

---

---

## Dialogue on Babbitt and Lincoln

### *Irving Babbitt on Lincoln and Unionism*

**James Seaton**

*Michigan State University*

Surveying American politics, culture and society in *Democracy and Leadership*, Irving Babbitt found little to admire and much to criticize.<sup>1</sup> Against the notion that “the people” could be trusted to choose worthy leaders, he reminded his readers that “Millions of Americans were ready not so very long ago to hail William Jennings Bryan as a ‘peerless leader’”—while in the present “Other millions are ready apparently to bestow a similar salute on Henry Ford” (308). Babbitt was willing to acknowledge that “Judged by any quantitative test, the American achievement is impressive” (265), but he was quick to add that “qualitatively it is somewhat less satisfying” (266). The understatement of this latter evaluation is surely to be taken ironically rather than literally, especially in the light of Babbitt’s considered judgment that “The American reading his Sunday paper in a state of lazy collapse is perhaps the most perfect symbol of quantity over quality that the world has yet seen” (269). Although Babbitt was aware that there were “many other countries besides America” in which “vulgarity and triviality are more or less visible” (267), he couldn’t help feeling that “we in America are perhaps preeminent in lack of distinction” (267-68). There was little in the contemporary scene that promised sustenance for the “moral imagination” to which Babbitt, drawing on Edmund Burke, turned in hopes of bringing “the experience of the past . . . to bear as a living force upon the

*American culture “perhaps preeminent in lack of distinction.”*

---

<sup>1</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979). All further quotations from this text will be cited by enclosing the page numbers in parentheses.

---

---

“Great  
unionist  
tradition”  
viewed as  
“offsetting  
influence” to  
democratic  
weaknesses.

present” (127-28). Babbitt did, however, find at least one element of American culture worthy of respect, one tradition shared by many Americans to which he could give his approval and on which he could base his hopes for American democracy. Babbitt holds up what he calls “our great unionist tradition” as the crucial “offsetting influence” (299) to all the temptations to which democracies are particularly vulnerable.

Babbitt argues that American history may be seen as a struggle between “two different views of government that have their origins in different views of liberty and ultimately of human nature,” an “expansive” view promoted most vigorously among the Founders by Jefferson and a “unionist” view that “has its most distinguished representative in Washington” (272). For Babbitt the results of the “American experiment in democracy” would not become finally clear “until the irrepressible conflict between a Washingtonian and Jeffersonian liberty has been fought to a conclusion” (273). Babbitt’s key objection to Jefferson’s outlook is his “faith in the goodness of the natural man” (272), a faith, Babbitt suggests, that lends itself all too easily to a belief that a country founded on “the natural man” can do no wrong and in fact owes it to the world to expand and dominate as much territory and people as possible. Shrewdly, Babbitt notes that “A democracy . . . is likely to be idealistic in its feelings about itself, but imperialistic in its practice. The idealism and the imperialism, indeed, are in pretty direct ratio to one another” (293-4). Those familiar with Babbitt’s critique of Rousseau’s affirmation of “the natural man,” what Babbitt calls in *Democracy and Leadership* Rousseau’s “glorification of the instinctive and the subrational” (97), and with his critique of Romantic expansiveness in general will not be surprised at Babbitt’s criticisms of Jeffersonianism. It is not so obvious, however, why Babbitt should turn to “unionism” as his chosen alternative to Jeffersonian expansionism. Some objections suggest themselves at once. Isn’t “unionism” as a political slogan the sort of justification of centralized power that one would expect Babbitt to oppose? Doesn’t “unionism” imply, or might it not easily be twisted to imply, a kind of nationalistic worship of the state? Besides Washington, Babbitt cites John Marshall as “our most eminent unionist after Washington himself” and Abraham Lincoln as “the true successor of Washington and Marshall” (275). In thus fleshing out his conception of “unionism,” Babbitt raises addi-

---

---

tional questions. He praises Marshall for his insistence on judicial review, but it is just those who have been influenced by Babbitt who are most likely to feel that the abuse of judicial power requires curbing. Lincoln himself was not remarkable for deference to the authority of the Supreme Court. Likewise, followers of Babbitt are among those most likely to be troubled by the suspicion that support for “unionism” involves giving one’s approval to the centralization of power in the federal government that occurred during and after the Civil War. (Russell Kirk, who admired Babbitt greatly, does not discuss Lincoln in *The Conservative Mind*, although there are chapters on John Adams and on “Southern Conservatism: Randolph and Calhoun.”)

In considering these objections, it would be well to first understand what Babbitt himself means by “unionism.” Babbitt’s core conception of unionism does not assert the federal government’s superiority to states and individuals but rather the need for the government to include “a higher or permanent self, appropriately embodied in institutions, that should set bounds to its ordinary self as expressed by the popular will at any particular moment” (273). Notice that Babbitt is not saying that the state embodies a “higher or permanent self” superior to the ordinary selves of its citizens. To say so much would indeed provide a philosophical justification for state control of ordinary citizens. Rousseau’s distinction between the “General Will” and the “Will of All” certainly provides such a justification, as Robespierre among others has demonstrated. Matthew Arnold, whose humanism is in many respects so similar to that of Babbitt, is vulnerable to a similar objection when in *Culture and Anarchy* he calls on the reader to accept

*Need for a  
“higher or  
permanent  
self.”*

the notion, so familiar on the Continent and to antiquity, of the *State*—the nation in its collective and corporate character, entrusted with stringent powers for the general advantage, and controlling individual wills in the name of an interest wider than that of individuals.

Arnold argues that culture itself supports the “idea of a *State*, of the nation in its collective and corporate character controlling, as government, the free swing of this or that one of its members in the name of the higher reason of all of them, his own as well as that of others.”<sup>2</sup> Because Irving Babbitt is also a partisan of cul-

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960): 75, 81.

---

---

ture and of “the higher reason,” it is important to emphasize that his notion of the state’s “higher or permanent self” is so different as to be virtually the opposite of Arnold’s. For Arnold the state itself should be the “higher or permanent self” of its citizens, whom it has the right to control. In contrast, Babbitt calls for the state to maintain a “higher or permanent self” that would exercise control over the state itself—not over the citizens of the state.

“Ethical union” associated with “self-control” rather than “social control.”

According to Babbitt, it is not the “unionist” but the Jeffersonian believer in the goodness of human nature who “has recourse to legislation” when confronted with social problems. It is the belief that “man has a higher self that acts restrictively on his ordinary self” (273) that, according to Babbitt, prompts unionists to argue that the structure of the state should include a “higher or permanent self” ready to veto the excesses of the moment. Since Jeffersonians neither make any such distinction between a higher and an ordinary self nor recognize the moral importance of self-restraint, they are all too likely “to substitute social control for self-control” (277). The affinities of the “humanitarian legalist” (279), eager to enforce morality through legislation, are Jeffersonian rather than unionist. Babbitt himself is not so much interested in justifying the power of the state as in encouraging the kind of “ethical union” (287, 293) that is strengthened when the importance of the “centripetal element in liberty” (299) is recognized. The issue is clarified when one realizes that the alternative to Babbitt’s “ethical union” is the sort of “secessionism” that Ralph Ellison identifies as “an old American illusion that arises whenever groups reach an explosive point of frustration” and which Ellison found in such disparate movements as “black separatism” and the Confederacy.<sup>3</sup> Ellison’s notion of “secessionism” confirms Babbitt’s point that legislation is no substitute for self-restraint since, as Ellison notes “we are all at some point or other secessionists.”<sup>4</sup>

The Jeffersonian is so sure of his own goodness and the goodness of his country that he is likely to become a “humanitarian crusader” (312-13) who has no qualms about attempting “to achieve spiritual ends . . . through the machinery of the secular

---

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Haverford Statement,” *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 427-32: 432.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Presentation to Bernard Malamud,” *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 461-68: 465.

---

---

order" (311). Babbitt has in mind the President Wilson who justified American entry into World War I on the grounds that "The world must be made safe for democracy" and asserted that "America is the only idealistic nation in the world."<sup>5</sup> Babbitt rejected the notion Wilson proclaimed, that "all other nations are self-seeking, but as for ourselves, we . . . act only on the most disinterested motives" (295). In doing so, Babbitt was not rejecting American culture but rather turning to the "sane moral realism" that he found in "our unionist tradition" and epitomized in Washington's reflection that "no nation is to be trusted further than it is bound by its interests" (295). Babbitt's "moral realist" does not assume that associating oneself with a noble goal such as peace or social justice assures one's moral goodness. The moral realist refuses "to shift, in the name of sympathy or social justice or any other ground, the struggle between good and evil from the individual to society" (316). Babbitt's conception of a "moral realism" that discerns "the will to power" in "the humanitarian crusader" (312-13) seems close to the "moral realism" championed by another liberal humanist willing to point out the limitations of conventional liberalism, Lionel Trilling. Trilling identified "moral realism" as "the perception of the dangers of the moral life itself."<sup>6</sup> Like Babbitt, Trilling knew that what Babbitt called "humanitarian crusading" is motivated by the "will to power" as well as pity and, like Babbitt, he found in the "moral imagination" the best means of illuminating the contradictions of human nature:

Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Babbitt's emphasis on the primary importance of individual self-restraint, he does acknowledge that some institutional

---

<sup>5</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Address at Sioux Falls," *Familiar Quotations*, John Bartlett, rev. by Emil Morison Beck, Fourteenth Edition (Boston: Little Brown, 1968): 842b.

<sup>6</sup> Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 193-209: 206-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-09.

---

---

*Babbitt hoped  
courts would  
uphold  
common law,  
not usurp  
legislative  
function.*

basis for restraint is necessary if state power is to be restrained. John Marshall is an exemplary Unionist because he recognized that "if ethical control was to have an ethical basis and not be another name for force," it "must be vested in the judiciary, particularly in the Supreme Court" (333). Those who think that decisions like *Roe v. Wade* demonstrate that it is precisely the judicial branch that is the ultimate source of governmental overreaching are likely to find Babbitt's view of the Supreme Court naive at best. Babbitt indeed hoped that the Court would be influenced by the common law, whose "spirit . . . at its best" he considered "that of a wholesome moral realism" (322). On the other hand, Babbitt was aware that even in his time "Judges have already appeared who have so solicited the strict letter of the law in favor of what they deemed to be socially expedient as to fall into a veritable confusion of the legislative and judicial functions" (322). He knew about "professors in our law schools who are departing from the traditional standards of the law in favor of 'social justice'" (333-34). Despite such forewarnings, Babbitt offers no alternative to judicial review as an institutional mechanism to restrain state power. This omission is no failure on his part, but an illustration of his belief that ultimately no government, however well-designed, will deserve to be called an "ethical state" (334-35) unless at least "an important minority" of the citizenry "is ethically energetic" (335).

If Babbitt should be given credit for anticipating the possibility of a runaway judiciary, he should be criticized, perhaps, in regard to the historical accuracy of his portrait of Abraham Lincoln as a champion of judicial review. Babbitt, after all, emphasizes that "to be like Lincoln one must know what Lincoln was like" (275), thus suggesting that he himself will present the real Lincoln, not merely another version of the sentimental "Lincoln myth" (275). According to Babbitt, "the man who has studied the real Lincoln does not find it easy to imagine him advocating the recall of judicial decisions" (276). It is true that Babbitt intends here a contrast with Theodore Roosevelt, who had argued that he was following in the path of Lincoln in demanding such recall. No doubt Roosevelt had gone too far in comparing himself to Lincoln, but Babbitt would have been on safer ground if he had acknowledged that Lincoln was certainly willing to question the validity of the decisions of the Supreme Court, especially the *Dred Scott* decision. The "element of judicial control" that Babbitt finds "at the very center of

---

---

Lincoln" (275) is perhaps evident when, in his 1857 speech on the Dred Scott decision, he emphasizes that he and his party do not believe that their disagreement with the decision entitles them to resist it:

We believe, as much as Judge Douglas, (perhaps more) in obedience to, and respect for the judicial department of government. We think its decisions on Constitutional questions, when fully settled, should control, not only the particular cases decided, but the general policy of the country, subject to be disturbed only by amendments of the Constitution as provided in that instrument itself. More than this would be revolution. But we think the Dred Scott decision erroneous. We know that the court that made it, has often over-ruled its own decisions, and we shall do what we can to have it to over-rule this. We offer no *resistance* to it.<sup>8</sup>

In Chicago Lincoln tells the crowd that he refuses "to obey it [Dred Scott] as a political rule. If I were in Congress, and a vote should come up on a question whether slavery should be prohibited in a new territory, in spite of that Dred Scott decision, I would vote that it should" (I, 450-51). In the same speech he seems to approve of Andrew Jackson's rejection of the authority of the Supreme Court in the controversy over the National Bank—though perhaps Lincoln is just making a debater's point, since Douglas, who now insisted on the sanctity of the Court's decisions, had supported Jackson:

... General Jackson then said that the Supreme Court had no right to lay down a rule to govern a co-ordinate branch of the government, the members of which had sworn to support the Constitution—that each member had sworn to support that Constitution as he understood it. I will venture here to say, that I have heard Judge Douglas say that he approved of General Jackson for that act. (I, 452)

In his first debate with Douglas and elsewhere, however, Lincoln went further, suggesting that the Dred Scott decision was part of a "conspiracy to nationalize Slavery" (I, 518). Lincoln admitted that he had no proof of conspiracy, but he believed that the signs of conspiracy were all around. In his "House Divided" speech Lincoln makes the case for conspiracy by analogy:

But when we see a lot of framed timbers, different portions of

---

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings*, 2 vols. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989): 302-03. Future references to this text will be identified in the text by the volume number in Roman numerals followed by the page number.

---

---

which we know have been gotten out at different times and places and by different workmen—Stephen [Douglas], Franklin [Pierce], Roger [Taney] and James [Buchanan], for instance—and when we see these timbers jointed together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill . . . in *such* a case we find it impossible to not *believe* that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common *plan* or *draft* drawn up before the first lick was struck. (I, 431)

The implication of this charge of conspiracy is that the Supreme Court decision is illegitimate, that it is not the result of the judges interpreting the Constitution to the best of their ability but instead an attempt to achieve by fraud what could not be accomplished honestly. The “resistance” that Lincoln deprecated in his June 1857 speech now seems to be justified, implicitly if not explicitly. At Edwardsville in September 1858 Lincoln seems to suggest that the result of “acquiescence” in the Dred Scott decision will be “tyranny”; although the only action he proposes is voting in an election, his rhetoric seems to justify more radical action:

My friends, I have endeavored to show you the logical consequences of the Dred Scott decision . . . What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? . . . Our reliance is on the *love of liberty* which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of that spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, every where. Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of those around you, you have lost the genius of your own independence, and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises. And let me tell you, all these things are prepared for you with the logic of history, if the elections shall promise that the next Dred Scott decision and all future decisions will be quietly acquiesced in by the people. (I, 584-85)

*Lincoln not  
an ideal  
representative  
of anti-  
Jeffersonian  
position.*

Lincoln, then, is not the ideal choice if one is searching for an American politician whose career and speeches demonstrate reverence for the Supreme Court. Another, perhaps even more important obstacle to enlisting Lincoln as a leading figure in an anti-Jeffersonian movement is Lincoln’s well-documented, lifelong loyalty to Jefferson and to Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. Jefferson was for Lincoln the source of both his political ideas and his political emotions. “The principles of Jefferson are the defini-



---

---

tions and axioms of free society" (II, 19), declared Lincoln in an April 1859 letter. In a speech at Independence Hall on his way to the White House Lincoln confessed that "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence" (II, 213). Babbitt does not consider the problems this raises for his view of Lincoln beyond acknowledging "peripheral overlappings between the democracy of Lincoln and that of Jefferson" (275).

Nevertheless, Babbitt's view of Lincoln as a "Unionist" rather than a Jeffersonian may be defended, though not exactly on the grounds Babbitt himself provides. What Babbitt calls the "sane moral realism" of the Unionist tradition, in Babbitt's view, avoids the moral exaltation that comes from certainty about one's own personal moral superiority and the superiority of one's cause. The case for Lincoln's inclusion in the Unionist tradition on the grounds of his moral realism is far stronger than any that could be made on the basis of his respect for judicial review, though he undoubtedly accepted that doctrine, as have other presidents. What is truly impressive about Lincoln is his resistance of the temptation to employ rhetoric demonizing his adversaries and sanctifying himself and his cause in a situation that seemed to many, then and now, to justify such rhetoric if it ever could be justified. While Lincoln insisted that slavery was a moral evil, he did not argue that slaveholders themselves were evil. In the speech that marked the beginning of his campaign against the introduction of slavery into the territories, the "Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act" (October 16, 1854), Lincoln coupled his denunciation of slavery as a "monstrous injustice" with a refusal to demonize Southerners, telling his Peoria, Illinois, audience that "the Southern people . . . are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south" (I, 315). At Kalamazoo, Michigan, in August 1856 he told the crowd of Northerners that "in intellectual and physical structure, our Southern brethren do not differ from us. They are, like us, subject to passions, and it is only their odious institution of slavery, that makes the breach between us" (I, 377). In his February 1860 speech at the Cooper Institute in New York, he told "the Southern people" that

*Lincoln  
condemned  
slavery  
but not  
slaveholders  
as evil.*

---

---

“I consider that in the general qualities of reason and justice you are not inferior to any other people” (II, 120).

Lincoln was not impressed by those who believe that their moral superiority allowed them to know the will of God. In the Cooper Union speech he judges and condemns John Brown in the light of common sense. His “effort,” Lincoln points out, “was not a slave insurrection” but “an attempt by white men to get up a revolt among slaves, in which the slaves refused to participate.” It was, in Lincoln’s view, “so absurd that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed.” Lincoln, unlike Thoreau and Emerson, did not consider John Brown’s action a noble effort but an example of a familiar kind of folly: “An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution” (II, 125). In the Second Inaugural Address, although Lincoln suggests that God’s justice may require the continuation of the war “until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword,” he makes no claim to himself know the will of God, nor does he offer to play the role of God’s executioner (II, 687).

Babbitt was indeed justified in offering Lincoln as an exemplar of the “sane moral realism” that he considers the hallmark of the Unionist tradition. Babbitt’s belief that reverence for the Constitution remains strong in the land and that this reverence is our best hedge against governmental overreaching remains persuasive even today. The opponents of the “New Humanists” often claimed that it was foolish for mere academics to hope that they could reverse the dominant trends of a culture through a few books and articles. One answer to those arguments is Babbitt’s notion of a Unionist tradition of moral realism, a tradition rooted in American history and culture. Today it would no doubt be a mistake to attempt to revive a “Unionist tradition” under that name; nevertheless, the spirit of that tradition persists even in postmodern America, as does the legacy of Babbitt himself.