

Life, Liberty and try pursuing a bit of tolerance, too.

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AS EXPERIMENTS go, the United States is a risky one: a nation of individuals held together not by blood, but by language, aspiration and an idea. That idea, expressed in the Declaration of Independence, is that “all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Fine words, better philosophy; and a hell of a creed to live up to. Lincoln himself asked whether “any nation so dedicated, so constructed, can long endure”; and Americans go on wondering.

In this election year, the symptoms of doubt are everywhere. Many are caused by a new nervousness, about the strength of American democracy itself. The Soviet Union provided both an enemy and a system with which Americans could make proud and unquestioning comparisons. That evil empire gone, America is starting to recognize the flaws in its own system: among them endemic violence, racial inequality and political indifference. As new democracies look to America, cheerfully parroting its values, Americans no longer feel sure they project them with the confidence they once did.

Values cannot often be credibly attributed to nations, nor peoples imagined to act in reliable concert with them. But they can come to obsess nations, and this is what has happened in the United States. Out of the original founding idea, Americans periodically pluck one value, ignoring others, to cement the nation in a new age. Lincoln plucked equality, the progressives of the late 19th century plucked opportunity; the Supreme Court in the 1960s plucked individual rights. These are taken, in their time, as the building-blocks of civil society. They are not immediately achieved, but the promise of them keeps America's dangerous volatility in check.

“Family values”, the unlikely war-cry of the present Republican campaign, would seem to be in a different category. This is surely sentiment, and not particularly American sentiment at that: it is not just Americans, nor yet all Americans, who believe in motherhood and apple pie. Most voters these days, the polls show, are more worried about the economy, and hence about whether America is still the land of equality, liberty, opportunity and the “dream”. Yet the traditional version of the dream includes the stable family, the hard-working, fortune-making father and the fecund mother. Even abstract ideals come to rest, as George Bush puts it, round the kitchen table.



From melting pot to salad bowl

Worries about values are not new. In the 1890s a wave of nervousness seemed to descend on the country, so that all looked gloomy, progress seemed doubtful, and the centre surely could not hold. Those feelings, however, were largely caused by fears that the crowds of new immigrants pushing into the cities would never be assimilated as Americans. For, throughout its history, America's sense of itself as an idea-based nation has coexisted with a much more humdrum view that America is basically a white, “Anglo-Saxon” nation wherein, as elsewhere, the ruling tribe [rules].

Worries about “values” begin typically when the ruling majority finds itself in decline and on the defensive.

It is on the defensive now. Immigration is at the highest levels since the 1890s. Between 1965 and 1990, 14m newcomers arrived of whom 85% were non European, mostly Hispanics and Asians. Each year 2m-3m illegal immigrants arrive from Mexico. By 2000 barely half of the people entering the workforce will be native-born and of European stock. The new immigrants are not only more visible than ever before, because of the colour of their skin, they are also encouraged, as never before, to cling on to what they have, to keep

their language and customs, to be different

The favoured phrase now is not “melting pot” (the invention of Israel Zangwill, Jewish Briton), but “salad bowl”, a tag with a longer ancestry. The motto on the president’s seal, “E pluribus unum” comes from a recipe for salad in an early poem by Virgil: “Garlic, parsley, rue and onions, seasoned with cheese, salt, coriander and vinegar, and finally sprinkled with oil”. In a salad, the ingredients do not merge; the union is simply the sum of its parts.

Unamalgamated parts are bothering to Americans. The nation did not amalgamate its black citizens, keeping them at a distance both socially and legally, until 1965. As a result, it is now faced with two kinds of black separatism. The first, academic and rarefied, is a distaste for “Eurocentrism” in schools and universities. At the latest count, the nation’s universities offered 400 courses, many faculties even, in black studies; each faculty comprising, as one conservative black writer has put in, a little sovereign state in which different values obtain from those of the white world.

The second kind of separatism, horrible and visible to all, is the drug-ridden and crime-infested black counter-culture of the inner cities. Although blacks are only 12 % of the population, they account for almost half the inmates of America’s prisons. The “values” that obtain in the ghetto — dominance, violence and each-man-for-himself — have a way of coming back to haunt America. When they are set beside the crass and violent video images that make up much America’s cultural exports, from westerns to rap, it is no wonder that foreigners raise an eyebrow at all the liberty-and-equality talk.

Etho-consciousness has this to be said for it: not before time, it has confronted the idea that there is only one, white, experience of America. It has fed through into a kind of general sensitivity (so that people do not say the so-called “n-word”, and so that school textbooks now give as much weight to black experiences of history as to white). But it has also underlined a strong disruptive tendency in America: the elevation of group and race rights over the interests of either the individual or the whole. What is presumed to be equality has turned into balkanisation, one camp against another; what is presumed to be an expression of the best American values, such as individual liberty, may get in the way of trying to impose other values, such as responsibility, in the streets of the inner city.

To the splits created by ethnicity (which have always been present to some degree, in American society) have been added other, more foreign sensibilities. Americans are now much readier to talk of class, to know which class they are in (through 80% would opt for the all-embracing “middle”) and to notice, and remark on, class differences. In some cases, as in “underclass”, the word is virtually a synonym for race. In others such as “the merit class”, it is used to explain the dominance of new elites that are supposed to have taken over from the old Protestant establishment, vaunting their computer skills rather than their money.

The seeds of this new class-consciousness seem to have been sown partly by a sluggish economy which has been growing at a rate of 2% or less since 1989, and partly by a startling discrepancy in the 1980s between the real hourly wages of the college educated, which rose by 2% over the decade, and those of people who went no further than high school, which fell by almost 10%. These discrepancies, together with an unemployment rate of nearly 8%, reflect a once-in-a-century adjustment, the departure of low-skilled jobs to third-world countries; and although the numbers of those defined as poor are actually falling (by 14 % between 1984 and 1989), there is a growing sense of inequity and of opportunities closed off.

America’s most evident value, to many of its citizens, is the freedom specifically to make money. Effort is individual and it is according to their efforts, by and large, that individuals are rewarded. The sense of group rights has undermined even this most basic belief; for the political favour that such groups demand is also economic, from job quotas to higher pensions to industrial protection. If in the future hard work in the anterooms of Capitol Hill is to carry more weight than hard work on the factory floor, one of America’s most vital values will have perished.

The political enthusiasm evident in group lobbying is, however, untypical. In general, citizen democracy, in which the founding fathers placed their hopes, has lost much of its attraction. Instead, Americans believe group entitlements to this or that are more likely to be gained through the courts. About half the electorate declines to vote, even in presidential elections, and party membership is falling. As incumbents stay put in the legislature, kept in place by sheer inertia, the citizenry is out on the streets where the clamour for rights

grows ever louder, less tolerant and more particular.

America has common symbols that are meant to foster unity: the flag, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Statue of Liberty, the pledge of allegiance. All are invoked in the “rights” arguments, usually on both sides, since liberals and conservatives alike see themselves as more truly American than the other lot. Even the Almighty gets dragged in. Around 90% of all Americans profess to believe in God, and a sunny confidence in divine favour fires people and even politicians. Yet to invoke God in public places is still deemed to threaten an “establishment” of religion (or, more likely, to promote the interest of one group, theists, over the rest). Such invocations, harmless as they seem to most Americans, keep many a lawyer in work.

Liberty or anarchy?

What values then are shared? Listen to the politicians and you could think all decent Americans still believe in marriage, family, hard work, community, parental authority, final piety and unlocked doors; in fact, many believe that a “stable relationship” is as good as (and more free and equal than) a marriage. According to the Census Bureau, barely a quarter of America’s households now contain that Rockwellian (and Republican) ideal, a married couple with a child or children under the age of 18.

Moreover, Americans increasingly feel that the word “family” should include the 60% of black households headed by women struggling to raise their children on their own. They believe too that the fact that 60% of women with children under six are in the workforce is less a threat to “family values” than a natural expression of another founding American principle, “I’ll do as I please”.

“I’ll do as I please” is not quite the same as the pursuit of happiness. It is a practical value, not an abstract ideal. It goes with two others cited recently by a journalist in the Washington Post: “I’m as good as you are”, and “You can’t do that to me”, leading to the observation that the nation’s chief unifying idea was the chance for each individual to reinvent himself.

These ideas are prosaically borne out in the movement of households. Americans are always ready to up sticks and seek progress, or a fortune, preferably both, in an-other place. In search of the dream, each man looks out for himself.

This restlessness lies behind both the plight of some blacks and the success of others. Those who cannot move, in city or country are stranded; they become the intractable poor. Those who leave the ghettos in search of the dream (the house in the suburbs, the car, the VCR, college for the children) tend to prosper — two-thirds of blacks now qualify as middle-class, a quarter of black adults have attended college, 80% have completed high school. Yet even their share of the once-white dream does not lead them to amalgamate with the nation as a whole. Their college is often by preference, black; their suburb is black; and what they are looking for, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, a pioneer of African-American studies, is the company of other African-Americans who care about “the race”. In other words, the dream is the ghetto, no matter how green.

Anyone can play at that game. Increasingly, the rich and white are fleeing, not merely to the suburbs but to enclaves within the suburbs, where there may be security guards at the gate, rules against dogs, rules against children, and unearthly quiet. At the latest count, one-eighth of the population lived this way, and 150,000 home-owners associations were protecting their right to do so. In such places, self-interest is paramount, to the extent that people pay private taxes to avoid crime and maintain their comforts, and resent paying anything for the needs of the wider area in which they are set. Yet why should anyone condemn them? The freedom to live as one likes is quintessentially American; helping one’s neighbour needs more inculcation. In any case, he ought first to try to help himself.

The result of these trends is that although America shows a surface homogenisation, so that far-flung regions now increasingly look, sound, shop and vote alike, separatism seems to move even faster. Modern communications, which might be supposed to blend the country together, actually strengthen divisions. Televised politics, with its nine-second sound bites turns each issue into a galvanising slogan. Soap operas bring fantasies of material wealth into every living room but remind the poor how far they are from sharing it. Black rap music has become the favourite listening of middle class white teenagers; because it lets them enjoy vicariously a word they will never enter and need never know.

The glue of tolerance

America still possesses that set of abstract values, as opposed to practical ones, which are meant to allow its diversity to take coherent shape as a nation. But do they still hold? Certainly liberty, equality and democracy are still invoked ad nauseam by politicians seeking moral stature. These values are what Americans have in mind, however vaguely, when, by huge majorities, they tell pollsters that they are proud of their country. But they are not well understood.

The essential underlying principle, although the word is nowhere found in the founding documents, is tolerance. Tolerance of race, of religion; of neighbour, and of the other man's point of view. Modern America shows all too acutely the dangers that arise when a nation of many peoples, beliefs, races and traditions keeps to the rallying cries of liberty, equality and happiness, but neglects the glue of mutual regard, attention and respect.

Some in America, now as in the 1890s, fear that increasing immigration will make matters worse. It need not. Ben Wattenberg, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, has called the United States "the first universal nation". From the offspring of many nations, it shaped—in the 19th century rather than in 1776—a national identity. Today's Americans need to learn afresh the tolerance that helped to achieve that.

How are they to be taught? America has a great longing for statesmen who can persuasively invoke the old ideals; but even Ronald Reagan, whose power of invocation was next to none, was content to preside over a nation in the grip of violent crime, racial distrust and fiscal extravagance. Brief as it was, the appearance on the political scene of Ross Perot suggested, however, that America's bipolar political system might eventually be shaken up into the sort of constructive consensus that the founders hoped for, though it would take a practised politician of immense appeal to do it. Likewise, the latest ruling by the Supreme Court on the contentious issue of abortion suggests that the court may be struggling, not towards an imposed tolerance, but to a careful recognition and amalgamation of the merits of both side's arguments.

Tolerance is hard to teach; but a start could be made in the schools. A core curriculum for elementary schools, developed by E. J. Hirsch and his disciples in Boston, requires teachers to devote half their time to the basics of American history, world history, geography and literature. It has been tried in inner-city schools and in all-white suburbs, and although this is not a civics lesson in the old style, a pledge of allegiance to the flag, the result is a set of children, differing in colour, creed and class, who understand why their country was founded, where it stands in the world and the chief influences that shaped it. As adults, these children may also better understand each other.

With a better understanding of the place of each in the whole, and of mutual civility and obligation, the present emphasis on "rights" might begin to fade away. There is evidence already that Americans are beginning to object to the hijacking of the media and political debate by those who are loudest and most bigoted; that the great, quiet middle, those people who would rather compromise and get along and try unobtrusively to improve themselves, would like to be heard. They could be heard if they voted. They might vote more readily if registration were easier and suburban shopping malls became centres of civic as well as commercial life. And by making a habit of voting they might lose a little of their excessive regard for litigation, which has done, much to divide the nation into intolerant camps.

There remains an economic element. Nothing will persuade Americans, moving ever on to fresh fields, to go back and pick up the pieces of projects that have failed. But those who are stranded behind may be helped in other ways. While America's public finances sink into ever deeper debt, it can hardly claim to embody the values of progress and self-reliance. Public solvency and the soundly based economic growth that springs from it would be powerful answers to the nagging sense of inequality and the intolerance in American life. Much of the present anxiety about values may sink to rest as the economy rises.