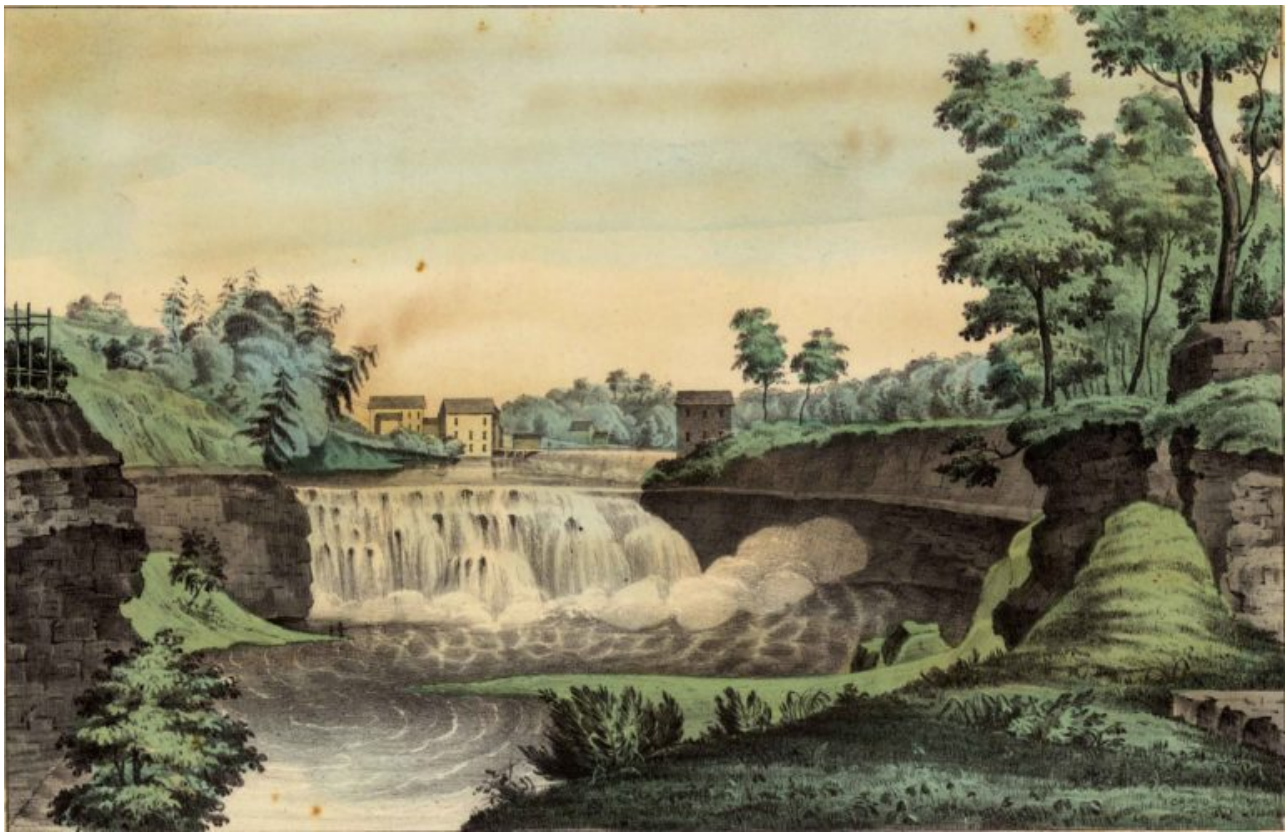
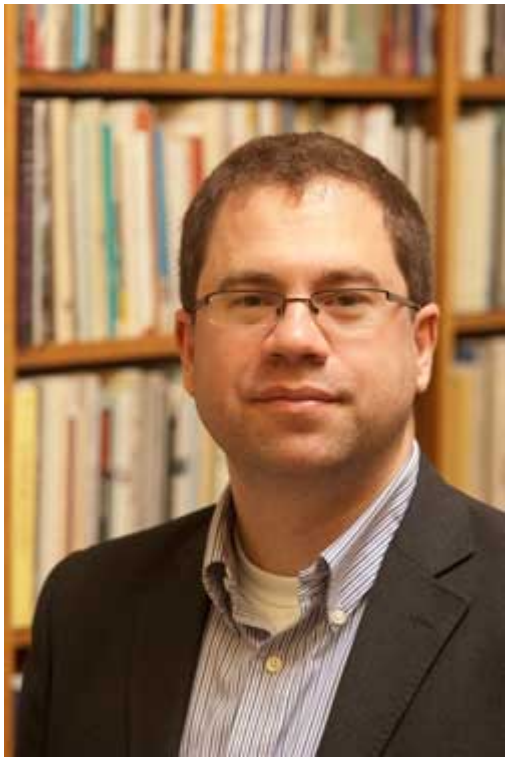
In Bleak Waters: Suicide and the State of the Union





Richard Bell

Ask the Author *talks to historian Richard Bell about his new book* We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self Government in the Newly United States*.* **Early in the book you discuss suicide as an important "political vocabulary" in the early American republic. Can you explain a bit what you mean by that, and why suicide was such a fraught issue?** *We Shall Be No More* is about the politics of self-destruction in the new republic. My goal is to try to explain why so many public battles about the state of this fragile new political union found expression in bitter, frenzied fighting over the meaning of certain suicides. Between the Revolution and the Civil War, "suicide" came to function as one of the most evocative and incendiary words in Americans' political lexicons. Like "freedom," "slavery," "democracy," "tyranny," and "disunion," "suicide" became a keyword in the new nation's vocabulary not only because of its connotations of finality and extremity but also because of its ability to embody complex ideas and provoke visceral emotional responses. That peculiar power stems from the difficulty of deducing the precise intent of those who commit suicide. Even today, I think, the act of self-destruction can be read in various ways: as submission or as protest, as dispossession or as mastery, as madness or as calculation. In all these ways, suicide can be interpreted as an inherently political act. After all, personal choices about how and when to die take place at the nexus of self and society, and for that reason the problem of suicide seems to strike directly at the core of questions about individual autonomy and collective organization, doing so in ways that are agonizingly personal, pointed, and profound. In the early United States, questions regarding whether or not individuals should have the freedom to do with their life and liberty as they see fit or have an obligation to serve the interests of a larger community were not abstract inquiries. On the contrary, these questions plagued all who wondered whether their fellow Americans had sufficient virtue, self-discipline, and care for one another to foster a stable and self-governing republic. As such, it's not so strange that the meaning of suicide became a principal locus of contention in this time and place. **For the most part you sidestep the question of whether or not there really was a suicide epidemic—or, at minimum, increasing numbers of self-murder—in this period. Can you talk a bit about that choice?** The book opens by confronting readers with a tidal wave of hand-wringing jeremiads, each one claiming that post-revolutionary America was in the grip of an escalating suicide epidemic. Ministers, newspaper editors, judges, and doctors filled the press with dire warnings that their fellow Americans were taking their own lives in unprecedented numbers. "Suicide is making a most alarming progress in these states," a writer in the *Pennsylvania Evening Herald*announced in June 1785, before describing the deaths of "three persons … who have dared to rush into the presence of their Creator." The proof of this progress was there in black and white: in Annapolis' *Maryland Gazette*, reports of completed suicide published during the 1790s were up three hundred percent over the previous decade, while New York City's *Weekly Museum* reported four times as many self-destructive acts during the 1800s as it had ten years earlier. So it's easy to see why people of standing and status were so concerned. If the papers were to be credited, suicide was suddenly so common that it had become a defining feature of life in the new republic. These sources are treacherous, however, and although precious few people at the time

paused to question the assumed correlation between rising reportage and elevated rates of self-destruction, we'd be wise to be more careful. For one thing, the 1792 Post Office Act—which made every variety of domestic news-gathering dramatically cheaper, faster, and easier—gave American newspaper editors subtle financial incentives to replace a good deal of their coverage of suicides in distant European cities with reports about men and women who took their lives here on American soil. These editorial decisions likely contributed to the perception that suicide rates in cities like Philadelphia and New York were actually rising. For this and several other reasons I won't go into here, I believe that we simply can't trust early national press coverage to provide an accurate index of suicidal behavior. Government statistics are no better. Although the bills of mortality compiled by city inspectors and the boards of health in cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia offer a tally of the number of inquest verdicts of suicide in these jurisdictions each month, that data is also spectacularly subjective. Early national coroners and jurors didn't even have a common definition of what constituted an intentional suicide and certainly could not agree on which forms of evidence—physical, eyewitness, circumstantial, forensic—deserved the most weight. They also struggled mightily to differentiate between accidents and genuinely self-intentioned deaths, especially when family members destroyed suicide notes, lied during testimony, or explicitly coerced jurors to return non-culpable verdicts (e.g. *non compos mentis*) that would prevent state officials from confiscating the deceased's heritable property. Because legal prohibitions against suicide varied considerably among states and also changed dramatically over time, these various sub-cultural factors should not be discounted or assumed to be random. So in the book, I try to refrain from placing too much weight or emphasis on the raw numbers contained in the extant bills of mortality; the data is vastly more subjective than it seems. So much so, in fact, that I think those sources are not very useful as statistical indicators of the frequency of suicidal behavior in a given time and place. That said, many Americans truly felt that suicide was on the rise in this period, and were disturbed by its perceived proliferation. The accounts, then, do offer a means to better understand which behaviors people on the ground interpreted as acts of intentional suicide and provide a lens through which to examine the larger meanings that they attached to self-destruction. **One of the book's big points is that Americans hotly contested the meaning of suicide in this period. How and why were these struggles inflected by gender and race?** In the book I argue that the way early Americans interpreted suicide was fundamentally relational. Then, as now, the way we react to another person's decision to die depends in great part on the assumptions we make about the deceased, and about that person's relationship to ourselves and to people like ourselves. For that reason, early Americans' ideas about race and about gender played important roles in determining how individuals and groups responded to the suicides they witnessed or, more commonly, read about. For instance, to test his theory that self-destruction was essentially a "crime of civilization" committed only by enlightened white Europeans (including his own troubled son, John, who attempted suicide by razor in March 1809), Benjamin Rush would sometimes question Native leaders like Alexander McGillivray and frontiersmen like Meriwether Lewis as to whether

“suicide [is] ever known among the Indians. And from what causes, if it be?” In a similar way, debates about the moral consequences of the rise of the novel in America in the 1780s and 1790s rested upon parental assumptions that young girls, in particular, were naturally too weak-willed to resist the power of sympathy; the more romantic teenage suicides these young women encountered in print, this argument went, the more likely such eminently suggestible readers would be to follow in the same bloody footsteps if ever their own adolescent romances encountered obstacles. In truth, race and gender seem to inflect almost every debate about suicide described in the book, and in several contexts they work in tandem. As I demonstrate in a final chapter, antislavery novels, pamphlets, and newspapers were filled with polemical descriptions of black suicide. Yet, depictions of slaves taking their own lives oscillated wildly over time as activists reached out to different audiences and experimented with different tropes. In the 1780s and early 1800s, for instance, antislavery authors trying to convince state and national legislators of the merits of ending the international slave trade focused upon enslaved black males, and represented their decisions to die as violent yet dignified assertions of autonomous manhood. “Such greatness of mind,” mourned a writer for Philadelphia’s *Independent Gazeteer* in a typical eulogy. Yet by the 1830s, that sort of language was in decline, overshadowed by the output of William Lloyd Garrison, Lydia Maria Child and their disciples. In order to touch the hearts of northern evangelical families, this small army of moral suasionists chose to reimagine slaves’ self-inflicted deaths, not as noble acts of mastery, but as feminized capitulations to the Slave Power. For a generation, desperate, distracted and abused wives or mothers, brutalized to the point of extinction, took center stage in a pageant of suffering. It was not until militant black abolitionists like Henry Highland Garnet and Martin Delany muscled their way into print in the 1840s and 1850s that depictions of the suicides of enslaved males again returned to assumed heroic status. “Oh! why is he not man enough to kill himself?” an inconsolable young black woman reportedly wailed as she watched Anthony Burns’ arrest and re-enslavement unfold in Boston in 1854. **The book is organized topically for the most part, with chapters focusing on politics (broadly defined), novels, humane societies, religion, the state, and antislavery/abolition. Yet what are some of the significant changes over time in the “career” of suicide?** One of the goals I set for myself was to show readers that suicide was the subject of incessant debate in the newly United States, and that in this formative period between Revolution and Civil War the language of suicide became a conspicuous resource for the advancement of larger arguments about the proper balance to be struck between liberty and order. Consequently, the book exhibits quite catholic interests and traces pervasive quarrels over what certain suicides seemed to say about the primacy of the self and about the stability of society across a range of terrain, from the fallout of an 1816 capital trial in which an inmate was accused of talking his cellmate into killing himself, to the highly politicized depiction of suicidal slaves in the pamphlets and newspapers that poured forth from abolitionist presses. However, I do hope that readers will also perceive the over-arching chronological argument embedded in the text. The period between the Revolution and the Civil War was, after all, a period of extraordinary transformation in

which the United States experienced dramatic demographic changes and unprecedented economic expansion and restructuring. Simultaneously, the inheritors of the Revolution witnessed the rise of systematic electoral competition, religious disestablishment and disintegration, and a velvet revolution in gender and family relations. Important in and of themselves, together these broad changes signaled a vast and atomizing transformation, the arrival of what Ralph Waldo Emerson later labeled "the age of the first person singular." Those sea changes provided the context for a significant transformation in the way many early Americans began to respond to the divisive social and political implications they perceived in acts of suicide. The longer the republic endured, the easier it became to publicly express compassion for men and women driven to suicide, albeit only in certain highly circumscribed situations. This small but significant shift in the way Americans responded to acts of individual suicide committed beyond their immediate circle of family and friends provided an opportunity that liberal activists did not pause to nurture and to exploit. Thus in the decades after 1815, the reading public occasionally found themselves confronted with depictions of suicide that assumed that mature, sensible readers possessed the capacity to sympathize with stricken strangers who took their own lives to escape oppression or protest tyranny. Stopping far short of any universal claim to a right to die, reformers began presenting certain end-of-life decisions as imperfect challenges to entrenched interests that could be dislodged no other way. Of course, this was an uphill battle and there were significant reversals. In fact, as the threat of secession and civil war grew ever more tangible in the late 1850s, a new generation of commentators decried disunion itself as something monstrous and heinous; as—what else?—a species of suicide. **Did some people believe there was a "right to die" in this period?** Although folks back then weren't always as quick to talk about "rights" as we are today, it's certainly true that some of them considered human dignity to encompass the autonomy to take one's own life. Of course, plenty of other people took the opposite view, and in the book I try to zero in on those moments when these two diametrically opposed positions come into contact and conflict. There's no better example of this than in a chapter devoted to a league of little-known suicide prevention charities. The agents and officers of these humane societies—Benjamin Rush served as a founding vice president and President John Adams was an honorary member—based their interventionist mission on the assumption that no one in their right mind could want to die. Yet as we see from the case notes of one humane society doctor, the people they tried to help sometimes seemed to be coldly rational actors asserting what we'd recognize today as a right to die. Around 6 p.m. on Sunday, February 21, 1795, Thomas Welsh was called to a property in Charlestown, Massachusetts, to save the life of a man who'd swallowed a massive overdose of twenty-nine grains of opium. Somehow still conscious when the doctor arrived, "A.F.," as Welsh referred to him in his case notes, still had his wits about him and was not about to be rescued by a meddling stranger. "As soon as I had seen him and understood the state of the case," Welsh later recalled, "I proposed to administer to his relief; but he strenuously refused to take any thing, avowing his intention was to deprive himself of life." With the morphine metabolizing rapidly, Welsh had no time to argue. But A.F. was adamant,

“asserting that he was a free agent, and that, as such, he had a right to free himself from the calamities which he suffered.” No one, not even a doctor, could “compel him to take medicine against his will.” But Thomas Welsh was not about to back down: “I maintained that he had, according to his own confession, attempted to commit a crime against society and to deprive it of one of its members; in consequence of which I should, if he persisted in his refusal of the medicine, compel him to take it.” In the chapter, I take this extraordinary encounter as a starting point for a discussion of the complex power dynamics that informed the work of early national humane societies, and use the episode to try to scrutinize the assumptions about insanity that undergirded their agents’ coercive interventions. But what happened that day in Charlestown is also clearly relevant to any discussion about the origins of a right-to-die movement in America. It’s hardly a stretch to read A.F.’s verbal defiance as a rebuke to elite opinions in support of a republican version of the social contract in which we are all our brother’s keepers. In A.F.’s clear-headed decision to die, one can perceive an alternate view emerging—a view that embraces the individualist position that we answer to no one but ourselves.

Many of the issues raised in the book have contemporary resonance, but in particular your treatment of the “anti-gallows” movement. How is it a predecessor of and yet distinct from modern critiques of capital punishment?

Although I sometimes hesitate to make them in the book, I think that there are all sorts of comparisons to be drawn between today’s cultural politics and the fierce arguments about the meaning of self-destruction in early America. I’ve lived in the United States for going on thirteen years now, and I can’t help but notice just how frequently public figures here try to leverage other people’s decisions to die for political purposes. So in that sense, at least, perhaps not much has changed. The early national crusade to police sentimental novels deemed to be a deadly influence on adolescent minds seems to correspond closely to modern assumptions about the copycat consequences of listening to expletive-laden rap music or playing violent video games. The same concerns that motivated suicide prevention campaigns at the turn of the nineteenth century find echoes in attempts to overturn assisted suicide laws passed in Oregon and Washington in recent years. Likewise, the demagoguery about the meaning of certain suicides first heard in debates over abolition now accompanies news reports of the suicides of bullied students and ruined executives, as well as war veterans, cult members, terrorists, and hunger strikers. Capital punishment is, as you suggest, a great example. In my chapter on the early American debate about the issue, I show how activists on both sides tried to manipulate public reactions to the suicides of death-row inmates to press their cases for and against the death penalty. For their part, officials within the criminal justice system represented inmate suicides as brazen challenges to state power, to their own authority, and to the integrity of public executions as a legitimate form of criminal sanction. In fact, in at least one case, a humiliated county sheriff refused to abandon a planned execution after his prisoner hanged himself in his cell, carting the man’s dead body out to the gallows and stringing it up anyway. Antebellum anti-gallows activists were, of course, outraged by this sort of behavior and took to the papers to push some very different ideas. In a torrent of ink they depicted the

same cellblock suicides not as affronts to state power, but as bloody evidence that capital punishment was a barbaric torture that drove the very people it was supposed to punish to kill themselves. Our public discourse today doesn't seem that much different. Because the United States continues to execute its own citizens—carrying out roughly the same number of executions in 2010 as North Korea, Yemen and Saudi Arabia—our national debate about capital punishment rages on. For instance, I recently learned of the apparent suicide of James Lee Crummel, a pedophile and convicted child-killer who had spent eight years on death row at San Quentin State Prison in California. Because his death by hanging comes just two months before voters in California will be asked to weigh in on a ballot measure to repeal that state's death penalty, I will not be surprised if Crummel's suicide is soon leveraged by media-savvy campaigners on one side or the other. Already reports have surfaced that the state's automatic appeals system is so dysfunctional that the 723 men and women on California's death row are more likely to die of old age or by their own hand than they are to ever face the state's ultimate sanction. In this dim light, Crummel's recent suicide may be a boon to the anti-gallows cause both in California and in the other 33 states that still practice legal execution. **The question on everyone's mind (or on mine, at least): what is it like to research and write a book on suicide?** There's no getting around it. Spending the last ten years in the company of so many soul-sick people has been sobering. Even after all this time in their company, it is not at all difficult to summon compassion for a grieving mother who can't accept the loss of her infant or for a blind old widower struck down by sorrow and confusion, or to be affected by stories of a deluded father who turns a pistol on himself after murdering his wife and children as a sacrifice to God or a fugitive slave who can hear his master's dogs in the distance. Two hundred years of detachment cannot numb a person to this sort of suffering. Yet if anything, this project has taught me most about the sufferings of those left behind in the wake of a suicide. While my book recounts the aborted lives and premature deaths of dozens, if not hundreds, of people, its focus is squarely on the fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, neighbors and fellow citizens forced to pick up the pieces—on those who are left to agonize about their own culpability, to lay blame, and to pass judgment. In some cases, I found their efforts to make meaning out of others' oblivion to be generous and endearing; on other occasions their responses seemed to me narrow-minded and hateful; but on every occasion it was clear that survivors were struggling mightily to make sense of their changed worlds, and in that they seemed to be poignantly, pitifully human. Writing a book about dealing with death has also sharpened my sense of my own mortality and the mortality of those nearest and dearest to me. How could it not? It's also shaped my views about suicide as a moral and ethical question in serious and permanent ways. I won't offer too much introspection here, but I will say that working on this book has taught me that people take their own lives for all manner of reasons and that presuming to precisely understand why a person would do this is folly, if not hubris. I've learned that rationality and insanity sit on a long spectrum, and that courage and cowardice can coexist in a single moment.

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