

# E Pluribus Unum – ‘Out of Many, One’

While not the official motto of the United States, *E Pluribus Unum*, is a common Latin phrase used in the United States since 1776 and still found on the Great Seal of the United States. Its meaning, of course, is “Out of many, one”.

It originally referred to the act of many states (or colonies as they were prior to gaining independence from Great Britain) coming together to form a nation. Never forget that it was the original 13 states that actually *created* the federal government of the United States. Power was rooted in the people and the states and only a portion of it was given to the federal government first through the [Articles of Confederation](#). As section III of the Articles of Confederacy states:

“The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever.”

For a variety of reasons, the Articles of Confederation were abandoned and the Constitution, which we have today, replaced them. Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the Department of Treasury, argued in *Federalist #1* that the reason for a new constitution was the following:

“After an unequivocal experience of the inefficacy of the subsisting federal government, you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America. The subject speaks its own importance;

comprehending in its consequences nothing less than the existence of the UNION, the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed, the fate of an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world. It has been frequently remarked **that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.**"

With the gauntlet thrown down, a vigorous debate took place in the young United States regarding the shape and content of the new constitution, with the anti-Federalists and Federalists battling it out. Both sides compromised in various places and we ended up with the U.S. Constitution built with checks and balances against the centralization of power, including a Bill of Rights.

The Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights, is a very European document, particularly influenced by the Anglo-Saxons experiences. Behind the debates over the Constitution and "union" were many unifying cultural inputs for Americans, including Christianity, various European customs, and the effects of the Enlightenment.

While initially the idea was to take many states and make them a nation, the phrase *E Pluribus Unum* eventually came to be understood as taking many people and making them one, making them Americans. But what does it mean to become one?

In 1897, President Grover Cleveland [wrote](#),

"Heretofore we have welcomed all who came to us from other lands **except those whose moral or physical condition or history threatened danger to our national welfare and safety.** Relying upon the zealous watchfulness of our

people to prevent injury to our political and social fabric, we have encouraged those coming from foreign countries to cast their lot with us and join in the development of our vast domain, securing in return a share in the blessings of American citizenship.

A century's stupendous growth, largely due to the assimilation and thrift of millions of sturdy and patriotic adopted citizens, attests the success of this generous and free-handed policy which, while guarding the people's interests, exacts from our immigrants only physical and moral soundness and a willingness and ability to work.

...

...In my opinion, it is infinitely more safe to admit a hundred thousand immigrants who, though unable to read and write, seek among us only a home and opportunity to work than to admit **one of those unruly agitators and enemies of governmental control who can not only read and write, but delights in arousing by inflammatory speech the illiterate and peacefully inclined to discontent and tumult.** Violence and disorder do not originate with illiterate laborers. They are, rather, the victims of the educated agitator..."

As President Cleveland pointed out, there are those who mean to do us harm. That is evident by 9/11 and the most recent ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in San Bernardino. But what does it mean to assimilate those who come with goodwill?

Books could be filled, and have been, with historical insights and discussions about what it means to be an American. And up until the 1950s America was predominantly a nation composed of Christian people, both Black and White. The big cultural divisions were on the flavor of Christianity, race, and ethnicity. Despite those differences, the country largely had a generally common worldview and understanding of how that was

reflected in the laws and customs of the country. But things have changed now.

As we have moved away from a fairly homogeneous white, Christian America, we are now truly confronted with a number of challenges. If we are not a Christian nation, then what is the common worldview that unites us? That is truly the question that is at the heart of the current immigration debate about Syrian refugees. It is the question that Hamilton raised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in *Federalist* #1:

**“...[are] societies of men ... really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice”?**

Enlightenment thinking abounds in Hamilton’s question. Can men empty themselves of their heritages and beliefs in order to rationally choose a “good government”? Or are ethnicity, race, culture, religion, etc. too deeply ingrained in the human heart? Furthermore, and here we come to the uncomfortable question, can a particular people, united in worldview, have a “good government” that works for them while that form of government does not work for a different people united through a different worldview?

What we are now asking ourselves is not whether or not we can take European Christians of various ethnicities and differing backgrounds and make them one through what is common to us and them. We are now asking ourselves if we can take the whole world into one country and make it one.

America is, and always has been, a grand experiment. We shall see how it plays out in coming decades.