

**TO RULE ONESELF
IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA**

**THE CONCEPT OF SELF-GOVERNMENT
FROM REVOLUTION TO SECESSION**

IN THREE VOLUMES

INTRODUCTION

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A while back I watched an interview with a Silicon Valley guru about a computer application that he had developed and the company that he had founded to market this application. It brought him fame and fortune, and not surprisingly he thought the story behind this venture was worth writing about. What caught my attention was his comment that trying to write history was harder than making history. Hard was his choice of words, and having practiced the writing of history for most of my adult life. I was taken aback by this confession by a scientist and entrepreneur that telling the story of how he did was daunting to say the least.

Writing history is arranging the past. Once arranged it may be subjected to other forms of inquiry and analysis, but first and foremost it has to be arranged. And that can be hard, harder than it might seem. It's hard when the sources are few and far between because so much is missing, and it's hard when the sources are extensive because so much has to be weighed. It is interesting to speculate how historians in the future will deal with the explosion of information that characterizes our age, but, in the end, whether faced with a dearth or plethora of sources, the historian must try to figure out what is a reasonable and defensible arrangement of the sources from which to create a narrative or analyze a problem. The arrangement does not happen automatically and can involve many missteps.

Working historians understand that historical writing presents only a slice of the past. Sometimes the slice is long and thin – think about historians like Edward Gibbons or Arnold Toynbee who preferred to write about the rise and fall of civilizations – and sometimes the slice is wide and thick – think about studies of a single village or a single family. In both cases the researcher has to decide on what to include or exclude and how to set benchmarks for the story that is to be told. It is obvious that historians with the long view must leave out many step-by-step details, and even though it's less obvious, historians with the narrow view still have to make choices about what is important and relevant. One can fantasize about creating a record that incorporates every known detail – not out of the realm of speculation in our age of high-powered computers – and yet even if that were accomplished, the record would be incomplete. Matters that might actually have a bearing on how history has been shaped, whether presented as narrative or as analysis, have been lost and may never be recovered. At times, we have a hint that something is missing, and at other times, we don't have a clue. If we have a sense that something is missing, we can write with caution; if we don't, we may write

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with too much abandon. And since so much history is now written from secondary sources or limited perspectives, the findings may be in error, the interpretations without foundation.

My professional career has been spent researching and writing the Spanish colonial economic systems. I have worked with numeric sources and used statistical techniques of which some historians are dubious. I am agnostic toward sources and methods in that every source and every method is suspect. Number-crunching is not a panacea, although some economic historians write as if it is, especially if their aim is to predict outcomes. The numbers that we dig up – in my field for the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries – the sources are rich enough that we have compiled many different databases on silver production, price trends and Atlantic trade, and yet we are missing some crucial indicators. For example, since workers were paid in a variety of ways that had little to do with the price of labor within a free market, we have difficulty trying to figure out how well off or badly off people were and in the absence of such information we cannot very accurately gauge the growth in aggregate or *per-capita* within these colonial economies. We can estimate – and I have offered some estimates – but estimates remain what they are, estimates. We have to struggle with the absence of data, on one hand, as well as with the inconsistency of findings from numeric analysis with findings from less numeric sources. And the same applies to non-numeric historians who must try to understand the data we have collected and analyzed in relationship to their own pursuits. There is no magic bullet. It's a juggling act, and, regrettably, we often drop the ball. All approaches have promise and risk, and none, I would argue, can be relied upon entirely to fill in the past. The historical context we are working in consists of people counting, people reflecting, people lying and people living along side of the natural and social forces that can enrich or disrupt lives.

My aim and focus in *To Rule Oneself* has little to do with numbers and a lot to do with ideas. There is a limit to numeric analysis, and here is where the limits are most clearly imposed. I'm sure somebody somewhere could turn this inquiry in to a numeric exercise, but would it be nearly as interesting to try to figure out with numbers rather than words what some Americans were thinking about how civil societies emerge and how individuals embrace, reject or change the ideological components? Through much of human history, individuals had no voice in how their societies should be organized. They were expected to be ruled by those who possessed the power to rule. In the modern world that mould was broken, in large part because of how the English colonists squared off against the ruling elite of the Mother Country. We often express wonderment that a band of individuals threw off one ruling system to initiate a new and different system of their own making. There

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was no precedent. There was only theory and idealization of what individuals were capable of. The track from rebellion to nationhood was unpredictable and treacherous, but, eventually, Americans reached a consensus about how they should be governed, and again we marvel at the achievement. In our marveling we latch onto words and phrases that have become a part of our own narrative on nation-building, even if their historical origins of what we repeat to each are either cloudy or unknown. As a kid, growing up in a small town, I regularly heard phrases like “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” or “make your own way” in a family with middle-class aspirations. The code had been learned, but in time I came to realize that the code along with some unsavory aspects had been memorized but hardly understood. The bootstraps were often out of reach. And the blame, when it was ascribed, was FDR and government, even though as a toddler I recall accompanying my mother to a place to pick up my father after work, that work being of all things road construction under the WPA. In a household and a family that owned few books and seldom if ever engaged in discussions about ideas or theories, the message stuck, even as circumstances changed. As I stepped outside the well-protected confines in which I was reared, the message became flawed and inadequate, and yet the power of the message remained a fascination to the point that something had to be said and written.

The place of the individual in the modern world was in both theory and practice different from what it had been. Within Western Europe the capacity of the individual to act in behalf of his own interests and goals independent of the social, religious and political imperatives and constraints had gained momentum since the Renaissance. Still bound to church, state and community, the individual increasingly assumed a status that influenced and shaped how the tripod could exercise its authority. By the eighteenth century the “nobility” of the individual had been elevated to the point that the institutional fabric of a society was what corrupted and misguided the individual, not the other way around. For part of the eighteenth-century, intellectual debate posited that liberating rather than constraining the individual would yield greater moral benefit for all. Exactly how restructuring the social order around these ideals was spelled out in different ways. The blueprint was incomplete and subject to change. The act of declaring a separation may have been easier to work out, although the debate over language and intent was hotly debated, than the next step, which the “declaration” fully anticipated, of agreeing to a new government: “it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it [Government], and institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” Americans did not have to delve deeply into theory or philosophy to understand what was happening. The people of

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the colonies were dissatisfied and were preparing to act to end their discontent. What they would create to replace the government they had known was outside the purview of the Declaration. The principle behind the Declaration was extremely important to establish. The “people” because of how they were endowed could act in their own best interests. Let it be clearly understood that the terms “individual” or “self-government” or variations of these terms did not appear in the Declaration of Independence. The people who made up the Thirteen Colonies were taking collective action in order to protect “certain inalienable rights” which all “Men” possessed. The rights belonged to individuals, however, not to any collectivity with the *a priori* authority to dole out rights, circumscribe or deny them, in a way that suited the purposes of those who claimed the power to rule. Individuals possessed rights and held the power to institute a form of government by which to protect those rights. They also could withdraw rights so assigned. That was the message conveyed in the Declaration, and once the people had exercised their duty (for the Declaration said it was a duty) of throwing off the government that threatened their rights, they had to complete the process by creating a new government that would “provide new Guards for their future security.” And that new government was subject to the same critical test as the government just being overthrown. “New Guards” could become “old hat” in which despotism was substituted for liberation.

This book is about “providing new Guards” and then trying to understand how the “new Guards” should work. It turned out to be arduous and ultimately perilous. Some would say that since three-quarters of a century later, the nation faced its own “rebellion”, the “new Guards”, set in place during first the period of the Articles of Confederation and then during the period of the Constitution failed. It did not fail completely in that the Union survived, albeit at a staggering cost in lives and with significant alterations in the basic charter. The question that interests me and is the subject of these three volumes is to what extent the focus on rights of individuals (by which the Revolution itself was ignited) both enhanced and undermined the growth and development of the nation. No can deny that even today after 200 years during which one section had to conquer and punish another section, we continue to idealize the power and the independence of the individual. We have long distinguished ourselves from the rest of the world because we remain committed to the assumption that the freer the individual is, the stronger both the individual and the nation will be. We are seldom critical of the liberation of the individual, even in the face of evidence that suggests liberating the individual has costs that can put the nation at risk. In the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars Americans had a clearer vision of how the nation should act in behalf of the individual than how the individual should embrace the nation. I have often asked myself, at the beginning of our third century, if this

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attitude might still prevail? I have not tried to answer that question for our times, but I have tried to explore the struggle with the concept of self-governing individuals in our early history in hopes of broadening the historical context in which we may want to try to answer what a self-governing society must face up to in a vastly different world. Ideas, theories, philosophies and ideologies have consequences, but those consequences may not be what we expect. This is not a historical lesson in how-to but a historical encounter with what was.

The *oeuvre* of published works on the period from the Revolution to the Civil War is huge with thousands of books and articles. My reading among the secondary works has been selective. I have generally been guided by a need to know and by a curiosity with how other scholars have treated aspects of antebellum history. It is not my goal to argue down prevailing interpretations, although I may raise questions, but rather to offer my own perspective on how America moved from a revolutionary spirit into a secessionist morass. The ebb and flow of arguments over how to govern is the focal point of *To Rule Oneself*. We may pride ourselves, given our long view on American history, in thinking that we have a better grasp of that ebb and flow than our ancestors, and yet in our immediate political climate we are once again hotly debating “who shall rule”, as if the answer remains elusive and unattainable. In self-governing societies, where hegemony theoretically is exercised by individuals taking actions on their own and not at the behest of agencies or institutions or in the context of class or status or, specifically, in harness with government itself, the concept of self-rule can have many interrelated facets. I have allowed myself considerable latitude to examine an array of topics that bear upon how Americans envisioned “self-acting” (an antebellum term) individuals within the larger framework of the functioning social order. Self-government can be treated narrowly as a political subject – instituting formal government after which the role of individuals as citizens in determining their affairs may be greatly limited. Such was not the case in America. Political self-rule was tied to a vision of a society where collective behavior remained suspect. Thus, in defining the attributes of an appropriate political system, Americans were also defining attributes of a social order in which disengagement was paramount. It is almost impossible to analyze and evaluate American political behavior without studying other aspects of American society, and to that end, the following pages will consider questions relating to economic wellbeing, social hierarchy, territorial expansion and, of course, slavery and reform. The landscape is as broad as it needs to be to get at the issue of how self-governing individuals went about the task of achieving their goals.

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This study relies heavily upon primary sources. There is controversy about some of the public sources I have used extensively, and I am aware of why there is such controversy. The public record – Congressional debates, Presidential messages, political party platforms or journal and newspaper reportage – grew in quantity and in quality over time, but was still uneven and incomplete. Since I'm interested rhetoric, debate, language and argumentation, I have few other sources I can turn to outside of the public record. What individual American were thinking in an age without the instruments that we have come to rely on in our day means we know very little. We know how they voted, although we don't always know why they voted as they did. We know they protested and demonstrated and tried to organize movements and parties to oppose certain policies or developments or to advance certain reforms, but we know these things primarily through the leadership rather than the membership. In some cases it's difficult to know who the membership is exactly. We can glean bits and pieces of information from letters and diaries, but only a handful of Americans wrote down their thoughts in a form that has been preserved. Piecing together the interior world of diverse citizens often generates more questions than answers. I recognized, of course, having been a number-cruncher for most of the my professional life, historians carry around very strong attitudes toward what sources can be trusted and what cannot. In the end, though, we are faced with the same dilemma: how to separate the wheat from the chaff, and even after we've made the effort, we can't be sure what we have. More than once I've read that political historians who dig into the private correspondence or personal papers of politicians come away with a "purer" sense of what the politicians wanted or how they behaved. I am skeptical. In some cases the private or personal may be more revealing, but not in all; beyond do we know or can we say with assurance that public comments were so fundamentally divergent from private musings. I have read thousands of Jefferson's private correspondence, often marked as highly confidential, and I have closely followed his public career, and I sense more often than not convergence between this private and public worlds, not divergence. It is not clear that intuitively we should be more trusting of what is said privately than publicly, or vice versa. Nor is it clear that the persons used private channels to convey a different persona from public channels. Human beings are constantly caught up in dramas and conflicts that are by their very nature confusing and ambivalent, and their reactions may be just as confusing and ambivalent. It is hard for the historians to proceed with some explanation or interpretation because the participants were themselves struggling to explain or interpret.

Ordinary Americans may have had little or no occasion to create a record of their lives, but some did, and those accountings are an important but not a definitive

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source for writing the history of a period. Even if some private archives exist, they are still less abundant than the public archives. Since how the nation should be governed was such an intense public spat, the public record is invaluable in and of itself because it is so extensive and can be made even more valuable alongside the extant private sources.

One positive advantage to posting by the Internet, as I have done with these volumes, is that I can create within the footnotes direct links at no charge to the relevant archives from which I drew material. Anyone who wants to check the actual document may do so. (With books and articles this is also possible, although these materials may not be in the public domain yet because of copyright issues.) Most of the accessible public record involves federal archives including the Library of Congress, but more and more state archives are digitizing parts of their archives. The trend will only intensify, and in a decade or two from now, an even vaster array of governmental and non-governmental, public and private and manuscript and printed materials will become available to read and to incorporate into the book and articles that we intend to write.

Let me illustrate briefly what I mean by links. The Congress where so much of the debate about the size and scope of the national government was recorded had two principle sources: the *Journals of the House and the Senate* and the accounts of the debates, which went under several different names. I have used both extensively with long quotes (since there is no cost in posting these volumes). The *Journals* were kept by the staff of the Clerk of each chamber, whereas the accounts were compiled by reporters from newspapers or periodicals. At the opening of each daily session in each chamber members were permitted to correct the accounts as published by the reporters. Normally the publication would agree to the members wishes without much debate. Until the second quarter of the nineteenth century the accounts were not direct transcriptions of what was said (often very difficult to hear the proceedings without amplification and with considerable noise inside and outside the chambers), and what we have are summaries, sometimes very detailed summaries, of what the members said in a speech or a debate. Members were permitted to submit transcripts of actual speeches, and if they had actually read from written texts, they were permitted to edit the texts (based on incorrect data or unfavorable reactions) that would then be published in appendices attached to the complete published accounts of the debates and proceedings of every session of Congress.

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I have listed below the links to *Journals* and the accounts (as they appear in the footnotes) so that readers may check these sources ahead of time to see how they were created and maintained. (Click on the blue link to go directly to the archive.)

The Journal of the House of Representatives:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwhj.html>

The Journal of the Senate:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsj.html>

Annals of Congress (1789-1824):

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwac.html>

Register of Debates (1824-1837):

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwrd.html>

Congressional Globe (1833-1873):

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwcg.html>

United States Statute-at-Large:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsl.html>

Bills and Resolutions (US Congress):

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwhbsb.html>

It is necessary with each of these aforementioned links for the reader to identify the Congress (1st, 2nd, 3rd...36th) and the Session (1st, 2nd, occasionally 3rd or Special) of each Congress plus dates and pages, all of which is provided in the footnote. It is important to know that these are scanned images, and while they can be printed, they cannot be copied (using the copy function on your computer).

Various other public archives are linked to the text by what of footnotes, and

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although I have tried to make the links as direct as possible, I could not do so in every instance because to reach some of the actual document the link itself can be extremely long and take up several lines within a footnote. Therefore, to keep the links as short as possible, a reader may have to rely on other information in the footnote to reach the precise document or may have to use the search function within the archives to find particular documents.

Only a few books and articles are linked within the footnotes. Most contemporary publications remain under copyright protection and cannot be downloaded. GoogleBook provides some access, but I have not cited those links since most GoogleBooks can be found easily through any Internet search. With most of the secondary literature cited in these volumes, I have used my own notes scribbled over the years or library copies.

Often more than one Internet link for a given document or publication may exist. I have tried to stay as consistent as possible in citing the same links and sources. One has to be careful that links claiming to cite the same documents may actually (and in some cases mistakenly) may offer different renderings of the documents. I have wherever I have found such inconsistencies note of that within the appropriate footnote.

I have not created a bibliography. The text is in Microsoft Word format, and the search function can be used to find a specific author or title.

The Word format can be read on PC's but also on Macs. (In fact, much of the text was written on a Mac).

In quoting or citing any section, please abide by rules of professional courtesy. The downloads are available without charge.

For what it's worth, the Silicon Valley guru, mentioned in the opening paragraphs, found writing history a challenge. I would find running a start-up even more challenging.

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