



The American Idea: The Best of the Atlantic Monthly

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“What is ‘the American idea’? It is the fractious, maddening approach to the conduct of human affairs that values equality despite its elusiveness, that values democracy despite its debasement, that values pluralism despite its messiness, that values the institutions of civic culture despite their flaws, and that values public life as something higher and greater than the sum of all our private lives. The founders of the magazine valued these things—and they valued the immense amount of effort it takes to preserve them from generation to generation.”

--The Editors of *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2006

This landmark collection of writings by the illustrious contributors of *The Atlantic Monthly* is a one-of-a-kind education in the history of American ideas.

The Atlantic Monthly was founded in 1857 by a remarkable group that included some of the towering figures of nineteenth-century intellectual life: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell. For 150 years, the magazine has continued to honor its distinguished pedigree by publishing many of America’s most prominent political commentators, journalists, historians, humorists, storytellers, and poets.

Throughout the magazine’s history, *Atlantic* contributors have unflinchingly confronted the fundamental subjects of the American experience: war and peace, science and religion, the conundrum of race, the role of women, the plight of the cities, the struggle to preserve the environment, the strengths and failings of our politics, and, especially, America’s proper place in the world.

This extraordinary anthology brings together many of the magazine’s most acclaimed and influential articles. “Broken Windows,” by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, took on the problem of inner-city crime and gave birth to a new way of thinking about law enforcement. “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” by Bernard Lewis, prophetically warned of the dangers posed to the West by rising Islamic extremism. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” by Martin Luther King, Jr., became one of the twentieth century’s most famous reflections upon—and calls for—racial equality. And “The Fifty-first State,” by James Fallows, previewed in astonishing detail the mess in which America would find itself in Iraq full six months before the invasion. The collection also highlights some of *The Atlantic*’s finest moments in fiction and poetry—from the likes of Twain, Whitman, Frost, Hemingway, Nabokov, and Bellow—affirming the central role of literature in defining and challenging American society.

Rarely has an anthology so vividly captured America. Serious and comic, touching and tough, *The American Idea* paints a fascinating portrait of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going.

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