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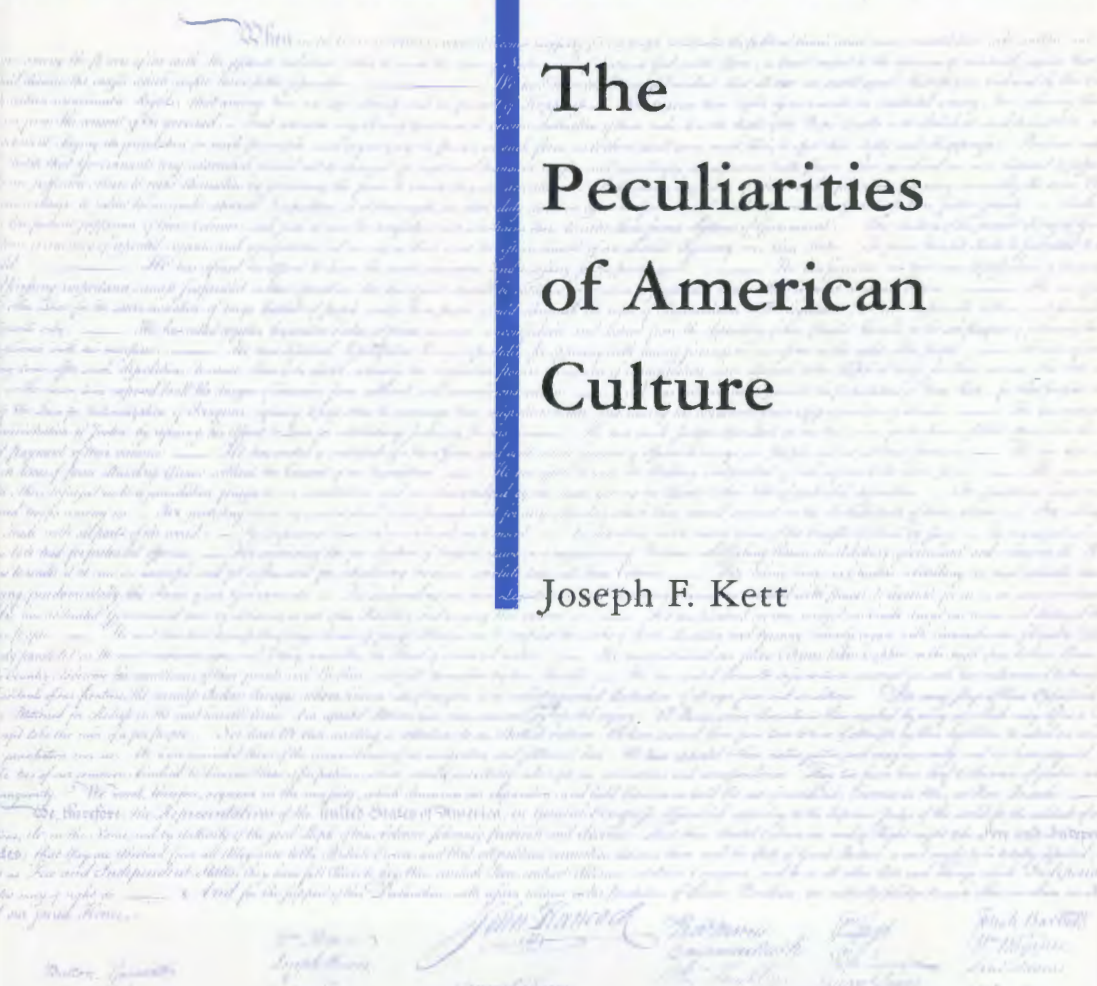
IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

Occasional Paper No. 1

The Peculiarities of American Culture

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Preface

The Center for United States Studies is pleased to present an essay by Joseph F. Kett as the first issue in its *Occasional Papers* series. Professor Kett received his doctorate from Harvard University in 1964 and has taught since 1966 at the University of Virginia, where he is Commonwealth Professor of History.

Joseph Kett's many publications include books on *The Formation of the American Medical Profession, 1780-1860* (New Haven, 1968), *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York, 1977), and *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750-1990* (Stanford, 1994). He is the co-author of one of the most influential textbooks on American history, *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* (third edition, Boston 1996) and of the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Boston, 1988, second ed.1993).

From August 31 to September 3, 1998, Prof. Kett stayed at the Center for U.S. Studies as guest faculty of the Center's in-service teacher training seminar on "The Peculiarities of American Culture." We believe that his insights deserve a wider circulation among teachers, students and scholars in Germany. Hence the idea to launch a series in which from time to time, as the name implies, guests and friends of the Center may publish thought-provoking work in American Studies.

Hans-Jürgen Grabbe

Wittenberg, January 1999

The Peculiarities of American Culture

Europeans find America both comprehensible and strange. It is comprehensible to the extent that it has shared the major economic, political, and intellectual influences that have affected Europe since the eighteenth century: capitalism; industrialization; rationalism; liberal democracy; romanticism; Darwinism; Freudianism; modernism; and now postmodernism. At the same time, the United States appears strange for any number of reasons. Its capitalism has been relatively unruffled by socialist challenges; its industrialization has been marked by an unusual penchant for innovation and invention; its politics, while essentially stable, often seem more suited to a circus than to a sovereign state; its modernizing rationalism sits incongruently with its religious exuberance and sense of divine mission; its puritanism appears to conflict with a popular culture marked by the aggressive merchandizing of wealth and sex; its people are highly patriotic but periodically turn on their elected leaders with fury and seem to devour their own government.

This portrait of American 'oddities is not new. Europeans long have worried about the American "challenge." In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries American republicanism threatened European monarchalism. In the mid-nineteenth century the British upper class held American democracy in fearful contempt and sympathized with the South in the American Civil War. In the 1920s the USA came to be seen by a variety of Europeans, ranging from D.H. Lawrence in England to German Fascists, as the demonic embodiment of mass society, a view still held by segments of the European intelligentsia.

This paper lays out some of the historical factors that have shaped the peculiarities of the United States.

Decentralized Government

In contrast to most modern revolutions, led by revolutionary cadres who first centralize and then refuse to surrender power, the American Revolution (1775-1781) led to a liberal republic with little centralization of authority. The Anglo-Americans had rebelled against Britain for taxing them, for taking away their property without their consent, not for repressing their national identity (primarily, Americans still thought of themselves as free-born Englishmen). The Revolution began not as a social upheaval of the poor against the rich but as a gentry- and lawyer-led secession from the British empire. As the Revolution gathered momentum, ordinary people were drawn into politics and the war itself produced significant social disruptions. New men came to power, and on the whole these revolutionaries had somewhat more plebeian origins than the initiators of the crisis with Britain, but they were far from

sans culottes and they did not seek a redistribution of wealth. Above all, they feared the arbitrary exercise of power. To check this, they drafted state constitutions in the late 1770s and 1780s which restricted the power of governors and which required the election or periodic rotation of other officers of government.

This fear of concentrated power also influenced the construction of national institutions. During the Revolution the USA was never more than a loose confederation of states. In 1787, a small body of upper-class delegates drew up a constitution that created a federal republic. The first three words of the Constitution, “we the people,” signified the intent of its framers to establish a national government, one drawing its authority from the consent of the people rather than the states and capable of acting directly on the people. Yet the republic created by the Constitution, while decidedly more of a nation state than the “United Colonies” that had declared their independence from Britain in 1776, was still loosely threaded. In contrast to Germany, where one powerful state, Prussia, led the drive for national integration, the largest American state, Virginia, which supplied four of the first five presidents, wanted to restrain the power of the national government, in part to prevent interference with slavery.

From the Revolution to the Civil War (1861-1865) the United States had a weak central government, which intruded only occasionally into the lives of its citizens. In theory, the president (an office created by the Constitution) had extensive powers, but before the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) presidents saw themselves as the chief administrative officers of the national government rather than as embodiments of the popular will. Jackson was the first president to view himself as the incarnation of the people, but he had scarcely any legislative program to enact. The presidential power that he exercised most dramatically was that of the veto, the power to strike down acts passed by Congress. For this, his enemies blasted him as “King Andrew I.” Indeed, Jackson did have a dictatorial temperament, but he is remembered for what he opposed rather than imposed. He opposed the continuation of a national bank and the establishment of national financing for roads and other internal improvements. Basically, he believed that equality and liberty would flourish as long as the national government stayed out of the lives of the people.

Jackson’s presidency revealed the persistence of American suspicion of government and of powerful private institutions that enjoyed privileges bestowed by governments. One of the most notable events of his two terms in office was his „war“ on the Bank of the United States, a federally-chartered bank that had private shareholders and that was only loosely controlled by the federal government. Jackson’s followers blasted the bank as the “Monster,” much as American revolutionaries a half century earlier had assailed King George III and his ministers. Throughout the period leading

up to the Civil War Americans were prone to find conspiracies against liberty everywhere. They feared Catholic conspiracies to bring them under the dominion of the Pope and conspiracies by financiers to gain control of the government. Northerners feared conspiracies by slaveholders to expand slavery into the North and southerners worried about abolitionist conspiracies to free and arm the slaves.

Apprehensions about plots against liberty and property dated to the era of the Revolution, but they were intensified in the period from 1820 to 1860 by the democratization of politics. In a democratic society it was hard to imagine that the popular will was being frustrated by anything other than a dark conspiracy. By the 1830s universal white manhood suffrage had become the norm throughout the Union and political divisions increasingly were mediated through mass political parties. The apparatus of governmental administration continued to be modest in size on both the federal and state levels; voters wanted no part of an "aristocratic" or professional civil service. In the absence of a powerful administrative state, the political parties themselves acted to thread together diverse regional, class, and cultural groups. Third parties appeared from time to time, but the United States essentially had, and continues to have, a two-party system (there is no proportional representation). Each party actively recruited voters by presenting clear policy alternatives. Voter turnouts rose to over 80% of the eligible electorate in 1840 and stayed high for decades after. Each party had its own list of demons threatening the republic, and each could effectively appeal to large blocks of voters. For example, Catholic immigrants usually voted for the Democratic party, and anti-Catholics gravitated to its rival. Paradoxically, while warfare between the political parties deepened divisions, political parties instilled national consciousness, an awareness of national issues, in voters, and in this way they contributed to threading the nation together.

The fact that the United States was a federal republic also shaped the nature of American politics. It did so in two ways: by arousing the interest in politics of ever wider circles of voters, and by ensuring that voters often would feel a sense of betrayal by the very leaders for whom they had voted. Often, voters first became active in state politics and only later turned to national issues. Conflicts between Catholics and Protestants over public education were essentially state issues (since the national government had no responsibility for education); conflicts over tariffs were national issues, since the states could not levy tariffs. National politicians had to put together coalitions of diverse voters, some of whom were primarily interested in state and others in national issues. Thus, federalism intensified popular interest in politics by making it possible for voters, in effect, to enter the political arena through different doors: national, state, and even local. At the same time, federalism required that political leaders engage in the delicate juggling and

balancing of the extremely diverse interests within each party. The legacy is still with us. Today American political parties continue to be coalitions of diverse and antagonistic groups; no sooner is a politician elected than he is apt to be charged with selling out his followers. In contrast to Europe, where rival parties often form coalition governments after the election, Americans form their coalitions (political parties) before the election.

Courts and Lawyers

The political parties could never agree with each other and no hereditary or traditional leadership class existed in the USA during the nineteenth century. As first Hegel and later Marx observed, the United States lacked the usual features of the State: no professional civil service to provide continuity in government; no monarch or hereditary nobility; no national church; no national university; and for all practical purposes, no true capital. Washington became the national capital at the turn of the nineteenth century, mainly because of a political deal struck between the rival political parties, but culture, finance, and science gravitated to other cities (respectively, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia). To complicate matters, the political system made it possible for one political party to control the executive and the rival party to control Congress. (This is the case as I write this essay, as it has often been in the past.) Thus, while the nation had innumerable political leaders, it seemed to lack a sovereign source of final decision-making.

To a significant extent, this vacuum was filled by courts. The framers of the Constitution had not envisioned the ascendancy of courts and judges, and Thomas Jefferson thought it utterly incompatible with republican ideals that judges should overturn acts of legislatures. But in 1803 the U.S. Supreme Court declared an act of Congress unconstitutional. It made a similar judgement in 1857, and after the Civil War it frequently did so. On the state level, courts often acted as a branch of government co-equal with legislatures and governors. As Alexis de Tocqueville, a French visitor whose *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) remains the most illuminating account of the United States by a foreigner, observed, lawyers abounded. The legal profession became the main route of entry into politics. Today, courts define not only the limits of legislation but all sorts of seemingly private relationships: between students and professors, or between professional athletes and club owners. Like the College of Cardinals in Rome, the Supreme Court acts as the official interpreter of national doctrine.

The development of the courts as arbiters has not occurred without controversy. In the 1830s Andrew Jackson is said to have muttered of Chief Justice John Marshall that Marshall has issued his decision and now let him try to enforce it. In the late 1930s President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed increasing the size of the Supreme Court so that he could appoint justices

more favorable to his New Deal programs. In the 1960s there were calls for the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren. Yet in the long run both legislators and the public generally have deferred to court judgements. The reasons for this are open to question, but it is likely that politicians have deferred to courts at least partly because courts serve their purposes. In a mass electoral democracy with parties that are coalitions of conflicting groups, legislatures are often disinclined to declare their will in precise and lasting terms. Thus, legislators find it convenient to deflect to the courts issues likely to divide their party. A good current example of this practice lies in the much-agitated issue of legal abortion. The issue splits both parties, but especially the Republicans, who are deeply divided by the antagonism between their upper-class/Wall Street wing and their conservative Christian wing. Many Republican politicians would like to see the abortion issue disappear. Barring that unlikely development, they promise their conservative Christian supporters to appoint judges unsympathetic to abortion rights, or to call for a constitutional amendment banning abortion. In either case, they put off the issue.

The ascendancy of courts in the United States is comprehensible for another reason. "Democracy" has several meanings in America, including frequent elections. But one more subtle meaning is that Americans historically have not been inclined to accept the social relations into which they were born as having much legitimacy. Social relationships are ever being defined and redefined. In the absence of respect for tradition or custom, courts inevitably have become arbiters of social relationships.

Business and Government

The American political system acquired its essential shape in the nineteenth century. Politically, the United States was the world's first mass democracy. Demographically, it was a nation with a largely rural and dispersed population. In 1800, when London contained over one million inhabitants, no American city contained even 70,000 inhabitants. Not until 1920 did the national decennial census record that the majority of Americans lived in places of 2,500 more people. Yet during the second half of the nineteenth century America emerged as a major industrial power, one capable of rivaling Britain by the end of the century. As much as Europeans distrusted democracy, they plunged capital into the United States, especially after the Revolutions of 1848. Immigration in the period from 1845 to 1854, mostly from the German states and Ireland, provided a source of inexpensive labor. Railroads became the first great national industry in the USA; by 1860 America had more track than any other nation. After the Civil War entrepreneurs like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie constructed industrial empires in oil and steel. Americans also developed innovations in retailing in the late nineteenth

century: chain stores, and mail-order houses. A nation that had been overwhelmingly agricultural in 1830 became hugely industrial by 1900.

All of this occurred under private auspices. The federal government encouraged economic development in various ways, for example by giving public lands to railroads as an incentive to lay track to connect the middle of the country with the West Coast, but the federal government did not directly conduct any industries, not even the railroads. The driving force behind industrialization was the vision of men like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and, later, Henry Ford, that immense profits could be reaped by catering to the ever expanding domestic market for inexpensive products. Fed by immigration (more cheap labor), the American population rose from 30 million in 1860 to 70 million by the end of the century. At the same time, the USA's low population density created incentives for capitalists to devise new forms of retail, such as mail-order houses (e.g., Sears-Roebuck). The American genius in business was to create vast corporations to produce and sell inexpensive commodities to the masses. In 1908, Henry Ford applied the principle of mass production to produce the Model T automobile. It sold for \$860. By 1916 Model T Fords could be purchased for \$360, and in that year his company manufactured nearly 750,000 autos. Ford illustrated the American tendency to bring commodities associated with the wealthy within the reach of the middle class, and also the American penchant, already evident in the criss-crossing of the nation with telegraph lines and railroads, to conquer distances.

Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford embodied the American ideal of the "self-made man." The same can be said of the foremost American inventor of the 1870-1930 period, Thomas A. Edison. These men seemed to be incarnations of the American Dream of opportunity, for none had much formal education, and none was born into wealth. Although Americans, including Ford, distrusted financiers, they admired industrialists and inventors, and they did not hold the wealth of the wealthy against them as long as it was put to use promoting development. Even before large-scale industrialization Americans tended to admire wealthy individuals as long as they created more wealth. Judges routinely sided with entrepreneurs who constructed factories or railroads, even if water-powered factories reduced the flow of river water to downstream farmers, and even if railroads damaged the property of landowners. In effect, courts and judges privileged the users of dynamic wealth against the holders of static wealth.

Although men like Rockefeller, Carnegie, Ford, and Edison were hailed as embodiments of individualism, they created vast enterprises: the Standard Oil Company; Carnegie Steel (later United States Steel); Ford Motors; and Edison Electric (which became part of General Electric.) Large-scale industrialization occurred in a nation with feeble traditions of centralized government. A few statistics suggest the contrast between the growth of Big

Business and the national government. In 1891 the Pennsylvania Railroad employed 110,000 people, nearly three times the total size of the armed forces of the United States in that year. In 1893 the receipts of the Pennsylvania Railroad were more than a quarter of those of the United States government, and the total debt of the federal government (\$999 million) was only slightly larger than the total capitalization of the Pennsylvania Railroad (\$842 million). Within a decade the establishment of the United States Steel Company would create the world's first corporation capitalized at more than one billion dollars.

The size and speed of industrialization aroused writers on economic topics in the late nineteenth century. Traditionally, the radical position in America had been that the activities of government itself created class divisions and disturbed the "natural" equality of an agricultural/small producer society. By distributing licenses, bounties, and acts of incorporation, governments favored some groups over others and thus upset equality. This Jeffersonian/Jacksonian strain of thought seemed incongruous to many thinkers in the late nineteenth century, for vast industrial empires appeared to threaten equality far more than the puny institutions of American government. In 1887 Congress established the first national regulatory commission, the Interstate Commerce Commission, appropriately to regulate the first national business, the railroads. The governmental regulation of Big Business in the "public interest" increasingly became the program of liberals.

The regulation of business continues to appeal to liberals, and conservatives no longer flatly oppose it. On balance, Americans have preferred regulation rather than the direct ownership of business by the government. Socialism made relatively few inroads in the late nineteenth century or afterwards. Historians on the political left continue to write sympathetic histories of American socialists, including Marxists, but they cannot escape the indifference of the electorate to socialism. Even during the Great Depression of the 1930s, communists and socialists were unable to mount a serious challenge to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, an essentially moderate program of reform that was intended to save capitalism from its vices rather than to extinguish it.

Various explanations help to account for the American indifference/hostility to socialism. I will mention two. The first relates to immigration. Industrialization coincided with vast immigration to the USA from central and eastern Europe: Italians, Poles, minorities from the Austrian Empire, and Russians. Life in the USA did not live up to expectations for all of these immigrants, but to most it seemed preferable to life in the societies which they had left. Many of the immigrants, especially the Italians and Poles, were Roman Catholics who equated socialism with godlessness. Further, the diverse sources of immigration ensured that the industrial proletariat, mainly recruited from immigrants and their children, would be deeply divided on ethnic and religious lines. When the Communist party of the United States was formed

(out of seceders from the Socialist Party of America) after the Bolshevik Revolution, it was divided into sundry language federations. This fact alone excluded it from the mainstream of American political life.

The second factor lies in the reality that the United States already had a mass party system before large-scale industrialization. As a result, the class antagonisms spurred by industrialization tended to be mediated within the existing party system. Since there was no proportional representation in the national political system (nor is there any now), third parties had little chance of success. The most notable third-party movement of the late nineteenth century, the People's (or "Populist") party sprang up in the 1890s not as a party of angry factory workers but as an outlet for agrarian discontent. In 1896 the Populist party was, for all practical purposes, absorbed by the Democratic party and its candidate, William Jennings Bryan. In that year Bryan went down to crashing defeat by a conservative Republican, William McKinley, whose pro-tariff stand appealed to many industrial workers.

The ability of the mainstream parties to absorb (and „Americanize“) immigrants was facilitated by the nature of citizenship in the USA. From the earliest days of the republic citizenship involved a rational decision to accept the principles of the republic, and not an ethnicity. To be sure, this ideal was not always realized in practice. In 1857 the United States Supreme Court, in its infamous Dred Scott decision, ruled that descendants of African slaves could never become citizens, and throughout the nineteenth century the aboriginal population (Indians/Native Americans) were not citizens. There have been numerous anti-immigrant "nativist" movements in American history, especially between 1840-1940. None of this should be surprising in a nation with such diverse populations, but in the larger scheme, what has distinguished the USA has been the ease with which foreigners could become full citizens. The American equivalent of the "guest workers" in several nations of Europe are citizens: Polish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and so on: the "hyphenates." A major reason for this receptivity to immigrants has been mass politics. In the nineteenth century the Democratic party proved especially receptive to immigrants, quickly turning them into voters. Even nativism had a partisan context: the party that rivaled the Democrats (first known as the Whig party and after 1855 as the Republican party) wanted to slow immigration (or restrict officeholding by Catholics) in order to weaken its political opposition. Similarly, after the Civil War the Republican party adopted a policy of enfranchising freed slaves in order to strengthen itself in the South. African Americans remained loyal to the Republican party, the party of Abraham Lincoln, until the 1930s, when they began to drift to the Democratic party. By the 1960s, white southerners, overwhelmingly Democrats for decades, responded by drifting toward the Republican party.

Waves of immigration also strengthened the role of local politics in the American political system. The major parties, especially the Democrats,

constructed local political “machines” to find jobs and housing for immigrants. All they wanted in return were immigrant votes. In effect, political parties acted as microcosmic welfare states, which helps to explain their ability to attract the loyalty of their constituents, who might well have been indifferent to the party’s stand on national issues.

Today, anti-immigrant sentiment is notably more muted in the United States than in France or Germany. The Republican party is somewhat more hostile to immigration than the Democratic party, but it has learned that a few careless words, especially about Hispanic immigrants, can cost it elections. The Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s accomplished the same result for African Americans. Most African Americans vote Democratic, but the Republicans are careful not to write off the black vote. Basically, there is no American *Le Pen*. It is difficult for most Americans to argue that one or another immigrant group “does not belong here,” for by that measure, one would have to ask, who does?

Ideals

Despite deep political divisions, Americans continue to be more overtly patriotic than citizens in European nations. While such exuberant patriotism (Americans go into a rage when another American burns the American flag in protest) embarrasses intellectuals, the United States is a nation held together by ideals. Public schools in the twentieth century have consciously aimed to “Americanize” immigrants, for example by teaching them to recite the Pledge of Allegiance (to the flag). The United States should be thought of as a nation where many find it necessary to reinvent the national identity every day. This obsession with national identity gave rise to a committee of the House of Representatives, now deceased, known as the Committee on UnAmerican Activities. “Americanism” naturally breeds its opposite: flag-burning and anti-Americanism. Because the United States has been as much a cause as a nation, its failure to live up to its ideals triggers anti-Americanism abroad, a phenomenon that has no equivalent with respect to any other nation.

If the United States stands for ideals, we may fairly ask, which ones? Before the late nineteenth century, the answer was the republic itself. Americans viewed themselves as engaged in an historic experiment to prove that republics could survive. The republican form of government was characterized by the freedom of its citizens to choose their representatives in fair elections. To a degree, this freedom required social equality. Every citizen was supposed to have a sufficiently large estate to ensure against his being bribed to give away his vote. There were considerable concentrations of wealth before 1860, but the predominantly agricultural and dispersed nature of the population made such concentrations less visible than they would

become after 1870, the Age of the Vanderbilts. An equally important meaning of equality was equality before the law. As long as the law did not privilege one citizen over another, then all would have equal opportunity to get ahead.

As concentrations of wealth and class differences became more visible in the late nineteenth century, Americans tended to talk more of equal opportunity rather than social equality (i.e., equality of outcomes). For the most part, Americans chose equal opportunity as their most desired goal, with social equality (the achievement of which would have required considerable restrictions on personal liberty) running well behind. Equal opportunity blended with the ideal of liberty. Liberty, in turn, had several connotations. It meant freedom to rise in the world regardless of one's birthright. While the distribution of wealth in the United States has been marked by significant inequality, Americans generally have not interpreted this as the mark of a defective social order. Rather, as long as they see opportunities for personal advancement, they can live with unequal outcomes. This is the case now, and it has been in much of their past.

What Americans cannot accept is the idea that one person, by virtue of his birth or any accidental characteristic should enjoy special advantages over another. The definition of an "accident" of birth has undergone significant change in the course of American history. In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, blacks and women were subject to all sorts of discrimination. Americans devised rather elaborate rationalizations for these prejudices: blacks allegedly were inferior by birth and women physically and temperamentally unsuited to competition for advancement. Obviously, opinion of these issues has changed drastically in the last thirty years. What is striking is how systematically Americans have gone about rooting out vestiges of discrimination. One of the most agitated issues in the United States today is that of Affirmative Action, which essentially means reverse discrimination. Municipalities, corporations, and universities set "goals" for the recruitment of blacks and women into prestigious positions. In some cases, for example in southern universities with a documented history of racial discrimination, the "goals" are legally mandated, and hence in reality are quotas. But no one dares use the word "quota," which is condemned as truly un-American. The fury that surrounds Affirmative Action programs results from the direct collision of methods—no discrimination on the basis of race/gender versus discrimination in favor of historical victims—to achieve the national ideal of equal opportunity. Not surprisingly, courts usually have the final word.

Religion

When Americans speak of liberty, they also embrace such ideals as freedom of speech, the press, and religion. Europeans are certainly familiar with the first two, but they should not underestimate the importance of the third. The United States is probably the only major industrial nation in which religion is on the rise. Historically, the churches have benefitted from several distinctive American features. First, many groups of immigrants came from nations in which they had encountered persecution for their religion. Examples of this include the early Puritans in the seventeenth century and the Irish Catholics in the nineteenth. To have been a Catholic in Ireland, for example, was to have been subject to any number of legal disabilities. Even more than ethnicity, religion defined the very nature of an Irish immigrant. Despite the pluralism and secularism of American society, the Irish remained intensely religious in the New World. A second factor has been the absence, for all practical purposes, of a religious establishment. With negligible exceptions, no religious denomination has enjoyed a legally privileged position since Independence. Put differently, the national government never allied itself with a privileged religious group to preserve a privileged social order. Laissez-faire and free competition were the norms in religion. Finally, the individualism and materialism that long have marked American society indirectly have stimulated religion. Americans have seen their churches as both communities and anchors in a fast-changing world. With their high rates of spatial mobility (Americans move all the time), they have also viewed churches as communities. Someone who moves into a new area will look for a church to meet like-minded people. Not infrequently, he or she will look for people who share his or her criticisms of the secularism and free-wheeling individualism of American society.

American Exceptionalism

Religion long has buttressed the American sense of national purpose, or mission. In 1629 John Winthrop told Puritans about to land in Massachusetts that they were to act as a „city upon a hill,“ and to set an example before the world. In the nineteenth century the American ideal of Manifest Destiny, the conviction that God had ordained that Americans spread across the North American continent, was soaked in religious imagery. Americans believed not only that their republic was the best government in the world, but that God had ordained its continued prosperity and extension. In the twentieth century Europeans have become familiar with the American conviction, now less permeated by religion, that the world would be better off if everyone adopted democracy and market economics.

American self-esteem developed steadily in the nineteenth century and it has persisted into the twentieth. As much as NATO allies have resented

American heavy-handedness, they have not urged the United States to leave Europe alone, mainly because they sense that America is more capable than Europe of strong, decisive action when it is needed. After a long history of isolation from European and Asian affairs, the United States has accepted its role as superpower since 1945. But the self-esteem and self-confidence („cocky“ Americans) was present long before 1945.

The reasons for this self-esteem are not far to seek. To a large extent, American history has been a success story of astonishing proportions. In the first three decades of the United States's national existence, many of its leaders doubted that it could survive. Republics did not have a history of lasting long, and the American republic covered a far larger area than any of its predecessors. There was a real fear that the republic would dissolve into small sectional pieces. This fear gradually faded as the republic turned back various conspiracies to break it up (one launched by a former Vice-President). In 1861 it faced its greatest challenge when the southern states seceded to form the Confederate States of America. This was the only real crisis faced by the United States since the darkest hours of the Revolution, and, as crises go, it has not been matched by any other American crisis. The newly inaugurated president, Abraham Lincoln, entered a capital city, Washington, which was surrounded by sympathizers with the Confederacy (Maryland and Virginia, the states bordering on Washington, were both slave states). Union troops had to fight their way through Baltimore in order to reach and defend the capital, and many northerners argued that it was not worth fighting a war to force the South back into the Union. Conquering the vast territory of the South seemed like a task beyond achievement.

The Civil War is the central event in American history. It was hugely destructive. More American soldiers were killed in it than in World War I and World War II combined. Yet the outcome of the war reinforced the American sense of success. The war destroyed an evil social institution, slavery; a backward looking aristocracy, the southern planters; and the enfeebling principle that the Union was just a league of states. The war's outcome also disclosed another American feature: its ability to make friends out of its enemies. The South was forced to renounce its heresy, secession, but only one southern official was executed after the war, and that was a Swiss-born commander of a southern prisoner-of-war camp, not a high public official. Robert E. Lee, the most famous of the southern generals, has become something of a national icon. Today, the South engages in more flag-waving patriotism than the North.

The Vietnam debacle aside, the American experience with war has generally been positive. The Revolution gave Americans their independence; the War of 1812 against Britain secured it; the war against Mexico (1846-1848) vastly augmented American territory; the Civil War ended slavery and solidified the Union; the Spanish-American War of 1898 gave the United

States a minor empire at a time when empires were all the rage. The United States entered World War I late, experienced relatively few casualties compared to the major belligerents, and ended on the winning side. World War II was more traumatic, but at least this time the United States fought and won against a genuinely evil regime, and it was the only nation to emerge from the war stronger than when it entered the war. The Korean War ended in a draw, but saved the independence of South Korea, now a major industrial power with increasingly durable democratic institutions. Americans are not especially militaristic—one can live in the United States a long time before seeing a military parade—but for reasons rooted in their history the Americans accept war as an instrument of foreign policy far more readily than Germans. Even the Americans' disastrous foray into Vietnam reflected an excess of self-confidence.

Culture

As the only surviving superpower, the United States now finds itself enjoying a degree of international dominance that it had previously experienced only during the immediate aftermath of World War II. Its population (in excess now of 260 million) puts it behind only China and India. Its seven trillion dollar gross domestic product makes it by far the leading economic power. Culturally, too, the United States enjoys a certain preeminence. It has no ministry of culture and no official means of spreading the English language, but English has come close to becoming the international language and American popular culture has achieved a world prominence that outsiders often find threatening. To Europeans, the "menace" of America long has been cultural as much as economic or political. Europeans may have exaggerated the American cultural challenge, which since the 1920s has been evident mainly in motion pictures and, more recently, in television serials. The United States has not been as important an influence as France, Italy, and, now, Britain, in fashion, and since the 1960s it has been less important than Britain in popular music. Yet European publics, perhaps publics everywhere, tend to connect films more than other cultural products to national cultures. Europeans might recognize a fashion in clothing as French or Italian without dwelling much on its national identity, but when they see American movies, they think of them as representing American culture in some significant way.

Interestingly, Americans often complain that American movies give a false impression of the United States, and many of the Rambo-style action movies that Europeans are quick to pronounce "typically" American go over poorly in the United States (but very well in South America). Still, the success of the American movie industry illustrates some genuinely American characteristics. The first of these is the willingness of American capitalists to

take risks. The fledgling British film industry in the 1920s virtually died because it could not obtain financing from the City of London. In contrast, American financiers were eager to plunge money into Hollywood. In the 1930s Hollywood was able to hire leading British actors. The most famous film in American history, *Gone with the Wind*, starred two Brits: Vivian Leigh and Leslie Howard, each playing an American (Hollywood also attracted German film directors and stars after 1933). In addition, Hollywood benefitted from American pluralism. With few exceptions, the owners of film studios in the 1920s-1930s were Jews, either immigrants or the children of immigrants. David O. Selznick, the producer of *Gone with the Wind*, was the son of a Ukranian Jewish immigrant. So, if we allow that the international image of the American South before the Civil War has been shaped indelibly by *Gone with the Wind*, we also have to acknowledge that the movie itself was an international enterprise that could be made in the United States because of the essential openness of the society. American pluralism also contributed to the action-oriented, rather unacademic nature of American film. For any American film to draw at the box office in the United States, it had to appeal to a wide, diverse audience, some of which did not speak English or spoke it poorly. Jokes in American movies were rarely subtle; most were, in the language of the trade, "sight gags." You look, you laugh. A joke that could play from New York to Los Angeles, it turned out, would also play from London to Warsaw.

Some nations see their past as punctuated by alternating success and catastrophe. Others view their history as essentially continuous with their present. Americans generally have taken the view that their history is progressive, an ascending curve of accomplishment, punctuated to be sure by occasional setbacks, and they expect the future to arrive on schedule.

For Further Reading

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