WHO ARE WE?
An Opportunity for Reflection

by Warren Goldstein

In the last few extraordinary years—which have included the contested 2000 presidential election, the terrifying attacks on New York and Washington, a “preventive war” in Iraq, and the massive increase in government investigative powers—many of us have been looking inward. Who are we exactly? What does this country stand for? How do others see us, and why? How much are we willing to trim our freedoms in return for feeling more secure when we board an airplane?

When “American Originals: Treasures from the National Archives” comes to the University of Hartford in February 2004, visitors will have a rare opportunity to travel backwards in time to experience for themselves the promise and conflicts that created the United States of America.

The documents themselves have an unexpected power. Even historians used to this sort of thing feel a little shiver when they get close to an important letter signed by George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln. And we all sense that a document can only hint at the battles and debates that came before or after it. Since many of the documents on display also open a window into our turbulent origins and into some of the deepest divisions in our entire history, just be ready for some strong feelings.

Early on, we’ve got George Washington himself accepting the commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Just think: the richest man in America, with literally everything to lose if the Americans failed, risked his life, his fortune, and his “sacred honor” (as the signers of the Declaration put it) to command a mediocre collection of militias against the army of the most powerful empire on Earth.

A dozen years later, in the summer of 1787, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention did something almost as heretical. Charged with revising the Articles of Confederation, they worked secretly to jettison the Articles and start over—in the process creating the single most enduring national constitution in the world. There’s a common misconception that the Constitution of the United States created a democratic system of government. Not so. State legislatures—not the voters—chose the Senate, the upper house; an Electoral College chose the president; Supreme Court Justices serve for life. Only members of the House of Representatives were elected by “the people,” and every state but Rhode Island had property-ownership requirements to determine which white men could vote. The Constitution as written ignored Abigail Adams’s plea to her husband to “remember the ladies,” and as for slaves—well, you can look a long time in the Constitution for a mention of slavery.

Still, “American Originals” tells the story of a country far from complacent, one in which its citizens struggled to change its shape and character almost from the beginning. Look at Thomas Jefferson, that apostle of small government who, through the Louisiana Purchase, presided over the single largest expansion of American territory of any president—even though he doubted his authority to do so.

In the late 19th century, Americans were the most technologically inventive people on Earth, filing many thousands of patents. We will be able to see several of these on display, one from the indefatigable Thomas Edison, who transformed American life; another from Elisha Graves Otis, founder of Connecticut’s own Otis Elevator Company, for “an improved hoisting apparatus.”

“American Originals” is richest, though, as it documents our struggles over slavery, over expanding democracy to include more and more Americans, over the true meaning of the country founded in 1776.

The Amistad Case burst onto the American scene in 1839. African captives bound for sale in America rebelled on board the slave ship Amistad, tried unsuccessfully to sail back to Africa, and were captured and imprisoned in Connecticut for a year and a half while the courts decided their fate. The Constitution had outlawed the external slave trade as of 1808, though not slavery itself. If the captives could prove that they had been imprisoned in Africa and brought to America to be sold into slavery, they could be freed. Abolitionists raised money for the court cases, found translators for the captives and taught them English, and persuaded former President John Quincy Adams himself to argue the case before the Supreme Court.

More than the legal arguments, the resolve and dignity of the captives fired the imagination of antislavery Americans. The deposition of “Bahoo of Bandaloo in Africa” (1839) describes his voyage of “two moons in coming from Africa to Havana,” during which time the Africans were “two and two chained together by hands
and feet.” With Chief Justice Joseph Story’s opinion, the captives won their freedom, but millions more African Americans remained in legal slavery until the cataclysmic events of the Civil War.

It is here that “American Originals” takes us into the heart of the most profound conflict in American history, the Civil War: first by giving us a glimpse of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) inflamed Northern opinion against slavery; through Virginia’s 1861 “Ordinance of Secession,” which all but ensured war; and then by bringing us face to face with the document that finally fulfilled the key promise of the Declaration of Independence—“that all men are created equal”—the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. We know it was only partial, that it only freed slaves in states still controlled by the Confederacy, that Lincoln issued it under pressure from radicals in his own party—all true. We also know it came to stand for far more: that it inspired millions of African Americans, slave and free; that it gave the Northern cause a new moral force; and that it transformed Abraham Lincoln into a liberator, an icon of American freedom.

The Civil War ended slavery and decided the question of whether the United States would remain one nation. The Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) even guaranteed former slaves the vote. But it took the massive, nonviolent civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., nearly a century later to make the United States government take a stand, in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, against the widespread denial of fundamental rights to African Americans.

After the Civil War, many American women who had worked hard to help abolish slavery felt they had earned the right to vote, too, but been betrayed by the Fifteenth Amendment. Susan B. Anthony,

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University's Museum of American Political Life and will be on display through May 16, 2004. The exhibition was created by the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., and the Foundation for the National Archives. The University of Hartford is the eighth and last venue in the exhibition's three-year, national tour. The Hartford showing is made possible through a generous gift from United Technologies Corporation.

whose profile now graces a one-dollar coin, insisted on voting in the presidential election of 1872—and, as we shall see in the exhibit, earned herself a federal arrest and conviction. Women would not gain the right to vote until the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920.

That so many of our national heroes so willingly risked ridicule, arrest, prison, hanging, or assassination on behalf of their visions of and for America ought to give us pause in the fearful and security-conscious United States of 2003. Beyond the documents, these bold spirits were the real “American originals,” willing to bet on Americans’ better selves and eager to test the boundaries of the way things were, the ones we want to see when we look into a mirror.