Introduction

AT A TIME when there were only a few million Europeans in the entire fifteen United States, Pierre Charles L'Enfant conceived a grandiose plan for a national capital to rival the capitals of the great European nations. He convinced President George Washington to support his plan, writing enthusiastically (but inaccurately) that "no Nation perhaps had ever before the opportunity offered them of deliberately deciding on the spot where their Capital City should be fixed."[1] L'Enfant knew he was to direct a great project, often using imperial terms like "vast empire" to describe the American nation and "palace" for the president's future residence. At the same time he was also aware that the city he was planning, as the capital of a *democracy,* was something "wholly new" in the world. Therefore he deliberately located the Congress House, not the president's mansion, as the center in the city plan. Although George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were deeply involved in the process, L'Enfant must be given credit for planning, in only a few months, a democratic capital and a "city for the ages."[2]

In the same letter to Washington he acknowledged that the financial state of the country would not allow the realization of such a plan for many years, but that the city's scale must be such as to allow for future growth. L'Enfant was right on both counts. The city would become a great capital, but it would first pass through a period of one hundred years of painfully slow development. The delay caused nearly a century of disparaging descriptions and snide comments about the American capital. One English visitor in 1806, when told that he was entering Washington, looked in vain for buildings and houses: "Seeing none, I thought I had misunderstood the gentleman who made the remark, and turning round for an explanation, he told me, laughing, that we were almost in the very middle of it."[3] Once called the city of "magnificent distances," Charles Dickens complained in 1842 that it was only a city of "magnificent intentions."

L'Enfant's original plan is still visible in Washington, his gridlike street plan, with diagonal overlays, and his central axial thoroughfares, which

define the core of the city. Pennsylvania Avenue remains a main axis connecting the Capitol and White House; the Capitol's vista has become the Mall. The view from the White House now reaches past the Washington Monument to the Jefferson Memorial and the Potomac River. With the passage of time and the gathering momentum of historical events, Washington has finally become the grand capital its creator imagined, the city at the center of the world.

Centrality is a dominant issue in Washington. The city was initially chosen as a compromise among conflicting regional interests and was seen as a midpoint in the geography of the existing states.[4] The District of Columbia was laid out as a perfect square, ten miles on a side (the limits imposed by Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution), with its four corners pointing to each of the cardinal directions, like the ancient cities of Ur and Babylon in Mesopotamia. Instead of a ziggurat at the center, the surveyor "Mr. [Andrew] Ellicott drew a true meridional line, by celestial observation, which passes through the area intended for the Capitol. This line he crossed by another, running due east and west, which passes through the same area."[5] The site for the Capitol building was actually moved slightly eastward, but planners still kept the central symbolism, using the *actual* location of the Capitol to divide the District of Columbia into Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast quadrants. The numbered and lettered streets of the city all originate at the Capitol. This aspiration to centrality would increase over time, symbolic and practical factors interwoven.

In 1850, President Millard Fillmore pressed forward with plans to double the capacity of the Capitol. Thomas U. Walter, the architect chosen for the project, seized the opportunity to replace its rather modest dome with a lofty and massive one reminiscent of the great European cathedrals of Saint Peter's in Rome, Saint Paul's in London, and Saint Isaac's in Saint Petersburg. This grander dome, besides being a triumph of architecture and engineering, also assumed immense symbolic importance. Before the project could be completed, the Civil War began and Washington was under threat by Confederate armies. Despite the risk and expense, Lincoln urged the project on: "If the people see this Capitol going on, they will know that we intend the Union shall go on."[6]

Eight years earlier, before the expansion had begun, the American sculptor Thomas Crawford was chosen to create a statue to be placed on the summit of the dome. He submitted a design representing Freedom, the goddess of liberty, wearing a Roman cap called the pileus, like those worn by freed slaves in ancient times. The superintendent of the Capitol expansion project at the time was Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. He did not like

the cap, finding it "inappropriate to a people who were born free and would not be enslaved."[7] Some believe that Davis saw in this cap a veiled criticism of the Southern institution of slavery, a threat to the "peculiar institution" in any suggestion of emancipation. Crawford was conciliatory, replacing the Roman cap with a bizarre sort of helmet "composed of an eagle's head and a bold arrangement of feathers, suggested by the costume of our Indian tribes." This is the headgear of the statue today, formally called *Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace*. But the sculptor kept the circlet of stars around *Freedom*'s brow, which he earlier said indicated "her heavenly origin."[8]

The visitor to Washington experiences numerous sites and signs like the Capitol dome, symbolically rich and conveying a variety of messages, some of them paradoxical or even downright contradictory. If the *Freedom* figure, as interpreted by Jefferson Davis, recalls the contentions of slaveholders against abolitionists, there is a counterpoint exactly one mile to the east. In the middle of Lincoln Park stands Thomas Ball's Emancipation monument of the sixteenth president freeing a slave. Ostensibly, both sculptures are dedicated to freedom, yet their histories are filled with ironies. Crawford's *Freedom* was cast in bronze by sculptor Clark Mills, who was sympathetic to the Confederate states and used slaves in his workshop to make the statue. On the other hand, the model for the emancipated slave who crouches below Lincoln in Ball's monument was Archer Alexander. He lived in Missouri, where his emancipation had been declared by military commander John Fremont, only to have the proclamation revoked by Abraham Lincoln. So, in reality, Lincoln had declared Alexander a slave. When Henry Kirke Brown, a Northern abolitionist, proposed a design for the eastern pediment of the House wing in 1855, it was rejected because it included a slave which Montgomery Meigs felt would offend Southern sensibilities. Then, implausibly, when Brown proposed a pediment containing eight slave figures for the lavish statehouse of South Carolina at Columbia, his design was accepted. [9] The Crawford and Ball "freedom" sculptures suggest something of the complexity and paradoxicality of Washington's symbolism as well as the riskiness of any "final" interpretation of its meaning. They also touch on the central issue of individual and communal understanding: who are the "chosen people"? For Davis, the national community was restricted to white Americans. The Lincoln sculpture, despite the ironies just mentioned, offers a different message. Erected in 1876, thanks to contributions of emancipated African Americans, it symbolizes an early step in their long struggle to become part of the "chosen people."

There is a religious message implicit in most of the buildings, memorials,

FIGURE 1 Thomas Crawford, *Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace*. Architect of the Capitol.

art, and iconography of Washington that recalls the original conviction so often stated by the Founding Fathers, that the Almighty stood behind the American experiment. As the Great Seal of the United States proclaims, *annuit coeptis, novus ordo seclorum:* "He [God] gave his approval to these beginnings, a new world order." This is nowhere manifest more clearly than in the Capitol building, the "Temple of Liberty." When at last the bronze head of *Freedom* was formally hoisted into place on December 2, 1863, the adjutant general's office ordered a ceremony that would rally Union troops and unmistakably confirm "this material symbol of the principle on which

our government is based."[10] *Freedom* was ritually installed to the thunder of cannons: a thirty-five-gun salute (for the number of states in the Union in 1863) from a field battery on Capitol Hill, which was then answered in succession by a similar thirty-five-gun salute from the twelve forts that encircled and protected the capital. However questionable *Freedom*'s symbolism, since that time the Capitol has possessed the requisite architectural grandeur to be what its designers had always hoped it would be, the moral and ideological center of city and nation.

There are two metaphors that I have found helpful in my attempts to understand the symbolism of Washington, D.C. One is the metaphor of archeology, whose task is to uncover earlier layers of human culture. The second is the metaphor of pilgrimage, the human desire to make journeys to a sacred destination. The first metaphor is principally temporal and requires the investigation of earlier historical epochs, their capitals, and the meaning their architecture conveys. These original meanings, though often hidden and ambiguous, still in some way exert their allure today. They are like a fine vessel or other archeological find from a past civilization. The second metaphor is more spatial, requiring a methodical visitation of Washington's most significant contemporary physical structures. The axial structure of the city invites the visitor to follow a systematic route. So just as traditional pilgrimage centers like Jerusalem, Mecca, and Banaras display a circuit or prescribed route for the pilgrim to follow, I have made a pilgrimage circuit of Washington, beginning at the Capitol, walking the three major axes of the ceremonial core of the city, and ending where I began, at the Capitol.

My two metaphors converge in one description of the pilgrimage experience as "a vertical shaft driven into the past, disclosing deep strata of ancient symbols, potent signifiers (sacred symbol-vehicles such as images, paintings, proper names, and places) which reinforce nationalistic sentiments."[11] The metaphorical first layer is the most obvious and accessible complex of ideas and ideals representing what scholars have called, in recent decades, "civil religion."[12] The expression originates with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The French philosopher believed that some religion was necessary as an ideology to support any civil society, but he rejected Christianity as inadequate in a revolutionary era. In its place he advocated a generic faith that he called "civil religion." Its general features included belief in an Almighty Power as guarantor of society's morality and civic order, who rewarded the good and punished evil in the afterlife. The Divine Power of Rousseau's civil religion was not the inactive Being of strict Deism but remained interested in human social harmony and provided sanctions to

restrain those who might otherwise plot to upset the system. The purpose of civic rituals was to dramatize and celebrate society's values and moral code.

In the America of the Founding Fathers, civil religion was frequently expressed by politicians and preachers and enacted in rituals such as the Masonic rite of laying the cornerstone of the Capitol. Washington, Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and others believed that the deity was actively interested in the success of the American experiment as a model that could eventually serve as a shining example for the rest of the world. They considered this novel experiment in freedom and democracy an epochal event, calling it a *novus ordo seclorum* (a new order in the world) on the Great Seal they devised for the United States. Nothing like it had been seen before, although there were brief classical foreshadowings in democratic Greece and republican Rome. Already in 1787 Representative James Wilson prophesied that the federal government would "lay a foundation for erecting temples of Liberty in every part of the earth."[13] As he lay dying in June of 1826, Thomas Jefferson wrote to the mayor of Washington, echoing the faith of the Founding Fathers that this new democratic form of government might be "to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all)" a signal to arouse men to burst their chains of slavery.[14] This faith may be seen everywhere in the city but is nowhere more eloquently and fully expressed than in the art and architecture of the Capitol.

Besides the clear expressions of civil religion, there are older and less obvious strands of religious meaning in Washington, which have their roots in the world of biblical thought, both Jewish and Christian. At the foundation of American politics is the deliberate attempt to separate the state from any specific church, while at the same time protecting the right of citizens to freely practice their religions. Still, the Founding Fathers were in certain ways embedded in the world of biblical language and thought because it had, over the centuries, so thoroughly penetrated European and American culture. They spoke the words of the Bible, and they thought by its metaphors. Commenting, for example, on Alexander Hamilton's deft financial strategy that allowed Washington to be built on the Potomac site, lawyer and statesman Daniel Webster said: "He smote the rock of natural resources, and abundant streams of revenue gushed forth."[15] For reasons not difficult to understand, the Christian founders of the colonies found the episodes in the Old Testament more useful than the New Testament to justify their enterprise in the New World. Compelling and ominous images of the New World as the "Promised Land" and the colonists as the "New

Israel" exerted undeniable influence on the minds of settlers as they strove to interpret their experiences in America and justify their conquest of the indigenous peoples they encountered.

At a deeper level, the Bible raised troublesome issues and posed questions that may not have seemed important in other cultures. First, because the Bible revealed a God who acted in history, significant events had to be examined and interpreted in that light. Whereas the great Hindu and Buddhist cultures of Asia might dismiss specific historical events as meaningless, Christian theologians and thinkers labored to make sense of all the major occurrences of human history. A second issue rooted in biblical thought was the tendency to elevate good and evil to transcendent dimensions, sometimes personalizing them as God and Satan. A third might be called "bibliolatry," the worship of specific texts as sacred. Because they considered their holy scriptures to be the very word of God, Jewish and Christian believers were predisposed to venerate such secular writings as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as they would divinely revealed documents. These three themes are the most significant for my analysis of Washington because they imply patterns of thinking that not only dictated how questions would be answered but more fundamentally determined which questions would be asked at all.

At the deepest level of investigation the visitor to Washington sees the very beginnings of urbanism. Urban historian Lewis Mumford pointed out long ago that it was the conjunction of the sacred and secular power that first gave rise to cities in the river valleys of the ancient world.[16] Kings and their architects strove to devise ways to express their belief that the gods approved of the ruler and that the royal city was directly related to the heavenly world of the gods and the structure of the cosmos. They built temples and palaces, laid out ceremonial avenues, and designed whole cities to imitate the geometry of the universe as they understood it. These architectural arrangements expressed the belief that heaven and earth should be in harmony, and many of the early methods of expressing this harmony have been repeated in the language of architecture and city planning down through the millennia. That is to say, the vocabulary of architecture and the design of cities have changed very little over the course of urban history. Visitors will find them expressed in the avenues, shrines, memorials, and monumental architecture of Washington today.

Speaking of even more archaic periods, Jacquetta Hawkes has noted that "while civilizations have come and gone we are still born to the identical equipment of body and limbs already shaped a hundred thousand years or more ago," and along with this physical inheritance "highly charged

emotional centers and all the strange furniture of the unconscious mind."[17] If this is true, then it is not enough to see the sources of Washington's development in Enlightenment views of the world or even in the older biblical patterns of thought. Our archeology must dig deeper, getting down to unconscious and archaic levels of the human mind, expressed in the search for sacred centers, for *temeni* (sacred precincts) that are places of connection to a more real world above, symmetries and axial boulevards, shrines, and monumental architecture whose underlying purpose is to give a transcendent meaning to the city.[18]

When Pierre L'Enfant proposed a design for the capital to George Washington in 1791, he was certainly not familiar with the concepts of his archaic predecessors who worked for kings and emperors. But he had been exposed to the work of André Lenôtre at Versailles, Paris, and elsewhere, the same "grand style" of planning that subsequently exerted such a strong influence on other great European capitals, including Rome, London, and Saint Petersburg.[19] The rectangles, circles, and diagonals, the grand vistas, the dramatic highlighting of monumental buildings, and the emphasis on movement are baroque features later reproduced in his plan for Washington. But it was L'Enfant's genius to transform the royal architecture of monarchy into a physical plan that was capable of expressing democratic ideals. So successful was he that architectural historian Norma Evenson could say in retrospect that "the baroque axis appears sufficiently flexible to represent any political system."[20] Yet in adapting what had once been monarchic forms of architecture L'Enfant was at the same time using ideas that had endured for millennia. Versailles itself, and baroque urban planning generally, were themselves expressions of the same archaic vocabulary of urban design: centrality, axiality, monumentality, cantonment, and the clever management of open spaces. If Rousseau was right that every government must establish its connection with the world of the gods, then the problem for democracy is even more difficult than it is for monarchy, since in the modern world the assumed connection between a transcendent being, the earthly ruler, and his subjects has been severed.[21] Yet even modern rulers who assume office "by the consent of the governed," still make "overt ritual appeals to higher forces and designs, [as when] an American president is at pains to demonstrate in his inauguration speech the moral leadership that transforms the electoral choice of this person into something other than an accident of history."[22]

Washington is a fusion of the secular and sacred, a uniquely modern blend of politics and religion that is nevertheless grounded in the archaic past. Politics and religion have always engaged the deepest convictions and

commitments of human life, but of the two, religion is probably the more powerful. When they become yoked, as they normally have been throughout human history, the resultant combination is potentially explosive. The ancient fusion of secular and sacred, which gave birth to cities and to the first large-scale political entities, still functions to enlist commitment, enflame passions, and create bonds of loyalty beyond anything one could rationally explain. All of us are implicated in ways of thought and modes of feeling that have ancient roots in cultural transformations that occurred many thousands of years ago and may be, for the foreseeable future, an inevitable feature of that "strange furniture of our unconscious mind."

Yet the archeology metaphor alone is not sufficient, suggesting as it does ancient and unchanging meanings and eternal verities. This immutability is an illusion because of the transience of mythic meanings and the "superabundance of architectural forms, that is, the way in which even the apparently simplest buildings invariably both transcend and subvert the deliberate intentions of their designers."[23] Because the meaning of capital cities is not static, I use the metaphor of pilgrimage as a corrective to this possible misapprehension. We do not know when the religious practice of pilgrimage first began, but it is a feature of all the major religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Perhaps it is universally attractive as a natural and powerful analogy of the human passage through life.[24] Going on a pilgrimage reassures pilgrims, in a concrete way, that their lives are not just an aimless wandering about, but a movement toward a sacred destination. The act of going on a pilgrimage suggests that life has meaning.

One scholar of political religion claims that "one's first pilgrimage to Washington can be a blinding religious experience, a rite of communion."[25] Although I doubt that Washington produces such a powerful effect on most visitors, the city lends itself to such an analysis, at least as an interpretative device. The axial structure of Washington invites visitors to follow specific routes in exploring the city's significant buildings and monuments. I do just that in the reflective narratives that begin the three sections of this book.[26] I did not take off my shoes, crawl on my knees, or kiss the ground, but I did find my walks conducive to reflections on the nation's now mythic Founders and the events of its sacred history, memories awakened at sites along the way. As Freud noted, "the monuments and memorials with which cities are adorned are also mnemonic symbols."[27]

A careful analysis of pilgrimage traditions reveals useful concepts that facilitate an understanding of the national mythology.[28] Pilgrimages organize space in a sophisticated and complex way, beginning at a sacred center

but extending beyond it to eventually delineate a universal or cosmic system. Pilgrimages also structure time and history through the creation of pilgrimage calendars, and many sites are conceived as the place where creation took place and time began. Each of the most famous pilgrimage cities—Jerusalem, Mecca, and Banaras—is held by believers to be the center of the world and connected with creation. One can see the centrality theme developing in the growing ambition of Washington first to be the nation's center, and then the center of the world. As Chapter 1 documents, there was even a movement to restructure the world's time meridian so that it would pass through Washington instead of Greenwich.

Ritual complexity is another feature of pilgrimage centers, involving traditions that embrace continuity and change, predictability and surprise, order and chaos. Washington has its rituals to reaffirm the unity of the nation, to celebrate victory, and to commemorate noble deaths. It has exemplary liturgies that reaffirm the nature of the three branches of government and their interrelationship, most prominently the inauguration of the president every four years. On the "chaotic" side there are the popular rituals enacted on the Mall, on Pennsylvania Avenue, and in Lafayette Park that bring protesters and supporters to Washington to dramatize and debate their causes. Symbolic complexity is also a feature of pilgrimage, with multiple interpenetrating levels of meaning and symbolism. Evidence of this complex network of symbols may be found throughout the city, but chiefly in the monuments and spaces of the core area.

Finally, pilgrimage is usually a behavior that develops at the "bottom" and moves up. By that I mean that it is not devised and ordained by ruling powers but is the collective behavior of free individuals. Once established, of course, it may achieve official sanction, be co-opted by a clerical hierarchy, and even become a criterion of orthodoxy. But it is not so in its origin. Washington bears the imprint of many hands: the original planner L'Enfant, Washington, and Jefferson; architects Benjamin Latrobe, James Hoban, Charles Bulfinch, and Thomas Walter; superintendents, sculptors, and painters such as Luigi Persico, Thomas Crawford, Augustus St. Gaudens, Constantino Brumidi; landscapists Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.; and the architects of the United States Senate Park Commission (better known as the McMillan Commission), to name only a few of the more prominent. But in many ways "the people" have shaped Washington, not only through their congressional representatives but also simply by choosing which memorials they like and which they do not, which they frequent and which they ignore. In so doing, they are "voting with their feet,"[29] ; they have simultaneously created the basis of the "pilgrimage

route" I adopted. For example, the memorial to Ulysses S. Grant, though vast in scope, centrally placed, and skillfully executed, has never captured the allegiance and affection of most visitors to the capital. Other sites, including the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Vietnam Memorial, are continually sought by throngs of visitors.

Pilgrimage is always set against the background of the story or stories that engendered it. But new narratives may enhance or change its meaning. I call these stories myths, the foundational narratives that form a community and shape the identity of individuals. To visit Washington is to experience the retelling of a story of mythic proportions, whose roots have a complex past, going back to Europe, to biblical lands, and even to the African and Asian river valleys where civilization began. The strangeness of this mythology is well captured in Lincoln's second inaugural address as the "mystic chords of memory." Mythology is communal poetry, the human attempt to make sense out of the chaos of human life, to connect what is disconnected, and to gain some hold on mysteries that defy rational figuring. As Robert Penn Warren pointed out, "if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake."[30] The chaos of events and persons, exemplifying justice and injustice, wavering loyalties and fierce commitment, the succession of peaceful achievements and bloody disasters—all of these cry out for understanding. The poet Elizabeth Bishop hails a great artist who is able to combat the destructiveness of mere history:

> Minimal, incoherent fragments:
> the opposite of History, creator of ruins,
> out of your ruins you have made creations.[31]

In that regard, at least, poetry and mythology are the same. We, the American people, call upon the myths of the past, reinterpret them, and recreate them to make sense out of the confusion of our uncommon history. Now "we" are no longer limited to the circle of white male gentry who founded the nation and first uttered the words "We the people," but are increasingly a rainbow of colors and ethnic diversity. The more democratic character of U.S. citizenship has brought changes in the interpretation of the national myth. This enterprise of myth-making may begin when visitors to Washington experience the planning, the buildings, the spaces, and the iconography of the city. But as they "reflect on, and 'play with' the built structures in their environment, they endlessly disrupt old meanings and awaken fresh ones" in the effort to find a place for themselves in the national mythology.[32] Though Pierre Charles L'Enfant's plan provided the initial impetus, the myth

of Washington has been shaped through the contributions and objections, the support and obstructions of presidents, commissions, architects, engineers, superintendents, and U.S. senators and representatives, and by us, the people. Together over time, we have continued to create the myth in stone that is today's Washington. Myth-making remains. "We," however, keep changing.