The Lanahan Readings in the American Polity

Synopsis of Readings

Reading #3

• The Liberal Tradition in America

• Louis Hartz

• Note: The word “liberal” does not mean what it meant when this article was written. It was meant to be a form of thinking which opposed the “Divine Right of Kings” and the hold which religious dogma held on all forms of discourse and debate.

• Summary: England never transported its monarchal and feudal elements of its culture to the colonies in North America.

• “When Tocqueville wrote that that ‘great advantage’ of the American lay in the fact that he did not have ‘to endure a democratic revolution’… was surely one of his most fundamental insights into American life.” (page 12– para. 2)

• “Tocqueville was writing with the greatest revolutions of Europe in mind, and from that point of view the outstanding thing about the American effort of 1776 was bound to be not the freedom to which it led, but the established feudal structure it did not have to destroy….” (page 12– para. 2)

• Summary: There was no class revolution in England’s colonies in North America like there would be in France in the French Revolution. The American Revolution involved both aristocrats like Washington and Jefferson, middle class like Franklin, and the common men who fought at Lexington and Concord.

• “We have been able to see ourselves as saviors at the very moment that we have seen ourselves as isolationists.” (p. 13, para. 1, line 10)
• “...the fact that the revolutionaries of 1776 had inherited the freest society in
  the world shaped their thinking in an intricate way.” (p. 13, para. 1, line 21)

• “Radicalism and conservatism have been twisted entirely out of shape by the liberal flow of American history…” (p. 14, para. 3)

• “The remarkable thing about the 'spirit of 1776,'... is not that it sought emancipation but that it sought it in a sober temper... not that looked forward to the future but that it worshiped the past as well.” (p. 14-15, para. 4)

• “Can a people that is born equal ever understand peoples elsewhere that have become so? Can it ever lead them?... America’s experience of being born equal has put it in a strange relationship to the rest of the world.” (p. 16, last para.)