

## Voluntarism Rather Than Coercion

George Will, "A history lesson you probably missed"

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*Locked in the public consciousness is the notion of Plymouth Rock, immediately followed by the Revolution. In between were 150 years of history, a leap toward individualism and a pivotal Indian War, writes George Will.*

Washington—For your summer reading, open a mind-opening book about an immensely important American war concerning which you may know next to nothing. King Philip's War, the central event in a best-seller that is one of this summer's publishing surprises, left a lasting imprint on America.

Americans in this era of sterile politics have an insatiable appetite for biographies of the Founders. But why are so many readers turning to a book—"Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War" by Nathaniel Philbrick—that casts a cool but sympathetic eye on an era usually wrapped in gauzy sentimentality?

One reason might be that it is fun to read about one's family: Philbrick estimates that there are approximately 35 million descendants of the passengers on the Mayflower. (Do the math: 102 passengers; 3.5 generations in a century. But remember 52 passengers died of disease and starvation before the first spring.) Perhaps a second answer is that the story is particularly pertinent as America is engaged abroad in a clash of civilizations, and is engaged at home in a debate about immigration and the common culture.

"In the American popular imagination," Philbrick writes, "the nation's history began with the Pilgrims and then leapfrogged more than 150 years to Lexington and Concord and the Revolution." That version misses, among much else, the history-turning 14 months of war in 1675 and 1676 that set in train events that led to Lexington and Concord. The war was between the English settlers and the Pokanoket Indians led by Metacom, whose English name was Philip.

In a six-decade downward spiral of mutual incomprehension and unintended consequences, the uneasy but growing coexistence of English settlers and American Indians dissolved in mutual suspicions, conflicts and retaliations. During the war, the colony lost 8 percent of its men (compared to the 4 percent to 5 percent of adult men killed in the Civil War). But American Indians fared far worse. Of the 20,000 in the region at the war's beginning, 2,000 died of wounds, 3,000 of sickness or starvation, 2,000 fled west or north—and 1,000 were shipped to the West Indies as slaves. Taxation and other costs of the war so injured economic life that a century passed before New England's per capita income returned to the pre-war level.

Philbrick writes that after ethnic cleansing, or at least ethnic sorting-out, there were no friendly Indians as buffers between the settlers and the unfriendly ones. So the settlers were forced to look to London for help. Soon a royal governor was appointed to govern New England. Then came irritating taxation—of stamps, of tea—and arguments about representation. Exactly 100 years after King Philip's War ended, the United States began.

But an American frame of mind began in 1623. "Mayflower" illustrates a timeless fact of politics everywhere—the toll reality takes on ideology—and a large theme of American life: the fecundity of individualism and enlightened self-interest.

The first important book-length manuscript written in America was “Of Plymouth Plantation,” the journal of William Bradford, the colony’s governor for nearly 36 years. Not published in full until 1856, it was then avidly read by a nation bent on westward expansion and fearing civil war.

In a section on private versus communal farming, Bradford wrote that in 1623, because of a corn shortage, the colonists “began to think how they might raise” more. After much debate, they abandoned their doctrine, which they brought with them on the Mayflower, that all agriculture should be a collective, community undertaking. It was decided, Bradford wrote, that “they should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves.” That is, they “assigned to every family a parcel of land,” ending communal cultivation of that crop.

“This,” Bradford reported, “had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise could have been by any means.” Indeed, “the women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which before would allege **weakness and inability**; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.” So began the American **recoil from collectivism**. Just three years after the settlers came ashore (not at Plymouth Rock, and far from their intended destination, the mouth of the Hudson), they began their ascent to **individualism**.

So began the harnessing, for the general good, of the fact that human beings are moved, usually and powerfully, by self-interest. So began the unleashing of American energies through freedom—voluntarism rather than coercion. So began America.