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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Thinning the Nation? The 1976 Bicentennial and the Politics of Revolutionary Memory in a Neoliberal Age

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Abstract

This article situates the 1976 United States Bicentennial as a critical juncture in the late-twentieth-century transformation and—borrowing from Daniel Rodgers—"thinning" of American understandings of society, state, and nationhood. It demonstrates how, amid economic crises and post-Watergate disillusionment, bicentennial commemorations provided key vehicles for reconfiguring more vernacular and granular conceptualizations of American identity and political economy. Repeatedly, discourses surrounding the bicentennial intertwined pro-enterprise ideals of producerism and economic self-determination with New Left idioms of personal empowerment, authenticity, and liberation. Following three interlinked case studies of bicentennial initiatives that sought to rehumanize American capitalism and restore its moral legitimacy, this article thus traces how less explicitly political commemorative discourses articulated, diffused, and naturalized soon-prevalent pro-market ideas. Ahead of the 2026 semiquincentennial, this article thus situates commemorative occasions not as political sideshows but as key formative moments in shaping Americans' understandings of society, state, and nationhood.

On July 4, 1976, President Gerald Ford stood at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, commemorating that famed site where George Washington's Continental Army encamped during the winter of 1777–1778, "exhausted, outnumbered, and short of everything except faith" (Figure 1).[1] Framing his speech as a moment to reaffirm a "vein of iron in our national character," Ford invoked the endurance of both those Revolutionary patriots and the "pioneers" of the American frontier. Their shared legacy, he argued, offered one urgent message to Americans in the 1970s celebrating their nation's two-hundredth anniversary: "though prosperity is a good thing, though compassionate charity is a good thing, though institutional reform is a good thing, a nation survives only so long as the spirit of sacrifice and self-discipline is strong within its people."[2] The warning was lifted almost word-for-word from speechwriting advice from the economist and editor Irving Kristol, who had mused regarding the speech:

[1]This research was made possible through the support of the Sara Norton Fund at the University of Cambridge and the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation. The author is grateful for the guidance of Gary Gerstle, Katharina Rietzler, Randall J. Stephens, and Tom Arnold-Forster, the anonymous peer reviewers from *Modern American History*, and all participants at the Work-in-Progress Workshop of the 2024 Historians of the Twentieth-Century United States Conference at the University of Southampton.

[2]"7/4/76: Remarks on the Spirit of Sacrifice at Valley Forge State Park, Valley Forge, PA," box 36, "President's Speeches and Statements: Reading Copies," Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan [hereafter GFPL].

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> Are we in danger of becoming a nation of cry-babies? Are we becoming a people who panic at the least sign of adversity? Are we becoming a people with a faith not in God or in ourselves, but in a paternalistic government to shelter us from all of life's hardships and misfortunes?[3]

Figure 1. President Gerald Ford Boards the Michigan Wagon at the Bicentennial Wagon Train Pilgrimage Encampment, July 4, 1976.
Source: Wikimedia Commons, courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Such rhetorics of patriotic stoicism were widespread as the United States celebrated its bicentennial (200th anniversary) amid the aftermath of Watergate, perpetual economic crises, and a humiliating defeat in Indochina.[4]

[3]Irving Kristol to Robert Hartman, June 7, 1956, 'Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[4]On the bicentennial, see Tammy Stone-Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Continuity, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst, 2013); M. J. Rymsza-Pawlowska, *History Comes Alive: Public History and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 2017); Benjamin Alpers, *Happy Days: Images of the Pre-Sixties Past in Seventies*

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Yet Kristol's reference to "paternalistic government" foregrounds how these appeals to revolutionary sacrifice were frequently mobilized to critique an allegedly overbearing New Deal state. Indeed, the bicentennial offered a key expressive vehicle for such pro-market rhetorics that—through their criticism of "un-American" government overreach—anticipated neoliberal argumentative tendencies that would become influential within late-twentieth-century American politics. These claims were not always uniform; they were not always *explicitly* about government, capitalism, or the market. They were certainly resisted, and they keenly redeployed arguments that had, in fact, been present in American political discourse since the 1920s and 1930s. Certainly, historical actors at the time rarely employed the term "neoliberal." Nevertheless, I argue that these varied idealizations of the United States' "spirit of sacrifice" help to explain the growing appeal of pro-market ideas precisely because of their vernacular adaptability and moralized appeals to national heritage and shared values. Put simply, rather than displacing or superseding ideas concerning the state and nation, they instead reworked such rhetorics, appropriating their symbolic power to legitimize market-oriented policies and practices by defining them as exceptionally American.

These arguments, then, laid a key conceptual seed in the neoliberalization of American society precisely because they grounded pro-enterprise ideas in more vernacular, informal, and local rhetorics. Rather than a single coherent body of thought, neoliberalism here is best understood as an interconnected set of values, ideals, and argumentative tendencies. This article thus prioritizes how pro-market ideas were deployed, discussed, and debated via political experiments on the ground. During a moment of crisis in Keynesian thought, the drive to mark the bicentennial across local communities created a plethora of testing grounds for neoliberal governmentalities. The "Bicentennial Communities" program, a loose coalition of grassroots organizations launched by the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA) in 1973 that was responsible for organizing commemorative initiatives in local communities, combined a "do-it-yourself" Great Society participationism with elite-led, public–private partnerships reflective of pro-market producerism. Stepping into the vacuum left by a spendthrift federal effort, these initiatives fostered uneasy ideological alliances, naturalizing implied associations between neoliberal ideals—chiefly "pioneer" thrift and self-reliance—and the promise of an improved quality of life for Americans during the third century of their nation.

In so doing, pro-market actors branded individual initiative and antipathy to an overbearing central state as uniquely American values, obscuring the heterogeneity of pro-enterprise ideas behind "common-sense" appeals to American economic exceptionalism. My analysis thus echoes Michael Hattem's recent argument that, while individual liberty, limited government, and free enterprise had been key to popular understandings of the American Revolution since the 1920s, these motifs were only firmly cemented as the "first principles" of Revolutionary memory during the Cold War, when a distinctively American capitalist dynamism was increasingly contrasted to alleged totalitarian sameness.[5] The bicentennial exemplified this "Americanization" of Revolutionary memory, embedding these principles into a mass-mediated, nationwide pageant that fixed them more firmly in the popular imagination.

Indeed, analyzing the bicentennial also foregrounds how these principles tended to neoliberalize historical understandings themselves, suggesting that twentieth-century Americans could best honor their revolutionary beginnings by pursuing personal advancement within normative capitalist politico–economic frameworks. This individuating, or "thinning" of nationhood and revolution itself, epitomized what Wendy Brown terms "neoliberal rationality," that tendency that "transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans

America (New Brunswick, 2024), 115–48; Michael Hattem, *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History* (New Haven, 2024), 239–65; and Marc Stein, *Bicentennial: A Revolutionary History of the 1970s* (Chicago, 2026).

[5]Hattem, *Memory of '76*, 193.

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themselves, to a specific image of the economic."[6] Reducing revolutionary ideals to principles for economic conduct, this "economization" encouraged a narrowed sense of Americans' revolutionary heritage, ultimately suggesting that one revolution had proved enough.

This article extracts five key findings from the 1976 United States Bicentennial that critically complement recent histories of neoliberalism attentive to contingency, irony, and the polycentric nature of political change.[7] First, the bicentennial underscores the fundamental diversity of pro-market ideas. Historians of neoliberalism increasingly utilize city- and region-specific case studies to offer longer, more complex histories of a neoliberalism shaped by local actors with less clear-cut ideological motives.[8] Neoliberalism, Tracy Neumann argues, "did not have a single germinal moment . . . there were instead many overlapping paths to neoliberalism."[9] This article consequently practices what has been described as analysis of neoliberalism "from the outside in," an approach that traces how neoliberal ideas were expressed within broader cultural discourses shaped by parallel ideological trends and vernacular ideas about individualism, governance, and social responsibility.[10]

Second, and concomitantly, studying the bicentennial foregrounds how these trends combined within popular, less formal rhetorics. The estimated 12,566 grassroots agencies associated with the Bicentennial Communities that facilitated approximately 66,484 bicentennial events and initiatives typified the "popular marketization" by which Benjamin Holtzman argues that New York was neoliberalized "from the ground up."[11] The agencies also epitomized what historians of British neoliberalism have recently termed "popular individualism," an ideologically capacious discourse that united in celebrating ordinariness and desiring "more autonomy and control than the non-political 'ordinary people' were felt to have had in the past."[12] A wide-ranging approach to studying pro-market ideas is therefore essential to studying a period in which ideas moved unexpectedly across partisan lines and ever-shifting political coalitions, particularly at the subnational level.[13]

Third, this "outside in" approach highlights the crucial yet underrecognized role of memory politics in popularizing pro-market ideas.[14] Celebrations of a "spirit of sacrifice," such as those Ford offered at Valley Forge, bracketed such characteristics as distinctively American. These rhetorics tended to rehabilitate an increasingly critiqued capitalism as not only a moral force—imbued with a deep sense of cultural authenticity—but also the decisive historical factor underpinning America's prosperity and world leadership. Implicitly, these appeals also

[6]Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York, 2015), 9–10.

[7]For overviews of this recent literature, see Ben Jackson, "Putting Neoliberalism in Its Place," *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 3 (Sep. 2022): 982–95; and Nicholas Mulder, "The Neoliberal Transition in Intellectual and Economic History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 84, no. 3 (July 2023): 559–83.

[8]See, for instance, Elizabeth Tandy-Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013); Allen Dieterich-Ward, *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America* (Philadelphia, 2015); Tracy Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia, 2016); and Benjamin Holtzman, *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism* (New York, 2021).

[9]Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt*, 11.

[10]Jackson, "Putting Neoliberalism in its Place," 985.

[11]Holtzman, *Long Crisis*, 5. For these statistics, see ARBA, *The Bicentennial of the United States of America: A Final Report to the People*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C, 1977), viii.

[12]Emily Robinson et al., "Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s," *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 2 (June 2017): 303.

[13]See Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 8.

[14]I am inspired here by Daniel Robert McClure's recent appeal for a "deep cultural history" of neoliberalism, see Daniel Robert McClure, *Winter in America: A Cultural History of Neoliberalism, From the Sixties to the Reagan Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2021), 5; and recent calls for histories of a neoliberal "personality," see Quinn Slobodian, Priya Lal, Gary Gerstle, and Tehila Sasson, "Writing the History of Neoliberalism: A Comment," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2026): 1–17.

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disavowed U.S. capitalism's iniquitous foundations. They typically underplayed the extractive role of state power (for example, in settler colonialism) while upholding an ideal of individual initiative unencumbered by state intervention—an ideal that, historically, had largely been the preserve of white men. This discourse thus implicitly attributed the inequalities of marginalized groups to character failings, mobilizing the political sympathies of the silent majority.

Fourth, the constant improvisations of bicentennial planners between 1966 and 1976 highlight how practices of New Deal governmentality were adapted (often haphazardly) into neoliberal modes of governance, as recently stressed by Brent Cebul and Amy Offner.[15] Offner urges historians to focus on how neoliberalism "sorted out the elements of mid-century mixed economies, destroying some practices, redeploying others, and retrospectively redefining them as emblems of two different eras."[16] In turn, I suggest that the bicentennial clarifies the discursive rationale for this "sorting." Specifically, the bicentennial speeches offered by President Ford justified elite-led, disaggregated, and often racial majoritarian forms of governance that, by curtailing federal intervention, claimed to revitalize founding era principles of realism and self-dependence. This marked a discursive distancing from an allegedly overbearing mid-twentieth-century government, now situated as the great exception to America's anti-statist beginnings. Yet it simultaneously re-entrenched a white nationalist welfare state by implicitly absolving the state of responsibility for tackling entrenched social disparities. Finally, the bicentennial underscores how the popularization of pro-market ideas was intimately tied to their Americanization. Defining these traits as a unique combination of frontier graft and New World ingenuity bracketed them as distinctively American, obscuring the international roots of neoliberal thought—as increasingly emphasized by scholars—behind appeals to moral and economic exceptionalism.[17]

These findings also situate the Ford administration as an underrecognized but nonetheless significant period of intellectual transition. To echo Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer's valuable assessment of the 1970s, even Ford's so-called "accidental" presidency was "not a pause in between two great periods, but itself marked an era that witnessed the emergence of trends, contests, and conflicts that have defined the public realm ever since."[18] Ford's bicentennial speeches argued that this disaggregated "do-it-yourself" commemoration demonstrated the creative potential of a so-called "New Federalism." This New Federalism promoted elite-driven community development, intertwining the Great Society's participatory ethos with promises to bring government back into touch with disaffected members of the New Deal coalition, chiefly white Americans. During an election year, the Ford administration repeatedly portrayed the market—when unencumbered by government—as inherently moral and self-governing. Offering voters a "third century of the individual" in unpretentious language borrowed from celebrants of popular individualism, including Frank Capra, this language thus elevated the market's putatively self-governing mechanisms to holistic models for American society. Sorting the New Deal state against the model of an allegedly limited founding government, Ford thus demanded a third century promising not New Dealist social reforms, but "liberty from oppressive, heavy-handed bureaucratic government."[19] By claiming to restore founding-era

[15]Brent Cebul, *Illusions of Progress: Business, Poverty, and Liberalism in the American Century* (Philadelphia, 2023); Amy C. Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Development States in the Americas* (Princeton, 2019).

[16]Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy*, 2.

[17]Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy*; Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *Market Civilizations: Neoliberal East and South* (New York, 2022); Raewyn Connell and Nour Dados, "Where in the World Does Neoliberalism Come From?: The Market Agenda in Southern Perspective," *Theory and Society* 43, no. 2 (Mar. 2014): 117–38.

[18]Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, "Introduction," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 1–10.

[19]Quoted in Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, 2005), 76.

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conceptualizations of state responsibility, market morality, and civic identity, this vision therefore laid key discursive groundwork for the neoliberal transformations that would come to define the late-twentieth-century United States.

Conceptual Slippage and Commemorative Salvage: New Federalism, the Pro-Enterprise Movement, and Neighborhoodism in Bicentennial Planning, c.1966–1974

Traveling the United States in 1975, the British-American journalist Alistair Cooke bemoaned that "anything you can imagine in a nightmare that idiots would do to celebrate the bicentennial is being thought of." Bicentennial commemorations included a dizzying array of improvised, local initiatives. Some, including Sumner, Missouri's "Maxie"—a forty-foot-tall, over-5,000-pound statue proudly celebrated as the "World's Largest Goose"—were only tangentially related to the founding era.[20] Nevertheless, the steady localization of commemorative initiatives during the mid-1970s underscores both the improvisational nature of neoliberalization in practice and the extent to which local bicentennial initiatives incorporated elements of mid-century political economy. Examining these initiatives therefore provides another critical example of how the Ford administration celebrated the governing capabilities of elite-led public–private partnerships. These partnerships exemplified how late-twentieth-century business elites appropriated Great Society participatory rhetorics to manage and mobilize consent, particularly within marginalized communities.[21] The localist ethos that guided some 12,566 affiliates of Bicentennial Communities also turns our focus to the 1970s' new "politics of scale." This new politics adopted emerging political identities—both local and global—in ways that cut across traditional left–right ideological divisions.[22] Building on recent scholarship that has characterized the emergence of neoliberal ideas as a "distinctly unsystematic and uneven process," this section therefore demonstrates the value of tying histories of market-oriented perspectives to political experiments as they developed on the ground.[23]

First, however, it is worth briefly surveying Americans' profound anxieties concerning the future in the 1970s. For many observers born into the boosterish atmosphere of the early Cold War, the future was not what it used to be. Neoliberal beliefs were popularized following collapsing confidence in Keynesian planning as the economy followed a pattern of stagflation (inflation alongside low growth) that defied the inverse relationship between unemployment and inflation suggested by the Phillips Curve.[24] During the early 1970s, environmental works, most notably the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972), also increasingly questioned pro-growth orthodoxies. Warnings of overpopulation and energy wastage filled the airwaves, many arguing that critical choices needed to be made in 1976 to prevent disaster by 2076's Tricentennial.[25] Isaac Asimov, for example, predicted that scientific advances by 2076 would increase the global population to 30 billion. He warned, however, that if population growth was

[20]Quoted in Carey McWilliams, "Thoughts on the Bicentennial," *The Nation*, Apr. 12, 1975, 420.

[21]Cebul, *Illusions of Progress*, 20.

[22]Suleiman Osman, "Glocal America: The Politics of Scale in the 1970s," in *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams (Chicago, 2019), 244.

[23]Ibid., 255.

[24]See Robert J. Gordon, "The History of the Phillips Curve: Consensus and Bifurcation," *Economica* 78, no. 309 (Jan. 2011): 10–50.

[25]On 1970s environmentalism, see Natasha Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation: Three Mile Island and the Political Transformation of the 1970s* (New York, 2018); and J. R. McNeill "The Environment, Environmentalism and International Society in the Long 1970s" in *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, ed. Niall Ferguson et al., (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 263–78.

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not limited, "what we face is hell."[26] Finally, religious discourse during the "Year of the Evangelical" was frequently characterized by a millenarian edge. In a televised sermon welcoming in the U.S. bicentennial year, the evangelist Billy Graham warned that America would not survive as a free society "unless a dramatic change takes place within the hearts of the people of this nation." The United States was "too young to die."[27]

From the moment President Lyndon Johnson first outlined his bicentennial plans in 1966, this ever-increasing pessimism combined with anti-government sentiment to undermine the Great Society idealism of Johnson's vision. Drafts for his first bicentennial speech declared that the celebration could anticipate an "American Breakthrough . . . in which technology fully serves opportunity, affluence moves in easy tandem with justice, and every man walks with head high in the tonic air of self-respect."[28] Planners in the late 1960s consequently made abortive proposals for a "Commission on 1976," a "domestic peace corps . . . concerned not with today's legislation but with tomorrow's dilemmas."[29] Their planned initiatives chiefly sought to combat the "plight of cities"—the British consulate in Philadelphia adjudged that these proposals were designed "to appease the poor and the blacks," yet "finally grew out of all proportion."[30] Likewise, President Nixon's bicentennial speeches persistently evoked national goals, suggesting that Americans by 1976 could "achieve as much progress in achieving our ultimate goal as we did in all the history of the country."[31] 1976 had to be celebrated "on the move," Nixon urged, bringing "exertion as well as congratulation."[32] He particularly encouraged the commemoration to focus on quality of life, considering this a suitably modern reframing of Thomas Jefferson's pursuit of happiness.[33] This idea—centered on individual prosperity and flourishing within a broader context of presumed societal affluence—indicates the emergent neoliberal logics of Nixon and Ford's bicentennial.

As plans for a central bicentennial exposition collapsed, the scaling back of centralized commemorations only accelerated growing business interest in leveraging the bicentennial for pro-enterprise messaging.[34] The commemoration thus became a key discursive vehicle for longer-standing pro-enterprise campaigns, originating during the New Deal, which protested government overreach by celebrating "free enterprise" as a historic yet imperiled cornerstone of American freedoms.[35] These campaigns tended to systematize free enterprise as a schema for

[26]Isaac Asimov, "A Great New World Awaits: If Only We Choose Carefully," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 4, 1976, K4.

[27]Billy Graham, "Our Bicentennial," Reprinted in *Congressional Record*, 94 Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 22, 1976, 710–12. On evangelism, see Daniel K. Williams, *The Election of the Evangelical: Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, and the Presidential Contest of 1976* (Lawrence, 2020).

[28]Joseph Califano to Robert E. Kintner, June 30, 1966, FG 605 "American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission 7/22/66," box 1597, Papers of Joseph A. Califano, LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, Texas.

[29]Quoted in Virginia Myhaver, "The 'New American Revolution': Cultural Politics, New Federalism, and the 1976 Bicentennial" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2014), 39.

[30]C. A. Thompson to D. S. Cape Esq, "Philadelphia Monthly Letter February 1971," Mar. 3, 1971, "Bicentennial Celebrations of American Revolution: Plans, Preparations; Possible Liaison Committee in UK (folder 1)," FCO 82–88, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London, UK.

[31]Richard Nixon, "Remarks to Members of the ARBC," Oct. 8, 1969, in Richard Nixon, *Richard Nixon: 1969: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 769–71.

[32]Richard Nixon, "Special Message to the Congress Outlining Plans for the Bicentennial Observance in the District of Columbia," The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255577 (accessed Oct. 15, 2020).

[33]Richard Nixon, "Message to the Congress Transmitting the Report of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission," Sept. 11, 1970, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240485 (accessed Oct. 15, 2020).

[34]Stone-Gordon, *Spirit of 1976*.

[35]Lawrence B. Glickman, *Free Enterprise: An American History* (New Haven, 2019). See also Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York, 2010); Jennifer A. Delton, *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton, 2020); and Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets Since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

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sociopolitical life that dated back to the founding and preceded the postwar state's more strenuous interventionism. "Free enterprisers," Lawrence Glickman argues, "did not understand their discourse as extreme or radical or even necessarily conservative. It was, in their view, simply American."[36] Increased public scrutiny during the 1970s had led many businesses to accelerate their pro-enterprise campaigning.[37] Adopting bicentennial-themed historic presentations consequently presented these embattled corporations as value-driven, independent enterprises both shaped by and tasked with safeguarding supposed frontier values of ingenuity and initiative.

It is particularly striking how presidential rhetoric translated this miscellany of initiatives into a nationwide testament to the creative potential of public–private community development partnerships, anticipating the business producerism that would soon become ever-present in neoliberal thinking.[38] For both Presidents Nixon and Ford, this increasingly disaggregated bicentennial planning specifically demonstrated the creative powers of New Federalism. In Nixon's words, New Federalism held that "the role of the Federal Government as we approach our third century of independence should not be to dominate any facet of American life, but rather to aid and encourage people, communities and institutions to deal with as many of the difficulties and challenges facing them as possible."[39] Bicentennial planning could be a laboratory for this participatory nationalism, triggering a "chain reaction of tens of thousands of individual celebrations . . . planned and carried out by citizens in every part of America."[40] The American Revolution Bicentennial Commission (ARBC)—the national body that organized commemorations until 1973—likewise pledged to motivate rather than micromanage grassroots initiatives. Indeed, they repeatedly argued that the commemoration could encourage Americans to believe that local institutions and communities could manage their own problems.[41] This celebration of community self-reliance wholly benefitted an ARBC keen to stress that it was "not an agency for social action, civil rights or public welfare."[42]

New Federalism's mediating structures were the 12,566 Bicentennial Communities affiliates, local groups uniting federal bodies, activists, and businesses to which the American Revolutionary Bicentennial Administration (the ARBC's replacement) provided grants-in-aid. These communities eventually covered 90 percent of the population, planning approximately 66,484 events.[43] This supposedly constituted the "most massive volunteer movement in peacetime history."[44] Yet, far from being apolitical party planners, Bicentennial Communities should be understood as a vast network of regulatory experiments, i.e., scaled projects that asserted, amplified, and replicated market-disciplinary modes of governance.[45]

[36]Glickman, *Free Enterprise*, 11.

[37]Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA* (Princeton, 2013), 66.

[38]Cebul, *Illusions of Progress*, 174.

[39]Richard Nixon, "State of the Union Message to the Congress: Overview and Goals," Feb. 2, 1973, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255358 (accessed Dec. 12, 2020).

[40]Richard Nixon, "Radio Address About the American Revolution Bicentennial," Mar. 10, 1974, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/256464 (accessed Dec. 12, 2020).

[41]See Julie Longo, "In the Spirit of '76': The American Revolution Bicentennial and Detroit Redevelopment, 1966–1983" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 2003), 138.

[42]U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 2 of the Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives Ninety-Third Congress First Session on HR 3695 and HR 3967: To Establish the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration*, 93 Cong., 1st sess., Mar. 14 and 15, 1973, 296.

[43]ARBA, *The Bicentennial of the United States of America: A Final Report to the People*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., 1977), viii.

[44]ARBA, *The Bicentennial of the United States of America: A Final Report to the People*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1977), 211. See also ARBA, *First Report to the Congress Pursuant to Public Law-93 179*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1975), especially 1–3.

[45]Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore, "After Neoliberalization?," *Globalizations* 7, no. 3 (2010): 335.

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This mosaic of initiatives also evidences the influential 1970s movement of neighborhoodism, a force that united both left- and right-wing ideas in celebrating intimacy, voluntarism, and smallness. Vitally, neighborhoodism exemplifies how pro-market thought during the 1970s frequently echoed countercultural ideals of self-determination and authenticity.[46] This synthesis was widespread during the bicentennial, held during what Ford proclaimed to be the "Year of the Neighborhood."[47] Bicentennial planning thus corroborates the influential framing of the 1970s as an "Age of Fracture" witnessing a retreat from the national toward "smaller communities of virtue and engagement—if not communities composed simply of one rights-holding self."[48] More broadly, it also evidences Daniel Immerwahr's contention that "the crisis of the liberal state unleashed market ideologies but also, running alongside them, communitarian ones."[49] In this way, Bicentennial Communities embodied a uniquely hybrid vision of governance: simultaneously decentralizing authority, fostering civic engagement, and subtly advancing market-oriented logics within local frameworks of self-reliance.

This emphasis on grassroots initiative was epitomized by programs including Johnny Horizons, the environmental education initiative named after its cowboy-esque mascot. This campaign translated the bicentennial's broader emphasis on participatory civic engagement into an environmentalism that privileged individual voluntarism and self-help, discourses focal to neoliberalism.[50] In a widely publicized letter, ARBC's chair, David Mahoney, argued that the program "contains the full measure of both environmental education and action 'on the ground' designed to attract the 'millions of helping hands' our President has said are urgently needed to clean up our country." Johnny Horizons therefore typified neoliberalism's tendency towards the "responsibilization of the self," encouraging an environmentalism that stressed individuals' rather than corporations' responses to environmental degradation. As Mahoney argued, it expressed an "emerging environmental ethic which seeks to establish a renewed attitude on the part of each individual to prevent litter, minimize pollution, and curb abuses of our natural resources."[51] Litter picking was the main concrete emphasis of the program. Even then, to commemorate this environmental initiative, the Ford Motor Company distributed 150,000 activity books; Safeway Stores over eight million shopping bags with a Johnny Horizon message encouraging recycling; and Burger Chef Systems Inc. two million full-color "Stop Pollution" posters.[52]

Altogether, such paradoxical programs illustrate the uneasy interplay between pro-enterprise campaigning, neighborhoodism, and New Federalism that became increasingly pivotal to bicentennial planning by Ford's presidency. This history of failed plans and successful improvisations powerfully elucidates both the importance of the politics of scale and the ideological heterogeneity of the actors and institutions that mobilized rhetorics of community development during this period.[53] Frequently, these plans combined the Great Society's participatory ethos with a pro-market business producerism. Bicentennial Communities therefore

[46]Suleiman Osman, "The Decade of the Neighborhood," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 106–27.

[47]Myhaver, "The 'New American Revolution,'" 44.

[48]Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 198.

[49]Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 175.

[50]Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt*, 52.

[51]"Johnny Horizon Based on America's Emerging New Environmental Ethic," *Bicentennial Newsletter* 4, no. 4 (May 1973), 4.

[52]"Business and Industry Cooperate with Human Resources, Dollars," *Bicentennial Newsletter* 4, no. 4 (May 1973), 7.

[53]Brian D. Goldstein, *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), 10–1.

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offers powerful avenues for future research into neoliberalization from below, attesting to Julia Brown-Bernstein's recent summation that "the non-elite history of neoliberalism, and how local politicians, and their constituents, gradually succumbed to its dominance, is, perhaps, our best vista into how neoliberal ideology gained hegemony in the United States."[54] Vitally, however, this approach to historicizing neoliberalism should not ignore elites entirely; rather, it should focus on how they co-opted vernacular languages and ideas, emphasizing persuasive adaptability rather than uncompromising dominance.

Indeed, throughout bicentennial planning, monied elites funded parallel programs to justify elite and often business-led public–private partnerships. These programs borrowed from New Left motifs of personal autonomy, naturalizing and normalizing market rationalities through popular individualist references to the American past. Tracing these programs consequently evidences how these historical actors mobilized a pre-existing popular individualism for their own political projects, making a turn against overbearing government seem to arise "from the ground up." Studying perhaps the most influential of those programs—the National Committee for the Bicentennial Era—thus once more attests to the uneasy intellectual alliances critical to the popularization of neoliberal principles during this period.

Renewing and Rehumanizing Capitalism: Countercultural Theory, Pro-Enterprise Ideas, and the National Committee for the Bicentennial Era

The National Committee for the Bicentennial Era (NCBE) epitomized this elite-led confluence of neoliberal economics, new federalism, popular individualism, and counterculturalism. An initiative that emerged from the Rockefeller Foundation, the NCBE was guided by John D. Rockefeller III (1906–1978). The grandson of Standard Oil co-founder John D. Rockefeller and the eldest son of John D. Rockefeller Jr., John D. Rockefeller III had long considered the future of capitalism through his work on population planning, particularly when leading Nixon's Commission on Population and the American Future.[55] Indeed, the NCBE felicitously combined Rockefeller's two leading interests: population planning and "fostering a better understanding and appreciation of democracy."[56] For Rockefeller, the bicentennial presented an opportune moment for celebrating America's essential values, something he had long encouraged. Pro-democracy education had, for example, catalyzed his work revitalizing Colonial Williamsburg, the philanthropist noting that the average American "is against militarism, totalitarism *[sic]*, communism, Nazism etc. but is not really for democracy or anything else."[57] Cultivating public support for democracy, both symbolically and intellectually, was thus essential to safeguarding American capitalism from transformational or "revolutionary" critique.

This commitment to nurturing interest in democracy shaped Rockefeller's expansive yet guarded engagement with countercultural ideas during the 1970s, a period aides dubbed his "second childhood." Indeed, he reportedly would have endorsed George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign were it not for the risk of embarrassing his brother Nelson Rockefeller,

[54]Julia Brown-Bernstein, "Bringing 'The Plant' to Life: Imagining Community Revitalization in the Neoliberal Era," *Modern American History* 7, no. 1 (2024): 75.

[55]Quoted in John Ensor Harr and Peter J. Johnson, *The Rockefeller Century* (New York, 1988), 368. On Rockefeller's contribution to President Nixon's Population Commission, see Derek S. Hoff "'Kick That Population Commission in the Ass': The Nixon Administration, the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, and the Defusing of the Population Bomb," *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 23–63.

[56]Harr and Johnson, *Rockefeller Century*, 423.

[57]Ibid.

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the Republican governor of New York.[58] Hearing of his daughters' exposure to student activism at Stanford University, Rockefeller III consistently dedicated money to exploring youth issues, creating a Youth Task Force to examine the student movement and commissioning several surveys of student opinion.[59] Indicating the privileging of elite-led, knowledge-driven networks also key to the Bicentennial Communities, his initiatives typically emphasized communicating shared values across the generation gap.[60] Introducing one volume of surveys, he argued that the participants "typify the cross-generation and cross-culture collaboration necessary to the well-being of our society." Understanding students' beliefs represented a crucial step toward meaningful dialogue that could benefit society as a whole.[61] Privately, Rockefeller's pollster also noted that channeling young people's energies along "constructive lines" could put the philanthropist in an "ideal position of leadership."[62]

Certainly, in response to these emerging concerns, Rockefeller prioritized reforming rather than revolutionizing capitalism. As one New York school principal observed, "his 'thing' is management. Youth wants *[sic]* basic change in the Establishment not surveys, talks, and meetings. Cooperation will not solve alienation."[63] For Rockefeller, countercultural protests strained but did not break the prevailing social order. In fact, they only furthered a quintessentially American tradition of self-improvement. Protestors justly encouraged Americans to become "involved personally and positively in the great drama of our times rather than feeling ourselves to be weary and impotent victims of imponderable forces."[64] He therefore argued that they were the "elite of our young people," concluding that their elders had to focus on sustaining rather than suppressing this "youth revolution."[65]

These concerns led Rockefeller to write *The Second American Revolution* (1973), a short yet remarkable bicentennial manifesto evidencing his intent to revitalize a humanistic capitalism by combining countercultural theory with a renewed emphasis on individual initiative. The work predicted an upcoming "humanistic revolution" driven by the desire to create a "person-centered society" that would leverage economic and technological change to encourage humanistic values.[66] Here, Rockefeller cited Charles Reich's paean to countercultural consciousness, *The Greening of America* (1970), to suggest that Americans were revolutionizing their understandings of the priorities of life.[67] Self-identified political moderates like Rockefeller had to steer this revolution, to "self-renew" America's institutions in order to "give direction to the runaway locomotive of change."[68] In the long run, this would benefit the establishment, improving every Americans' quality of life. By contrast, repressing revolution would merely lead to "friendly fascism," a term Rockefeller adopted from the social scientist Bertram Myron Gross, who demanded a humanistic, Scandinavian-style capitalism to counter the hegemony of big business and government.[69]

The cross-fertilization of countercultural and neoliberal ideals evident in Rockefeller's citations of Reich and Gross was also apparent in his fascination with human capital theory,

58Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty* (New York, 1976), 377.

59Theresa M. Richardson, "Research on Youth in an Age of Complexity: The Rockefeller Youth Task Force and Daniel Yankelovich, 1965–1975," *American Educational History Journal* 35, no. 1 (2008): 185–203.

60On mid-twentieth-century American philanthropy's emphasis on networking, see Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York, 2012), 259.

61Daniel Yankelovich, *The Changing Values on Campus* (Washington, DC, 1972), ix–x.

62Richardson, "Research on Youth in an Age of Complexity," 189.

63Ibid., 195.

64John D. Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution: Some Personal Observations* (New York, 1973), xv.

65"John D. Rockefeller 3rd Calls for Support of 'Youth Revolt,'" *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 1968, 28.

66Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 6.

67Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (London, 1971).

68Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 7.

69Ibid., 8.

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an interest shared with many neoliberal thinkers of the period.[70] The chief focus of Rockefeller's humanistic capitalism would be fostering "conditions which provide genuine opportunity for each member to develop his full human potential."[71] When discussing overpopulation, Rockefeller had long evoked such higher, third-dimensional needs. He spoke of self-actualization with the psychologist Abraham Maslow weeks before Maslow's death and urged the 1974 United Nations World Population Conference to revise prevailing ideas about growth so that it was "consciously and deliberately directed toward human goals."[72] These proposals paralleled *The Second American Revolution*'s and Rockefeller's engagement with the distinctly countercultural Human Potential Movement. In the book's acknowledgements, Rockefeller noted a "special intellectual debt" to Willis Harman, an engineer and futurist who encouraged a "self-realization ethic" to counter the dehumanizing effects of industrialization.[73] Echoing Charles Silberman's *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970), Rockefeller also encouraged a student-centered pedagogy fit for a society reaching a reckoning point on the road to post-industrialism.[74]

Still, like many pro-market thinkers during the bicentennial, Rockefeller continued to celebrate individual advancement within a capitalist system as the most rewarding route to self-actualization.[75] Like the Bicentennial Communities, he therefore exemplified a more centrist form of what Joshua Clark Davis terms participatory economics: "the idea that citizens could regain power over their lives by making their daily experiences in capitalist society more humane, authentic, and even politically progressive or radical."[76] Promoting *The Second American Revolution*, Rockefeller reflected that "humanism versus materialism, that's really the heart and soul of it." He thus advocated not only for further privatization but also for abolishing assembly lines, growing employee stock acquisition schemes, and broadening ownership of the means of production.[77]

Vitally, this vision of a more humanistic capitalism promoted individual initiative while simultaneously retaining a role for the state. Granted, Rockefeller warned that "the Bicentennial will be meaningful and productive [only] if it becomes an era during which the power of private initiative is rediscovered."[78] The federal government had to facilitate participation without imperiling personal self-reliance.[79] Notably, however, while Rockefeller lauded private initiative, he deemed its connotations of complete laissez-faire "unfortunate." Private initiative was not anti-statist but merely represented "the decision by individuals to become involved and committed to something larger than themselves." This was "democracy in action."[80] Rockefeller consequently concluded that "what counts perhaps is not specific values, but the recognition by all of us that we need to reach beyond the material and concern ourselves with what makes life

[70]On human capital theory as an example of this confluence, see Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (New York, 2022), 90–3; and Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, 2001), 141–2.

[71]Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 39.

[72]George V. R. Smith, "Can Planning Slow Down the Population Explosion?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 13, 1974, SM10.

[73]Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, x. See also Willis Harman "Humanistic Capitalism: Another Alternative," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1974): 5–32.

[74]On Silberman, see Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 136; and Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York, 1971). On "reckoning point," see Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 79.

[75]Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 183.

[76]Joshua Clark Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs* (New York, 2020), 3.

[77]Dee Wedemeyer, "A Revolutionary Rockefeller," *The Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 6, 1973, 7.

[78]Rockefeller III, *The Second American Revolution*, 175.

[79]Ibid., 108.

[80]Ibid., 178.

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worth living—and loving."[81] In this way, his vision sought to channel the emancipating powers of individual initiative into civic engagement with a more decentralized, humanistic state.

Even the name of Rockefeller's eventual bicentennial project reflected this emphasis on individual advancement. The Citizens Committee for the Bicentennial Era, incorporated in January 1974, aimed to "explore programs of private support to complement public efforts for the Bicentennial Era."[82] The Era concept proposed that the bicentennial should commence a "period of national achievement" lasting until 1987, the U.S. Constitution Bicentennial.[83] Yet this framing of "achievement" was firmly individualistic, prioritizing personal advancement and fulfillment within capitalism. As Rockefeller declared that April, this era would encourage a "revolution of fulfillment, not of overthrow." That pragmatic patriotism—exercised by individual Americans—could revive the forefathers' blend of idealism and realism, encouraging "the classic American manner of taking initiative to solve our problems." Once more, he warned that the government could only support rather than lead this project, declaring that "just as 200 years ago, it is the people who will determine the outcome." Indicating perhaps most powerfully the intellectual heterogeneity of popular individualism, Rockefeller even praised the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation and the New Left-aligned People's Bicentennial Commission as successful "private sector efforts" that celebrated the value of individual initiative.[84] Paradoxically interpreting protest movements that challenged market-oriented celebrations of 1976 through the lens of entrepreneurial initiative, Rockefeller thus slighted the structural critique critical to the very countercultural ideas he adopted. Once more, this statement evidences how his engagement with counterculturalism remained profoundly selective, centered on "self-renewing" rather than revolutionizing capitalism.

Increasingly frustrated by federal inaction, Rockefeller revived his plans that November by forming the National Committee for the Bicentennial Era (NCBE) to encourage "a serious and meaningful opportunity rather than a superficial birthday party."[85] This decision evidenced his growing frustrations with the federal bicentennial commemoration—as one aide later recalled, "it was going to be a disaster. This was when we began to get interested. We didn't just go rushing in."[86] The goals of the NCBE were strictly communicative, focusing on disseminating a Bicentennial Declaration that asserted the necessity of rediscovering the powers of individual initiative. Planning memos anticipated "the single most important effort of the entire Bicentennial," one that would offer a "bargain" to prospective donors, whose support would "clearly constitute important public service."[87] The project's eventual donors included Mobil Oil Corp., Bank of America, IBM, and the aerospace giant TRW Inc.

While reliant on business support, the NCBE still engaged extensively with government, underscoring how pro-market commemorations always partly relied on the powers of the state.

[81]Ibid., 184.

[82]"Articles of Incorporation of Citizens Committee for the Bicentennial Era," attachment to Leonard L. Silverstein to William D. Ruckelhaus, Jan. 7, 1974, "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York [hereafter RAC].

[83]John Rockefeller III, "Humanizing America: John D. Rockefeller Proposed a 13-Year Bicentennial," *Green Bay Press-Gazette Family Weekly*, Jan. 13, 1974, 4.

[84]John Rockefeller III, "My Turn: Taking the Bicentennial Seriously," *Newsweek*, 83, no. 13 (Apr. 1 1974): 11. On the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation and the People's Bicentennial Commission respectively, see Leon Litwack "Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (Sept. 1987): 315–37; and Simon Hall, "'Guerrilla Theater . . . in the Guise of Red, White and Blue Bunting': The People's Bicentennial Commission and the Politics of (Un-) Americanism," *Journal of American Studies* 52, no. 1 (Feb. 2018): 114–36.

[85]"Application for Recognition of Exemption under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code," Undated, "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974-1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

[86]Collier and Horowitz, *Rockefellers*, 381.

[87]J. E. Harr to John Rockefeller III, Sept. 25, 1974, "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

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As Elizabeth Tandy Shermer argues, debates over neoliberalism rarely pitched statism against anti-statism. They instead centered on questions of "how state power was deployed, who the state was intended to serve, and what types of policies the state was pursuing or curtailing."[88] That winter, Rockefeller networked extensively, meeting with Ford and writing to his brother Nelson—now Ford's vice president—warning that businesses would only invest in the Bicentennial Era concept if the president led the way. Were Ford to publicly read the declaration, it would reassure them and encourage investment.[89] When Ford's advisers refused, Rockefeller went so far as to write back, drafting a letter to be sent by Ford declaring the president's "wholehearted support" of his initiative.[90]

This declaration was indeed the program's cornerstone, being launched in forty major newspaper market areas.[91] It encouraged, once more, a second American revolution "of fulfilment, of fresh purposes, and of new directions," urging "tough-minded planning and accomplishment." Individuals, not government, had the primary responsibility for national advancement. It concluded by arguing that the American democratic experiment itself would fail "unless the Bicentennial era becomes a time when we once again assert the primacy of individual initiative in moving our country forward." The signees included a remarkable cross-section of Americans, evidencing both popular individualism's wide-ranging political appeal and the declaration's call to "every color, creed, age, and ethnic background."[92] Notable signatories included famed broadcaster Walter Cronkite; civil rights leaders, including Roy Wilkins and Vernon Jordan; former government officials, including Robert McNamara; academics, including Margaret Mead and Jonas Salk; trade unionists, including George Meany; and even the violinist Isaac Stern and tennis player Billie Jean King. Commentators warned, however, that while it was "impossible to quarrel with the committee's high-minded sentiments[, i]t is almost as difficult to translate them from the abstract into concrete programs. Presumably, that is where the individual initiative enters in."[93] While the declaration's soaring rhetoric rallied a diverse chorus of prominent voices, the true test therefore remained: to transform these abstract ideals into precisely the tangible acts of individual initiative the declaration so fervently championed.

Indeed, by March 1975, Rockefeller aides bemoaned a "truly dismal" response. Ordinary Americans could not relate abstract ideals to the age's harsh material realities. The declaration consequently needed to spotlight tangible bicentennial projects where individuals could demonstrate initiative.[94] Popular individualism, local neighborhoodism, and pragmatic patriotism thus combined as the NCBE worked up from the individual across the politics of scale, asserting that "what we all do as individuals can make a difference to our block, our community, and to the nation."[95] NCBE adverts encouraged readers to send their copy to their local church, union, or firm and pin it on community bulletin boards.[96] By May 1975, the NCBE had received 100,000 requests for reprints.[97]

[88]Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism*, 12.

[89]John Rockefeller III to Nelson Rockefeller, Jan. 3, 1975, "1975/07/31: Federal Agency Bicentennial Task Force," box 49, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[90]John Rockefeller III to Philip Buchen, Feb. 19, 1975, "American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (1)," box 1, Philip Buchen Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[91]"Minutes of Meeting of the NCBE Board of Directors, February 20, 1975," "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

[92]Michael T. Kaufmann, "Bicentennial Goal: 'Back to Fundamentals,'" *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1975, 28.

[93]"Bicentennial Idealism," *Des Moines Tribune*, Feb. 28, 1975, 10.

[94]Richard W. Barrett to John Rockefeller III, Mar. 10, 1975, "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

[95]Gary Knisely to Richard W. Barrett, Mar. 18, 1975, "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

[96]"What You Can Do About the Bicentennial," *The News and Observer*, Mar. 31, 1975, 14.

[97]Draft Letter from John Rockefeller III to Declaration Signers, Undated, "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 447, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

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Like Rockefeller's student-related initiatives, the NCBE primarily encouraged elite-led programs to reconcile divided societal groups. Indicatively, a "Work in America Institute" would investigate the quality of working life, creating "a neutral and objective resource to bridge the adversary relationship of management and labor to help improve both productivity and the quality of working life in the third century."[98] The proposal was quintessentially neoliberal, framing labor relations as a technical optimization problem and prioritizing productivity over systemic critique as a means to empower labor. The NCBE particularly celebrated its "American Issue Forum." Developed from an idea raised by Walter Cronkite, this nationwide seminar program would discuss nine monthly themes, including "Certain Unalienable Rights." Ford officials lauded this "perfect example of private/Federal partnership, with Governments *[sic]* merely coordinating and advancing interest developed in the private sector."[99] Another official encouraged Ford to endorse the effort, declaring that "no past Administration has ever had, and no Administration is ever again likely to have, the opportunity to announce any program or policy which has such an incredible range of support."[100] Allegations spread, however, that the forum emanated from the "artsy, crafty bunch," one leading bicentennial planner predicting that it would "go over the heads of 90 percent of the people."[101] Ultimately, then, the NCBE's initiatives—from labor studies to the American Issue Forum—embodied a distinctly neoliberal approach to social improvement that was top down, elite driven, and focused on managerial problem solving, often appearing disconnected from the very ordinary Americans it purported to represent.

In sum, Rockefeller's efforts once more evidence both the serial improvisations and intellectual heterogeneity of private-sector bicentennial planning. Like many twentieth-century American nonprofits, the NCBE critiqued federal commemorations and celebrated its independence from the state while determinedly seeking support in Washington.[102] Reluctant to fund concrete projects, the NCBE instead publicized local initiatives that demonstrated the powers of individual responsibility, considering self-responsibilization "an antidote to the apathy and alienation we have heard so much about in recent years."[103] Echoing Ford and many American businesses during the bicentennial, Rockefeller thus defined 1976 as primarily a moment for individual advancement within the normative bounds of capitalism, reiterating claims of U.S. economic exceptionalism that naturalized American capitalist primacy in a Cold War world.

Particularly during a decade when a conservative "counterrevolution from above" shifted the philanthropic landscape rightward, the NCBE thus illustrates liberal philanthropy's blend of New Left and pro-market rhetorics.[104] Seeking to rehumanize and "self-renew" but not overturn capitalism, Rockefeller's popular individualism welded New Left self-actualization to neoliberalism's responsibilization of the self through human capital theory. Taken together, the

[98]"Notes from NCBE Breakfast Meeting, June 18, 1975," "National Committee for the Bicentennial Era, 1974–1976," folder 448, box 53, JDR III Fund Records, RAC.

[99]"Schedule Proposal for the President" from Theodore Marrs, Apr. 10, 1975, "American Issues Forum," box 64, John Marsh Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[100]Ronald Berman to Theodore Marrs, Apr. 22, 1975, "American Issues Forum," box 64, John Marsh Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[101]Russ Rourke to Jack Marsh, June 4, 1975, "American Issues Forum," box 64, John Marsh Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[102]See Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century*, 260.

[103]John Rockefeller III to Albert H. Quie, July 23, 1976, "Bicentennial Observance (1976): Correspondence 05," National Endowment for the Humanities Collection, Senatorial Papers of Claiborne Pell, University of Rhode Island Digital Commons, Kingston, Rhode Island.

[104]The mid-1970s saw the foundation of the Heritage Foundation and Cato Exchange and the revitalization of the American Enterprise Institute. See Alice O'Connor, "Financing the Counterrevolution," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservatives in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 148–68.

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variety of the declaration's signers and such wide-ranging influences consequently underscore the intellectual cross-proliferation vital to the pro-market ideas of capitalist futurity expressed during the bicentennial.

The "Third Century of the Individual": Gerald Ford's Bicentennial Speeches and New Realism

Few Americans in 1976, however, possessed a more influential platform from which to project America's future than the president, Gerald Ford. While historians have largely neglected Ford's bicentennial, his speeches commemorating the anniversary profoundly epitomize the popular individualist elements of bicentennial discourse. Like his Valley Forge address, they typically celebrated individual achievement while simultaneously critiquing federal overreach. In an election year, Ford promised Americans a "third century of the individual" that would restore the self-reliance he considered foundational to American prosperity. His economic ideas were articulated in unadorned, basic language. Recognizing that their president was "not a poet but a doer," Ford staffers aimed to write direct and action-oriented speeches.[105] The goal was to "personalize, rather than theorize."[106] Oriented around the theme of an "American Adventure," these speeches centered white male frontier endeavor as the engine of American prosperity, romanticizing settler colonialism as a testament to the United States' ability to civilize and interconnect an increasingly interdependent world. Simultaneously, they obscured internal divides concerning Ford's economic policy and attempted to make a virtue (if, perhaps, unsuccessfully) of his prevailing reputation for common-sense pragmatism.

After all, Ford—the United States' first president not to have been elected to the vice presidency or the presidency—was not conventionally associated with long-term vision. His domestic policy advisor, Jim Cannon, recalled that "any suggestion that he [Ford] articulate soaring goals or a vision for America left him embarrassed."[107] Historians have broadly concurred: John Sloan describes Ford's economic policy as "groping towards a macrotheme."[108] Foregrounding New Federalism, however, underscores how Ford's bicentennial centered community-driven local interventions within this broader popular individualist rhetoric. His bicentennial speeches, then, were not atheoretical. Rather, they attempted to humanize and relate to historical American values a politics of "anti-government governance." This rhetoric foregrounded the inefficiencies and limitations of government intervention, seeking less to deploy government to remedy social issues than to address the problems created by government action and overreach.[109] Ford's bicentennial thus cloaked market-oriented proposals in the language of local empowerment, recasting federal retrenchment as a patriotic return to American "frontier" values that were both the product and guarantor of national prosperity.

Briefly put, Ford staffers had long emphasized the necessity of "glorifying revolution and stability at the same time." Ford's so-called "intellectual-in-residence," Robert Goldwin—a scholar of John Locke closely associated with the neoliberal American Enterprise Institute—heralded a "law-and-order revolution" that succeeded "exactly because it led to stability." It consumed neither its ideals nor its leaders.[110] Ford's bicentennial speeches urged Americans to

[105]"Bicentennial Series: The American Adventure," "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[106]Jim Cannon to Robert T. Hartmann, c. June, 1976, "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[107]James Cannon, *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History* (New York, 1994), 395.

[108]John W. Sloan "Groping Towards a Macrotheme: Economic Policymaking in the Ford Administration" in *Gerald R. Ford and the Politics of Post-Watergate America*, vol. 3, eds. Bernard J. Firestone and Alexej Ugrinsky (Westport, 1993), 277–308.

[109]Cebul, *Illusions of Progress*, 203.

[110]Robert Goldwin to Marsh et al., June 22, 1975, "Bicentennial: General (2)," box 65, John Marsh Files, GFPL.

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keep faith with this continuing revolution, defiantly defending America's constitutional mechanisms and historical innocence despite Watergate. Goldwin argued further, "we have made mistakes time and again in our history; we have gone down false paths; we have lost our way. We definitely are not angels. But our principles are sound." Americans could not dwell on the past; they had to build on it.[111] As Ford's *de facto* bicentennial adviser John Marsh explained, this stance was vital to protect the United States' revolutionary heritage from "scavengers of revolution"—those international and domestic actors who alleged that the Cold War–era United States was itself an imperial power. Despite recent crises, Americans did not have to appear "hangdog and half-ashamed." The United States Bicentennial thus "relate[d] basic values to the current situation," encouraging "re-examination and new dedication, not self-flagellation."[112]

If Americans rarely shared this enthusiasm for economic self-discipline, Ford's New England tour of April 1975 offered an opportune moment to recall revolutionary resolve. This tour coincided with the two-hundredth anniversary of the start of the American Revolutionary War. Accordingly, Marsh encouraged Ford's speechwriters to describe "royal oppression which called on sacrifice" in order to "relate basic values to the current situation." He even liberally paraphrased Rudyard Kipling to clarify this message of resilience amid challenging times: "Conflict, content, delight the ages/Slow bought gains they perish in the night/Only ourselves remain to face the naked perils." By invoking the self-reliance that Kipling celebrated amid the outbreak of World War I, Ford could moralize his previous calls for financial responsibility, energy independence, and restraints on spending, concluding—in language strikingly reminiscent of Rockefeller's—with a "call to individuals for national achievement."[113] Ford's counsel Roderick Hills (the Securities and Exchange Commission's chairman) praised these "excellent" suggestions. Ford's speeches stressing economic goals were his most effective and nothing would more clearly demonstrate the continued vitality of American capitalism than "lead[ing] the free world out of its recession during the celebration of its 200th birthday." Americans were "willing to take a tough speech on the fact that we must not put any more cuffs on capitalism."[114] Unshackled capitalism, then, was not merely an economic necessity but the truest expression of American global leadership.

In moralizing anti-government governance, the administration also cast the New Deal as an un-American aberration. This framing was epitomized by Ford's speech to the New Hampshire State Legislature, which observed that the federal budget took 180 years to reach $100 billion per annum, nine more years to reach $200 billion, and four more years to reach $300 billion. Arguing that Americans had to live on production rather than promises, Ford criticized the New Deal state's promise to voters that "government can and will satisfy most of their needs—and even their wants." By spending judiciously, however, Americans could restore "not only the American budget, but the American conscience and the basic American virtues." Ford therefore situated fiscal austerity as a patriotic duty, arguing that New Hampshire—the only state with a joint Republican-controlled state legislature—"offered us the horizons of free men and women, not those burying this nation and our people in debt." This was the "true new frontier."[115]

[111]Ibid.

[112]John Marsh to Paul Theis, Apr. 2, 1975, "President's Trip to New Hampshire and Massachusetts, 4/18–4/19/75 (1)," box 70, John Marsh Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[113]Ibid.

[114]Rod Hills to Jack Marsh, Apr. 9, 1975, "President's Trip to New Hampshire and Massachusetts, 4/18–19/75 (1)," box 70, John Marsh Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[115]"Text of an Address by the President to be Delivered to a Joint Session of the New Hampshire State Legislature State Capitol," Apr. 17, 1975, "President's Trip to New Hampshire and Massachusetts, 4/18–19/75 (1)," box 70, John Marsh Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

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Ford's New Hampshire speech consequently foregrounds how he, reflecting broader neoliberal rhetorics, promoted anti-government governance by consistently moralizing fiscal austerity and translating it into a moral imperative for individual and collective fortitude.

Celebrating patriotic stoicism and a future of restored pioneer liberties reinforced the Ford campaign's consistent attempts to add bicentennial theming to its economic messaging. Days after Ford's New Hampshire speech, Jack Casserly (the speech's author and the "resident Bicentennial authority" of Ford's speechwriters) penned a memo stressing that Ford had to restore Americans' faith in the worth of the individual.[116] Like Rockefeller celebrating the cross-generational appeal of this popular individualism, Casserly emphasized how this principle appealed to younger voters: it was "a NEW DOCTRINE in their thinking, although it is obviously quite old. This thinking appeals to the young—for its NEWNESS—and to the old who will recognize it as old."[117] It also reinforced Ford's broader promise of healing a troubled nation, Ford staffers noting an "analogy to a team (football) falling down or apart. The Coach then dispenses with the 'razzle-dazzle' aspects and goes back to basic drill practice."[118]

Notwithstanding this deliberate unpretentiousness, Ford's popular individualism remained profoundly influenced by emerging neoliberal ideas. The Council of Economic Advisers' chair, Alan Greenspan, was the most influential economic authority here. In November 1975, Greenspan suggested that Ford utilize the bicentennial to take stock. American prosperity had not come "automatically or by accident," but through "an ever-solid foundation, our Constitution, and the inevitable progress that a free people will generate once government sets the legal framework through which citizens unencumbered by repressive government can flourish." In the United States' third century, the president needed to dispel any notion that the government could confer benefits on certain Americans without imposing costs on others. Put simply, the government could not escape the rules that applied to individuals and any other institution.[119] The secretary of the treasury, William Simon, agreed, for the sake of "the survival of the private sector, and the individual liberties which have never long survived the collapse of a society's free enterprise system."[120] Limiting government thus represented a moral imperative for sustaining American freedom.

The Ford administration's use of the bicentennial to moralize anti-government governance was particularly evident in 1976's State of the Union, a speech journalists described as "laced with Bicentennial themes."[121] These themes had the sum effect of masking internal divisions concerning the administration's economic policy. Staffers debated the speech's economic details with days remaining and made stylistic changes on the day. Journalists alleged that Ford's team was divided between those—including Greenspan and Robert Goldwin—who desired an ideological speech stressing the evils of excessive government and those—including Ford's counselor Robert Hartmann—who sought a pragmatic speech focusing on specific issues and solutions.[122]

[116]Paul Theis to John Marsh, May 12, 1975, "Bicentennial: General (3)," box 92, Robert Orben Files, 1973–1977, GFPL.

[117]Jack Casserly to Paul Theis, Apr. 21, 1975, "Bicentennial: General (2)," box 92, Robert Orben Files, 1973–1977, GFPL.

[118]"Discussion of Bicentennial Themes at Scheduling Meeting," Apr. 5, 1975, "Bicentennial: Themes," box 92, Robert Orben Files, 1973–1977, GFPL.

[119]Quoted in James Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change: The Nixon and Ford Administrations* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 383. On Greenspan, see "A Conservative Who Can Compromise," *TIME*, June 15, 1987; Joseph Kraft, "Right, for Ford," *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1976, 199; and Andrew D. Moran "More Than a Caretaker: The Economic Policy of Gerald R. Ford," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Mar. 2011): 44.

[120]Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change*, 383.

[121]James M. Naughton, "State of Union: Congress Urged to Act with 'Common Sense' to Meet U.S. Needs," *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 1976, 1.

[122]Philip Shabecoff, "Mr. Ford in Search of the Right Speech," *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1976, 208.

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By most accounts, pragmatism triumphed. As per Casserly, who resigned shortly thereafter, Greenspan was distraught following the address. In Casserly's judgement—itself far from neutral—the final speech provided "no promised vision," "no promised philosophy," and "little spiritual dignity."[123] Evoking a "new realism," Ford lamented how an overconfident nation "tried to be a policeman abroad and the indulgent parent here at home." In so doing, the federal government "trampled on sound principles of restraint and endangered the rights of individuals," jeopardizing values critical to U.S. history. By contrast, Ford's new realism reflected the "truly revolutionary American concept of 1776"—that "successful problem-solving involves much more than government."[124] This was notably stark language for an *officially* non-partisan occasion. Ford's unornamented, "new realist" rhetoric thus evidences a continued tendency to sidestep internal policy debates through a more vernacular moral rhetoric promising the imminent revitalization of American values of pragmatism, self-reliance, and realism.

As July approached, Ford's desire to celebrate the future possibilities available to ordinary Americans was evident in his choice from five possible themes for his bicentennial speeches: "The American Adventure." This theme—formulated by the speechwriters Patrick Butler and David Boorstin following consultation with David's father, the historian and Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin—aimed to detail "the whole sum of how we got where we are and what made us what we are." Adventure could "convey a sense of excitement and continuation—the best is yet to be."[125] Daniel Boorstin's celebratory histories, which stressed the continuity of American ideals and the role of everyday citizens in national progress, had long influenced the administration.[126] In his role as Ford's "intellectual-in-residence," Goldwin invited to White House dinner meetings with Ford several intellectuals of the emerging conservative counter-intelligentsia, including Boorstin and the political scientists Martin Diamond, Irving Kristol, and James Q. Wilson.[127]

Dining together in December 1974, Goldwin noted Boorstin's emphasis on maintaining a "sense of momentum" in the perfection of democracy. The most important contemporary issue was "how to make people feel that what they do will make a difference."[128] This emphasis was key to the "American Adventure," and it profoundly aligned with Ford's attempt to fuse realism and popular individualism. As the theme's draft observed, Ford could combine "reaching for the unknown with a reverence for the past" through "down-to-earth and human" examples.[129]

The American Adventure also mirrored the three centuries narrative ubiquitous in Ford's previous bicentennial speeches, a reading of American history remarkably inspired by conversations with the filmmaker Frank Capra.[130] What scholars of Capra have described as his "appeal to charity and individual goodness—combined with a distaste for the complexities of

[123]Jack Casserly, *The Ford White House: The Diary of a Speechwriter* (Boulder, CO, 1977), 288–91.

[124]Gerald R. Ford, "President Gerald R. Ford's Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union," Jan. 19, 1976, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-reporting-the-state-the-union (accessed Dec. 10, 2020).

[125]Memorandum from Counsellor Hartmann, June 10, 1976, "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[126]See Nick Witham, *Popularizing the Past: Historians, Publishers, and Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago, 2023), 44–76.

[127]Tevi Troy, *Intellectuals and the American Presidency: Philosophers, Jesters or Technicians?* (Lanham, MD, 2002), 111–26.

[128]Robert Goldwin, "Notes on Conversation, Dec. 5, 1974," "Boorstin, Daniel J," box 3, Robert Goldwin Files, 1974–1976, GFPL. Emphasis in original.

[129]"Bicentennial Series: The American Adventure," "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[130]Jack Marsh to Theodore Marrs et al., May 27, 1975, "Bicentennial: General (3)," box 92, Robert Orben Files, 1973–1977, GFPL.

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political life" likely found favor with Ford, his golfing partner.[131] Indeed, Capra's everyman heroes epitomize the popular individualism key to the American Adventure theme and Ford's three centuries narrative. This narrative held that America's first century saw "the establishment of a free political system," its second "the development of a free economic order," and its third the imminent "expansion of independence for the individual, which was where it all began."[132]

Once more, this progression underscores how Ford's promise to revitalize individual freedoms was predicated on a steadfast faith that the second century's "free economic order" had *already* resolved most material inequalities. That this narrative's "free political system" far predated the attainment of voting rights for African Americans and women highlights the disavowal of gendered and racial contestations in this selectively nostalgic appeal, catered particularly to disaffected white male voters. Indeed, this "adventure" also transparently romanticized conquest and settler colonial violence, exemplifying the strategic blindness to indigenous dispossession that typifies what Kevin Bruyneel has termed settler memory.[133] The three-century progression would nonetheless "receive the emphasis from here on out," with all speeches to be divided threefold into detailing past progress, present challenges, and future goals.[134]

This three centuries narrative reflected the Ford campaign's broader attempts to humanize its economic philosophy. Its campaign strategy, for example, encouraged Ford to become actively involved in debates over recreation and improving quality of life, a phrase previously employed by Nixon. While suburban swing voters strongly supported responsible environmentalism, Ford was seen as "pro-business and anti-environment." Usefully, quality of life evoked the idea of nurturing healthy community environments, an appealing connotation in the "Year of the Neighborhood." Particularly as there were "sound Republican methods to these goals," Ford's blueprint for the future had to explicitly convey his dedication to improving individuals' quality of life.[135] Similarly, pre-debate memos identified Ford's non-interventionist theme as the "most distinctive of Ford's themes and also the toughest to handle rhetorically without being overly negative." Non-interventionism had to be "put in human, not institutional terms," framed as a positive, innovative policy rather than merely a negative attack on government.[136]

The July Fourth weekend offered several prominent opportunities to humanize Ford's economic policy. Perhaps the most notable was Ford's July 4 "Foundation for Liberty" speech at Philadelphia's Independence Hall. Here, he celebrated how the American Revolution was uniquely "fought in the name of the law as well as liberty." In words lifted from Kristol, he described how the Declaration sought to "secure the rights of the individuals against even Government itself." It was, however, "not a protest against government but against the excesses of government." It was the duty of all Americans to preserve that equitable balance and "increase the independence of the individual and the opportunity of all Americans to attain their full potential."[137] Together with his claims earlier that day at Valley Forge regarding a national

[131]Charles Lindholm and John A. Hall "Frank Capra Meets John Doe: Anti-Politics in American National Identity," in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London, 2000), 29–40.

[132]Memorandum from Counsellor Hartmann, June 10, 1976, "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL. Notes from this dinner clearly anticipated the three centuries idea, see Jack Marsh to Theodore Marrs et al., May 27, 1975, "Bicentennial: General (3)," box 92, Robert Orben Files, 1973–1977, GFPL.

[133]Kevin Bruyneel, *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States* (Chapel Hill, 2021).

[134]Memorandum from Counsellor Hartmann, June 10, 1976, "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[135]"Campaign Strategy for President Ford," "Presidential Campaign: Campaign Strategy Program (1)," box 1, Dorothy Downton Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[136]Lee Auspitz, "Cross-Cutting Leadership Themes in the Debates," c. late Sept. 1976, "Auspitz, Lee," box 25, Michael Raoul-Duval Papers, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[137]"Presidential Remarks at Independence Hall, July 4, 1976," box 36, President's Speeches and Statements: Reading Copies, GFPL.

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"spirit of sacrifice," the speech thus firmly tied individual virtue to the promise of national prosperity, typifying a broader analogization between national and individual moral values characteristic of both Ford's bicentennial and late-twentieth-century neoliberal thought.

Lesser noticed but nonetheless important was Ford's July 1 "Reaching for the Unknown" address, which opened the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum. This speech deserves particular attention because it underscores how the "American Adventure" theme romanticized capitalist expansion, drawing upon rhetorics that had long presented the American frontier as a place of possibility, promise, and emancipation.[138] While Ford spoke at Independence Hall of creating opportunities for all Americans, his Air and Space speech instead underscores neoliberalism's broader tendency to attribute the societally entrenched economic privileges of white male historical actors to a presumed superiority of character. Implicitly, this framing ascribed the inequalities facing marginalized communities (those often excluded from frontier imagery) to their lacking distinctly American characteristics of thrift and self-reliance.

In drafting this speech, Ford's speechwriters sought to evidence Americans' history of "trying new and untested enterprises; new political, social and economic systems."[139] Irving Kristol recommended emphasizing a familiar phrase: quality of life, an ideal that reflected America's "spirit of scientific and technological progress." The phrase would highlight Americans' confidence that "a free people, freely using their creative talents, can use science and technology to resolve the problems posed by science and technology." If that was not so, Kristol reasoned, "the argument for freedom itself—freedom of thought, freedom of intellectual enterprise, freedom to innovate—[was] itself brought into question."[140] To doubt the United States' capacity for future progress was, in Kristol's view, to imperil the very basis of its freedoms.

The lead writer of the speech was David Boorstin. Much like his father's *The Exploring Spirit* (1976), a bicentennial-themed celebration of American exploration, David's speech celebrated an American tradition of benevolent internationalism apt for a 1970s era of interdependence.[141] Reflecting the Boorstins' adventure theme, Ford's speech argued that the Mayflower and NASA's shared "eagerness to reach for the unknown … opened the eyes of mankind." As with much of space rhetoric during détente, this situated the United States as a pioneer of internationalism.[142] The speech thus naturalized U.S. global leadership by recasting empire as benevolent exploration, positioning the United States as the indispensable lynchpin of a harmonious, interdependent economic order. Returning to popular individualism, Ford then praised the frontier's "do-it-yourself society," a "hard life" that "attracted few learned scholars." The United States was "driven forward by challenge, competition and creativity," transforming the "untamed wilderness" of a continent "once remote and isolated." The year 1976 thus represented a waypoint within this "daring attempt to build a new order in which free people govern themselves and fulfill their individual destinies," Ford concluding "let the experiment continue."[143] Like the State of the Union, then, Ford appealed to voluntarism, self-help, and popularism within a speech that offered few tangible policy proposals. Moreover, these very

[138]Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York, 2019).

[139]"Bicentennial Series: The American Adventure," "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[140]Irving Kristol to Robert T. Hartmann, "The President's Bicentennial Speeches," June 7, 1976, "Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

[141]Daniel Boorstin, *The Exploring Spirit: America and the World, Then and Now* (New York, 1976).

[142]Teasel Muir-Harmony, "Selling Space Capsules, Moon Rocks, and America: Spaceflight in U.S. Public Diplomacy, 1961–1979," in *Reasserting America in the 1970s: U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Rebuilding of America's Image Abroad*, eds. Hallvard Notaker, Giles Scott-Smith, and David J. Snyder (Manchester, UK, 2016), 127–42.

[143]"Remarks of the President at the Dedication Ceremonies of the Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution," July 1, 1976, "Bicentennial Speeches (3)," box 2, Ron Nessen Papers, 1974–1977, GFPL.

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framings of voluntarism and individual grit displaced structural critique, recasting the American settler–colonial project as part of a universal march toward opportunity.

In sum, then, Ford's deliberately unornamented rhetoric not only obscured the exclusions and violences embedded in the nation's settler–colonial past but also conflated market imperatives with national destiny, thinning the nation. Eschewing Great Society idealism for new realism, Ford's bicentennial evoked promises of renewal, rededication, and spiritual cleansing, finding within 1976 "a rebirth as well as a birthday—a rediscovery of our strength and potential."[144] Evoking pioneer thrift, Ford moralized pro-market values of self-reliance and freedom from government, analogizing between *national* fiscal austerity and the *individual* self-reliance of both ordinary Americans and his own unostentatious presidency. While Ford ultimately failed to distill a coherent economic vision for voters, this combination of sweeping historical panoramas with direct appeals to individual morality anticipated Ronald Reagan's later appeals to the "magic" of the market. Indeed, like Reagan, Ford's bicentennial tended toward "effacing the importance of organized political action, economic forces, and social movements" and "featuring stable tableaux meant to illustrate enduring qualities of the nation rather than [providing] causal explanations for historical change."[145] Such continuities bespeak how the Ford presidency anticipated the discursive forms of these later invocations of market ideals, the language of which would define late-twentieth-century American political life.

Conclusion

Taken together, the Bicentennial Communities, the NCBE, and Ford's bicentennial speeches all attest to the contingent, improvised, and heterogeneous nature of pro-market ideas during the extended United States bicentennial celebration and the 1970s more broadly. This heterogeneity is, however, analytically generative, providing a powerful lens on the intellectual cross-proliferation that much of the recent literature suggests was critical to the popularization of neoliberal ideas within the United States. From neighborhoodism to Rockefeller's *The Second American Revolution*, the bicentennial was suffused by rhetorics of participatory localism and popular individualism that intertwined beliefs from the left and right. bicentennial planners, American businesses, John D. Rockefeller III, and the Ford administration all had divergent economic beliefs. Yet they shared a common urge to morally revitalize and rehumanize an increasingly embattled American capitalism. Together, they wished to revive those individual freedoms they considered both product and guarantor of American prosperity. Disavowing the possibility and even desirability of genuinely revolutionary change at a structural level, they instead rendered the bicentennial an opportune moment to demonstrate individual achievement within the normative structures of American capitalism.

If perhaps the central dilemma confronting our recent literature on neoliberalism is explaining the appeal of such a variable ideology to voters, the bicentennial foregrounds the importance of these informal, popular arguments, ballasted in appeals to American memory. Put briefly, if the popularization and Americanization of pro-market ideas went hand-in-hand, the bicentennial represented a critical stage in both processes. Vitally, then, pro-market ideas did not supersede the nation, but instead leveraged it, fusing new forms of American economic exceptionalism with global ambitions but distinctly national intellectual scaffolding.

In a recent review article, Nicholas Mulder has urged historians to "interrogate the novelty of neoliberalism by re-examining the concrete reality of the nineteenth-century era of classical

[144]"Remarks of the President at the American Freedom Train Certification," Alexandria Railway Station, Dec. 19, 1974, 'Bicentennial," box 2, Vernon C. Loen and Charles Leppert Files, 1974–1977, GFPL.

[145]Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, 2004), 64.

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liberalism held up by many neoliberals as a historical arcadia."[146] Using this logic, the bicentennial underscores three primary ways in which these references to the United States' founding concealed the historical roots of economic inequality in American society and—by disavowing the concerted government intervention needed to address such inequalities—perpetuated these injustices in the present. All three factors can be traced to the anti-structural, popular individualist tendencies of a bicentennial rhetoric that centered white male thrift, resolve, and sacrifice. This rhetoric firstly tended to bracket as exceptionally American neoliberal rationalities, obscuring neoliberalism's international roots and tying the supposedly distinctive vitality of U.S. capitalism to the triumph of the United States' global mission. Second—as was particularly implied in Ford's rhetoric—it circumlocuted the New Deal as an exceptional period of American history that endangered such values. This circumlocution tied pro-market governmentalities to an older frontier democracy, camouflaging neoliberal political economy's many inheritances from New Deal politics.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this rhetoric harked back to an age before white male privileges were increasingly named and condemned by social protest, thereby obscuring the significance of racial and gendered contestations in U.S. history. This defiantly masculine rhetoric certainly reflected post-Vietnam anxieties surrounding American manhood—recall Kristol's provocation regarding the Valley Forge speech, "are we in danger of becoming a nation of cry-babies?"[147] This rhetoric thus re-entrenched white privilege by naturalizing an inegalitarian libertarianism as a quintessentially American tradition. This racial majoritarianism camouflaged the serial exclusions of the United States' founding and—particularly through a frontier mythos that romanticized indigenous genocide—implicitly attributed white Americans' societally entrenched privileges to a superiority of character. These implications epitomize the broader tendency by which neoliberal beliefs obscure the "invisible hand of whiteness" behind ostensibly impartial economic rationalities and quantitative analysis.[148]

Throughout bicentennial planning, however, even Ford's "anti-government governance" reserved some role for the state. The Bicentennial Communities and Ford's New Federalism underscore both the importance of the ideologically heterogeneous politics of localism and how New Deal practices, across a decade of planning, were sorted into neoliberal governmentalities. They encourage historians to look beyond "red–blue" histories of the 1970s and foreground how neoliberalism aspires not to eradicate the state (or nation) but to capture and reuse it to shape a pro-corporate, free-trading market order.[149] Creating this order necessitated passing leadership to elite-led public–private partnerships that promised to restore control to "ordinary," i.e., white voters. The Bicentennial Communities consequently represented an extensive regulatory experiment that—despite the guise of apolitical localism—embedded and extended neoliberal pro-market rationalities within American communities. A nationwide example of New Federalism in practice, their local operation merits further analysis.

Finally, this article has utilized the bicentennial as a key lens on the ideas of a Ford presidency rarely associated with ideological vision. Ford's three centuries narrative bracketed the New Deal as an exception to American traditions, utilizing perceived characteristics of the United States' founding to simultaneously sort out elements of New Dealist political economy and obscure such continuities. Ford, however, had neither the time nor the political capital available to Ronald Reagan. He could only modulate the New Deal state's holdover programs rather than offering his own program for governance. Confronted with profound distrust of the federal

146 Mulder, "The Neoliberal Transition," 582.

147 Irving Kristol to Robert Hartman, June 7, 1956, 'Bicentennial (5)," box 5, James M. Cannon Files, 1975–1977, GFPL.

148 This argument is indebted to McClure, *Winter in America*, 11.

149 Matthew Lassiter, "Political History Beyond the Red-Blue Divide," *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 760–64; Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford, 2010), 10.

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government, Ford instead celebrated improvised bicentennial programming as a masterstroke of New Federalism, anticipating the commercialization of public history that increasingly aligned business interests with late-twentieth-century Republican anti-governmentalism thereafter, most notably during a 1987 U.S. Constitution Bicentennial spearheaded by the private sector.[150]

Altogether then, the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial only further underscores the recent focus of histories of neoliberalism on heterodoxy, contingency, and improvisation. This article therefore both models and advocates for a history of neoliberalism closely attuned to cultural beliefs, vernacular rhetorics, and appeals to national memory. For all our valuable local and global histories of neoliberalism, explaining neoliberalism's appeal to voters still requires analysis that interrogates the *culturally defined* politics of scale, investigating how neoliberal advocates shaped and reshaped ideas of "America." Histories of neoliberalism must, therefore, reengage the national, not as a neutral spatial entity but as a malleable and contested category that these figures continually distorted, contorted, and, indeed, thinned. That the diverse historical actors surveyed here all slighted the structural and radical histories of the American Revolution—celebrating an anti-centrist revolt rather than an anti-imperial revolution and demanding individual success within capitalism rather than profound societal transformation—evidences how neoliberalism alters such scales, thinning the nation. This critical analogization between the fate of individuals and the American nation both reflected and reinforced a broader disinclination toward structural critique.

Contrary to its proponents, neoliberalism was neither colorblind nor uniquely American nor a new product of the 1970s. Nevertheless, examining the contemporary political uses that these assumptions served during the bicentennial elucidates both how these myths came about and the interests they served. The key to challenging such assumptions lies in their historicization. Historians of neoliberalism must analyze, therefore, not only the roles of Americanist rhetorics in popularizing neoliberalism, but also neoliberalism's role in individuating our very understandings of American nationhood. We must interrogate, then, not only the neoliberalization of the United States, but the neoliberalization of Americanism. This is not to suggest that present conceptions of Americanism are wholly or unambiguously neoliberal. Certainly, the upcoming 2026 semiquincentennial will feature beliefs from across the broadest spectrum of American political thought. Yet it is, perhaps, to underline the danger of any individuating reading of the United States' past—a framing that obscures the structural inequities that have shaped American capitalism and continue to condition our economic and political possibilities in the present.

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[150] Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, 85.

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