

Stuck with liberalism

by [Christopher Beem](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History*, by John Patrick Diggins

In his long and storied career, historian John Diggins has, he admits, been called many things. He says that the phrase he likes best is "a cold water historian." Fittingly, in this work he lines up a myriad of candidates and gives all of them a thorough dousing.

Diggins begins by taking up the claim that the American founders articulated and sought to institutionalize a version of civic republicanism--in short, the claim that the first Americans were more concerned with the public interest than their own. Diggins ably demonstrates that Louis Hartz (one of the historians to whom he dedicates this work) was right all along: the unrivaled core of American thought is and remains Lockean liberalism. The desire for material well-being, Locke believes, is basic to our humanity, and that means that the pursuit of happiness entails the pursuit and protection of property, status, power and wealth. The American founding orients both society and government around these fundamental realities.

Diggins is just as eager to dispose of those (mostly on the left) who would use history to advance a political agenda. For all their differences, purveyors of identity politics, poststructuralism and multiculturalism all endeavor to uncover the moral failures of America's past and then use that knowledge to try to make America more just and inclusive. Diggins believes that this strategy frequently compromises the study of history. More to the point, it ignores the Lockean realities of American life and politics. At best, the advocates of this approach consign themselves to a relevance bound by the walls of the academy. At worst, they deprecate and thus undermine the genuine opportunities for empowerment--economic empowerment, that is--that are there for the taking. America is what it is, Diggins insists; whatever you might think of the water, you won't get anywhere unless you dive in.

Both of these groups appeal to history to overcome what they see as liberalism's disastrous tendencies toward materialism and unbridled self-interest. Diggins knows

full well that these problems are endemic to liberal thought, but the cold water is that we are stuck with these problems. To all those whom he has left sputtering, his response seems to be "get over it." Looking for a history that isn't there, these hand-wringing malcontents are doomed to disappointment. Like it or not, liberalism is the only game in town.

But Diggins also believes that that game is better than we think it is. Embodied in someone like Abraham Lincoln, he finds that an unrepentant liberalism has much to recommend itself. He sees Lincoln as an unconscious Lockean. Lincoln celebrated liberalism, understood the realistic conception of human nature that undergirds it, and was willing to fight a war over the rights that lay at the heart of it. For Lincoln, the principle of liberty to all means "enterprise and industry to all." Diggins thus contends that Lincoln elevated the doctrine of free labor "to a spiritual principle."

Though Diggins's account of Lincoln's thought is strangely episodic, his main point is clear: Lincoln offers one of the best, most elevated expressions of the real heart of American political thought, and the best hope for a restored American moral consensus. If we want to make America a better place, Diggins believes, we could do no better than to return to Lincoln's "hallowed ground."

At the very end of the book, Diggins notes that "the counter-narrative to the story told in these pages would emphasize community, an expression that conveys the more positive feelings of fraternity and solidarity." Indeed. In the generation since he wrote, no one has toppled Hartz's account, but many have noted that he failed adequately to consider nonliberal influences. That same problem appears to have befallen Diggins himself. Diggins knows as well as anyone that America's founders were extremely nervous about the society they were constructing. If it is too much to claim a radical republican center to the founding, it is surely correct to note that the founders hoped ardently that the civic spirit of the revolution would linger. There was, as well, a constant search for institutions and mechanisms that might preserve this spirit.

Diggins also knows that this counternarrative was driven by the very figures to whom he appeals. He notes repeatedly that the thought of Locke, Lincoln and the founders bespeaks a liberalism chastened and constrained by Calvinism. He states, for example, that "our contemporary consumerist culture . . . would bring tears to the eyes of a moralist like John Locke." But Diggins appears dubious that Calvinism has any role to play in contemporary America. In the book's introduction he tells the

story of how he lost his Catholic faith. Perhaps this scholar who has written on Weber and who calls himself a kind of Nietzschean recounts this story in order to disabuse those who would hope to reclaim the religious side of the synthesis. Diggins certainly believes that a liberalism that has left classical virtue behind can still be moral and responsible. Perhaps the same can be said for a liberalism that has left behind religion, or indeed any resource that might meaningfully restrain its endemic vices.

Perhaps. There is, to be sure, plenty of evidence that those chickens are now well roosted. But there is good reason to wonder about a society united by nothing more than a Gatsby-like longing for the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. More to the point, I doubt that Lincoln, the one who appealed to the mystic chords of memory, the chorus of the Union, and the better angels of our nature, would think so. Those who stand drenched by Diggins's mordant and passionate work need to affirm that Lockean liberalism does indeed orient American politics and American life. But Lincoln most of all would argue that that is not the whole story, and I expect that he would challenge us to uncover and exploit the extra-Lockean elements that are likewise part of our American birthright.