

“A Field Guide to the American Character”

So you want to know about the character of the American people? There’s little disputing the fact that this question has vexed both foreigners and Americans alike since a bold step was taken on July 4, 1776, as ink was set to parchment and a young English colony boldly declared itself independent and sovereign. Two hundred and twenty-eight years later, the American experiment of a modern democratic Republic is still going strong, the sole superpower remaining in a world that for the past several years has seemed more fragile and insecure than perhaps any time since the Second World War.

However, since the War on Terror began following the traumatic September 11, 2001 attacks within the U.S., pundits and everyday people have analyzed, debated, denounced and celebrated the “American character” as if such an elusive concept could be readily quantified and calibrated. Arguably, this is a fool’s errand, for to simplify a people into some pre-conceived mold, especially a people as ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse as those of us occupying a not insignificant portion of the North American continent, is not an easy task. As present day Americans, we have inherited a certain legacy and reputation, despite being a relatively young nation state when compared with some of our European and Asian counterparts, and this national myth at times defines us, motivates us, and perhaps bears more than a passing semblance to the objective Truth.

Americans can be exasperating. Let's not kid ourselves, this is a nation that suffers from a complex, on the one hand wildly optimistic and idealistic, on the other, inclined towards fits of isolationism and deep soul-searching in a land overrun by grandiosely oversized houses, vehicles and increasingly, people. In a decidedly post-modern framework, we're conflicted as hell and steeping in contradictory impulses, a prime candidate for years of therapy (judging from current popular culture, a favorite American pastime along with public confessions), yet there remains something noble in our psyche that is worthy of analysis and commentary.

First and foremost, Americans tend to be an optimistic, principled and idealistic bunch, and arguably, these normally positive attributes have gotten this country into a spell of trouble time and again. From the beginning, perhaps due to the hardy nature of the early pioneers (after all, those who weren't hardy tended not to last long) or the fact that this continent is filled with immigrants (some descended from ancestors that immigrated thousands of years ago, rather than in recent recorded history or living memory), we have a "can do" spirit that believes persistence and hard work ultimately pay off. Many immigrants came to these shores fleeing poverty, persecution or simply seeking a new start in life; many of these people had little material possessions to their name. They came seeking opportunity, and for many, such opportunity was realized either within their lifespan or by their progeny. While it is arguably true that the sometimes elusive "American Dream" may be harder to realize for many in our current economic and social environment, America still remains a land where self-improvement is possible. Despite the fact that there may be wide gulfs between the working poor and

the de-facto “American gentry” of the highest socio-economic brackets (families that have either created wealth on their own, inherited it through previous generations or brought enormous wealth from other nations), it is still possible for those who start with very little to amass wealth. Perhaps now more than ever before, racial and gender barriers that once existed are largely crumbled, and talent, or at least the ability to pander to whatever the popular culture deems worthy of financial reward, are the tickets to a gilded American lifestyle.

Americans tend to be impatient, and all too often, we want to view the world strictly in terms of black and white, rather than acknowledge the invariable complexities that will introduce those ever troubling shades of grey. We’re a nation in search of easy solutions, and when applying this logic to problems that have bedeviled the interactions between groups of people for hundreds, if not thousands of years (e.g. The Middle East), we tend to find ourselves in rather compromising positions. While it is possible to make the case that such blanket labels as Good and Evil can be applied to certain people and situations, one very well can’t base a consistent and viable foreign policy on such notions without demonstrating a willingness to “pay any price and bear any burden” to see it through to the end. We’re still working on that proposition.

Are we greedy? Do we consume a disproportionate share of the world’s resources? Sure, there’s truth to both statements. And certainly neither charge is something to be proud of. But that being said, when one examines the amount of foreign aid that the U.S. routinely awards each year, or its humanitarian efforts, it becomes

apparent that we tend to spread some of our largesse to others. Like a blackjack player who has been on an all night winning binge, we see the value in tipping the dealer and buying drinks for the other players, for fear that our streak will end or incur the wrath of some higher power. Of course there are geo-politics involved in such actions, and strategic considerations in the typically unwritten but implicitly understood riders to these acts of goodwill. But then again, any seasoned statesman understands that nations don't have friends, simply allies whose interests more often than not happen to align. The sobering reality is that we Americans typically don't want to believe this, and we are always puzzled when our proverbially outstretched hand gets bitten, even if we're giving rather than receiving or simply taking.

Perhaps we've been coddled and complacent too long. Aside from the Great Depression, for the most part Americans have enjoyed a high level of prosperity and security, at least until the recent past, and that's made us spoiled. Maybe even a little soft. We take it for granted that our elections will be fair and open; that riding on public transportation or gathering in public spaces shouldn't be akin to playing one's hand in the death and dismemberment lotto; that the air we breathe and the water we drink will be kept reasonably clear of poisons by benevolent government or self-regulating and responsible corporate entities. Maybe this is a selfish notion, and not one shared by the inhabitants of most other parts of the world. But that's what makes it so damn precious, and worth fighting for. Not just for ourselves, or our own future generations, but for the world at large. Because unlike the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Americans never have quite bought into the notion that life should be, "Nasty, brutish and short."

Another hallmark trait is that we revel in freedom, even at a time when many Americans have forgotten the sacrifices necessary to secure such a society. The past few years have been a wakeup call, a cold slap across the face reminding America that freedom comes at a price, all too often in blood, not to mention national treasure. And yet freedom is interpreted in different ways. For some, exercising the very freedoms enshrined in our Constitution is the noblest of acts and civic responsibilities such as voting and serving on jury duty are treated with a great seriousness of purpose. For others, the freedom to *not* vote or to find excuses to shirk inconvenient duties that don't entail financial reward are the highest of callings. In either case, what's amazing is that American society can support both points of view.

So for the critics out there, especially those in other lands, secure in their smug assumptions, go ahead, take your potshots at America. This is a diverse nation that defies easy characterization and cavalier dismissal, and while it's true that we have plenty of stereotypical self-centered, narcissistic "Ugly Americans" sucking air on this great continent, we also have some of the finest minds and noblest spirits that the human race has yet put forth. And you can bet that for all of our collective faults and shortcomings, when the chips are down and all appears lost, even in times when our own government fails to act out of ignorance, malfeasance or willful neglect, in the finest traditions of the U.S. Cavalry, no matter who else answers the call, there will be Americans among those saddling up and riding to the rescue.

Because at the end of the day, that is the very essence of the American Character.

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