American History for Truthdiggers: Roots in Religious Zealotry

by Maj. Danny Sjursen via jill - TruthDig *Sunday, Feb 18 2018, 2:27am*
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> *Truthdig editor's note: The past is prologue. The stories we tell about ourselves and our forebears inform the sort of country we think we are and help determine public policy. As our current president promises to "Make America great again," this moment is an appropriate time to reconsider our past, look back at various eras of United States history and re-evaluate America's origins. When, exactly, were we "great"?*

John Winthrop, self-righteous, intolerant bigot and religious fanatic

Below is the second installment of the "American History for Truthdiggers" series, a pull-no-punches appraisal of our shared, if flawed, past. The author of the series, Danny Sjursen, an active-duty major in the U.S. Army, served military tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and taught the nation's checkered, often inspiring past when he was an assistant professor of history at West Point. His wartime experiences, his scholarship, his skill as a writer and his patriotism illuminate these Truthdig posts.

Part 2 of "American History for Truthdiggers." / Click here to see the first installment in the series.

It is the image Americans are comfortable with. The first Thanksgiving. Struggling Pilgrims—our blessed forebears—saved by the generosity of kindly Native Americans. Two societies coexisting in harmony. If Colonial Virginia was a mess, well, certainly matters were better in Massachusetts. Here are origins all can be proud of.

Our children re-create the scene every November, and we watch them with pride through the lenses of our smartphones. But is this representation of life in Colonial New England an accurate portrait of Anglo-Native relations at Plymouth, or, for that matter, in the larger Massachusetts Bay Colony? Of course it isn't, but nonetheless the impression—the myth—persists. That's a story unto itself.

Consider this: How many Americans even know there was a difference between Pilgrims and Puritans? The distinctions matter. The Pilgrims, of course, arrived first. Calvinists of humble origins, the Pilgrims were Protestant separatists who believed the mainstream Church of England was beyond saving. They fled England for the Netherlands in the early 17th century, and then, in 1620, about a hundred boarded the Mayflower to go to North America. It was they who landed on

Plymouth Rock.

The far more numerous Puritans were also pious, dissenting Protestants, but they initially believed the Church of England could be reformed from within. They were generally wealthier, more prominent citizens. In about 1630, about 1,000 Puritans formed the first wave to settle the area claimed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They were, indeed, fleeing the persecution of King Charles I, but—unlike the Pilgrims—they received a royal charter for their colony. They hoped to found a "New Jerusalem" in the New World.

Stark Contrasts: Virginia vs. New England

These weren't the gold-hungry aristocrats of Colonial Virginia. The Puritans (and Pilgrims) came as families—they included women. The Massachusetts climate and natural population growth made for far lower mortality than that experienced at early Jamestown in Virginia. Everyone was willing to work, and the productive family units made, eventually, for bountiful harvests. This was not a land of "gentlemen" and cash crops, as in Virginia, but of dutiful families tilling the land.

The motivations and origins of the two English colonies affected the social structure of each. Differing goals set the tone from the first. Virginians sought to exploit the land, mine its resources, compete with the Spanish and turn a quick profit. Not so the Puritans. They strove to settle, to put down roots and thrive in an idealized community. Their middling origins combined with communal goals and resulted in familial plots with widespread land ownership—another contrast with the tobacco plantations of Jamestown. All this translated into a rough economic equality, at least in the early years. There was also a near total absence of chattel slavery: The climate didn't support the most common cash crops, and so there was little incentive to import Africans to New England.

God Wills It: The Motivations of the Puritans

It all sounds harmonious, idyllic even. Yet something lurked below the surface, something dark and unpleasant to modern eyes. These were fundamentalist zealots! These insufferable, millenarian Calvinists held themselves in shockingly high esteem. They were chosen, they would transform the world by their example. If the Pilgrims sought separation from a world of sin, the Puritans meant to create a New World, an example for all to emulate. It briefs well, and makes for an agreeable origin narrative, but isn't there something disturbing about such a people, about such overbearing confidence?

Ponder the words of John Winthrop, an early governor of the Bay Colony:

"*... wee shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England: for we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. ...*"

These were people on a mission, the Lord's mission, come what may. Such people would seem to be on a collision course with the region's natives and Anglo nonconformists. And this would soon come to pass.

The Puritans' motivations and goals raise some salient questions. What does it say about, and what are the implications for, a society founded on such colossal self-regard? Is it, ultimately, a good thing? That's certainly a matter of opinion, but the questions themselves are instructive. Americans must make such queries to get an honest sense of themselves and their origins. This much is hard to

argue with: Here, in Massachusetts, we find the geneses of American exceptionalism—the blessing and curse that has shadowed the United States for more than three centuries, driving domestic and especially foreign policy. Divergent modern political figures, from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, stuck carefully to an American exceptionalist script, in rhetoric if not in deed. One wonders whether this "City on a Hill" milieu, on the whole, has been a positive attribute. This author, at least, tends to doubt it. Perhaps we should mistrust such pride, and conceit, in even its most American forms.

Stifling Dissent: Life in Colonial New England

Could you imagine living with these people, comporting with their way of life? It sounds like a nightmare. Yet we Americans hold these antecedents in high esteem. Perhaps it's natural, but this much is certain: Such veneration requires a certain degree of willful forgetting, a whitewashing of inconvenient truths about Puritan society.

Sure, Massachusetts avoided the worst famines of Jamestown's early years, but life in Colonial New England was far from serene. It rarely is in repressive religious societies. Remember, the Puritans constructed exactly what they said they would, a theocracy on the bay. The Massachusetts Bay Colony may indeed have more in common with modern Saudi Arabia—executing "witches" and "sorcerers"—than it does with contemporary Boston. Our ancestors were far more religious than most Americans can fathom. But there's also a problem of framing; we've omitted the uncomfortable bits to fashion an uplifting origin narrative.

There were many subgroups that certainly didn't enjoy life in early Colonial Massachusetts: religious dissidents, agnostics, free thinkers and, well, assertive women. We've all heard of the infamous Salem Witch Trials, but nearly four decades earlier the widow Ann Higgins was executed, hung for witchcraft, after having the audacity to complain that hired carpenters had overcharged her for a remodeling job on her house.

All told, 344 citizens were accused of witchcraft in 17th-century Massachusetts. Twenty were executed. The accused had commonalities that are indicative of the nature of gender relations in the Bay Colony. Seventy-five percent were women. Most of those women were middle-aged or older and demonstrated some degree of independence. Many were suspected of some sort of sexual impropriety. The point is that Colonial New England was inhabited by zealots—conformist and oppressive fundamentalists who strictly policed the boundaries of their exalted theocracy. Forget the Thanksgiving feast: This was Islamic State on the Atlantic!

If life was as idyllic as the settlers intended in hail-the-Protestant-work-ethic Massachusetts Bay, then why were so many colonial "heroes" kicked out? Roger Williams, for example, founder of Rhode Island, promoted religious toleration and some separation of church and state, and asserted (gasp) that settlers ought to buy land from the native inhabitants. His thanks? A ticket straight out of Massachusetts. Slightly less well known was