Revolution two hundred years ago, the United States is confronted with
the question of how far the Revolution should go, whether the ideas of
the Revolution are true for only some or for all.

Benjamin Rush, the enormously talented physician in Philadelphia
who became involved in virtually every reform movement of his day,
sensed the way in which the Revolution had not been finished and should
not end. Writing in 1787 as the Constitution was being drafted, Rush
declared, “The American war is over, but this is far from the case with
the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of
the great drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our
new forms of government, and to prepare the principles, morals, and
manners of our citizens for these new forms of government after they
are established and brought to perfection.” 11

What Rush was arguing and what this nation needs to realize again is
that America’s strength does not lie in the power or even durability of
its institutions but in the values that give them purpose and meaning.
Today the ideas that undergirded the American Revolution are usually
forgotten or ignored. From the Third World to American cities, in one
policy after another, the United States testifies to the ideas of its own
Revolution more in the breach than the practice. For millions of people
in the world, American power has become synonymous with tyranny,
not freedom, and with oppression, not justice. Even for many of its
citizens, American political values are treated with cynicism.

Fifteen years ago, Arnold Toynbee issued this blunt verdict. “The
American Revolution has gone thundering on,” he said. “Nothing can
stop it, no, not even the American hands that first set it rolling. But
during these last . . . years, your revolution has gone on without you.
The leadership has fallen into other hands. These non-Americans could
never have seized the leadership of your revolution if you had not
dropped it.” The United States, he continued, finds itself in the position
“of being the leader of the very opposite of what America’s World
Revolution stands for. . . . But the future is still open. Your role in the
coming chapter of the World’s history is not yet irrevocably decided. It
is still within your power to re-capture the lead in your own revolu-
tion.” 12

Perhaps Toynbee’s optimism is justified. One might hope so. But a
more somber note must be sounded as well. For the Christian, any final
confidence and faith in either a leader or the political existence of the
United States is ultimately idolatrous. In the brutally realistic words of
the psalmist,

Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man in whom there is no help.
When his breath departs he returns to his earth;
on that very day his plans perish (146:3–4).