4

Equality, Inequality, and Difference: Genius as Problem and Possibility in American Political/Scientific Discourse

John Carson

Thomas Jefferson was a master of the succinct formulation. In his opening to the second paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence*—"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal..."—he fashioned perhaps the most well-known phrase in all of American political language, one that has resonated powerfully to this day. This paean to human equality, however, was not his only view on the subject. As a slaveholder, he lived out one version of the paradox of extolling equality while continuing to benefit from an extreme form of human inequality. And even from a theoretical perspective, while he might assert that all people are created equal, he was also engaged near the end of his life in an extensive correspondence with his old friend and long-time political rival John Adams, where one of the subjects they took up was the notion, as Jefferson put it, of a "natural aristocracy." Adams was rather skeptical about the notion, but Jefferson embraced it with relish: "The natural aristocracy," he proclaimed, "I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society...May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?"[1] All people may be equal, but in Jefferson's view some were much more qualified because of their natural "virtue and talents" to assume positions of authority in a well-ordered republican society.

Jefferson was by no means alone in the new republic in simultaneously praising equality while also suggesting that the acknowledgment of human differences and their implications was critical to establishing a viable political order. For many of the first generation of American political thinkers, the overriding question was not so much whether or not to have a republic, but how to create one that would last. Human frailty, the tendency toward corruption, and the presumed fragility of republics loomed large in their imaginations.[2] Virtue—particularly the virtue of political leaders and the small

proportion of the populace that would be entrusted to choose them—was almost universally conceded to be one way to combat these tendencies and was deemed essential if a republic were to survive.[3] But virtue, while necessary, was rarely conceded to be sufficient. In theory, anyone—well, any white, adult, property-holding male—could be virtuous. But in most of the political imaginaries of the period, not anyone could rule. No one suggested choosing leaders by lot, even from the minority of the population that fit the criteria of independent and virtuous. Rather, they imagined elections where, as Jefferson suggested, those of superior talents or genius would be chosen to guide the republic. This was not accidental. Given the almost insuperable problems that establishing and maintaining a large republic were believed to present, most political writers concluded that only the most virtuous *and* talented could guide the nation successfully.[4]

This vision of rule by genius, as it were, did not come without its dangers. On the one side, as Joseph Perkins pointed out in his *An Oration upon Genius* (1797), those of genius and talent might choose other pursuits than public service, lured by the riches that seemed available to anyone in an "egalitarian republic" such as the United States, or that the electorate might be blind to its own true interests and so vote in those of lesser ability.[5] Perhaps the even greater danger lurked on the other side, where those of genius might prove themselves to be demagogues, less interested in *res publica* than in private gain and unlimited power, using their talents to turn the electorate and then the government to their own interests.[6] By the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville would worry about this problem explicitly when discussing the susceptibility of democratic republics to tyranny by the majority.[7] But even James Madison in the early moments of the formation of the new nation can be seen to have the problem of genius in mind when trying to fashion a structure for the republic that would insure that no single interest could dominate.[8] Genius thus seemed to bring with it both the power to make the republic and the power to destroy it.

This double nature of "genius," the sense it could be either beneficent or malevolent, has had a long history in the West, stretching at least from Goethe's *Faust* or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to contemporary representations of heroic and evil scientists. This chapter will explore one aspect of that tradition, the way in which the double nature of genius figured in American social/political discourse during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the role that scientific/philosophical understandings of genius played in underwriting the conceptions of genius being promulgated. The chapter begins by examining the meaning of "genius" itself and the stabilities and changes in its denotations from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. There it highlights an important duality and tension in the meaning of the term and suggests how the dual nature of "genius" has remained alive in many ways right up to the present moment. The chapter then turns to the politics of "genius" and examines how "genius" was central to the development of the notion of republican meritocracy at the same time as it was seen to pose a threat to the very possibility of a republican democracy. Finally, the chapter concludes by considering how such a seemingly unstable combination as genius and democracy might have been able to persist in a kind of creative tension.

"Genius" in language and culture

In 1797, Joseph Perkins was called upon to give Harvard University's anniversary commencement address. The subject for his address was "genius," which he defined as

> significant of those variously modified intellectual powers, uncommon in kind or degree, by the possession, cultivation, and exertion of which, an individual is enabled to rise superior to the great mass of mankind, and by some extraordinary production, beneficial improvement, or difficult and important discovery, to bear away the palm of excellence from his envious or gratefully admiring cotemporaries.[9]

Perkins's characterization caught some of the key features of the term as it was commonly used at the time, mixing together almost promiscuously the sense of genius as some highly developed intellectual power, as something that raises an individual above the common run of humanity, and as something that results in (or perhaps is itself) an extraordinary accomplishment that might bring renown to its possessor. One of the tensions that would persist in the meaning of the term, right up to the present day, is whether genius refers to a kind of person ("a genius") or a specific instantiation, be it something produced or discovered ("that novel is a work of genius") or some highly developed ability ("she has a genius for research"). Giorgio Agamben, in his 2004 essay on "Genius," has highlighted another aspect of "genius," its impersonal quality, the sense that genius comes from without and remains distinct from the individual, from the "I," and indeed stands in constant tension with that "I."[10] Perkins does not directly allude to this feature of "genius," but the sense that genius might be something external to the individual is among the word's oldest associations in English, going back to notions of good or evil spirits that still persist in the plural form, "genii."[11] It contrasts with a rather different connotation, that genius is not so much a sport of nature as a product of nature, whether that be of the efforts of an individual to develop their genius or of nature itself to, in Thomas Paine's words in 1792, distribute "mental powers...as she pleases."[12] It will be worth laying out in a little detail the linguistic terrain that the word "genius" occupied in English from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries in order to get a better sense of what kinds of possibilities, and dangers, lurked within the appropriation of the term for scientific and political speculation, as well as to understand better how its discursive field was dynamically reshaped in the course of its use.

Before examining meanings, however, we might ask a prior question, whether "genius" was a word of much social presence at all and thus worth taking the trouble to understand? One way to get some glimpse into the place

of "genius" in the lexicon of the English-speaking world is to investigate its frequency of use. Figures 4.1a–4.6b were generated using Google Ngrams on the corpus of all English-language books in the Google Books data set and then on those denominated as "American English."[13] For all of the limits of Google's Ngram technology, and there are many, the sharp rise in the relative frequency of the word "virtue" and slow rise of "genius" starting in the first half of the eighteenth century are noteworthy (figures 4.1a, b), which is even more so if one were to add "talents" to "genius," as they were often used as virtual synonyms until nearly the middle of the nineteenth century (figures 4.2a, b).[14]

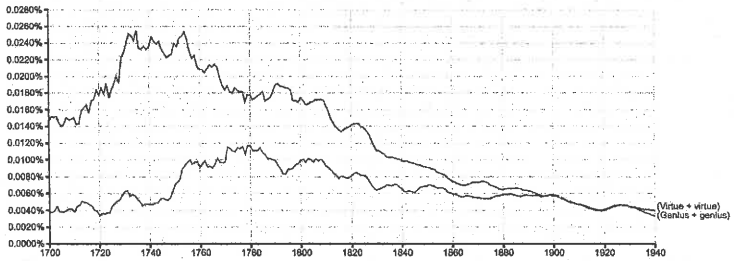

Figure 4.1a English search for Genius + Virtue (1700–1940).

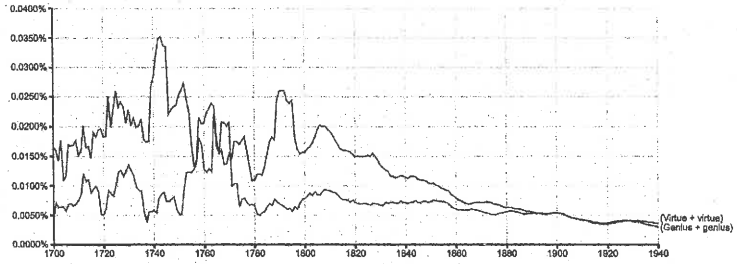

Figure 4.1b American English search for Genius + Virtue (1700–1940).

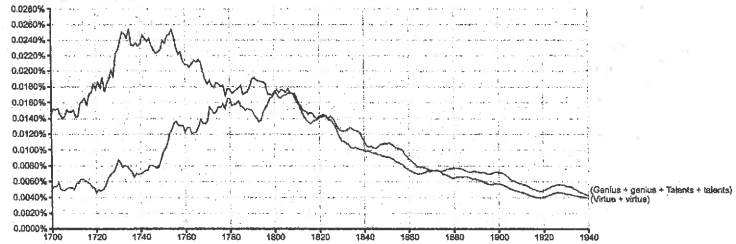

Figure 4.2a English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue (1700–1940).

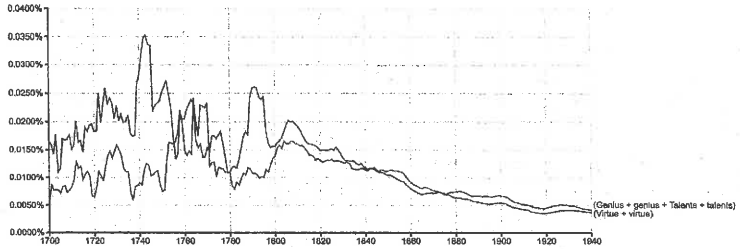

Figure 4.2b American English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue (1700–1940).

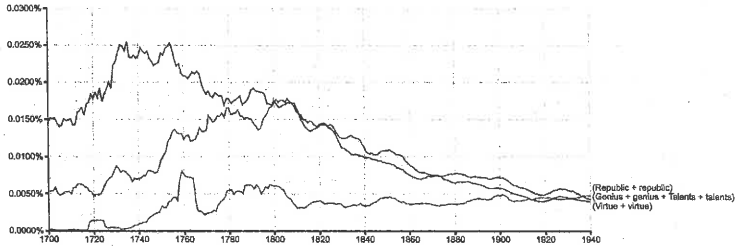

Figure 4.3a English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic (1700–1940).

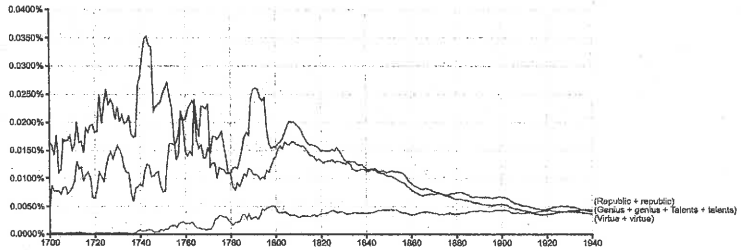

Figure 4.3b American English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic (1700–1940).

When the word "republic" is added to the analysis, we can get a sense of just how much more in play "virtue" and "genius" were even during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a period when the concept of a republic was being debated and fought over as never before or never since (see figures 4.3a, b).

However, adding yet another keyword from the era, "fame," also reveals the limits to the language of genius, at least until the 1790s, when "fame" precipitously declined and by 1810 was completely eclipsed by "virtue" and "genius" (figures 4.4a, b).[15]

As one more point of comparison, consider the term "equality," which, like "virtue," rises to prominence during the early eighteenth century and then remains as an important term for the next 200 years (figures 4.5a, b).

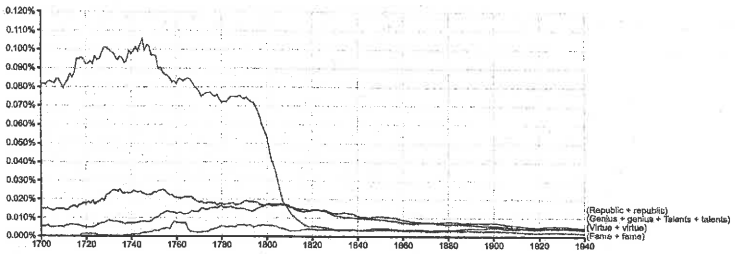

Figure 4.4a English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic + Fame (1700–1940).

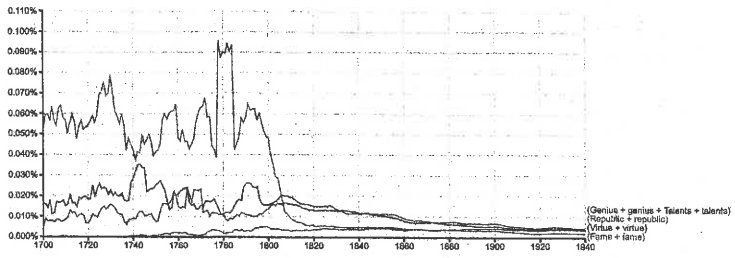

Figure 4.4b American English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic + Fame (1700–1940).

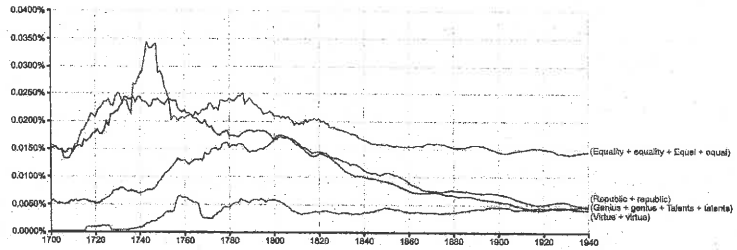

Figure 4.5a English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic + Equality (1700–1940).

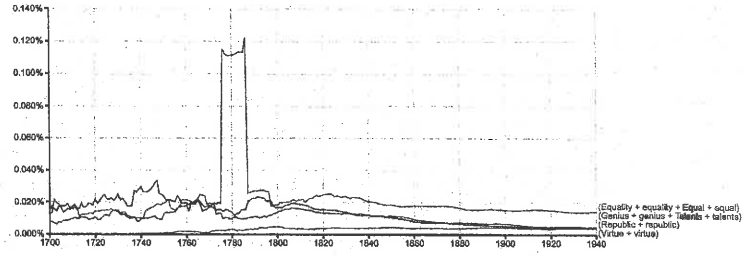

Figure 4.5b American English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic + Equality (1700–1940).

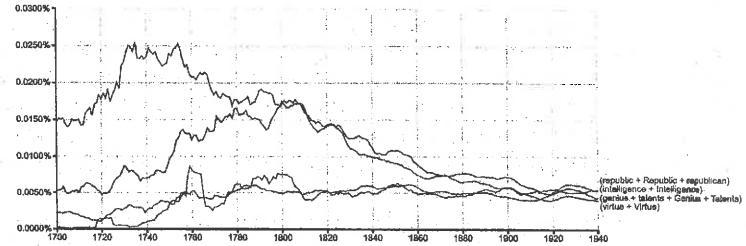

Figure 4.6a English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic + Intelligence (1700–1940).

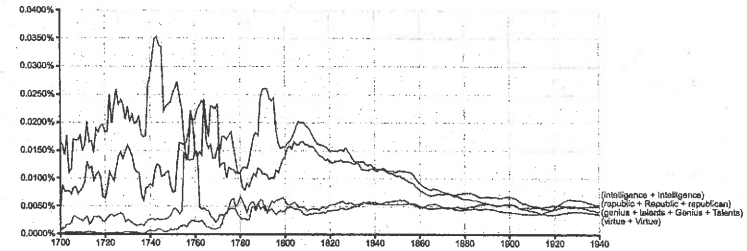

Figure 4.6b American English search for Genius and Talents + Virtue + Republic + Intelligence (1700–1940).

What the data suggest is that "genius" as a word began to rise steadily in usage in the English-language scene starting in the 1720s, peaked in the early 1800s when it matched "virtue" in frequency, and then slowly declined (along with "virtue") though still was significant until around 1920, when another word started to eclipse "genius," "intelligence" (see figures 4.6a, b).

More superficial analysis of other online databases for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US publications confirms that the term "genius" was

found everywhere, as present in African American newspapers, for example, as in elite philosophical texts.[16]

With regard to the meaning of "genius," there was a range of possibilities, as Samuel Johnson makes clear in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). "Genius" could signify a spirit ("the protecting or ruling power of men, places, or things," as Johnson put it); "a man endowed with superior faculties"; "mental power or faculties" themselves; a natural disposition "for some peculiar employment"; or nature or disposition broadly understood, such as "the *genius* of the times" or, very commonly, the *genius* of a people.[17] The *Encyclopædia Britannica* of 1771 also defined "genius" first as "good or evil spirit," and then as "a natural talent or disposition to do one thing more than another," emphasizing with the latter that "art and industry add much to natural endowments, but cannot supply them where they are wanting."[18] The first American edition of the *Encyclopædia*, Thomas Dobson's published in Philadelphia in 1798, amplified this second sense, emphasizing that genius was something one was born with, but was also something very specific, such as "a genius for commanding an army."[19] In this formulation, the vision was of genius expressed in an almost unlimited variety of ways, "the diversity of genius," as the author put it, explained on the basis of the observation that nature "has made an unequal distribution of her blessings among her children; yet she has disinherited none; and a man divested of all kinds of abilities, is as great [i.e., rare] a phenomenon as an universal genius."[20] In the first edition of his *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), Noah Webster provided six separate meanings for "genius," including "good or evil spirit," "a particular natural talent or aptitude of mind for a particular study or course of life," "uncommon powers of intellect," "man endowed with uncommon vigor of mind," and "peculiar character; as the *genius* of the times."[21] By the end of the century, *Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language* (1898) was still listing the same basic definitions, though now with a long explanation of how "genius" and "talent" differed: "genius" having more to do with intuition and the imagination, "talent" with mental training and command of all the faculties.[22]

What do these various definitions tell us? The notion of "genius" as "good or evil spirit," though listed by dictionaries throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as one of the principal meanings of the term, seems to have largely fallen out of fashion by the mid to late eighteenth century, at least in terms of explicit usage. Agamben's essay, however, suggests that this understanding of the term may well have shadowed some of its other meanings, a contention substantiated by the way in which a number of romantic authors characterized "genius" in their works.[23] Much more common, though, was "genius" used to refer to a highly developed but very specific mental ability, most probably present from birth. Typically, when used in this way, "genius" combined notions of inborn potential with the concentrated training or education deemed necessary to realize that potential, an emphasis on experience fully in keeping with both John Locke's associationist psychology and the faculty psychology of the Scottish Common Sense school.[24] Over the course of the eighteenth century, another meaning of "genius" began to gain traction, "genius" as suggesting overall mental superiority. In this guise, "genius" could refer not just to the power of an individual's mind but occasionally, and with increasing frequency, to a particular kind of person. The "genius," in a certain sense, began to appear as a real possibility by the early eighteenth century, a possibility perhaps already apparent in the Enlightenment's glorification of Isaac Newton. Alexander Pope's famous 1727 epitaph for Newton stands as a vivid emblem of the cult of Newton's genius. In Pope's rendering, Newton is imagined as almost a new kind of being, requiring his own special act of creation: "Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night: / GOD said, *'Let Newton be!'* and all was Light."[25] Finally, "genius" was frequently used to refer to the peculiar character or "animating spirit" of a nation, people, religion, era, and so on. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this third sense would largely be eclipsed and "genius" as overall superiority would rise to equal and even surpass "genius" as a specific mental ability, particularly when "talents" or "abilities" or "aptitudes" came to be used much more typically to denote specific capabilities of great strength rather than overall ability.[26]

Underlying, or perhaps riding alongside, these specific denotations, "genius" has commonly embraced a second kind of distinction, one between genius as something fully naturalized and genius as in some way suggesting the uncanny. In the now classic interwar novel, *The Man without Qualities*, Austrian writer Robert Musil devoted the famous thirteenth chapter—"A Race-Horse of Genius Contributes to the Awareness of Being a Man without Qualities"—to a brilliant exploration of the tensions inherent in these two senses of genius. "If one were to analyse a powerful mind and a champion boxer from the psycho-technical point of view," Musil observes,

> it would in fact turn out that their cunning, their courage, their precision and their combinatory ability, as well as the quickness of their reactions on the territory that they have made their own, are approximately equal... In this way sport and functionalism have deservedly come into their own, displacing the out-of-date conceptions of genius and human greatness.[27]

With his reference to the "psycho-technical"—and here one might want to think about intelligence testing as the quintessential twentieth-century psycho-technics of genius—Musil suggests that genius as something out-of-the-ordinary and beyond the ken of science has been done away with. In its place is the ability to make commensurate all kinds of intellects, not just of different people but also across the whole of the animal kingdom, so that all are seen to be various degrees and manifestations of the same phenomenon, points on a series of bell-shaped curves. In this, Musil suggests, quite rightly as far as it goes, that genius was rendered via modern science into something ordinary and predictable and thus no longer a quality that could set the individual apart.[28]

However, Musil's own current standing, as one of the great writers, indeed geniuses, of twentieth-century letters, suggests that there may be another

side to the story as well. Certainly the twentieth-century psychological sciences did, in a number of ways, tame genius and make it seem part of the normal order of things. At the same time, stories of the discovery of prodigies proliferated in America, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, the heyday of intelligence testing.[29] And one of the great cultural shifts in the representation of genius, at least in America, was the displacement of Thomas Alva Edison, for whom genius was depicted as 99 percent perspiration, with Albert Einstein, whose genius seemed almost otherworldly, and who was represented more as a seer or prophet than as a tireless laborer in the vineyards of science.[30] As Marshall Missner has observed: "So, together with the view that Einstein was a great genius and a secular saint, there also developed the view that what Einstein had done would enable small groups of outsiders to use secret and mysterious methods to harness enormous power and thus control, and maybe destroy, the ordinary person's life. The reverential side became the predominant one, but the fearful side never went away, and it made a very significant contribution to the development of Einstein's fame."[31] Genius thus did not become simply psychotechnical in the modern age; rather, it retained, if in a modified form, the dual sensibility of being both part of the natural order and yet of also possibly standing in some sense outside of it, associations the word had had since it burst on the intellectual/political scene in the early eighteenth century. Indeed, these very tensions and multiplicities of meaning, as we shall see, were fundamental to making possible the political projects that saw in genius a powerful resource for articulating what a modern republic should look like. They constituted as well a fact about human nature that had to be taken into account in any serious vision of a republican polity that would be advanced.

"Genius" and the American republic

Rule by genius sounds far removed from current American politics, and even in that now mythologized moment of the "founding fathers," few would have subscribed explicitly to the notion of a republic ruled by some sort of intellectual or cognitive elite. America's revolution, as is well known, was as much about preserving a particular political and social order (and a rather stratified one, at that) as it was about trying to establish something radically new. Indeed, for all the talk of equality and universal rights as justification for revolution, most of the actual grievances were niggling at best (consider the whole second half of the *Declaration of Independence*, with its laundry list of rather minor complaints), and the underlying presumption was that stratifications in civil and political society would inevitably persist, even within the most privileged class of white, propertied males.[32] "Was there, or will there ever be," John Adams wondered in 1787, "a nation, whose individuals were all equal, in natural and acquired qualities, in virtues, talents, and riches? The answer of all mankind must be in the negative."[33] Thomas Jefferson was certainly more optimistic than Adams about the potential

of education and abundant land to produce rough equality (at least for adult, white males) within a politically engaged republic of yeoman farmers. Nonetheless, the system of education he laid out in *Notes on the State of Virginia* was designed, as he so charmingly put it, so that "twenty of the best geniusses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed, at the public expence."[34] Such was the fate of young white males of the common sort; the elite would be allowed to pay for any of their children to continue on to advanced education, and women, native peoples, and African Americans simply never registered in his imaginary. Moreover, Jefferson too conceded that society would remain divided; he hoped, however, to ensure that such divisions were based on what he took to be the right criteria, the reward for an individual's virtues and talents, for their genius, rather than the legacy of family or rank.[35]

For both Adams and Jefferson, and indeed for Thomas Paine and almost anyone else touching on the subject, the nature of genius constituted one important stumbling block helping to insure that complete equality could never be achieved even in an ideal republic: some people simply were endowed from birth with particular talents, and those superior abilities, if allowed to flourish, either entitled those individuals to, or would help them to attain, positions of power in government and influence in civil society.[36] Rather than lament this "truth of nature," most political theorists sought to use it. They generally argued first that some sort of broadly available public education was necessary in order to insure that all those with natural genius would be identified and then receive training appropriate to their talents, and second that in one way or another the fact of human differences actually had the potential to help stabilize a republican form of government rather than undermine it.[37]

Although the United States never initiated any centralized plan for mass education in the manner of their French cousins after their revolution, at the local level the commitment to basic education for white males and often even white females is striking. British North America had already had a tradition of high literacy rates for both males and females well before the American Revolution, and important features of the new republican form of governance simply underscored the need for an educated citizenry.[38] Adult (white) propertied men had to be sufficiently educated so as to be able to distinguish the virtuous and able from the demagogues and self-interested when voting, and (white) women required sufficient schooling so as to be able to train properly the next generation of virtuous republican citizens.[39] Nonetheless, in addition to these rationales for broadly available comprehensive basic education, a number of writers argued that identifying those with particular genius and then training them to enhance their abilities were critical to the success of the new republic. Thus, Perkins extolled the new American republic as likely to be particularly conducive to genius, because with basic learning and education widespread, individuals from all strata of society would be able to "kindle into a flame those latent intellectual fires, which are calculated to enlighten and adorn the world."[40]

James Carter made the point even more forcefully in his *Essays upon Popular Education* (1826):

> While the best schools in the land are free, all the classes of society are blended. The rich and the poor meet and are educated together. And if educated together, nature is so even handed in the distribution of her favors that no fear need be entertained, that a monopoly of talent, of industry and consequently of acquirements will follow a monopoly of property.[41]

The value of the common school, Carter argued, lay in its ability to discover and nurture talents wherever they might arise.

This desire to find and develop the talents and genius of the populace served a number of functions for those imagining and carrying out the project of fashioning the new republic. First and foremost, of course, was its role in helping to establish a commitment to equality of opportunity, rather than equality of outcome, as a key attribute of the American republic.[42] As is well known, few of the revolutionary leaders were actually desirous of initiating fundamental changes in the social order. Their goal by and large was to place the existing hierarchy (with perhaps a few additions from among those of genius in the lower ranks) on a new, and even firmer, footing, one that would fit the dictates of reason and not just accord with the commonplaces of tradition. This meant finding ways to justify privilege and distinction that could be meshed with commitments to republican equality. A republic based on merit, one where (white, male) individuals rose or fell according to the particular set of virtues and talents that they possessed (whether through birth or education or both), for many, fit the bill admirably.[43] As even that noted champion of the common people, Andrew Jackson, declared in 1832: "Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth cannot be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law."[44]

Not that many republicans, whether radical or conservative, spoke explicitly in the language of merit. In America, direct discussions of merit would not really blossom until near the end of the nineteenth century, when the spoils system and the power of urban immigrant political machines were challenged in the name of new systems of hiring based explicitly on merit and not party loyalty. Earlier, the words "virtue," "talents," and "genius" were used almost ubiquitously to identify the kinds of characteristics that justified advanced education or election to public office. Jefferson, as has already been indicated, proposed an educational system where only the "best geniusess" among the common folk would move up the educational ladder; the purpose, as he explained, was "to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated."[45] James Madison discussed explicitly the interrelations of republican politics and human capacities in *Federalist* No. 58 (1788), when discussing the proper size for the House of Representatives. Those "of limited information and of weak capacities," he maintained, were most likely to be susceptible to demagogues and thus to allow a democratic republic to be transformed into an oligarchy. Republics, Madison concluded, required representatives who were knowledgeable and intellectually talented in order to survive.[46]

It is, of course, one thing to celebrate a republic of genius and another to actually create one. Or perhaps, to put it more accurately, it is one thing to celebrate talents and genius, and another literally to establish a polity where those characteristics really would supersede all others in power and influence. Clearly, that would have been the kind of social revolution for which the supporters were scarce, at least among the elite. Two related strategies emerged to contain this possibility. Jefferson's plan for education reveals one: while the poor would be sifted for those few of potential genius to gain special training, the well-off could by-pass this system and simply pay for the education necessary to make their children, if not the absolutely most talented in their areas of interest, at least skilled enough to be readily considered part of the virtuous and talented. Until the enactment of the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, broad basic education for a relatively large portion of the white population was paired with higher education limited to a tiny proportion of the population, mostly white and male, and almost all requiring private support from families or a willingness to enter the ministry to attend college.[47] Thus, as the liberal arts colleges promoted their production of "virtuous, cultivated Christian gentlemen," as most of them did, they created for the social elite a direct means virtually to insure that their sons (and even some daughters) could be readily considered among the nation's talented—their genius sharpened as much as was possible.[48]

The second strategy for containing many of the radical possibilities inherent in refounding the social/political order on merit was to suggest, as so many early theorists of republican governance did, that those with genius would almost naturally rise to the top, whether in governance or any other sector of the social order. Because this was depicted as, at times, an almost natural law, the suggestion was that a corollary should follow from it: that those who had achieved positions of political and social power must be those who are among the virtuous and talented. Genius is known by its deeds, the dictionaries pointed out. Achieving a position of power or authority is a sign of success; thus, if the system is working correctly, it must have taken talent to arrive at a place of note.

Certainly not everyone accepted the most extreme form of this ideology; many of the dispossessed fought not only the authority of the elite but the very right of that elite to wield such authority.[49] Nonetheless, it is striking how often not just working-class Jacksonians but African Americans and women and others argued for their inclusion in governance or the professions on the basis of genius and talent, rather than basing such decisions on different criteria altogether. For example, Hannah Mather asserted in 1818 that "the wise Author of nature has endowed the female mind with equal

powers and faculties, and given them the same right of judging and acting for themselves, as he gave to the male sex."[50] Claims about the particularly developed genius of various African Americans—including Benjamin Banneker, Thomas Fuller, and Phillis Wheatley—filled the pages of *Freedom's Journal*, the *Colored American*, and other papers in attempts to demonstrate not only that African peoples were not biologically inferior as a race, but that a system that rewarded fairly the individual talent of anyone, whatever their color, would benefit blacks as much as it did whites.[51] One need only think of W. E. B. Du Bois's celebration of the "talented tenth" at the turn of the twentieth century to see how thoroughly the language of talent and genius as justification for differential access to positions of power and influence came to seem natural in America.[52]

This undergirding and naturalizing of a language of merit around the notion of equality of opportunity was, in all likelihood, the most powerful and important political role that notions of genius played in the United States, from the founding of the republic up to the present moment. It helped establish a logic of inclusion and exclusion that continues to guide aspects of the nation's political and social debate. But it was by no means the only one. There were at least two other ways in which "genius" in its various guises proved to be a critical tool for those trying to imagine and then realize the possibility of establishing a viable republic. Both spoke directly to key problems lying at the heart of republican theory: the issue of self-interest and the fear of the passions. Without wishing to exhume or get entangled in the long and complex historiographical debate over republicanism, what it was, and who advocated which version of it, one can safely say that a concern articulated by almost every political writer who weighed in on how to organize the new republic was the worry about self-interest versus concern with the public good, along with the related issue of how to insure that the passions were kept in check by reason.[53] Typically, these were framed as the need to restrict the active citizenry—those who could vote and hold office—to those who could be deemed to be independent (i.e., property-owning adult white males), and thus able to rise above their specific interests to consider dispassionately the good of the whole of the nation, the *res publica*.[54]

By 1800, George Washington became one symbol of this figure, lionized in the American press for his self-sacrifice and, tellingly, for his genius.[55] Partly, the new nation was in search of heroes, and who better than Washington, the man who had defeated the British Empire, refused the possibility of becoming king, retired after two terms as president, and then conveniently died soon after leaving office? But encomiums to his genius as well as his virtue were signaling something else as well, that it took more than the status of being an independent yeoman farmer to actually see rightly what the needs of the nation as a whole might be. It required talents—genius—to look beyond self-interest and to overcome the ability of the passions to overwhelm reason.[56] The new nation might have foundered if a person of lesser genius had been at the helm in those crucial early moments. Independence was surely necessary,

but perhaps the ability to put aside self-interest for republican virtue was not sufficient to guarantee that an individual would see rightly, guided by reason alone, what was best for the whole. From this perspective, the earnest proclamations by so many political writers that those with virtue *and* talents would almost inevitably rise to the top and be chosen by the electorate to assume positions of authority and leadership may have reflected less their confidence in the new nation than their own fears that without the ability of those with genius to see clearly and dispassionately, the republic might perish, however well intentioned the leadership.

If genius promised great things to those imagining how to create a viable new republic, it also presented certain threats. Embedded in the developing language of meritocracy, notions of genius and equality of opportunity could be used to maintain the status quo, reframing long-standing exclusions of women, the working class, African Americans, and others from significant positions of power and authority, now on the presumably rational grounds of merit rather than the arbitrary ones of privilege and custom.[57] While members of each of these groups turned repeatedly to the language of the *Declaration of Independence*, with its proclamation of the equality of all, to press for an expansion of their powers and opportunities, they faced in the nineteenth century an American republic where basic legal and citizenship rights, even when accorded, did not necessarily guarantee access to significant sites of authority. Rhetorically, anyway, they had to give evidence of their genius as well, and the structures of education plus presumptions about what kinds of talent were relevant to what kinds of authority constituted for most significant obstacles to advancement. This state of affairs was particularly clear with women, who were typically represented not so much as mentally inferior to men as mentally different (whether by nature or from education), having their own forms of genius, which suited them for domestic work and child raising, but not for politics or the professions.[58]

Genius presented a different sort of problem to those wanting not so much to change the social order as to maintain it. First, the very possibility that genius of one sort or another could flower anywhere meant that the possibility of monopolizing power and authority could never feel completely secure. New claims coming from those whose abilities were manifest might prove difficult to contain, and might include demands for much broader recognition of the talents of the social group to which the individual belonged, demands that could be readily couched in the very language of merit that was developed to help marginalize such claims. Frederick Douglass mined this possibility with great success in mid-century America, using his eloquence, intellect, and mounting fame to symbolize vividly, at least to some, the possibility that whole groups of Americans—those of African heritage—should be accorded real opportunities for intellectual development and inclusion in the polity.[59] A second kind of threat lurked in the very logic of republican theory, in the worries about the untamed passions of the multitude. That threat was the demagogue, a figure of genius but without the virtue to keep that

genius working for the common good. As Francis Wayland astutely observed in 1842:

> There will always be produced native talent, vast power of influencing mankind, united with restless, aspiring and insatiate ambition. And this talent will be unfolded in greater proportion as common education is more generally diffused. The question, then, is not whether such talent shall or shall not exist. The only practical question is, whether these rare endowments shall be cultivated and disciplined and cautioned and directed by the lessons of past wisdom, or whether they shall be allowed to grow up in reckless and headstrong arrogance...It is merely a question whether the extraordinary talent bestowed upon society by our Creator, shall be a blessing or a curse to us and to our children.[60]

In this vision, the genius is able to step outside of all the careful mechanisms designed by Madison and others to keep power safely out of the hands of any single interest group. Following the logic of the tyranny of the majority that Tocqueville lays out so brilliantly in *Democracy in America*, genius linked with restless and uncontained ambition might use the very potential that a republican democracy presents to undercut the very functioning of that system.[61]

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to sketch out a picture of some of the roles that "genius" and its allied term "talents" played in the American political imaginary during the formation and early decades of the republic. Central was the way in which notions of genius and talents could create a seemingly natural and almost uncontestable language of inequality at that same time as equality could be trumpeted as a fundamental truth of politics and society. Rather than being completely at odds, there proved to be powerful ways of writing these stories together, so that the principle of equality, once rendered as equality of opportunity, could lead almost inexorably to inequality. I would like to finish, though, by returning to the tensions lurking within "genius" between the quotidian and uncanny. The sense of genius as a kind of person, a sport of nature, a conduit for truths almost independent of the genius himself, or herself, carries with it an intrinsic threat, that all attempts to domesticate genius might prove futile. Henry David Thoreau is one of the most obvious nineteenth-century examples, and perhaps Dr. Strangelove stands in well for one type of the twentieth-century version.

Notes

1. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 388; and John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 15, 1813, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 397–400.

2. See, for example, the repeated addressing of such issues by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers*. For some important secondary works, see Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism or Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).
3. For a sampling of the enormous literature on virtue, see Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13 (1987): 37–58; James T. Kloppenberg, "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 9–33.
4. See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992), esp. 229–43, 271–86; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 288–303; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 506–18.
5. Joseph Perkins, *An Oration upon Genius* (Boston, MA: Joseph Nancrede, 1797).
6. John Jay, in *Federalist* No. 64, argued that the age restrictions for president and senator were necessary because "it confines the electors to men of whom the people have had time to form a judgment, and with respect to whom they will not be liable to be deceived by those brilliant appearances of genius and patriotism, which, like transient meteors, sometimes mislead as well as dazzle." See John Jay, *Federalist* No. 64: "The Powers of the Senate," from *The New York Packet*, Friday, March 7, 1788 at http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_64.html.
7. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (London: Penguin, 2003), esp. vol. 1, pt. 2, chs. 5–9, vol. 2, pt. 4, chs. 2–4.
8. In *Federalist* No. 10, Madison discusses the diversity of faculties in men and how that can mean some are much more successful in accruing property (and power) than others. James Madison, *Federalist* No. 10: "The Powers of the Senate," from *The New York Packet*, Friday, March 7, 1788 at "The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard against Domestic Faction and Insurrection," from *The New York Packet*, Friday, November 23, 1787 at http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_10.html.
9. Perkins, *Oration upon Genius*, 8
10. Giorgio Agamben, "Genius," in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 9–18.
11. See "Genius, n. and adj.," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, December 2014. http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/77607?redirectedFrom=genius (accessed March 14, 2015).
12. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1792; rep., New York: Penguin, 1985), 175.
13. I have real reservations about just what this technology in its present state can tell us, as it is notoriously rife with inaccuracies (indeed, from some spot checking I did, the graph of American English appears to be of questionable value, as many of the texts in its data set were actually British in origin).
14. On "talents," see John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 26–32.
15. On the notion of "fame" in the early republic, see Douglas Adair, "Fame and the Founding Fathers," [1967], in *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, ed. Trevor Colbourn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 3–36.
16. I found 221,918 instances of "genius" in American newspapers indexed in *America's Historical Newspapers* Readex database between 1750 and 1860, and 157 instances in the *African American Periodicals* Readex database between 1825 and 1860. However in the *Accessible Archives African American Newspapers* database I found 1,961 instances of "genius" between 1825 and 1860.

17. Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar. By Samuel Johnson, A.M. In two volumes*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1755–1756), n.p. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale. University of Michigan March 14, 2015. http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=umuser&tabID=T001&docId=CW3311286175&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.
18. *Encyclopædia Britannica; or, a dictionary of arts and sciences, compiled upon a new plan…Illustrated with one hundred and sixty copperplates. By a Society of gentlemen in Scotland. In three volumes*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1771), 672. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale. University of Michigan. March 14, 2015 http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=umuser&tabID=T001&docId=CW3326042865&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.
19. Thomas Dobson, *Encyclopædia: or, A dictionary of arts, sciences, and miscellaneous literature; constructed on a plan, by which the different sciences and arts are digested into the form of distinct treatises or systems, comprehending the history, theory, and practice, of each, according to the latest discoveries and improvements; and full explanations given of the various detached parts of knowledge, whether relating to natural and artificial objects, or to matters ecclesiastical, civil, military, commercial, &c., including elucidations of the most important topics relative to religion, morals, manners, and the œconomy of life; together with a description of all the countries, cities, principal mountains, seas, rivers, &c. throughout the world; a general history, ancient and modern, of the different empires, kingdoms, and states; and an account of the lives of the most eminent persons in every nation, from the earliest ages down to the present times*, vol. 7 (Philadelphia, 1798), 623–24.
20. Dobson, *Encyclopædia*, 624.
21. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language: Intended to Exhibit, I. The origin, affinities and primary signification of English words, as far as they have been ascertained. II. The genuine orthography and pronunciation of words, according to general usage, or to just principles of analogy. III. Accurate and discriminating definitions, with numerous authorities and illustrations. To Which Are Prefixed, an Introductory Dissertation on the Origin, History and Connection of the Languages of Western Asia and of Europe, and a Concise Grammar of the English Language*, vol. 1 (New York, 1828), 818.
22. Noah Porter, ed., *Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language. Being the Authentic Edition of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, Comprising the Issues of 1864, 1879, and 1884* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1898), 619–20.
23. See Agamben, "Genius," esp. pp. 13–14; Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), esp. ch. 4.
24. See Carson, *Measure of Merit*, esp. 14–20, 44–52.
25. Alexander Pope, "Intended for Sir Isaac Newton, in Westminster-Abbey," in *The Works of Alexander Pope*, vol. II (London, 1822), 379.
26. See Carson, *Measure of Merit*, esp. 26–32.
27. Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, vol. 1: *A Sort of Introduction the Like of It Now Happens (I)*, trans. Ethne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), 47.
28. This is clear in Francis Galton's earliest presentations of his statistical understanding of genius. Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (London, 1869). For discussions of the domestication of genius, see Carson, *Measure of Merit*, ch. 5; Raymond Fancher, *The Intelligence Men: Makers of the IQ Controversy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 18–40; Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 128–46, 270–314.
29. Carson, *Measure of Merit*, 255.
30. For some contemporary examples extolling Einstein's genius, see, for example, Emil Ludwig, "Are There Great Men Today?," *New York Times*, August 28, 1927; "Einstein Receives Keys to the City," *New York Times*, December 14, 1930; "Sees a New Science Mapped by Einstein," *New York Times*, August 21, 1931. For scholarly analysis, see Marshall Missner, "Why Einstein Became Famous in America," *Social Studies of Science* 15 (May 1985): 267–91; Jozsef Illy, ed., *Albert Meets America: How Journalists Treated Genius during Einstein's 1921 Travels* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

31. Missner, "Why Einstein Became Famous," 288.
32. See Gary Kornblith and John M. Murrin, "The Making and Unmaking of an American Ruling Class," in *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 27–79; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, esp. 70–75, 471–518; Morton G. White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
33. John Adams, "Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States (1787)," in *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 4, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston, MA, 1850–1856), 391.
34. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia (1781–1785)," in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin, 1977), 196.
35. Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 388.
36. See Carson, *Measure of Merit*, ch. 1.
37. Madison argues this point explicitly in *Federalist* No. 10.
38. See, for example, Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983).
39. See Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
40. Perkins, *Oration upon Genius*, 10.
41. James G. Carter, *Essays upon Popular Education, Containing a Particular Examination of the Schools of Massachusetts and an Outline of an Institution for the Education of Teachers* (1826; rep., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 20.
42. See Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, esp. 70–75; Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 180–86.
43. See Carson, *Measure of Merit*, chs. 1–2.
44. Andrew Jackson, "Veto Message," quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage, 1948), 62.
45. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 198.
46. James Madison, *Federalist* No. 58, "Objection That the Number of Members Will Not Be Augmented as the Progress of Population Demands Considered," [1788]; at http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_58.htm.
47. See Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Vintage, 1962); David B. Potts, "Curriculum and Enrollment: Assessing the Popularity of Antebellum Colleges," in *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roger Geiger (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 37–45.
48. Mary Kelley, *Empire of Reason: The Making of Learned Women in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
49. See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
50. Hannah Mather Crocker, *Observations on the Real Rights of Women, with Their Appropriate Duties, Agreeable to Scripture, Reason and Common Sense* (1818), reprinted in *Sex and Equality* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 5.
51. See *Freedom's Journal*, vols. 1–2 (1827–1829); *The Colored American* vols. 1–3 (1837–1839), n.s. vols. 1–2 (1840–1841); Carson, *Measure of Merit*, 93–95; Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs. 1–2; Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
52. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York: James Pott, 1903).
53. See J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

54. See Gordon S. Wood, "Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 69–109; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*.
55. See, for example, Henry Lee, "Funeral Oration in Honour of the Memory of George Washington," *The Maryland Gazette*, January 16, 1800; "Extract from a Sermon, on the Death of General Washington, Preached at Burlington, N. J. by the Rev. Dr. Wharton," *Gazette of the United States*, January 8, 1800, vol. XVII; "Judge Minot's Eulogy on Gen. George Washington," *Thomas's Massachusetts Spy*, January 29, 1800, vol. XXVIII; "Eulogy on the Late Illustrious Citizen, George Washington. Delivered in Lexington, on Saturday the 25th," *Stewart's Kentucky Herald*, February 11, 1800, vol. V; Gouverneur Morris, "An Oration, upon the Death of General Washington, Delivered at the Request of the Corporation of the City of New-York," *The Providence Journal, and Town and Country Advertiser*, February 12, 1800, vol. II; "New-York; Friday, February 14, 1800," *Commercial Advertiser*, February 14, 1800, vol. III; Samuel Stanhope Smith, "An Oration upon the Death of Gen. George Washington," *The Centinel of Liberty, and George-Town and Washington Advertiser*, March 18, 1800, vol. V.
56. "The Sun of our glory has set forever: WASHINGTON is no more!" announced *Thomas's Massachusetts Spy*. "Capt. Dunham's Funeral Oration," *Thomas's Massachusetts Spy*, February 19, 1800, vol. XXVIII.
57. See Carson, *Measure of Merit*, chs. 1–3.
58. See Ibid., 52–60.
59. See John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
60. Francis Wayland, *Thoughts on the Present Collegiate System in the United States* (Boston, MA: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1842), 7.
61. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, pt. 2, chs. 7–8.

Genealogies of Genius

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