

# THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN SUCCESS

by Jeff Calkins

With the passing of America's 199th birthday and with preparations being made for the coming bicentennial celebrations, one largely overlooked fact is that the United States is the world's oldest surviving republic and is also one of this planet's oldest continuing governments.

Even more remarkable than the political stability of the American republic is its unprecedented economic success. Americans enjoy, on a mass scale, material well-being undreamed of even by the royalty of bygone days.

Obviously, something, somewhere, went right.

British intellectuals in the nineteenth century often debated the causes of the American success. Liberals argued that the American experiment had succeeded because of its democratic structure of government. Conservatives countered that the American success was due to an accident of geography and natural resources, which they called "propitious circumstances."

Two largely overlooked factors — both found in the Bible — indicate that both sides were right.

## I. Propitious Circumstances

Geography and natural resources have played an immense part in America's success story. The U.S. has been politically buffered by two oceans and has hence been free from the threat of any great nation's

army poised within easy marching distance of its borders.

American farmland is among the richest in the world, and the climate favors raising crops on a mass basis.

"We... find ourselves in the peaceful possession of the fairest portion of the earth, as regards fertility of soil, extent of territory and salubrity of climate..." noted Abraham Lincoln, but this "fairest portion of the earth" was not the result of "propitious circumstances," but rather divine providence.

Essentially, the majority of the American people are descendants from the ancient Hebrew nation of Israel. The bountiful land of the United States was inherited as a result of the promises God made to the patriarch Abraham. (A fuller explanation can be found in the Ambassador College booklet, *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*.)

Interestingly, Americans have historically compared themselves with the ancient Israelites. One side of Thomas Jefferson's proposed seal for the United States pictured the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In 1789, Yale President Ezra Stiles called the newly formed United States "God's American Israel."

The early Puritans, of course, saw themselves as Israelites coming into the Promised Land, with the Atlantic Ocean being the Red Sea. Governor John Winthrop saw the New England colonies as a "city set on a hill," and Winthrop himself was later, in a eulogy compared to Moses.

The relationship between the ancient Israelites and the Americans is more than metaphorical. It is ancestral. The American people are not blessed for their own righteousness, but for Abraham's. The geographic and natural factors in the equation were God's doing.

## II. Checking Human Nature

But external surroundings do not explain the whole of the American success. Trees, minerals, even good farm land, aren't necessarily valu-

able in themselves. They must be developed. To the degree that the American structure of government encouraged that development, it is responsible.

The success of America's political structure lies in the Constitution's acceptance of the biblical view of human nature. The founding fathers' perception of the nature of man seems to come right out of Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9.)

The designers of the U.S. Constitution took a most distrustful view of human nature. They believed that institutions must check men's selfish impulses. The genius of the document is that it takes human nature into account and seeks to harness it.

"The fiery and destructive passions of war reign in the human heart with much more powerful sway than the mild and beneficent sentiments of peace; and to model our political systems upon speculations of lasting tranquility is to calculate on the weaker springs of the human character," wrote Alexander Hamilton in Federalist Paper Number 34.

The condemnation of human nature is even stronger in Federalist Paper Number 51. "*Ambition must be made to counteract ambition*.... It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels no government would be necessary."

Men, of course, aren't angels. The longevity of the American government derives largely from the series of checks and balances which stem from a realization of this fact.

The result has not only been political stability, but also the maintenance of the civil and economic liberties which have allowed the transformation of abundant natural resources into the highest degree of mass material prosperity the world has ever known. □