Notes from Puritan Origins of the American Selfby Sacvan Bercovitch)

**I.**                  **Historical Background:**

o     The Reformation: the 16th century movement resulting in the separation of the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church. (England became a Protestant country when Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church.)

o     Martin Luther: earliest leader of the Reformation (95 theses Oct. 31, 1517 nailed to the door of Wittenberg Castle); held the belief that no pope or bishop had the right to impose any law on a Christian soul without consent.

o     John Calvin: died in 1564; held to the belief that God freely chose those whom He would save and those He would damn eternally.

o     Mayflower sails to New England in 1620

o     Pilgrims: staunch Calvinists; landed before the Puritans at Plymouth Rock in 1620 and were separatists; were eventually absorbed into Puritan society by 1700; established the Holy Commonwealth, a covenant for civil government based on biblical principles, the Mayflower Compact (i.e., Following Calvinism, they believed God established the state for the purpose of restraining sin. And to control sin God entered into covenants with men, covenants to establish churches as well as covenants to establish civil governments� (*Christianity and the Constitution*, 28); the Puritans established the Holy Commonwealth of Massachusetts under Governor John Winthrop in 1630.

Colonists,Puritans and Pilgrims lived in the shadow of the Reformation, and the majority had strong Calvinistic backgrounds.

Puritans:

The name given in the 16th century to strict orthodox Protestants within the Church of England who thought the church was too worldly and corrupt and that the English Reformation had not gone far enough in reforming the doctrines and structure of the Church; they wanted to purify their national church by eliminating the Catholic influence. Not strictly separatists, they believed they should stay in the church and sanctify or purify it according to biblical principles.

Puritans embraced a Calvinistic interpretation of scripture. That is to say, they believed in--

�  the sovereignty of God: that God rules and reigns in the affairs of men;

�  the total depravity of man apart from Christ (the typology: man’s fall from grace; Covenant of Law versus Covenant of Grace);

�  unmerited salvation: that man is a passive recipient of divine grace; he neither earns or merits salvation;

�  the Priesthood of all believers; no priests as mediators;

�  a meaningfully personal religious experience;

�  the doctrine of the elect: those who are elect and predestined of God are saved through faith in Christ.;

And finally they believed America had a special place in Christ’s millennial return (i.e., William Bradford’s notion of the “City upon a hill”) and maintained an emphasis on education.

**II.**               **The vital relation of Calvin/Calvinism and Puritanism to the berthing of American principles of self-government and republican liberty:**

The majority of colonial Americans had Calvinistic backgrounds. Calvinism encompasses a worldview and view of human nature which directly affected our choice for an effective government.

*Tenets*:

1)      Total depravity of human nature apart from the saving grace of Jesus Christ (Romans 7:18; Isaiah 64:6)

a.      Government must be powerful enough to restrain the evil impulses of men.

b.      But, rulers also possess a sin nature and thus cannot be given absolute power; hence limited government (power as delegated “by the people, for the people”)

2)     Doctrine of election: those who are elect and predestined of God are saved through faith in Christ.

3)     Priesthood of all Believers (Hebrews 4:16) ; no priests as mediators.

a.      Everyone should be able to read and interpret scripture for him or herself since the individual alone is responsible for her own soul.

b.      This sensibility contributed to a promotion of universal education, establishing a high caliber for learning (Harvard College was founded, for instance, in 1636 to meet the demand for an educated people).

4)     Relevance of God’s law to civil government.

5)     Covenant theology finds its expression in civil government.

6)     Self-governed church versus church run by bishops and high church officials (finds its expression in local self-government/ helped form a basis for representative and decentralized government, the cornerstone of the American constitutional system)