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Construction of National Identities in Early Republics: A Comparison of the American and Turkish Cases

INTRODUCTION

The study of America’s relationship to the world is often conducted in one of two ways. One approach is to study America’s direct relationship with another people or place through diplomacy, trade, and military or cultural interaction. Another way is through comparative analysis, or by means of what Marc Bloch called “study of societies that are at once neighboring and contemporary, exercising a constant mutual influence, exposed throughout their development to the action of the same broad causes... and owing their existence in part at least to a common origin.”¹ Recently Bloch’s approach has been called “interconnected or ‘entangled’ history,” concerned with

subjects’ ‘mutual influencing,’ ‘reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions,’ and
the intertwined ‘processes of constituting one another.’”

Scholarship on the relationship between the United States and the Republic of Turkey typically has followed these approaches. Studies of U.S.–Turkish diplomacy and studies of immigration and popular culture tend to emphasize American influence. The United States gained Turkey as an important ally during the Cold War. The seductiveness of American material prosperity offered Turks icons and products from Hollywood and Madison Avenue. In the twentieth century, the United States became a superpower, while Turkey remained a developing country. Such a focus on America’s influence on Turkey has shaped but also limited the scope and the findings of studies concerning the connections between the two republics.

If, however, we study the relationship between the United States and Turkey by comparing their early national development, rather than their direct connections or “entanglements,” we learn more about their similarities. This essay seeks to do this. It assesses the countries’ experiences in nation-building by comparing the development of republican government and society in each country’s formative period: the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century for the United States, and the first part of the twentieth century for Turkey.

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Both Americans and Turks embraced “republicanism.” American advocates of republican thought and governance during the War of Independence emphasized popular sovereignty, encouraged citizens to exercise virtuous self-sacrifice on behalf of the public good, and were highly suspicious of government corruption, which they believed could be prevented by political competition and periodic changes in government authority. Another more contested element of early American republicanism was economic self-interest. Some American leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison, worried that the individual pursuit of wealth would conflict with public sacrifice. Others, especially Alexander Hamilton, advocated economic opportunity and national growth as the means to protect both liberty and virtue. By the early nineteenth century Americans characterized republican virtue less as self-sacrifice than as democratic sociability, particularly with regard to achieving peace and prosperity through honest labor in the rapidly developing American economy.4

Turkish republicanism (cumhuriyetçilik) emerged as one of the six arrows (altı ok) articulated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and other founders of the Republic of Turkey: republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, laicism, and revolutionism (they are symbolized on the flag of the modern Republican People’s Party). The interaction of these foundational national principles came to be called Kemalism: statism and secularism protected populism from being manipulated by demagogues; statism provided for government control of economic modernization, which included shifting the fiscal burden from peasants to landlords and townspeople; revolutionism, or perhaps more accurately, reformism, prevented the stagnation that had crippled the Ottoman Empire; nationalism protected against foreign aggression; republicanism, or

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the dissolution of the personal rule of the sultans, along with secularism, encouraged reformism. Perhaps more rigid in its meaning than American republicanism, Kemalism emphasized rational thought among the citizenry, partly in order to break the hold of religion on society.\(^5\)

As in America, some aspects of republican thought and policy in Turkey came from European precedents, while others developed indigenously. Echoing the Ottoman reform program of the nineteenth century known as Tanzimat, Turkish founders borrowed particular institutions of Kemalism, especially laicism, from the French and Swiss systems, in order to overturn usage of Islamic canon law. Other practices emerged from the influence of rural peasant groups. Irrespective of the origins of Kemalist values, a Turk was expected to support and conduct himself or herself in accordance with them.\(^6\)

There were some differences in the meaning of republicanism for American and Turkish founders. However, by comparing the two regimes’ nation-building stages, the twentieth-century power disparity between the two countries may be offset, allowing intriguing similarities to emerge. In particular, this essay shows the similarity of the ideas and writings of several significant key figures in each regime who assumed the responsibility to nationalize and consolidate their countries’ formative political cultures.

Rather than reaching specific conclusions about republican ideology in the United States and Turkey, in this essay we seek to illustrate ways to broaden and enrich scholarship on the comparative history of republican political ideology and institutions. We focus on two approaches in particular. We


compare two postcolonial republican regimes at “disparate moments and without common vocabulary” that shared “common technologies of intervention and common anxieties of rule.” We also challenge the implication of Western exceptionalism in studies of republican state formation. Marc Bloch criticized “long-range” comparisons of “societies . . . separated in time and space.” But such an approach illustrates what George Fredrickson called “macro-comparative history—the effort to deal cross-culturally with broad themes or tendencies,” intended to yield “differences at one level of generalization and similarities at another.”

**Differences Between the Two Republics**

While other regimes could also be compared, comparison of the United States and Turkey allows for study of two regimes separated by time as well as, ostensibly, by the cultural or civilizational division between the West and the East. This division once had been partly bridged by the Ottoman Empire, a state that in its heyday spanned the Middle East, North Africa, and southeastern Europe. American founders tended to see the Ottoman Empire as a warning against excessive local authority and corruption. Alexander Hamilton actually compared the weak Ottoman sovereign to the impotent American central government under the Articles of Confederation, which was “gradually dwindling into a state of decay.” The decline of Ottoman power and stability by the late nineteenth century, in fact, would precipitate

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the U.S. government’s first intervention in the Middle East, in protecting the schools and businesses of American missionaries and their Orthodox Christian allies, many of whom resented Ottoman authority. Twice U.S. warships entered Turkish harbors in the 1890s to enforce redress of American citizens’ losses amid the Turkish suppression of Armenian uprisings. American global ascendance and Ottoman decline, effectively creating the unequal American–Turkish relationship of the twentieth century, were roughly contemporary, opposite movements.9

Besides their different relationships with the Ottoman Empire, there were other differences between the early Turkish and early American republics. In 1922, Turkey, under Atatürk’s military and political leadership, thwarted efforts by Britain to control Istanbul and by Greece to occupy western Turkey. American colonists also thwarted British occupation, although with the essential assistance of British rivals Holland, Spain, Prussia, and France. At its outset Turkey’s population, generally, was of central Asian ethnic extraction, and remained so. The population of the early United States was heavily British (and, on account of slavery, African American), but sizable and growing numbers of immigrants from other European nations were becoming U.S. citizens as well. Where Americans, partly through the competitive jealousies of European powers, were able to expand American territory westward to the Pacific Ocean by 1850, Turkey’s borders became largely fixed in 1923. The Republic of Turkey never practiced slavery, the Ottoman Empire having effectively abolished it by the late nineteenth century. The United States practiced slavery until 1865. Neither regime restricted citizens’

access to firearms, although only the United States provided constitutional protection for this right.10

Other constitutional doctrines also differentiated the American and Turkish states. To regulate the public influence of religion the Turkish government established a Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), whose responsibility was to maintain places of worship, approve weekly Muslim prayer texts, and publish works on the history of Islam. The predominantly Protestant United States sought to separate religious practice from national government sponsorship or restriction, although when the country was established seven of the original thirteen states retained tax-supported churches, a practice that lasted until 1833, when Massachusetts, the last state to do so, abolished its church tax.11 The concept of separation of powers also helped legitimize both multiparty politics and the practice of judicial review in the early United States, whereas Turkey suppressed formal political opposition to the Republican People’s Party until a generation after the Republic’s founding, curbing for the first time “the authoritarianism of the military-bureaucratic center under one-party governments.” The Constitutional Court of Turkey, responsible for reviewing acts by the Turkish Grand National Assembly, was established only in 1962; prior to this, parliamentary power was absolute.12

Such differences between these early republics “separated in time and space” may seem obvious, but they hardly preclude comparison of them; indeed the differences bring the important similarities of the two regimes into sharper focus. Americans and Turks faced common challenges of resistance

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12Üstün Ergüder, “The Turkish Party System and the Future of Turkish Democracy,” in Çiğdem Balm et al., eds., *Turkey: Political, Social and Economic Challenges in the 1990s* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1995), 60; Ergun Özbudun and Omer Gençkaya, *Democratization and the Politics of Constitution Making in Turkey* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009). In *Judicial Review in the Contemporary World* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971), Mauro Cappelletti distinguishes between “decentralized” models of judicial review, such as the American tradition, and “centralized” models, such as the Turkish system.
to European colonialism as well as construction of post-colonial national unity. Their common nation-building strategies included suppression of political dissent; cultivation of political and cultural institutions distinct from those of the imperial period; creation of myths in which certain aspects of the pre-republican period were presented as foreshadowing the eventual rise of the republic; assertions of national “exceptionalism”; and reliance on the persistence of popular religious practices and attitudes about race and gender.13

Common Challenges of State-Building

Both Americans and Turks quickly sought to enshrine the date on which their respective countries “began.” Americans sanctioned July 4, 1776, the date of Congress’s adoption and printing of the Declaration of Independence from Britain, as the founding date of the United States. Likewise Turks speedily began commemorating the proclamation of the Republic on October 29, 1923. However, declaring republics and establishing them proved to be different matters. Both countries encountered daunting challenges including weak standing in the international order; tenuous domestic political leadership; resistance to authority by variously constituted political, ethnic, racial, and religious groups; and an uncertain sense of new national identity. The first allegiance of ordinary Americans was local or regional, not national, which hindered the growth of nationalist sentiment. The Articles of Confederation, providing for no executive ruler, national taxes, or national army, and requiring the individual states, not Congress, to organize domestic and international commerce, reflected this local orientation. The historian Peter Parish described this dilemma as “a crucial formative influence in the American experience [:] the establishment of a political framework, with the potential to become a national framework, even before a vigorous national self-consciousness had developed.”14


Parish believed this situation distinguished formative American nationalism, but the same case could be made for the early Turkish republic, which suffered from the problem of dubious or undeveloped loyalty, owing to Turkey’s background in the multiethnic Ottoman Empire. Despite the Turkish constitution’s declaration that “sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the nation,” many citizens of the early Turkish republic had little inclination to equate the state and the nation. From the early nineteenth century onward, sultans Mahmud II and Abdülmecid I and state ministers Mehmet Ali Pasha and Fuad Pasha had introduced a program of Western reform to the Ottoman Empire, known as the Tanzimat. Key to this program was the cultivation of Osmanlılık, or Ottoman identity and citizenship, which was meant to supplant older religious and ethnic loyalties.¹⁵

This sense of imperial citizenship, however, did not take hold. At the end of the Empire two other allegiances were still influential. First, most Ottoman subjects still revered the sultan as the supreme administrative and religious authority, even if he no longer was considered the “Shadow of God on earth,” a medieval title. Second, they identified themselves through their religious affiliations. Most Ottoman subjects were Sunni Muslims, but many others were Greek, Syrian, and Armenian Orthodox, Catholic, or Jewish. In some regions Ottoman bureaucrats remained important elites in republican Turkey, thus providing for continuity in authority. Yet many Ottoman subjects’ identity as slaves (kullar) of the sultan, and/or as members of a religious group, interfered with the spread of a Turkish republican identity. In 1924

the Republic abolished the caliphate and the title of protector of the Muslim peoples claimed by Ottoman rulers, and replaced religious schools (madrasas) with Western-type schools. Such radical reforms provoked Sheikh Said Piran, a Kurdish leader, to rebel because, in his words, “earlier... a common caliphate... gave to our religious people a deep feeling of being part of the community that the Turks also belonged to.” The nationalist writer Ziya Gökalp acknowledged in 1923 that even Turks in Anatolia, the putative heartland of Turkey, did not think of themselves as Turks. Similar to the early American republic’s challenge to deeply local political identity, Turkey in its early days struggled with little secular political loyalty.16

American and Turkish founders recognized their countries’ diversity and lack of consensus as obstacles to state-building. Contrary to the custom in Europe, in America ethnic background officially had little to do with American identity. The Declaration of Independence objected to King George III’s discouragement of immigration to the colonies and obstruction of the colonies’ naturalization laws. In the United States citizenship was not a requirement for voting. The first U.S. citizenship law of 1790 was generous towards “free white persons,” requiring of them only a two-year residence and support for the U.S. Constitution in order to “become” Americans. George Washington wrote, “The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship... For happily the Government of the United States... requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens...”17


American citizenship, however, remained restricted. The required residence period was raised in 1802 to five years. Slaves and white women, perhaps 55 percent of the population, were denied the right to vote. At the 1815 Hartford Convention conservative New Englanders petitioned that the U.S. Constitution be amended to restrict federal office-holding to native-born citizens. As late as 1830 half of the states required an individual’s payment of taxes as a requirement for voting. Many American leaders saw diversity as a handicap to national stability. Ironically, the main author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, feared that a continuing influx of immigrants from Europe would “warp and bias [America], and render it a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass.”18

Turkish leaders, partly reflecting their attraction to western-style “modernization,” proclaimed that they valued pluralism. Ziya Gökalgp wrote, “Nation is not a racial, ethnic, geographical, political, or voluntary group or association. Nation is a group composed of men and women who have gone through the same education, who have received the same acquisitions in language, religion, morality, and aesthetics.” Founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk at the time of the Turkish Constitution of 1924, the Republican People’s Party drew on the Ottoman concept of Osmanlılık and insisted that anyone who supported Turkish national independence and the supremacy of the laws more than loyalty to family, tribe, class, or religious community could enjoy Turkish citizenship. The party was open to representatives of different ethnic groups. The actions of the Kemalists, however, often indicated that they viewed pluralism as a security risk. Reflecting suspicion of multiparty government, the Republican People’s Party was monolithic, the only real political organization in the country until after World War II. Party leaders insisted that its members have a Turkish identity and practice Turkish

culture, defined principally in terms of embracing a revised Turkish history and the evolving Turkish language. At the Lausanne Conference of 1923, İsmet İnönü, the Turkish foreign minister, affirmed the desire of Turkish nationalists to seek “a homogenous, unified homeland” and a collective cultural identity through a shared memory of Turkish independence and a common destiny.

In light of weakness in government and divided loyalties, it is somewhat surprising that both the early American and the early Turkish republics survived. The formative years of the United States saw a host of events challenge American stability. Domestic rebellions by white men hit Massachusetts in 1786 and Pennsylvania in 1794. In 1807 Aaron Burr, the former vice president, was tried for treason for conspiring to detach the new Louisiana Territory from the United States. Disaffected New England Federalists considered secession in 1814. During the War of 1812 British forces invaded and burned Washington DC—the only time before September 11, 2001, that America’s national capital was attacked. Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans in 1815 diminished the likelihood that the country would split apart, at least on an east versus west basis, yet well into the nineteenth century it seemed likely that the last words of the foreign minister of France, writing in 1776, would become as true as the first: “There is every reason to believe that... the [American] Colonies... will give to their new...”

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19 An opposition political party, the Liberal Republican Party, was established in 1929, but was closed a year later as “premature and dangerous.” Atatürk shaped both of these developments. Tevfik Çavdar, “Serbest Fırka [Liberal party],” in Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkiye Ansiklopedisi [Encyclopedia of Turkey during the Republican era] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985), VIII: 2058; Bernard Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 280.

government the republican form, and that there will...be as many small republics as there are at present provinces.”

Likewise, the people of the Turkish republic grew up amid chronic military conflict and economic and political instability. The Ottoman Empire’s war with Russia in 1877 led to the establishment of a public debt administration in 1881, controlled by foreign powers to oversee the Ottoman budget so as to guarantee the repayments of credits. Bulgarians invaded the province of Eastern Rumelia, and Cretians revolted in 1885. Ottomans suppressed Armenian ultra nationalists in 1894–1896, fought Greeks in 1896–1897, and faced a revolt in Macedonia in 1903. The “Young Turks” revolted in 1908, seeking reapplication of the 1876 constitution, suspended by Sultan Abdülhamid II. Ottomans went to war against Italy in 1911, fought the Balkan Wars in 1912–1913, and entered World War I in 1914, beginning a decade of hostilities that would last through the War of Independence of 1923.

In some ways these conflicts facilitated the spread of state authority. For example, they effectively weakened resistance to the state by unionized labor. More important, however, the Turkish infrastructure was devastated, and only in 1923 did the last of the European forces leave Istanbul, ending years of invasion and occupation. Kurdish rebellions, precipitated by the Republic’s initiatives towards secularization, broke out in the country’s eastern provinces in 1925, 1927, and 1930. Meanwhile, Turkey inherited the sagging Ottoman economy of the late nineteenth century, including two-thirds of the Empire’s debts, an amount that would not be paid off until 1948.

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In responding to these challenges, the leadership in each country relied on both short-term measures, designed to provide immediate insulation from dissenting groups within the new political borders, and long-term measures, designed to cultivate among the citizenry an organic sense of civic awareness and loyalty to the new nation. For both states, the short-term measures involved a suppression of civil liberties and political opposition, and even the physical relocation of minority groups deemed to be a threat to state security. In the United States of the 1790s, opponents of the administration of President John Adams were subject to arrest and deportation under the Alien and Sedition Acts. A few decades later President Jackson, through treaties and military coercion, oversaw the removal of Indian tribes from the East to the less contested western hinterlands, where they were thought less susceptible to scheming with the European powers against the U.S. government.23

Turkey, meanwhile, amid a series of religious and separatist uprisings through the 1930s, experienced wholesale suspension of civil liberties. Leaders rationalized that citizens would resist reforms and manipulate an open society, thus personal freedoms and political opposition could be sacrificed as less important than protection of the Constitution. As in the early United States, minority groups were resettled: Ottoman peoples of Orthodox Christian background were deported to Greece in exchange for Greek Muslims, and rebellious Kurds, angered over the failure of the Lausanne Treaty to recognize them, were relocated to western Turkey.24


24During World War I military forces of the Ottoman Empire deported and/or killed hundreds of thousands of Armenians. This removal of the Armenian population, shortly before the birth of the Republic of Turkey, meant the disappearance of a common enemy of the Kurds and the Turks, which contributed to their mutual hostilities. Many Armenians and scholars today consider the actions of Ottoman officials to have been a policy of extermination. For views of this issue see Taner Akçam, Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Gwynne Dyer, “Turkish
removal accomplished the opening up of lands in the American southeast to white settlement, an economic incentive that the relocation of Kurds from the Turkish southeast lacked. Still, such suppressive measures in both regimes seem incongruous in light of the official commitments made by their respective founders to create pluralistic republics. For that reason they warrant more extensive comparative analysis for what they may suggest about the authoritarian aspects of republican state creation. In effect, both the United States and Turkey relied upon “safety valves” to relocate groups that had the potential to jeopardize the formation of national identity—the United States through positioning native peoples beyond involvement with white settlers, Turkey through sending Greek Christians outside its boundaries and repositioning the Kurdish minority within an ethnic Turkish majority to encourage assimilation.25

A longer-term project adopted by the leaders of both republics was the strengthening of their citizens’ civic identity. The U.S. Constitution of 1787 stated that it would not become law until state conventions—an innovation of American legal-constitutional practice—in nine of the thirteen original states voted for ratification. The fate of the early American republic hung suspended for nearly a year, until New Hampshire became the ninth state to vote for ratification. Even after this, fierce public debate ensued in New York and elsewhere, provoking an outpouring of pro- and anti-Constitution writings that remain a hallmark of American political philosophy. This debate also led to an important addition, the Bill of Rights, which specified citizens’ and states’ rights that the central government could not

deny. James Madison wrote, “The people were in fact, the fountain of all power . . . “26

The Turkish Constitution of 1924, on the other hand, became law largely through ratification by the Turkish Parliament and declaration and endorsement by Atatürk. Unlike the state constitutional conventions in America, the Turkish constitution did not undergo popular ratification, a difference in the two regimes’ process of official state building. The people of Turkey did not have the tradition of political participation, including the town meetings and political constituency-building, that had characterized the American colonial experience. The American Revolution had taken place “not in a society in need of modernization but in one that was already highly modernized,” in contrast to its Turkish counterpart. At the time of the founding of the Turkish republic, moreover, Atatürk’s heroic leadership in the War of Independence and in negotiating the Treaty of Lausanne was a more vivid image among the Turkish people than was the American people’s association of their war for independence with constitution-framing. For many Turks, that is, Atatürk represented the nation, the Grand National Assembly, and the new government. Many advocates of the U.S. Constitution, in contrast, were younger Federalist politicians without military prominence. They therefore had to seek a popular mandate to impose the federal government’s authority over the sprawling states. Still, like the Federalists, Atatürk appealed to the Turkish people to embrace the new Turkish state: “All the wonders that the Turkish nation displayed during the last years and all the political and social reforms that it made belong to the nation itself,” and sovereignty was to “belong to the people without any qualifications and conditions.” Both American and Turkish constitutional doctrine invoked the will of the people.27

In both cases, however, state legitimacy also relied on what Seymour Lipset called “charismatic authority,” or the influence of a leader “who embodies in his person [a developing nation’s] values and aspirations.” When the Republic of Turkey was proclaimed, an opposition Istanbul newspaper remarked that Atatürk, as the head of the state, Parliament, and the only political party, held more power than had the sultans, and even suggested that his authority diverged sharply from the example of George Washington, who, at the height of his power and influence in 1783, had retired to his farm rather than seeking political power.28

The Istanbul paper was correct in part. Washington’s example of giving up power created a precedent for peaceable change in American political office, as well as for civilian rule. Widespread predictions proved unfounded, for example, that Thomas Jefferson’s election to the presidency in 1800, the first occasion for change of party in political authority, would cause civil war and perhaps the rise of another Napoleon. In contrast, presenting itself as the guardian of Atatürk’s legacy, the Turkish military intervened in Turkey’s civilian rule four times in the twentieth century. The American republic was distinguished by the absence of military influence in government.29

The Istanbul newspaper failed, however, to appreciate that like Atatürk, Washington had played a vital cultural and ideological role in securing his new nation.30 The military hero Washington had credibility among ordinary Americans. Without him stumping for the new U.S. Constitution in key regions, the document might not have been ratified. A cult of personality grew up around Washington, and the myth of his honesty, citizen soldiery, and humility became a basic moral lesson in early American popular culture and pedagogy. Noah Webster, the most influential American Revolution with distinction, including Alexander Hamilton, John Dickinson, Rufus King, William Livingston, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney.

28Lipset, First New Nation, 18; Kinross, Atatürk, 434.
schoolbook author and advocate of an “American tongue,” urged Americans to adopt a national school curriculum to unify their language and culture and to wean the country away from a corrupt and culturally hegemonic Europe. Webster prescribed Washington’s memory as central to this American curriculum: “With the infant in his cradle . . . [L]et the first word he lisps be ‘Washington.’” Another popular schoolbook compared Washington to Moses. George Washington was no less a quasi-religious patriarch to American republican youth than Atatürk was to Turkish “youth” (gencler), which he referred to as the new leadership of Turkey. Across nation-building regimes, “civic education . . . requires . . . a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy objects of emulation.”

Besides relying on the imagined kinship between national leaders and common citizens, American and Turkish founders also sought national unity on the basis of a shared belief in what might be called paternal religious republicanism. In both cases, they searched history to try to avoid mistakes that others had made. Americans gained their appreciation for “virtue” by studying the histories of Athens, Rome, and Florence. These once healthy republics, Americans believed, eventually had succumbed either to fratricide or empire. Likewise, nationalist writers such as Ziya Gökalp urged Turkey to return to allegedly pre-Ottoman Turkish customs, because the Ottomans had mistakenly emphasized conquests of different ethnic groups, neglecting

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the wholesome social and cultural values that the empire putatively had at its origins.  

Americans and Turks also shared a sense that their new countries were exceptional and bore a contemporary global responsibility to bestow enlightenment on other peoples and places. For example, in his influential pamphlet, *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine exulted that Americans could begin the world over again. In the mid-nineteenth century an American history text declared that Americans “[were] to work out, not alone our destiny, but that of the whole world… The inferior races shall be educated and made fellow laborers in the great work of human progress.” Even later, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln urged supporters of the Union to see the great conflict not merely as one over states’ rights or the extension of slavery, but as a struggle to preserve the global example and leadership of the United States, “the last best hope of earth.”

Turks were no less visionary. At the inaugural meeting of the Turkish Historical Association in 1932, the educational reformer Afet İnâan stated, “History of the Turkish nation is not limited to Ottoman history. Turkish history is older than that. And it was the Turkish nation that disseminated the cultural light to all nations of the world.” Meanwhile İnâan’s associate Reşit Galip argued that while, “in the last few centuries, because of external causes, the Turks lost their leading position in directing the course of world civilization,” today “these degrading causes are being removed with the reforms, and so the Turkish nation is looking forward to undertake again its role in bringing mankind to a higher grade of civilization.” Intellectual

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and political leaders of both early republics embraced a sense of national “mission” to the rest of the world.34

American and Turkish history and language books were similar sources for guidance to ethical public action. In both cases, elements of the past that did not support a concept of national unity in the present were de-emphasized or omitted, or were shown to be corrupt exceptions to a general historical trend of progressive consensus-building. In the American case the decentralized structure of the new republic left ideological education largely to the jurisdiction of the states or to private philanthropic groups. Education ideologues such as Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, David Ramsay, Timothy Pitkin, and John Marshall were de facto government mouthpieces for a loyal citizenry. Rush famously saw as the goal of American education “to convert men into republican machines.” In 1789 Webster announced his quest to create a national language, for a “national language is a band of national union.” Americans boasted of their political independence from Britain, but, Webster admonished, they still sought out British culture. This was “astonishing,” because Britain in the late eighteenth century, said Webster, was in national decline. Webster became America’s leading author of textbooks and dictionaries, designed to cure Americans of too much diversity and cultural and linguistic provincialism.35

Early American historians reinterpreted the past from a nationalist perspective. In this way the “different customs and forms of government” of the early American republic could be worn away, “mould[ing] us into a homogeneous people,” according to David Ramsay. History-writing in the early American republic consisted of presenting the British colonial past as a republican genealogy, revealing that revolutionary republicanism

34 Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi: Konferanslar, Muzakere Zabıtları [The first Turkish history congress: the minutes of the conference and discussions] (İstanbul: Maarif Vekaleti, 1932); Cumhuriyet [Republic], 21 September 1937; Reşit Galip, “Türk Tarih Tezi ve Yabancı Tezler [Turkish thesis of history and foreign theses],” Ülkü 9 (1933): 142–43; Muhiddin, “Türkler Tarihin Yeni ve Taze Milletlerinden Biridir [Turks are one of the new young nations in history],” Meslek 24 (İstanbul: 26 May 1925): 2; Mardin, “Ottoman Empire,” 115–128.

had evolved from the beginning of colonial settlement. In describing the American Revolution, Timothy Pitkin emphasized the “unexampled unanimity of sentiment... among two or three millions of people” that characterized the American rejection of British authority. We now know that, contrary to Pitkin’s claim, as many as two-thirds of American colonists remained neutral during the Revolution or were Tories loyal to the British crown. John Marshall, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, described New England as a region that was “originally settled,” not by Puritan religious zealots who had no concept of republicanism, which was actually the case, but “by republicans.” History-writing in the early American republic sought to emphasize the deeply rooted and widespread nature of American republicanism, even to the point of anachronism.36

Turkish history-writing, often overseen directly by the government, likewise sought a usable past, to vindicate Turks’ capacity for self-government, to point out the vices of the Ottoman Empire, and to justify the need for a reformed and distinctive Turkish language. For instance, Mithat Sadullah’s Yeni Yurt Bilgisi (New Homeland Knowledge) the official school textbook for fifth graders approved by the Republican People’s Party in 1932, emphasized the historical greatness of Turks in history: “Turks are the oldest independent nation in history... while the other nations were in a state of near barbarism; the Turks had a strong government and good laws.”37 Meanwhile, contributors to the new journal Genç Kalemler (Young Pens) revised Ottoman literary works in the belief that they had been adulterated by the admixture of Arabic and Persian elements and did not reflect the greatness of the Turkish nation and its language. The Republican People’s Party announced in 1937 that Ottoman cultural works already known and accepted by society had to be revised in conformity with republican ideals and values. Works of fiction and poetry from the Ottoman era were

37 Ziya Gokalp, Turk Toresi [The Turkish ethics] (Istanbul: Akın Yayınları, 1972); Ziya Gokalp, Turkiye Medeniyeti Tarihi [History of civilization in Turkey] (Istanbul: Maarif Vekâleti, 1925); Reha Oğuz Türkkan, Milliyetçilik Yolunda: Ergenekon, Bozkurt, Gökborn; Yeni ve Eski Yazlar [On the path of nationalism: Ergenekon, Bozkurt, Gökboru; ancient and new texts] (İstanbul: Müftüoğlu Yayınevi, 1944); Mithat Sadullah, Yeni Yurt Bilgisi [New homeland knowledge] (İstanbul: Türk Kitapçılığı, 1929), 205; Allen, Turkish Transformation, 114.
rewritten, including such famous titles (to Turkish readers) as Asık Garip, Köröglü, Yedi Alimler, Tahir ile Zübre, Arzu ile Kamber, Leyla ile Mecnun, Nasreddin Hoca, Şahmaran, and Kerem ile Aslı. Overall, writers of early republican Turkish literature invoked a Turkish cultural folkloric heritage with a purified Turkish language, distinct from the Ottoman era. Partly to integrate highbrow intellectual and lowbrow folk Turks, the Turkish republic abandoned the Ottoman script in 1928 because it failed to reflect a true Turkish tongue.38

Perhaps through such an emphasis on the political usages of language and history, the early American and early Turkish republics achieved innovative forms of republican government. The American model, at least until the Civil War, confounded the conventional wisdom of Europe that only small republics could avoid fragmentation, its comparatively weak central government paradoxically fostering loyalty to an expanding and prosperous yet stable country. The Turkish republican system was equally without precedent, though in a different way. In 1924, Turkey renounced the Ottoman sultans’ claim to the caliphate, the leadership of the Muslim world community, so that, in the words of the journalist Falih Rifki Atay, “the bridges attaching Turkey to the Middle Ages [could] be blown up.” Determined to create the first secular state with a Muslim majority population, Atatürk daringly declared, “The Caliphate may have significance for us only as a historical recollection.”39

Neither the U.S. nor the Turkish constitution refers to “God.” That silence was possible because of the two countries’ strong religious cultures, not because the respective national founders were atheists. In republican Turkey Sunni Islam “helped people become...genuine Turk[s].” After the


mid-nineteenth century the United States would become religiously diverse, but during and after the American Revolution, Protestant Christianity was the dominant American religion. American evangelical Protestantism emphasized not only salvation through a practitioner’s piety and belief in the deity of Jesus. This faith also advocated the spread of religious institutions ruled by popular moral authority, and not by ordained ministers. Thus, the virtues of discipline and sacrifice derived from Protestant morality reinforced civic republicanism and provided a basis for democratic order and institutions. Both the American and Turkish early republics, in short, created a secular sphere to legitimate government power. But like Islam in Turkey, even after the abolition of its political power, in America, Protestantism was a whole system of living and an important source of ideological unity.40

Finally, both the American and Turkish early republics were paternalistic, in the shared assumption that the principal enactors of civic virtue would be men. In the United States until the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 this generally meant white men, pursuant to racial beliefs that the early republic carried over from the colonial experience. American women would work throughout the twentieth century for full citizenship rights. Specific struggles focused on voting rights, which women won by 1920, and eligibility for jury and military service. By comparison, the Republic of Turkey rapidly extended the franchise, granting all male citizens suffrage in 1924 and adopting women’s suffrage in 1933. Atatürk endorsed the emancipation of women because the Republic “need[ed] men who [had] better minds, more perfect men.” “The mothers of the future,” he anticipated, “[would] know how to bring up such men!” Equation of women’s suffrage with women’s equality,

of course, is problematic, particularly in the Turkish case, where the Republican People’s Party effectively decided whom to allow to serve in office. But both early republics envisioned a political role for women—if it was an indirect role—focused on raising sons and encouraging husbands to be citizens upon whom the state could rely.41

Summary

In summary, despite variations in the sources and the meaning of “republicanism,” there are sufficient similarities between the American and Turkish cases to allow us to use the same (English) word, “republicanism,” to describe, understand, and compare the attitude and actions of the respective founders concerning, in Atatürk’s famous words, how to create “peace at home.” Republican ideologues sought to cultivate such a creed, emphasizing both “peace,” or domestic tranquility, and “home,” or a sense of primary identity in a homogeneous, unified nation, as a means of national survival.

Those means had both short-term and long-term consequences. As this essay shows, short-term means of republican nation-building included restriction of civil liberties and suppression of perceived dangerous minorities. Longer-term means of republican nation-building were more various, including definition and encouragement of citizenship in terms of national loyalty through support for the new constitution; mythologizing of a founding “father” to symbolize and inspire appropriate national allegiance; cultivation of a new language identifiable with the formation of the new state; reinterpretation of history to emphasize the continuity of the new republic’s values with certain symbolic times in the past; and development of a republican national identity that was radically new, yet dependent upon underlying social

attitudes about religion, race, and gender. Despite their chronological, geographic, and cultural differences, the American and Turkish early republics shared these attributes. The relevance of such developments to other situations of pluralistic republican nation-building invites further inquiry, if only to answer the question of whether or how these two early republics together were different from, or similar to, early republics elsewhere, “West” and “East,” “North” and “South,” across modern history.