.

Mason Locke Weems—upon Washington’s passing—saw a literary niche in the culture of his day and filled that niche (and his pockets) by mythologizing Washington. His *Life of Washington* perhaps did more to perpetually elevate Washington as the great American liberator symbol within the myth than any other work. It has also perhaps sparked more controversy than any other work about Washington. Why was that? Interestingly, Weems’ success and popularity in his day can be attributed to the same source of his later notoriety and infamy. Weems—when he wrote his famous work which featured Washington as America’s liberator—was not breaking new ground with the content or with the style; he spoke in a language which was all too familiar to the American people—Providence myth language. In that respect, his writings were not unique. But Weems’ popularity and success were due to his innovation in crossing genre boundaries. He had transplanted the Providence myth from its natural habitat in sermons, correspondences and other recognizable hagiographic settings into a sort of pop-culture biographical literature. He had taken Providence myth literature and made it more digestible for the general public. Henry Cabot Lodge offers additional insight into how the talented myth-writer, Weems, ended up with the label as a charlatan and a fraud. Speaking of Weems’ book,

Lodge wrote: “The biography did not go, and was not intended to go, into the hands of the polite society of the great eastern towns. It was meant for the farmers, the pioneers, and the backwoodsmen...To them its heavy and tawdry style, its staring morals, and its real patriotism all seemed eminently befitting the national hero, and thus Weems created the Washington of the popular fancy.” However, Lodge observes, Weems’ version of Washington became so embedded in the popular culture of America that “finally everybody was affected by it, and even the most stately and solemn of the Washington biographers adopted the unsupported tales of the itinerant parson and book-peddler” (42-43). In other words, Weems wrote within the realm of myth. However, as Weems’ copyists transplanted Washington’s stories from the realm of myth to the realm of biography and history, *they*, inadvertently, were declaring him to be a historian. Weems was, in reality, a hagiographer, not a historian. However, because of the use of Weems by historians, he has frequently been viewed over the years as a falsifying historiographer. But it was never his intent to be confined by the rules of history-writing. Lodge concludes his explanation of Weems by saying “Weems was not a cold-blooded liar, a mere forger of anecdotes...in a word, Weems was an approved mythmaker” (31). Weems had written, abiding by the rules of myth-writing; and he was quite good at it.

Mason Locke Weems’ most famous piece of mythologizing in his *Life of Washington* is the tale of the cherry tree which young Washington damaged with his new hatchet—later owning up to the act with its presumed consequences. Weems then moralized about the young Washington’s honesty. That story has nicely fulfilled its mythological purposes with countless young Americans—implying that if a young person wished to be a Washington on the battlefield or in the political arena in adulthood, one must be a person of integrity in youth. For as Weems said, “it was to those *old-fashioned virtues* that our hero owed everything” (3). Weems’ book

was not, however, just concerned with moralizing young people, he was contributing to the American national Providence myth. He was, after all, an ordained minister who had studied theology in London. His writings have an unmistakable religious tone. To that end he wrote that “the Almighty” had created America superior in size, topography and resources to all other lands (an idea borrowed from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*)—such a superiority “to any thing of the kind in the other continents, that we may fairly conclude that great men and great deeds are designed for America” (5). According to Weems, the greatness of America was a testament that America was providentially made for great men, and great men were providentially made for America, “and accordingly we find America the honoured cradle of Washington” (6). With these introductory comments to his work, Weems is already invoking the promised land and liberator symbols of the American national Providence myth.

An early (and very significant) instance of the Providence myth in *The Life of Washington* is recounted by Weems immediately after the relating of the cherry tree incident. In the story, Washington’s father intends to “startle George into a lively sense of his Maker” (10). To do so, Augustin Washington planted cabbage seeds in the form of George’s full name in large letters along a path in the garden which George frequented. After a few days, young George excitedly called his father to the garden to show him the phenomenon and a discussion ensued in which George sought to discover who was responsible. Augustin suggested that it occurred by chance and the younger Washington reasoned that would be impossible. The elder Washington then seized upon the opportunity, saying to George “I want, my son, to introduce you to your *true* Father” (11). Augustin then proceeded to teach George that just as he had ten days earlier (unseen by George) organized the plant bed so that it would spell out George’s name in green letters, and just as George found it impossible to believe that it had occurred by chance, he

should find it equally difficult to believe “that chance could have made and put together all those millions and millions of things that are now so exactly fitted to his good...so exactly fitted to his use and delight.” Augustin concluded by asking “Now how could chance ever have done all this for my little son?” (12). Young Washington was convinced that “God Almighty” was the source of all that has been provided for him (13). If this work were concerned with factuality, I would be asking about documentation or witnesses of the event as related by Weems. But again, myth isn’t concerned with factuality. This story of the interaction between Augustin and young George Washington is a perfect piece of eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century Providence myth literature. Although it is an example of the personal (as opposed to the national) Providence myth, it serves the purposes of a myth-maker like Weems (and the desires of American myth-consumers) to explain where George Washington would have acquired his belief in—and dependence on—Providence throughout the American Revolution.

As Weems transitioned in his account from Washington’s boyhood to his military career, he invoked the Providence myth by mentioning “Where George got his great military talents, is a question which none but the happy believers in a *particular Providence* can solve: certain it is, his earthly parents had no hand in it” (22). Washington’s military acumen and proclivities were not due to his upbringing, according to Weems, but could only be explained by attributing them to Providence. Like many biblical liberators, Washington’s birth and upbringing were contrary to—not conducive to—producing a liberator; thus the only explanation was a providential one. The hand of Providence continued to be manifest as Weems’ Washington volunteered for a 1753 expedition to deliver a message from Virginia’s governor, Robert Dinwiddie, to the French commandant in the Ohio River Valley. Weems narrated how “a hand unseen...effected his escape” from an Indian that shot at him at only fifteen paces and also from two near-death

experiences with icy rivers (24). America's liberator was beginning to take shape within Weems' narrative.

Weems' account of Washington's experience in the 1755 expedition with Braddock's army is where Washington's role as the liberator symbol within the Providence myth really gained traction. Braddock had heard of Washington's reputation and asked him to accompany the expedition as an aide-de-camp. Washington agreed. However, once the expedition was underway, Braddock frequently spurned Washington's military advice. Due to his disregard for Washington's advice, they were ambushed. Once the attack began, the presence of Washington and his rangers and their backwoods skills were the only thing that "through a kind Providence, saved Braddock's army." But Braddock's unwillingness to listen to Washington's counsels had come at a very dear cost:

...Braddock had fallen—his aids and officers, to a man, killed or wounded—and his troops, in hopeless, helpless despair, flying backwards and forwards from the fire of the Indians, like flocks of crowding sheep from the presence of their butchers. Washington, alone, remained unhurt! Horse after horse had been killed under him. Showers of bullets had lifted his locks or pierced his regimentals. But still protected by heaven; still supported by a strength not his own, he had continued to fly from quarter to quarter, where his presence was most needed. (33)

Washington managed to organize a retreat and to get the troops back to Fort Cumberland, where General Braddock soon died. There, according to Weems, Braddock died in Washington's arms, begging his pardon for dismissing Washington's military advice. Weems then further reinforces the myth regarding Washington by telling how "a famous Indian warrior, who acted a leading part in that bloody tragedy, was often heard to swear, that 'Washington was not born to be killed

by a bullet! For,’ continued he ‘I had seventeen fair fires at him with my rifle, and after all could not bring him to the ground!’” Weems concludes that “some invisible hand...turned aside his bullets” and relates that by the time of his writing of his account “American writers have pretty unanimously agreed that Washington was, under God, the saving Angel that stood up between Braddock’s army and total destruction...Braddock lost the victory; but Washington saved the army” (34-6). Braddock’s 1755 expedition may have been an abject failure for the British army, but perhaps no other event did more to solidify George Washington as the liberator within the developing American Providence myth than his role in that crushing military defeat.

Washington’s own account of the event as found in his correspondence to his brother, Jack, attributed his survival to Providence. Washington’s personal account certainly contributed to his role as the liberator symbol within the American national Providence myth, albeit to a lesser degree.⁵ As Peter Onuf mentioned, while the reader can and should acknowledge the discrepancies between the accurate historiography and Weems’ account, the reader should also acknowledge that the aim of a myth-producer like Weems was to inspire, to explain, to give

⁵ After his experience with Braddock’s army, Washington wryly wrote the following missive from Fort Cumberland on the 18th of July, 1755:

Dear Brother,

As I have heard since my arrival at this place a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you that, I have not, as yet, composed the latter. But by the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability and expectation for I had 4 bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me yet although death was levelling my companions on every side of me, escaped unhurt. (“To John Augustine Washington”)

Washington, like Weems, attributed his survival to Providence. But then with relatively little fanfare, he recounts the details of his survival. Weems’ account, on the other hand, which told how “horse after horse had been killed” under Washington, was not technically false. But it is misleading since the reader is left to assume that this was a repeatedly recurring event, rather than just two horses being shot from under him. Likewise, saying “showers of bullets...pierced his regimentals” is more dramatic than simply and specifically detailing that four bullets pierced Washington’s coat.

meaning. Weems' account, by those standards, made for better myth than Washington's own account of the event and probably did more for the establishment of Washington's myth.

Once Weems' story moved to the Revolutionary War and Washington had assumed control of the continental army, his invocation of the Providence myth continued. However, Weems' mythologizing of the Revolutionary War departs less from Washington's than did his mythologizing of Washington's formative years. There seem to be two explanations for this: first, the Revolutionary War years required less fabrication on Weems' part thanks to more documentation of the events; there are vast amounts of Washington's papers from the Revolutionary era whereas there are few extant papers from his youth. The second explanation for fewer discrepancies during the Revolutionary era involves a consideration of Weems' audience and intent. Weems confessed in the opening chapter of his work that one of his chief designs was to put Washington's "private virtues" on display for the rising generation, saying "be it our first care to present these, in all their lustre, before the admiring eyes of our children...because in these," referring to Washington's private virtues, "every youth may become a Washington" (3-4). Weems may have embellished and taken more liberties while recounting Washington's youth because his writings largely targeted a younger audience. Whatever the case may be, the events recounted in Weems' Revolutionary War Providence myth-telling are generally also treated to one degree or another in Washington's papers.

The preparations for the Battle of Long Island were discussed in Washington's papers; but not much is said of the outcome. The battle did not go well for Washington and the continentals: the American army was routed—suffering more than 1200 casualties compared to only 400 on the British side. Weems used his myth-writing abilities to heighten the significance of the moment by contrasting the loss to the British on the "hottest day in the year" with what

had the potential to be “the freezing point in the American affairs” (66)—for the British had Washington’s troops pinned down against the East River and had encamped less than six hundred yards away. This would have been an early end to the Revolutionary War had Washington been forced to surrender with his army on Long Island. However, as soon as it was dark, Washington had his troops stealthily retreat across the East River. In spite of the negative outcome of the Battle of Long Island, Weems was still able to see the hand of Providence in the event. Weems wrote “Providentially a thick fog continued next morning till ten o’clock; when that passed away, and the sun broke out, the British were equally surprised and enraged to see the rear guard with the last of the baggage, in their boats, and all out of danger” (Weems 66). Providence had not provided the victory that Washington had anticipated in his correspondences leading up to the battle. However, Providence had extended the cover of night –by means of the thick fog—precisely long enough for Washington, the liberator, and God’s chosen American people, to escape and live to fight another day. Weems, true to myth-participant form, was able to see the hand of God in the loss at the Battle of Long Island.

As Weems concluded his narrative of the 1776 New York campaign, he did so by telling how Washington and his continental army were incredibly outnumbered, “destitute of necessities” and less martialled in war than the British. He stressed the idea that—much like there had been no earthly (only a providential) explanation for the young Washington’s military proclivities—there was now no earthly explanation for the success of Washington and his armies. “But Jehovah, the God of Hosts, was with him: and oft’ times, in the ear of the slumbering hero, his voice was heard, ‘fear not, for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God’” (66). I am not sure why Weems chose to have the voice of God come to Washington in his sleep—perhaps he felt a dream or vision was the easiest way for readers to imagine the voice

of God coming to Washington or perhaps it simply made for good myth. But in the content of this message, Weems was making a very obvious bridge between Washington and the Old Testament Israelite liberator, Joshua. Weems' biblical language would have been unmistakably familiar to most eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans who would have recalled the words of Jehovah to Joshua "Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (*King James Version*, Joshua 1.9). Weems used the biblical language yet didn't cite or reference the Bible. However, Weems wasn't plagiarizing; he was mythologizing. This is, in part, what Roland Barthes meant when he wrote that "myth is a type of speech" (109); and as a type of speech, myth requires fluency from its participants. Weems counted on his readers to be familiar with the Bible and its language and to recognize that Washington was the modern liberator—the American Joshua.

The next significant event documented by Weems was General Benedict Arnold's attempted (and foiled) betrayal of Washington and his army at West Point. Shortly after the discovery of the plot, Robert Smith—the previously-quoted Revolutionary period minister—had written the following "The salvation of our beloved general and his army from Arnold's hellish plot, and all the coincident providences relating thereto, deserve to be wrote with a pen of iron and the point of a diamond" (19). Weems endeavored to provide just such an iron-penned, diamond-pointed account of the plot. He wrote "In September 1780, an attempt was made to take off our Washington, and by means which I can hardly believe the old British lion was ever well pleased with...I allude to the affair of Arnold's treason" (82). It is worth noting the use of the possessive plural in both Smith's and Weems' references to Washington. The use of the plural possessive in "Our Washington" and "our beloved general" were significant. They were, I believe, terms of legitimate endearment regarding Washington on behalf of the writers and the

American people. Furthermore, the use of “our” expressed the common connection all Americans felt to Washington—to Americans, Washington was “our liberator.” Again, this should be understood as an element of myth; the myth must be common or shared within the culture. God had given them Washington as their liberator and now he was being preserved and prospered by the hand of Providence. As he continued his account of Washington’s providential preservation from the Arnold plot, Weems would employ an interesting American-Enlightenment variation of the Providence myth and liberator symbol. Weems recounted how Arnold’s betrayal was within a hair’s breadth of succeeding and how “the guardian genius of Columbia burst into tears—she saw the fall of her hero, and her country’s liberties crushed forever” but then with theatric, myth-teller timing, he wrote “Dry thine eyes, blest saint, thy Washington is not fallen yet—the thick bosses of Jehovah’s buckler are before the chief, and the shafts of his enemies shall yet fall to the earth, accurst” (84). Major Andre, Arnold’s courier who carried the plot to deliver Washington to the British, had passed every check point but then was stopped by three militia men who were off duty. They detained him because one of them did ‘not like his looks’ and ultimately they discovered the fateful papers he was carrying. In this version of Providence myth-making, Weems conflates Islamic and Christian mythology as he speaks of the guardian genius (jinni) of Columbia—whom he also refers to as Washington’s “blest saint.” One would not encounter such references within the Puritan version of the Providence myth. The Puritans would probably not have liked a reference to a saint—that would have been too papist. The mention of the jinni would have been similarly frowned upon. But interspersed references to Roman, Greek and Christian mythology were commonplace in the American Enlightenment. And Weems—as much as he was a Christian clergyman and was quick to point out the hand of Jehovah in Washington’s life and in the outcome of the

Revolutionary War—was also a gifted raconteur and a man of his times. Above all, he was fluent in myth, and the late eighteenth-century Providence myth now had an ecumenical flavor about it which included non-Protestant and even non-Christian references.

Weems may have consulted Washington's general orders to the Continental Army for September 26, 1780 as a source for his account of the Arnold affair.⁶ According to Peter Onuf, this would have been the most likely scenario (183). Again, Washington's personal account of Arnold's treachery is an example of good myth-writing. But Weems' account is great myth-writing. Against-all-odds scenarios that require the miraculous intervention of deity make for great myth, as Robert Hay points out "The seeming futility of their cause would force oppressed Israels, ancient or modern, to recognize that their deliverers were the agents of the Almighty" (785). As Weems concluded his account of the Revolutionary War, he continued to employ this against-all-odds mythic language:

America, without cash or credit!—her officers, without a dollar in pocket, strolling about camp in long beards and dirty shirts—her soldiers often without a crust in their knapsacks or a dram in their canteens—and her citizens everywhere sick and tired of war!—Great

⁶ Weems likely again noted Washington's use of the Providence myth to explain the detection of Arnold's treachery and expounded upon it. Washington wrote:

Treason of the blackest dye was yesterday discovered! General Arnold who commanded at WestPoint, lost to every sentiment of honor—of public and private obligation—was about to deliver up that important Post into the hands of the enemy. Such an event must have given the American cause a deadly wound if not a fatal stab. Happily the treason has been timely discovered to prevent the fatal misfortune. The providential train of circumstances which led to it affords the most convincing proof that the Liberties of America are the object of divine Protection. ("General Orders, 26 September 1780").

Washington did not give the detailed dramatic account of the betrayal. He opined that the treachery—had it succeeded—would have been fatal to the American cause. And, true to myth form, he saw Arnold's capture as evidence that the American cause was righteous—that indeed they were the chosen people and that the hand of Providence was manifest in their behalf.

Britain, on the other hand, everywhere victorious over the fleets of her enemies—completely mistress of the watery world, and, Judas-like, bag bearer of its commerce and cash! With such resources, with all these trumps in her hands, will she play quits, and make a draw game of it? Impossible! But if she should, “it must be the work of that Providence who ruleth in the armies of heaven and Earth, and whose hand has been visibly displayed in every step of our progress to Independence. (93)

Weems’ depiction is a veritable David-and-Goliath story. The patriots, in their poverty, went to battle, metaphorically having but a sling and “five smooth stones.” Britain—depicted perfectly within the myth as the antagonist—was the “uncircumcised Philistine,” who defied “the armies of the living God” (*King James Version* 1 Sam. 17.26, 40). Could the simple American shepherd boys conquer Great Britain—the giant and champion of the seas? “Impossible!” wrote Weems. One also readily notices that Weems employed another biblical trope to vilify the British as “Judas-like” in their lust for wealth. Weems was truly an accomplished myth-writer. But what particularly interests me about this quotation from Weems is the last sentence where he included quotation marks which leave one to presume that he was quoting Washington. A closer examination reveals that he wasn’t; that exact quote is not found among the writings of Washington. However, it appears that Weems was referencing Washington’s farewell orders with his “quotation.” In that address, Washington employed the same myth trope as Weems, emphasizing the overcoming of distressing circumstances by the Continental army. He wrote “The disadvantageous circumstances on our part, under which the war was undertaken, can never be forgotten. The singular interpositions of Providence in our feeble condition were such, as could scarcely escape the attention of the most unobserving.” He went on to state that the armies’ ability to persevere and succeed against Britain “was little short of a standing miracle”

(“Washington’s Farewell Address to the Army”). Besides telling of their difficulties and mentioning the hand of Providence, in that same address Washington spoke of “the God of armies.” In other words, one might try to explain that Weems merely pieced together ideas from Washington’s farewell address to the armies into one quotation. The failure, on Weems’ part, to properly cite Washington’s farewell address doesn’t seem to be that egregious. But Weems didn’t confine his source-material for the creation of his quotation to just one address. The portion of the quotation that states “every step of our progress to independence” was borrowed from Washington’s Inaugural Address where he stated “Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency” (“First Inaugural Address”). Weems’ monster-of-Frankenstein-like “quotation” may not have just been confined to those two addresses either. Peter Onuf explains “Mason Locke Weems cobbled much of his *Life of Washington* from well-known addresses delivered by Washington at key moments in his career.” Onuf also points out that at times, “Weems puts words in the dead Washington’s mouth” and encourages the reader, upon noticing the differences between the two, to “make what they will of the discrepancies they discover” (183). The discrepancies can primarily, in my opinion, be explained by myth. In other circles, this type of citation would not be tolerated. Weems did not follow the conventions of citation. Yet, in the realm of myth, he actually *was* quoting Washington. Myth is not as rigid as history. Instead, myth is often history that has been “telescoped”—to borrow a term from Peter Munz (2). This appears to be what Weems did. He had, as Onuf explains, cobbled together pieces of Washington’s addresses from the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, telescoping several statements into one. And it is unlikely that the consumers of the American national Providence myth would have had any problem with this seemingly undisciplined and

unscholarly production of literature. Myth is its own type of literature and it is disciplined and governed by its own set of rules. The telescoping of history into myth is well within the rules of myth.

Weems' wrapped up his Revolutionary War account of the liberator, Washington, by having the reader see Washington from the perspective of the departing, defeated, broken British armies, lamenting as they set sail back for Britain: "Washington met us in his strength...vain was all our valour; for God fought for Washington. Hence our choicest troops are fallen before him; and we, the sad remains of war, are now returning, inglorious, to our native shores" (Weems 94). From this language, it is easy to conjure an image of the victorious Washington standing on the shores of America with a corona of light behind him as he observes the vanquished British antagonists setting sail for home. America was the promised land. The Americans were his chosen people. Washington was God's chosen liberator. The "choicest troops" had not been able to withstand Washington. God's hand was sufficiently manifest that the British were forced to acknowledge it in the conflict. Such were the conclusions surmised from Weems' *Life of Washington*; "God fought for Washington."

I recounted how profusely Washington was eulogized at the time of his death throughout the republic, but again the expressive raconteur, Weems, took his Washingtonian end-of-life mythologizing to another level. He narrated (as if he had been a spectator to the scene) Washington's final moments. True to form, Weems drew parallels to two of Israel's previous liberators—Moses and Christ: "There, by himself, like Moses alone on the top of Pisgah, he seeks the face of God...until (in humble imitation of the world's great Redeemer) he has poured forth into the bosom of his God those strong sensations which the solemnity of his situation naturally suggested...He is now about to leave the great family of man...He is now about to

leave his country...then breathing out ‘Father of mercies! Take me to thyself,’—he fell asleep” (134). But Weems didn’t end his narration there. He then recounted Washington’s ascension into heaven “Swift on angels’ wings the brightening saint ascended; while voices more than human were heard...hymning the great procession towards the gates of heaven...and myriads of mighty angels hastened forth...to welcome the honoured stranger...in front of the shouting hosts, were seen the beauteous forms of Franklin, Warren, Mercer, Scammel...with all the virtuous patriots, who, on the side of Columbia, toiled or bled for liberty and truth” (134-5). Modern readers of Weems’ ascension account probably raise an eyebrow or smile as they read it. But Weems apparently felt no compunction about incorporating his stylized apotheosis of Washington into his account. Regarding Weems’ account, Barry Schwartz explains that it “was plausible to most Americans; it nicely articulated the steady but vague impression they were entertaining in their own minds” (101). Weems was again counting on early nineteenth-century Americans to be fluent in myth; this would not be a foreign language to his readers. Furthermore, Weems’ depiction of Washington’s ascension was hardly anomalous. There have been many depictions of the apotheosis of Washington. By 1862—when Constantino Brumidi completed his portrayal of Washington’s apotheosis in the rotunda of the United States Capitol building (see fig. 3)—Americans were evidently comfortable enough with the idea of a mythologized, canonized Washington that they commissioned it to be portrayed in their center of government. And Weems, the skilled myth-maker, had played a role in securing Washington’s place in American mythology and in seating him in heaven alongside the liberators of old and the martyrs and heroes of the Revolution.



Figure 3. “The Apotheosis of Washington”

Chapter Conclusion

To conclude this chapter on Washington as the exhumed liberator symbol, I think it is fitting to ask why Americans chose to retain Washington as the liberator when they had other great living revolutionary figures like Adams, Jefferson and Madison that could have become to Washington what Joshua was to Moses in the Providence myth. As Robert Hay points out, the New England preachers attempted to do so with Adams as they eulogized Washington (789).

Furthermore, each of those men did succeed Washington as the President of the United States, and--as has been discussed in this dissertation--myth *is* constantly shifting. It would not have been uncharacteristic of the myth to find a new liberator. The answer lies in Washington's mythological, unifying power. As I mentioned in chapter four, as brilliant as Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton and Washington's other contemporaries were, they did not carry the same mythological power that Washington did to unite the American people. While many Americans had disagreed in the first decades about what the young nation should look like and exactly how it should be governed, nearly all Americans agreed that Washington had been heaven-sent to be their military and political leader. Barry Schwartz puts it this way: "At the beginning, the need for solidarity in the face of a powerful military foe led to the creation of a heroic George Washington; at the time of his death, the nation's solidarity *presupposed* his central, unifying role" (97, emphasis added). Americans were united behind Washington as the children of Israel were united behind Moses. After Moses' death, Joshua benefited from the "solidarity occasioned by war" which Washington had also enjoyed. The circumstance could be summed up by saying that Washington had been both America's Moses *and* America's Joshua. However, in Israelite history, once Canaan was conquered and Joshua was dead, there had been a void in Israelite leadership, and the Israelites had degraded into a state of apostasy and factionalism during the reign of the judges. Similarly, at the death of Washington, there was great potential for similar division and factionalism in the adolescent United States of America. Americans acknowledged Jefferson's, Madison's, and Adams' instrumentality in the birth of the nation, however, none of them had the same unifying mythological power—the same cultural cachet—that Washington possessed. Each of them could only count on the political support of a portion of the nation. In that regard, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton and Madison (to name only a few of

the founders that sought to lead America after Washington) were perhaps more akin to the Israelite judges than they were to Moses or Joshua. Washington's power to hold the nation together, on the other hand, was a presupposed certitude—even from beyond the grave. Party spirit threatened to divide the young republic; but Washington's myth helped to continue to hold it together.

As the nineteenth century began, Americans--to address the historical moment that faced them--consciously or not, participated heavily in the Providence myth, particularly in their use of Washington as the liberator symbol, to justify the righteousness of their great cause and to preserve the necessary momentum to propel the cause of America forward. Expression of the myth made factual for them the notion that God had indeed smiled upon their cause—that they were his chosen people and that he had given them victory through George Washington. The mythologizing efforts of Weems and his contemporaries served to solidify the Providence myth (and Washington's place within it) as a national myth and to draw upon its unifying power to hold the young nation together. John Adams was able to observe the historical moment seizing Washington and casting him within the myth as Drexler and White pointed out: “we see Adams refer, again and again, to the Founders as fictional constructs...the Founders are imaginative fictions, characters in the specifically literary sense, whose circulation is essential for their constitution and whose significance in the narrative often results from narrative elements clustered around them” (Drexler and White 5). Such was the case with Washington. The moment made the man. His mythological significance resulted from the historical moment which surrounded him during his life and, interestingly, after his death.

As I've mentioned, Washington was not incredibly orthodox in his religious observance and was certainly not a traditional eighteenth-century Christian. Yet in his own way, he had

been profoundly influential on America's religious and cultural landscape (particularly in their invocation of—and adherence to—the Providence myth). His remarks in a letter from the midst of the Revolutionary War proved to be prophetic regarding his influence on the American cultural landscape. He wrote "The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations, but, it will be time enough for me to turn preacher, when my present appointment ceases; and therefore, I shall add no more on the Doctrine of Providence..." ("To Brigadier General Thomas Nelson"). In that letter, Washington, of course, referred to the conclusion of his appointment as the commander of the Continental army; and it is rather certain that he had no intention of joining the clergy after the war. However, as his mortal appointment ceased, George Washington became—chiefly by being written into the narrative by Weems and his other post-mortem myth-producers—one of the most powerful preachers of the American national Providence myth.

**Chapter 6—The Incorporation of the American National Providence Myth into an
Updated Myth and Symbol Pedagogy**

An Updated Myth and Symbol Pedagogy

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I reviewed the key tenets of myth and symbol theory. That theoretical school can be summed up nicely in the words of Alan Trachtenberg: “what needs most emphasis of all, is that ‘myth and symbol’ rested upon a conviction that the true subject of a critical cultural history, a history guided by a critical political stance, lay in ‘culture,’ that it was not the specific literary text, for example, which constituted the object of critical attention, but its embeddedness within a system of meanings, a structure of significance, an ideological order represented by charged images and symbols” (671). Indeed, the great contribution of myth and symbol theory is that it promotes looking at a culture through an examination of its images and symbols as found in literary texts. In that chapter, I added five updated definitions/clarifications to myth and symbol methodology in order to respond to some of the criticisms about its shortcomings. Now in order to demonstrate the continued pedagogical utility of myth and symbol principles, and in order to establish a common vocabulary for such a pedagogical discussion, I again provide those updates:

1. A myth is a story which is considered true by, and has power for and upon, those within the myth’s culture. Those that participate in the myth within that culture are mythologizers.
2. A myth is made up of basic constituent units called symbols. These symbols have power and meaning only through their relationship to the myth and its other symbols.
3. For a myth to exist, it must be a part of the collective mind of a culture. When a myth is held by the collectivity of a nation, it is referred to as a national myth. Collectivity

does not imply unanimity or necessarily even majority. It does imply an awareness of the myth, a fluency in myth, and a willingness to mythologize by those within the culture. When mythologizing ceases, the myth dies or shifts.

4. A scientific and structuralist approach to examining myth can be taken by an examination of its constituent symbols. These symbols are artifacts found in the literature and everyday world of a culture. This examination should not be confined to the haute literature of a culture but should also include non-literary texts. Those that engage in examining myth (speak about it) are mythologists.
5. A study of myth should not generally concern itself with the myth's factuality or historicity, only with how history and myth fertilize each other.

I will now proceed to demonstrate how this updated myth and symbol methodology could be used to teach the American national Providence myth in a modern American Studies classroom.

The Relationship between Myth and History

The foundation for a myth and symbol pedagogy can best be laid by discussing the complex yet fascinating interrelationship between myth and history. This is particularly important since as Alan Trachtenberg says the central aim of myth and symbol pedagogy is to achieve "the synthesis of historical scholarship and cultural criticism" (669). I assert that a discussion similar to this one regarding myth and history should occur very early in a myth and symbol approach to American Studies because it will help students understand myth's contributions to history and history's contributions to myth.

Myth and history are frequently juxtaposed with the former being labeled as false and the latter as fact and the two being placed in complete opposition. If students embark upon their

academic journey in American Studies with that false opposition in mind, they will never grasp the significance of myth in culture and history. The reality is that the two things—history and myth—are, in fact, interdependent and symbiotic. I owe my thoughts on this topic mostly to Peter Munz and I will therefore quote him extensively in the next few paragraphs. Munz writes “Myth and history, in a very special sense, are interdependent. They fertilise each other; and it is doubtful whether the one could exist without the other” (1).

To make his point, Munz begins by introducing the reader to two Latin terms *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*. These two terms can be translated “the totality of everything that happened” and “a narrative of the events that happened,” respectively (2). People naively think good history is an account of *res gestae*. But Munz points out that any historian is forced to acknowledge that historians don’t actually record the totality of things that happened—the *res gestae*. For one, it would be a fool’s errand since such a complete account would take at least as long as the actual occurrence of the events. But more importantly, any historian will also acknowledge that all events are not equally valuable to record. Munz then asks the piercing question “How was it, that they singled some events out as being significant and therefore worth telling?” (2). The answer is found in myth. In this sense, every historian is a mythologizer. A recounting of the totality of events has no value to the historian. The work of the historian, in Munz’ words, is to “distend” myth; “a historical account is a distended myth” (3). This idea may not initially be popular with some historians, but how else can one explain the omission of some historical details in favor of others which are viewed as “more significant?” One’s myths determine the significance of events selected for the history. “Our whole conception of what was worth writing about and worth recording is coloured by [our] original myth” (Munz 4). Brian Attebery hints at this when he says that a historian’s “perceptions are both enabled and limited

by the structures of thought given by his culture” (334). Claude Lévi-Strauss articulates this same idea when he says “a clairvoyant history should admit that it never completely escapes from the nature of myth” (“Overture” 57). For many students (particularly at the secondary or undergraduate level), this will be an earth-shattering revelation.

I will use the telling of Benedict Arnold’s treason from Henry Cabot Lodge’s 1889 biography, *George Washington*, to illustrate how myth (in this case, the American national Providence myth with George Washington as its liberator symbol) is distended into history. Henry Cabot Lodge is generally acknowledged as a qualified historian. He held a PhD in History from Harvard, taught at Harvard, practiced law, engaged in politics and wrote several biographies. I mention those credentials merely to further solidify his credibility as a historian.

In his biography on Washington, Lodge confesses the following regarding his motive for recounting the Arnold story: “To us it is of interest, because it shows Washington in one of the sharpest and bitterest experiences of his life. Let us see how he met it and dealt with it” (187). Lodge acknowledges that he is recording that which he considers “of interest.” What determines which historical details were “of interest?” The answer is: the myths which were held by Henry Cabot Lodge and those in the culture for which he was writing. What I mean by that is that Lodge obviously felt that the events of George Washington’s life which he selected and recorded are more significant to American history than all the other lives and events which were happening simultaneously to Washington’s and which are omitted from Lodge’s *Washington* biography. Obviously, the very title and subject of the book acknowledge this fact. Lodge is not seeking to write the *res gestae* for the year 1780. A writer’s myths guide the writer in the selection of events to record. Lodge “singled out one definite strand from the totality of past events, recorded it and related everything that happened subsequently to that strand” (Munz 4).

Lodge's history-writing is the distension of his culture's myth regarding Washington. He tells how as Washington travels en route to meeting with Arnold "in one village...all the people turned out, the children bearing torches, and men and women hailed Washington as father, and pressed about him to touch the hem of his garments" (Lodge 188). Lodge is, of course, pointing the readers' minds to Jesus Christ and his experience with the woman with an issue of blood by recounting this event, thus implicitly likening Washington to Christ. He is acting as a historian in that he is recounting a string of historical events. However, he is guided by his myth about Washington in his selection of which events to recount.

Lodge then foregoes most of the details of Arnold's treachery (being guided by myth, instead opting to focus on Washington's response to Arnold's treason: "The most sudden and appalling treachery had failed to shake his nerve, or confuse his mind. Yet the strong and silent man was wrung to the quick, and when he had retired to his room, the guard outside the door heard him marching back and forth through all the weary night" (189). Again, Lodge's selection of which events to record speaks volumes about his dearly-held myths. The myths he holds cause Lodge to focus on and recount Washington's stoic response to a calamitous treachery while omitting many details of the treachery. Lodge's myths dictate what events he chooses to tell in order to build Washington's myth. Regarding Arnold's treason and one of the greatest threats to the success of the American Revolution, Lodge crisply concludes "There is but little more to tell. The conspiracy stopped with Arnold" (190). Henry Cabot Lodge, who would have certainly considered himself acting in the role of historian as he wrote Washington's biography, was distending Washington as the liberator symbol in the American national Providence myth. This leads to Munz' next key observation—that "myth yields significant history." In other words, if the object of historians was really to record the *res gestae*—the

totality of things that occurred—there must necessarily be “no line of inquiry” in their writing (5). But that is never the case. The writing of history is never a disinterested recording of events. “On the contrary, if we analyse the matter sufficiently, we will find that the only structural attachment facts [those transpired events one chooses to record] have is the one provided for them by a pattern of myth” (Munz 6). Consequently, a selection (be it deliberate or subconscious) of events which are seen as *significant* become the recorded history. This discussion will also help students understand that myths can be discovered not only in literary texts but also in non-literary historical texts.

Besides the need for students to understand that myth directs the writing of history, Peter Munz also points out that history affects myth. He argues that a myth is simply created by telescoping “the manifold material which had been historically observed into a single tale” (6). Munz points out that myth-makers are not bound by accurate chronology, factuality or the “literal truth,” but that the myth-maker seeks to build from historically recorded events a “concrete universal story” (7). It is concrete in the sense that it has defined people, events and places. It is universal in that “when history is telescoped into myth, the myth-maker always has the object of bringing out certain features deeply characteristic of human behavior” (7) and portraying “the most universal patterns of human life” (8). Nathan Hatch makes a similar observation as he discusses the Providence myth as articulated by New England preachers about their forebears during the Seven Years’ War: “Rarely did New Englanders tire of building myths about the heroic acts of the founders of ‘the city on a hill.’” Hatch says of those myths: “they reflect their authors’ values and were used by them to express their concerns” (Hatch 422). The New England preachers used concrete people, places and events from New England history.

They then used the experiences of those people to teach the universal notion that the hand of Providence was active in the lives of those founding forebears.

Franklin's proposed seal for the United States of America is another illustration of history telescoped into myth. The entire recorded history of the conflict between Great Britain and the United States of America is telescoped down into the following story of concrete universals as portrayed in Franklin's proposed seal: "Oppressed Americans (God's modern Israelites) wanted their freedom. Great Britain wanted to keep the Americans as its subjects. The tyrannical King George amassed his armies against God's chosen people, the Americans. God providentially interceded to help the Americans gain their liberty." The history of the Revolutionary War and America's beginnings have been even further telescoped down into the current national seal of the United States of America. To illustrate this concept in the classroom, I have my students take out a cultural artifact—a one-dollar bill (see fig. 4). A teacher could then ask "what United States history is told on the back of our most common piece of paper currency?"



Figure 4. Reverse Side "United States One Dollar Bill"

Few students will consider their money as a source for a history lesson or a lesson on myth—but it is both. Indeed, as decisions were made by Charles Thomson and his seal

committee predecessors about what to include on the national seal for the United States of America, it is unequivocal that they (and the 1782 United States Congress which approved the seal) wished to tell a story. They did not intend to tell the *res gestae*—the totality of events which occurred in early America; instead, they telescoped all of those events down into a handful of messages about the United States of America to tell its myth: *Annuit Coeptis*, best translated “he has approved the undertaking” expresses (along with the image of the eye of Providence) that they felt the hand of God had been evident in the nation’s inception; *Novus Ordo Seclorum* is the Latin phrase for “a new order of the ages” which signifies their belief that their cause truly was revolutionary and that it would change the course of human events; *E Pluribus Unum*, meaning “out of many, one” expresses their belief in the ability of a democratic system of government by the people to unite and advance the great cause in war and in peace (symbolized by the arrows and the olive branch in the eagle’s talons); the Roman numerals for 1776 and thirteen red and white stripes are also part of the seal to remind this cultural artifact’s viewers of the year and number of colonies at the nation’s commencement. History is recounted in the national seal; but in the recounting of that history, myth is expressed even more forcefully in the form of the Providence myth’s hand of God and chosen people symbols.

One final point from Munz that powerfully articulates the interrelationship between history and myth: “a historical statement taken by itself is incomprehensible.” As an example, I will give the statement “George Washington was born on 22 February 1732.” Munz points out that this sort of “statement, if not taken in conjunction with some other statements, is not illuminating” (9). If there is no reason for the reader to value George Washington and his story, then the reader will certainly not care about his date of birth. Munz then goes on to argue that the best type of statement to conjoin with purely historical statements are concrete universal

statements—statements that express an element of myth. A concrete universal statement adds the most value and illumination to the historical statement because the reader sees it as applying to himself or herself. If the historical statement regarding Washington’s birth is supplemented by a concrete universal statement, then the first statement gains significance. For example, by following up with the concrete universal statement “Washington devoted much of his life to gaining liberty for Americans and establishing one of the world’s longest-standing democratic republics,” the reader—especially if American—values the statement about Washington’s birth because of the universal regard for liberty and the concrete reality and relation to Washington and the United States of America. With the concrete universal statement, the historian taps into personal myth and the myth of readers to make the history significant.

I have demonstrated how myth and history interrelate and provided illustrations of that interrelationship from the American national Providence myth. Hopefully, I have successfully demonstrated that a discussion regarding the interdependence of these two concepts is foundational to a myth and symbol pedagogy.

The American National Providence Myth in an American Studies Classroom

At Brigham Young University-Idaho, I teach a survey course entitled American Foundations 101 which entails a broad examination of the American experience. It is an interdisciplinary course taught by team members from the Departments of History, Geography, Political Science, English, Economics and Religion. Some of the units of the course are: The Rights and Equality of Humans; The Rule of Law; Origins of American Government; The Constitution of the United States; The Constitutional Convention; Power in Government; Market Morality; Varieties of Political Economy; Religion in America; Race and Culture in America; Political Ideologies in America; and America and the World. Literary and non-literary texts

which articulate the unit topics are incorporated as readings into the units. While this is perhaps not a traditional American Studies course and while there may not even be a course exactly like this one at another university in the United States of America, it is very much an American Studies course.

Pedagogically, I have already incorporated my dissertation work into that course over the last five years, discussing how the Providence myth has catalyzed many of the key moments and movements in United States history. One of the key points I make in my updated myth and symbol approach is that when mythologizing (the speaking of) a particular myth ceases, that myth shifts or dies. Thus, one of the most natural questions that arises from this dissertation is whether the American national Providence myth—the primary subject of this dissertation—has modern relevance. Chapter five provided a bridge to this discussion on pedagogy by demonstrating that the Providence myth (and particularly the liberator symbol) continued to serve Americans after Washington’s death. In the next few pages I will model how one can find the perpetuity of the Providence myth in five significant American historical moments and how one might dissect cultural artifacts from each of those moments to discuss the American national Providence myth in an American Studies classroom. By doing so, I will argue that the American national Providence myth—one of America’s oldest myths—has remained a significant myth in American culture up to the present day and one that is worthy of examination in modern classrooms.

Manifest Destiny

Just as the Providence myth had been used as a catalyst in the settlement of the lands of the United States of America during the colonial era and in justifying the American Revolutionary War, so again in the mid-nineteenth century the myth was employed to fuel

westward migration and settlement and to justify conflicts with Mexico and Native Americans. Some of the most significant cultural artifacts from that era were a number of articles produced by John L. O’ Sullivan, the editor for *The Democratic Review*. If students have already been introduced to the Providence myth and its five symbols and learned how the myth was used to accomplish political purposes by the Founding Fathers, then O’Sullivan’s articles can serve as an excellent example of later myth implementation for political utility. This would work best as a homework assignment because of its magnitude. I would provide students with copies of two of O’Sullivan’s articles—“The Great Nation of Futurity,” and “Annexation.” Both articles are about five pages in length. I would assign students to read both articles and to find mentions of Providence and one example of each of the five constituent symbols of the Providence myth in the articles. This portion of the exercise will demonstrate that the Providence myth was still functioning in its fullness in mid-nineteenth century America.

I would then provide them with the Nicholas Guyatt statements which point out that “Providential ideas were at work in some of the most important debates in early America” and how the use of “providential language” had been employed “strategically to achieve a desired political or social end” (Guyatt 4, 6). I would assign students to explain how any individual symbol of the Providence myth was implemented by O’Sullivan to achieve a political purpose. There will be a wide variety of responses, but students may point out the early seeds of American exceptionalism planted by O’Sullivan in his forceful employment of the promised land and chosen people symbols, saying “we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity” (“Great Nation” 426). He continued “America is destined for better deeds...We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can” (427). They may also discuss how

Woodrow Wilson's and George W. Bush's moral diplomacy has its beginnings in O'Sullivan's words "this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man... For this blessed mission to the nations of the world...has America been chosen" (430). The monarchies, aristocracies and oligarchies of Europe fill the antagonist symbol in O'Sullivan's "Nation of Futurity" article (430), but then he broadens the symbol to encompass any nation in Europe or the Western hemisphere that impedes America's expansion—particularly targeting Mexico as "imbecile and distracted" ("Annexation" 9) with regards to its ability to govern California and Texas. O'Sullivan continues his antagonist symbol usage, saying "other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves...in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" ("Annexation" 5). The coining of the phrase "manifest destiny" here is O'Sullivan's most famous Providence myth invocation. In doing so, he invokes the hand of God and promised land symbols, seeing it as God's plan that America eventually extend across the width of the continent. Imperialistic American policies towards other countries of the Western hemisphere found their justification in O'Sullivan's Providence myth language. The liberator symbol may be the most difficult to point out in this cultural artifact, but one could argue that America is the liberator—the knight in shining armor—in O'Sullivan's "Annexation" article. He states "Texas is now ours...the sweep of our eagle's wing already includes within its circuit the wide extent of her fair and fertile land... She comes within the dear and sacred designation of Our Country" (5). Texas, the damsel in distress, had been taken under the wing of the beneficent United States.

In summation, O’Sullivan employed the Providence myth to justify an imperialistic and eventually militaristic agenda against Mexico, to advance westward migration and the transcontinental railroad, and to sympathize with slavery with his advocacy for the annexation of Texas as a slave state. After this exercise, students will hopefully gain a strong sense of how myth affects and sometimes directs the political landscape.

The Mormon Exodus

During the same time period in which O’Sullivan’s articles emerged, the main body of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as Mormons) found themselves in the middle of a mass exodus. Joseph Smith, their prophet, had been killed in Carthage, Illinois in 1844. After Smith’s death, they found themselves still to be the objects of intense persecution, and resultantly—under the leadership of Brigham Young—they had begun a westward migration to the Great Basin. William Clayton had been forced to flee Nauvoo, along with other leaders of the church, and to leave his expectant wife behind. Upon hearing on the trail that she had given birth to a son back in Nauvoo and that all was well with the mother and child, Clayton penned in the next twenty-four hours the hymn “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” To examine this as a piece of American Providence myth literature, I would pair students up and provide them with the third and fourth stanzas of that hymn:

We’ll find the place which God for us prepared,
 Far away in the West,
 Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
 There the Saints will be blessed.
 We’ll make the air with music ring,
 Shout praises to our God and King;

Above the rest these words we'll tell--
 All is well! All is well!
 And should we die before our journey's through,
 Happy day! All is well!
 We then are free from toil and sorrow, too;
 With the just we shall dwell!
 But if our lives are spared again
 To see the Saints their rest obtain,
 Oh, how we'll make this chorus swell--
 All is well! All is well! (Clayton)

I would then provide each pair with the following prompt: “Find one or more symbols of the Providence myth in William Clayton’s poem/hymn ‘Come, Come, Ye Saints’ which he wrote on the Mormon Trail in 1846. Discuss how this symbol might have had political power within Mormon culture to provide the impetus necessary to make the arduous journey of 1,300 miles from Nauvoo, Illinois to Utah. Also discuss how this 1846 Providence myth invocation has shaped modern America.”

Students will perhaps discover the promised land, chosen people and antagonist symbols of the Providence myth in this hymn. Mormons, the saints, were God’s chosen people. The promised land symbol is found doubly in this work: first, in the place in the West that had been prepared for them by God; but also in their heavenly reward which they would receive if they died en route to their destination. The myth provided a win-win promised land scenario. The antagonist symbol is referenced in the phrase “where none shall come to hurt or make afraid.” Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had been persecuted and pushed out

of several locales over the previous fifteen years and they now sought a promised land where they would be out of reach of their antagonists—the mobs which had hunted and haunted them. Responses to the final prompt will vary. Students might discuss the Mormon influence on the settlement of the West. In a sense, Mormons—in their creation of an outpost in the middle of the Great Basin and in the role they played in the final stages of the transcontinental railroad’s construction—helped to bring to pass O’Sullivan’s vision of the not-too-distant day “when the Empires of the Atlantic and Pacific would again flow together into one, as soon as their inland borders should approach each other” (“Annexation” 9). Students may also discuss the role that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints plays in the modern American religious landscape—its demographics, politics and culture.

“The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “God Save the South”

My sections of American Foundations 101 generally have between eighty and one hundred students in them. As a result of the size of the sections, it is easy for individuals that desire to do so to disappear into the woodwork when I initiate an in-class discussion. For that reason, I regularly use discussion boards in my teaching to encourage universal participation and to help students see issues from another perspective. To demonstrate how the American national Providence myth was appropriated by both the North and the South during the Civil War, I would pair students up on the online discussion boards and provide one member of the pair with the following three stanzas of Julia Ward Howe’s *Battle Hymn of the Republic* (which was the unofficial battle hymn of the Union army and was published by the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments) and ask that student to find symbols of the Providence myth in the hymn:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
 He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
 He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
 His truth is marching on.
 He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
 He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
 Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
 Our God is marching on.
 In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
 With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
 As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
 While God is marching on. (Howe)

Howe saw the cause of the North as God's cause. The hand of God symbol is evident in the mention of "His terrible swift sword" and Howe's linking of final judgement to God's wrath for the antagonists or oppressors in the slave-holding South. Howe then pairs Christ (as the liberator who though his death provides salvation for humanity) to Union soldiers (who would die to provide salvation from slavery for African-Americans). The hymn was a call to arms to perform God's work and was particularly political in light of the committee which published it. Its publication was in part intended to inspire African-Americans to participate in the war effort.

To the other partner I would assign the following lines of George H. Miles' *God Save the South* (which is widely considered the Confederate national anthem) and also ask her to find elements of the Providence myth in the hymn:

God be our shield, at home or afield,

Stretch Thine arm over us, strengthen and save.
 What tho' they're three to one, forward each sire and son,
 Strike till the war is won, strike to the grave!
 God made the right stronger than might,
 Millions would trample us down in their pride.
 Lay Thou their legions low, roll back the ruthless foe,
 Let the proud spoiler know God's on our side.
 Rebels before, our fathers of yore.
 Rebel's the righteous name Washington bore.
 Why, then, be ours the same, the name that he snatched from shame,
 Making it first in fame, foremost in war.
 God save the South, God save the South,
 Her altars and firesides, God save the South! (Miles)

The second student in each pair will hopefully see that Miles depicted the “millions” of the North as the oppressive antagonists; Miles says that although the Union outnumbered the Confederacy three to one, the hand of God would be manifest for the “right” of the South and not for the “might” of the North; and in another pairing, Miles paired the rebel liberator Washington with the “rebel” South. For their follow-up post, I would require students to read their partner’s initial post and then have them respond to the following prompt: “You and your classmate have just demonstrated how two cultures with opposing agendas used the national Providence myth to explain their military actions against one another. Peter Munz says that history is not a record of the totality of things that occurred, ‘rather an account of a selection of things that happened’ and that a historian’s ‘whole conception of what was worth writing about and worth recording is

colored by...myth' (Munz 4). In approximately 100 words, write the South's history which was colored by their version of the Providence myth and which made them feel justified in engaging in the Civil War. In approximately 100 words, do the same for the North." This exercise will hopefully help students to further understand the interrelationship between history and myth but also see how myths shift and get appropriated by different cultures.

Martin Luther King

Besides incorporating my dissertation work into my American Foundations 101 classes, I have also received approval from my department for fall semester 2020 to teach a special topics course—Religion 390R—entitled “God in America.” The class will examine the cross-pollination that has occurred between the American political and religious landscapes over the last four hundred years. While the Providence myth will not be the central theme of the course, I will introduce students to it early in the course and incorporate discussions of the myth when it is appropriate. One of the historical moments which I will examine in that class is the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The American Civil Rights Movement provides an excellent illustration of religious figures, principles and organizations having a significant impact on the politics of the moment. Many of the religious figures involved in the Civil Rights Movement were fueled in part by the Providence myth. The Moses trope is a variation of the Providence myth's liberator symbol and was a very familiar one which had been employed frequently by, and about, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he sought to accomplish the political purposes of the Civil Rights Movement. Clifford Longley points out the historical progression in American Providence myth liberators and their link to the ancient lawgiver, saying Moses was “attractive to myth-makers in America..., and his name was invoked in comparisons with individuals as diverse as John

Winthrop, George Washington...and Martin Luther King” (Longley 143). King is so deeply connected to Moses in the American national Providence myth that the United States’ Episcopal Church’s liturgical calendar reads “Almighty God, by the hand of Moses your servant, you led your people out of slavery, and made them free at last: Grant that your Church, following the example of your prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love, and may secure for all your children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (“Rite 1”).

King himself applied the symbols of the Providence myth perhaps most famously in his last speech which was given in Memphis, Tennessee on the eve of his assassination. In that Providence myth invocation, King cast himself as Moses, saying:

We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind.

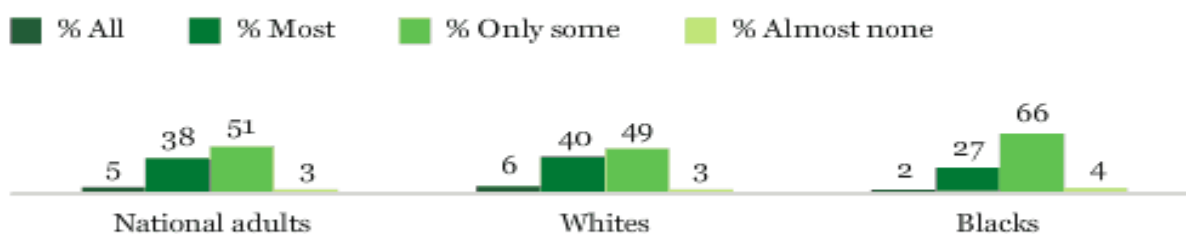
Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! (King).

King saw himself as the Moses/liberator of his generation, leading them up to the borders of—but (prophetically) not into—the promised land. He employed all five of the symbols of the Providence myth in that famous last speech. He was the liberator; racist organizations and individuals were the antagonists; African-Americans were the chosen people; racial equality was the promised land; and the hand of God was manifest with each step closer to the promised land

of racial equality in victories like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In connection with this Providence myth usage, one of the most fascinating discussions I have in my American Foundations 101 class occurs in the “Race and Culture in America” unit. I play the video segment of Martin Luther King’s final speech to the class and then I ask them by a show of hands to indicate whether or not they feel in the fifty years since his death we have entered “the promised land” as seen by King. There is always a mixed response. I then show them a slide (see fig. 5) from a 2008 Gallup Poll that shows the results of a poll directed by a kindred question. The result is always an enlightening discussion about the good news and bad news of the poll and the differences in responses from the two demographics within the United States.

Thinking about the goals of Martin Luther King and the 1960s civil rights movement, do you think that all of their goals have been achieved, most have been achieved, only some have been achieved, or almost none of their goals have been achieved?



Jan. 17-19, 2008

GALLUP POLL

Figure 5. 2008 Gallup Poll Results (qtd. in Saad).

Of further interest is the iconic liberator symbol position Martin Luther King has come to occupy in American culture. Lydia Saad observes the following:

A December 1999 Gallup Poll of U.S. national adults found King to be tied with John F. Kennedy and Albert Einstein as one of the most admired people to have lived in the 20th century, second only to Mother Teresa. Two-thirds of Americans said King was the person they “most admired” or admired from that century, while another 22% said they somewhat admired him. Only 10% said they did not admire him.

King edged out such world leaders as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Pope John Paul II, and Winston Churchill in the 1999 ratings, and far outranked two other pacifist icons: Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi.

As evidenced by these findings, public respect for King's life and work is so prevalent in the United States today that Americans' rejection of King and his political methods some 50 years ago may be hard to conceive of, especially for modern-day schoolchildren enjoying a day off in his honor. (Saad)

Much like Washington's mythic power as an American liberator grew after his death, so, too, did that of Martin Luther King, Jr. He did not enjoy the widespread acclaim during his lifetime that he enjoys today in the hearts and minds of the American people as one of America's great liberator figures.

Barack Obama Presidential Campaign

Lastly in my “Political Ideologies in America” unit of American Foundations, I have a brief discussion about how politicians will sometimes cast themselves as being an instrument of accomplishing God's purposes or as being on the right side of history (which could be interpreted as articulations of the liberator, chosen people and hand of God symbols). In 2007, as Barack Obama announced his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States of America, he borrowed King's version of the myth and invoked it in order to achieve his political purposes.

He was invited to speak in Selma, Alabama in commemoration of Bloody Sunday. Obama was speaking to a largely African-American religious audience. He was trying to convince them that he was a viable candidate for President and that he (although he had a white mother and a Kenyan father and was not a descendant of American slaves) was one of them. He used the Providence myth to accomplish his purposes. He knew the audience members were very fluent in Providence myth language. He hoped that by showing them that he, too, was a fluent participant in the myth that he could achieve a unity similar to the one attained by the founding fathers through their invocation of the myth. There were several people in the Brown Church on that day from the previous generation which had been a part of the Civil Rights Movement. Obama began his mythologizing by acknowledging them and saying “we are in the presence today of a lot of Moseses” (Obama). He told the audience how he’d received a letter from Reverend Otis Moss, Jr.—who was also part of the Moses generation of the Civil Rights Movement—and that in the letter Reverend Moss had told him “if there’s some folks out there who are questioning whether or not you should run, just tell them to look at the story of Joshua because you’re part of the Joshua generation.” Obama continued his myth invocation:

I’m here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we’ve got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn’t cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him...we’re going to leave it to the Joshua generation to make sure it happens. There are still battles that need to be fought; some rivers that need to be crossed... The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us 90% of the way there. We still got that 10% in order to cross over to the other side... it was left to the Joshuas to finish the journey

Moses had begun, and today we're called to be the Joshuas of our time, to be the generation that finds our way across this river. (Obama).

Barack Obama, like those early founding fathers, recognized the power of the Providence myth for accomplishing political purposes. His version of the Providence myth acknowledged that while many great things had been done by the Moses generation, there was yet work to be done in order to enter the Promised Land of complete racial equality. By casting himself as a Joshua (or at least a member of the Joshua generation) in that speech, he demonstrated that the same belief story which had driven them during the Civil Rights Movement still drove him today. He was wanting to help perform the Joshua generation task of getting the chosen people into the promised land—the borders of which they (the Moses generation) had brought them within sight. John Coffey observes “Obama’s Selma speech-cum-sermon displayed his characteristic mastery of rhetorical form and revealed a man well versed in the African American tradition of Exodus politics.” Coffey then points out that Obama, having found a source of power and political traction in his Providence myth invocations, continued to employ it: “He revisited the biblical story in a number of campaign speeches, and his outreach to young religious voters was even named the Joshua Generation Project” (Coffey 2).

Such modern Providence myth invocations are not anomalous in the presidency of the United States. As I mentioned in the opening lines of this dissertation, President George W. Bush spoke of the “the ways of providence” in two State of the Union addresses. Regarding President Donald Trump, journalist Lou Dobbs recently said “God sent this President. He is a person of providence” (qtd. in Moran) and Trump’s Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, suggested that Trump was like a modern “Esther, sent by God to save Israel from Iran” (qtd. in Johnson).

In other words, the Providence myth still has enough utility that the last three Presidents of the United States have mythologized or been mythologized within that myth.

In short, from the time of the American Revolution down to the present day, the Providence myth has remained one of America's most powerful national myths. This does not mean that everybody in the nation agrees with all or any of the tenets of the Providence myth; remember, myth is part of a collective--but not necessarily a universal—imagination. But the Providence myth does continue to have utility in the modern United States of America; it is still alive as a powerful myth for many Americans.

Modern Classrooms Must Serve as Safe Zones and Training Grounds

Classrooms as Safe Zones for Mythologists

Mary Douglas points out that “talking about other people’s religions risks offending susceptibilities...” she then exhorts the mythologist or sociologist that “the moral bias has to be unloaded, and the language of exhortation and reprimand needs to be cooled. Appeal to the emotions has to be eliminated” (xv). For my purposes, I would replace Douglas’ use of the word “religions” with “myths,” because I feel the term is more comprehensive. But Douglas is right—talking about other people’s myths risks offending susceptibilities. Myths are humans’ belief stories which serve to explain why they are where they are and to explain their behavior given their current situation. Such an assumption means that myth and symbol discussions will be naturally charged by the invested beliefs of all parties involved. Because of myth’s universal nature, all students and teachers arrive in the classroom as a product of (and proponent of) their particular myths.

The last thing a student should feel upon entering a classroom is a sense of oppression or marginalization because of mythical differences—their adherence to a different belief story. The

famed author/educator, bell hooks, describes having just such an oppressive experience in her famous pedagogical work, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

Regarding her graduate school experience, she writes that it was a place where she “struggled to claim and maintain the right to be an independent thinker.” She tells how “The vast majority of our professors lacked basic communication skills...and they often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power.” These negative, oppressive classroom experiences, however, helped her to begin shaping her own pedagogy that would be “empowering” (hooks 4-5). In a similar experience, at one point in my graduate work, we were asked to give presentations on theoretical approaches. As another student presented, he shared a video clip which essentially made fun of a myth or ideological belief in which I was a participant. After the presentation, the professor—rather than providing a forum for counterpoints, or even simply moving on—made a couple of mocking remarks which condoned and agreed with the views expressed by the video. Of course, because I felt such intense ideological pressure from the professor, I didn’t dare express my disagreement. Resultantly, there were no conflicting views or myths presented and no fruitful dialogue ensued. Instead, the class moved forward as if the view presented was the only correct perspective on that topic. An updated myth-and-symbol classroom must be free from the sort of ideological bullying that hooks and I experienced and instead be empowering to students.

Educators, particularly, must master this art; they already occupy a place of power as students enter their classrooms. This imbalance of power will naturally make students uneasy about a discussion of myths. As educators act in the role of mythologists, they must model benign treatments of others’ myths. This modeling can perhaps be done most effectively as class members examine the myths found in works of literature. There is sometimes a temptation in the

absence of a past myth's participants to depict those myths as naïve and primitive. Such condescending acts by educator/mythologists can do irreparable harm. It has a doubly negative effect. First, it subconsciously trains students to mimic the educator's behavior and gives them license to marginalize defenseless or weak myth-participants. Secondly, it produces an unwillingness on the part of the students to trust the educator with their own personal myths.

Peter Munz adds that efforts to characterize "mythical thinking in the early ages of human history as a misguided, fumbling and superstitious attempt at controlling nature are based upon a serious prejudice." He further asserts that to view past myth-participants in this light is to suggest "they had no intelligence at all" (9) and adds that "Ancient myth-making represents instead an early and by no means unsubtle attempt at historical thinking," reflecting "the ancients' grasp of the universal and essential patterns of human life" (9). Jordan Peterson adds "These myths are centrally and properly concerned with the nature of successful human existence." Peterson's book, *Maps of Meaning*, tasks itself with a "careful comparative analysis" of myth in order to arrive at a universal morality—an incredibly lofty undertaking. While my pedagogical approach to myth and symbol is not nearly so comprehensive in its approach, my pedagogy does borrow from Peterson the idea that a properly grounded examination of myth can help contribute to successful human existence and interaction and diminish inter-individual and intergroup conflict.

As Douglas said, great care will have to be taken in order not to offend. The realm of myth is a sensitive area and requires tact and delicacy. Students need to feel safe and comfortable talking about myths—their own, the myths found in the literature that they're studying, and the myths of their classmates—without threatening others or feeling threatened by their classmates or instructors.

Classrooms as Training Grounds for Young Mythologists

It is tempting in one's pedagogy, then, to merely abide by the old saying and to "never talk about politics or religion in polite company." Myth, as I've demonstrated throughout this dissertation, is deeply intertwined with both of those supposedly taboo topics. In their article "Welcoming and Educating Students' Emotional Responses to Disturbing Literature," Alexandra DeSiato and Elaine O'Quinn confess that there are "days when we felt our teaching would be easier if we removed life experiences, personal uncertainties, and passion from the classroom altogether." They continue "Perhaps it would be easier, but our belief is that students would learn and engage less with the real and critical issues of certain texts, missing the potential carry-over into their lives, which is, after all, one of the main purposes of reading literature" (11). While DeSiato and O'Quinn do not use the term "myth" in their article, they are making a similar argument to the one that I am making. They acknowledge that literary works are cultural artifacts and "believe literature is a site for political and moral discourse, a reflective space for understanding and critiquing culture, and a site for personal growth and expression" (12). Failure to engage a text and to ask what myths are at work in that text "disempowers" it, "by privileging stories as aesthetic artifacts without moral meanings and fixed entities that cannot be questioned, rather than as vehicles of exploration meant to interrogate social codes and individual belief systems" (10). If we fail to explore the myths contained in a text, we have stripped it of some of its intended and unintended messages.

An educator then, rather, than shying away from the charged task of being a mythologist, should welcome it as an opportunity to train students as proficient mythologists and dialoguers. In their work, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy argue "that schools are, and ought to be, political sites." They are using

the term political “as it applies to the role of citizens within a democracy: *We are being political when we are democratically making decisions about questions that ask ‘How should we live together?’*” (4). Classrooms that discuss myths are political classrooms, and can serve as powerful catalysts to accomplish positive political purposes. Jessica Wahman writes regarding national myths “[A]s idealizations of collectively held hopes for what our country can achieve, they can inspire creative solutions to new problems and, in turn, reshape themselves with the changing times” (16-17). Wahman further astutely observes that “America’s inspirational myths are many, coexisting, conflicting, and able to effect mutual change.” (Wahman 18). Our myths shape our world. Roland Barthes confesses “whatever its mistakes, mythology is certain to participate in the making of the world” (156). A myth-and-symbol classroom can help to channel the “making of the world” in positive directions. It can provide a training ground where students learn civil discourse and the navigational skills that inevitably are required to learn of others’ myths and express their own myths—particularly when those myths are at odds. If young mythologists can learn to artfully do so in academic settings, great strides can be made in cultural, sociological and political dialogues; students will acquire the skill of civil discourse; and students will understand and appreciate those they might have previously seen as “other.” The ability to discuss the myths and mythologizers in the literature of the past without viewing them in a condescending light, as if “they had no intelligence at all” (Munz 9), will help students develop the ability to discuss modern myths and mythologizers in a similar fashion.

Mythologists within a classroom need to acknowledge that myth has repeatedly driven change in American history, but that there are many myths and the “promised land” at which each mythologizer is trying to arrive is not the same. This is why learning to dialogue about conflicts in myth is so central to an effective myth and symbol pedagogy. Pedagogues must learn

to occupy the complex position of mythologist/ mythologizer in order to have effective dialogue in our academic settings. Richard Hughes provides an example of performing this tightrope act when he says regarding national myths: “Our national myths, then, are national stories—stories that serve the nation in important and crucial ways...stories that explain why we love our country and why we have faith in the nation’s purposes. Put another way, our national myths are the means by which we affirm the meaning of the United States” (2). It seems apparent from Hughes’ use of the first-person plural pronouns “our” and “we” in his statements on national myth that he probably considers himself a mythologist *and* a mythologizer. On the one hand, he speaks myth, using it to explain his relationship to and affection for the United States of America, yet he also steps outside of myth and operates as a mythologist, observing his own mythologizing. Hughes is not oblivious to the negative possibilities of mythologizing either. He acknowledges that we often respond to our myths “in ways that are fundamentally damaging to the Republic. There are two ways in which this might happen. On the one hand, we can respond...with such depths of cynicism that we rob the nation of any meaning at all. On the other hand, we can absolutize the righteousness of the United States, confuse the ideals of the creed with the realities of the present moment, and eliminate dissent” (3). Hughes nicely simultaneously models critical mythology while acknowledging his own mythologizing. Such mythology helps the classroom to be a seedbed for brilliant, compassionate dialogues and not a breeding ground for ideologues and demagogues. The mythologizer and mythologist of any given myth should be able to sit down and have an enlightening, non-threatening discussion about the myth at hand.

As I mentioned, I teach American Foundations 101 at Brigham Young University-Idaho. Teaching this course has presented me with the opportunity to discuss the American national

Providence myth at length and on numerous occasions. As I've done so, I have had students that viewed the myth from all points along the spectrum—from those that still hold the Providence myth as one of their most important myths for understanding the United States of America and their place as citizens of the same to those that view it with contempt as an instrument of Manifest Destiny, racist agendas and exceptionalism in foreign policy. This experience has provided me with opportunities as an educator to put these skills to work, seeking simultaneously to create meaningful, political discussions while at the same time maintaining a safe zone where students feel free to express their own myths or to express discord or agreement with the myth at hand.

Educators should also be prepared to have some of their own myths challenged and be proficient in handling those challenges in a way that demonstrates conviction but is non-confrontational. Educator must constantly be on their guard against becoming “enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the classroom” (hooks 17), and instead strive to establish “a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (21). As educators model this ability to be a mythologizer of a myth that is at odds with the myths in the texts they are examining or with other myth-participants in the room and yet engage those myths civilly, students will learn to do the same. Just as I have experienced mythical oppression as a student, I have had my myths challenged as an educator. The knee-jerk response to a student's mythical dissonance is to see it as a student challenging the educator's classroom authority. Instead, an educator should see such dissonance (if expressed properly) as a positive indicator that a student feels safe being at odds with the professor and that the classroom is serving its function as a training ground for the discussion of and expression of myths.

Chapter Conclusion

Educators who implement my recommendations for an updated myth and symbol pedagogy in their examination of literature will be greatly benefited. Similarly, those educators will be greatly benefited by taking the time to discuss and demonstrate the indissoluble relationship between myth and history in order to help students understand that the two are not at odds one with another, but that they “fertilize” one another as Peter Munz puts it. Myths are powerful and have been employed to accomplish great things and horrible things historically. Because of the powerful and emotionally-charged nature of myth, educators should be excited to implement this myth and symbol pedagogy in order to provide a training ground for meaningful dialoguing and yet at the same time be vigilant in maintaining a safe zone where all feel free to dialogue.

The American national Providence myth was perhaps the most powerful national myth at the time of the American Revolution and has continued to pervade American history and society down to the present day. An examination of the Providence myth as found in literary and non-literary texts can prove very fruitful to educators who are wanting to employ this updated myth and symbol pedagogy, to historically trace a single myth, or to provide a better understanding of the United States of America by examining one of its most pervasive myths. Incorporating an examination of the Providence myth into literary studies can also help breathe new life into early American texts that may have previously seemed archaic and irrelevant to students—especially when interwoven with modern day examples of the Providence myth like the ones mentioned in this chapter. Such practices will also give context and meaning to many sociopolitical issues that are addressed in modern literature as students develop an ability to identify the Providence myth in its modern-day manifestations and variations.

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