John Witherspoon

AND THE FOUNDING OF THE

AMERICAN REPUBLIC

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William Wilberforce once remarked that a man he had just met was sadly in need of “the chastening hand of a sound classical education.” The same can be said of me; but fortunately I had the benefit of many chastening hands (and brains) along the way to writing this book. To begin with, there were my teachers at Georgetown University: Walter Berns, George Carey, and Joshua Mitchell. Carey, that most enlightened person, made especially trenchant suggestions. There were also these colleagues and mentors who helped me in innumerable ways: Daniel Dreisbach of the American University; my former colleagues in the Department of Political Science at the United States Air Force Academy, particularly Paul Carrese and Stephen Knott (now at the University of Virginia); John Witte, Jr., of Emory University Law School; Mark Hall of George Fox University; Garrett Ward Sheldon of the University of Virginia’s College at Wise; Michael Novak of the American Enterprise Institute; Barry Ryan of Regent University; and Robert George of Princeton University. I owe a special debt to my editor (now friend) at the University of Notre Dame Press, its associate director, Jeffrey Gainey. Of course, as academic authors are compelled to say, none of these people is to be held accountable for the book’s shortcomings and errors, though I do recall Publius saying something like “I never expect to see a perfect work from imperfect man.”

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In the northwest quadrant of that monumental city, Washington, D.C., a bronze statue of John Witherspoon towers over traffic between Connecticut Avenue and N Street: stately, imposing, and altogether ignored. Most people who work or live in Washington, even residents of fashionable Northwest, are equally ignorant of its existence (it is a stone’s throw from a well-known statue of Longfellow) and the man it memorializes.

That monumental statue, now one of three in the U.S. to Witherspoon—another, equally ignored, is in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park—was erected in the early twentieth century in front of the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant, whose members wished to commemorate one of their own denomination who had signed the Declaration of Independence and had earned, they thought, a distinguished place in American history. Those Presbyterians wished to memorialize Witherspoon both as a churchman and as a statesman. A Witherspoon Memorial Association was formed; private donations were solicited from Andrew Carnegie and others; the sculptor William Couper, creator of the Longfellow statue in Washington and the heroic likeness of John Smith at Jamestown, was commissioned; and in 1909 the statue was unveiled and dedicated. At the dedication ceremony addresses were given by Lord James Bryce, the English ambassador, and by President Woodrow Wilson, a son of Witherspoon’s Princeton, whose address was titled a “Review of the Life and Services of Witherspoon.” Around that time the statue became, as so many things eventually do become, the property of the federal government. Years passed, the Church of the Covenant was torn down, and in 1976, during the bicentennial of the Declaration, a committee of Presbyterians was formed to have the Witherspoon statue moved to the National Presbyterian Church
on Nebraska Avenue. In the event, the statue remained where it had always been, and Witherspoon himself continued to fade from memory.

I began this project in 1994, the bicentennial of Witherspoon’s death. In the decade I have been studying Witherspoon I have conceived a fondness for that statue, partly because I like underdogs, but mostly because it teaches two telling object lessons. First, it illustrates how thoroughly Witherspoon has been ignored in the century since its commissioning; second, it shows up the confusion that sometimes exists in modern America over the proper degree of separation between church and state. Apparently the proposed transfer of the statue in 1976 occasioned some hand-wringing over the constitutionality of the federal government honoring a minister with a statue in the first place. Two bills (H.R.12778 and S.2996) were introduced in Congress that year authorizing the relocation of the Witherspoon monument, but the project died a quiet death, lost in the welter of bicentennial activities and what a contemporary wag called “tons of red-white-and-blue junk.” Nevertheless, because he was a preeminent churchman and statesman, Witherspoon still affords an ideal point of departure, to appropriate Alexis de Tocqueville’s language, for addressing questions about religion and politics and, more broadly, about the American founding.

But Witherspoon scholarship remains, as one writer put it in 1990, “astonishingly thin.” The best book on Witherspoon is still Varnum Lansing Collins’s President Witherspoon: A Biography, a two-volume work from 1925 that was reprinted in 1969. There have been several other biographies of varying quality besides the Collins work. Of these, two repay attention: a portrait of Witherspoon by his former pupil, Ashbel Green, probably written in 1840‒1841 and finally published under the editorship of Henry Lyttleton Savage in 1973; and one by Witherspoon’s descendant, David Walker Woods. In 2001, L. Gordon Tait published The Piety of John Witherspoon, a solid study of his religiosity that devotes little space to his political life. Beyond these books Witherspoon has merited chapters in edited volumes such as Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten’s Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment, and histories such as Mark Noll’s Princeton and the Republic, 1768–1822. Usually, however, he has merited pages rather than chapters, and nothing to speak of by a political scientist. So far as I know, this is the first comprehensive treatment of Witherspoon’s political thought and career.

Much of the scholarship on Witherspoon has dealt with his pre-American life in Scotland from 1723 to 1768 and has emphasized, in one way or another, his Scottishness. I focus instead on Witherspoon as an American
political thinker and have relatively little to say about his Scottish career, although I suggest how the Scottish common sense philosophy helped make him and his students into practical American politicians. I have attempted throughout to relate Witherspoon’s political thought and even his moral epistemology to that of the key founders, particularly that curious pair of rivals-turned-friends: the northern Federalist John Adams and the southern Republican Thomas Jefferson, the “North and South Poles of the American Revolution,” as Benjamin Rush called them. (Indeed, Rush—who helped reconcile the two in their old age—wrote to Adams that while others may have done more, he and Jefferson “thought for us all” during the Revolution.) The final chapter is devoted to placing Witherspoon in the context of American political thought during the founding era, particularly in relation to the three dominant ideologies associated with British liberalism, classical republicanism, and Protestant Christianity.