

# **The American Identity**

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“America was something new. It was a global and timeless nation-more like an electromagnetic field that attracted billions of highly charged particle in a pattern that constantly shifted with the currents of energy than it was like an enduring monolithic traditional structure.” (William H. Goetzmann, 2009:377)

American lives continue to be shaped by the American identity. Our identity as Americans gives us our ideals, our expectations, our values, and our preferred way of conduct. In this essay, as a member of the younger generation of Americans who will help shape its future, I will now explain what I believe to be the American identity, and what I perceive around me as the reality of the current American experience.

I have learned several themes of the American identity: 1) optimism, 2) hard work is rewarded with prosperity, 3) all individuals are equal before the law and all have equal opportunities and equal access to education; and this creed is what binds all Americans together, 4) there are always new frontiers to conquer and it is the responsibility of Americans to forge the path, 5) self reliance, 6) a God-given American mission to the world, though that mission may be unappreciated.

#### 1. Optimism.

The distinguished American historian Henry Steele Commager said, “Nothing in all history had ever succeeded like America. And every American knew it. Nowhere else on the globe had nature been at once so rich and so generous, and her riches were available to all who had the enterprise to take them and the good fortune to be white. As nature and experience justified optimism, the American was incurably optimistic. Collectively, he had never known defeat, grinding poverty, or oppression, and he thought these misfortunes peculiar to the Old World. Progress was not, to him, a philosophical idea but a commonplace of experience: he saw it daily in the transformation of wilderness into farm land, in the growth of villages into cities, in the steady rise of community and national to wealth and power. . . He planned ambitiously and was used to seeing even his most visionary plans surpassed; he came at last to believe that nothing was beyond his power and to be impatient with any success that was less than triumph.” (Commager, 1950: 5.)

I agree with Commager’s opinion about the American identity; I have always been taught that, “the sun will come out tomorrow.” When I read the *Real George Washington*, a biography of Washington, it struck me that no matter what hardships he was called to endure during the Revolution, he had faith that the Continental Army could, and would triumph.

Immigrants coming to this country were told that America was like “a city of gold,” and again, no matter the hardships, they would eventually find their personal El Dorado.

In *The Jungle*, it talks about a hard working immigrant, Jurgis, coming to America who meets a more cynical American, Jack Duane:

“The young fellow [Jack Duane] had an amused contempt for Jurgis, as a sort of working mule; he, too, had felt the world's injustice, but instead of bearing it patiently, he had struck back, and struck hard. He was striking all the time—there was war between him and society. He was a genial freebooter, living off the enemy, without fear or shame. He was not always victorious, but then defeat did not mean annihilation, and need not break his spirit.” (Sinclair 2004: 17) Notice that whether one was a naïve immigrant or a cynical citizen, optimism was still uppermost in both of their minds.

But I must admit that as I gaze around me in 2011, after three years of spectacular economic recession, I think that sense of optimism among Americans is fading. Unemployment remains at about 9% of the population, and that estimate doesn't include the number of Americans who have given up looking for work. (Trading Economics 2010) The retirement accounts of many Americans were wiped out during the Recession, as was the value of their homes. As a commentator for the New York Times put it, “What's good for Wall Street isn't necessarily good for Main Street.” (Herbert, 2010) While Wall Street prospers, American jobs have been cut; American pay has been cut, and Americans are no longer optimistic. They are not sure that their children will enjoy the same lifestyle that they themselves recently had.

Is optimism still part of the American identity? As a young person, I am not certain.

## 2. Hard Work Leads to Prosperity.

The American Dream is predicated on the fact that it doesn't matter who you are, what color you are, what sex you are, etc.: if you work hard, your prosperity will grow. Again, Commager is our guide:

“The American had always met hardship with fortitude, partly because he was so sure that fortitude, together with industry, shrewdness, and a little luck, was bound to be rewarded in the end. He preached the gospel of hard work, and regarded shiftlessness as a vice more pernicious than immorality. He liked solid evidence of wealth but distrusted ostentation; women whose position and wealth anywhere else would have justified servants did their own housework.” (Commager, 1950:6.)

If you get into any taxicab in New York City, you will find Pakistanis, Kazakhs, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, and many, many others, who are willing to work hard for a share of the American Dream. They themselves may not reach the middle class, but they believe in their hearts that their children will.

Or will they? Robert Reich informs us that 1% of the American population owns 23% of America's wealth; in 1980, the figure was 9%. (Reich 2010) This level of economic inequality (which puts America after the Ivory Coast and Cameroon according to the CIA World Factbook,) does not support the stability of our nation. America could tolerate this level of inequality when the middle class actually had living wage jobs and a real stake in the system. Now that a good part of the middle class has fallen into the basement, Americans are asking, what is an economy for, if not to put a roof over the heads of their children and food on their plates?

What I hear now all around me is, “Will it even be possible for my kids to go to college now? Will I ever have a job that will permit me not to have to work a second job in order to keep my family fed? How do I pay for the medicine my child needs? Will my kids ever be able to get a job that will enable them to get married and have children?”

As James Oliver Robertson suggests, “There is fear [among Americans] that the wealth and productivity of America may decline or cease to exist. There is great ambivalence among Americans, increasingly conscious and obvious, concerning government of all kinds, the Presidency, the military and defense, and the availability and consumption of American resources” (Robertson, 1980: 7). Being in the young generation I now ask my country, is the American Dream still real, or is it now only a dream?

### 3. Equality of Individuals Before the Law and Equal Opportunities.

Robertson states,

“The Revolution not only made a nation, it individualized Americans . . . The American individual was and is, by definition, free and independent. An American pursues his/her own happiness, develops his/her own abilities, makes his/her own fortune, and established his/her own family. The generations of Americans who grew up after the Revolution were and are impatient with the remnant or existence of dependence . . .” (Robertson, 1980:147).

In my opinion, this is one of the most attractive parts of American mythology, that there is no feudal system, and there are no classes, high or low. There is fairness. People are given opportunity based on merit, not birth. These are all the hallmarks of the best and fairest of human societies.

But then I look around me and see that things are not necessarily as I have been taught. The highest CEOs on Wall Street make several hundred times what their employees make; for example, the head of Goldman Sachs (which company helped to catalyze the Recession by their greedy financial policies), makes almost \$69 million per year. (Martinuzzi 2006)

How far have we progressed since the time when John Steinbeck wrote *Grapes of Wrath?* (a book about the Depression). In it, a car salesman explains:

"Fella in business got to lie an' cheat, but he calls it somepin else. You go steal that tire an' you're a thief, but he tried to steal your four dollars for a busted tire. They call that sound business." (Steinbeck, 12)

The very wealthiest have seen their personal fortunes rise during the recession, while the personal fortunes of the rest of Americans have fallen dramatically. Not only that, but this misconduct of Wall Street executives during the Recession did not result in their companies going bankrupt. Instead all the financial suffering they should have gotten was taken out on the US taxpayer. America was to provide the bailout simply because these companies were “too big to fail.” But, apparently, ordinary Americans were “too small to be bailed out.” And not one of these top CEOs has been brought before the bar of justice: for all the havoc they wrought in our economy due to outright fraudulent business practices, not one of them will ever see the inside of a prison.

New York Times columnist Bob Herbert notes,

“Over the last generation,” the authors write, “more and more of the rewards of growth have gone to the rich and superrich. The rest of America, from the poor through the upper middle class, has fallen further and further behind.”

(Herbert, 2010)

And then I learn that unless my family is extremely wealthy, there is no way that I will ever be president of the United States. The current estimate is that one needs at least \$20 million personally to even attempt a run for the presidency of the United States. (Herbert 2010) Indeed, you pretty much have to be a millionaire to even run for congressman in the United States.

I also learned that who you are still matters in what you are worth to society. Women still earn only 77 cents to every dollar earned by a man. Even though women are gaining even more college degrees than men, only 17% of our national legislature consists of women. The percentage of business CEOs that are women is far less than that, about 6%. The work that mothers put into their homes and children is not even counted by our Social Security system as work, leaving mothers as the poorest subgroup of the American population. There isn't even any paid maternity leave for mothers in America, putting us in a very small category of nations that includes Papua New Guinea and Somalia. (Wiesul 2011)

And education? American identity emphasizes the importance of education for breaking through barriers of race and privilege. As Frederick Douglass puts it:

“These dear souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race.” (Douglass, 2004, 10)

Americans used to pride themselves in having the best schools and education in the world. However this is no longer the case. In fact, America stands as #43 in terms of quality education among countries, with much of Europe and Asia way ahead of America. (CIA, n.d) The quality of American education depends on the school district. But it seems like the schools that are failing are located primarily in poorer geographic regions in the USA. According to what I have been taught, America is supposed to provide the best education for the most vulnerable students in the country. But that is definitely *not* the reality.

#### 4. Americans and their New Frontiers.

“[Americans'] destiny was manifest: they were driven westward by the hand of God, and they carried with them all that was best of civilization, education, improvement, republican government, and democratic ideals. They filled a vast and 'empty' continent with the virtues and institutions of the freest people on earth.” (Robertson, 1980: 72).

We Americans think of ourselves as pioneers. Whether we speak of the Lewis and Clark expedition, or whether we speak of landing on the moon, Americans expect that their citizens will be the head of any new frontier. These days, the new frontier is technology, including computer technology, weapons, energy, etc.

However, in keeping with the discussion of the previous section, American education may wind up being America's Achilles heel as mentioned by Condoleeza Rice in a recent speech she gave at Brigham Young University. For example, Sykes notes, "By the 1990s, American students lagged pathetically behind much of the rest of the world in academic achievement—but consistently ranked on top when asked to rate their own performance." (Sykes, 1992:115).

China has already topped the US when it comes to solar energy technology. China has also announced that it intends to be the first nation to send a man to Mars—the United States has already announced it will not seek to send a man to Mars at all for another 20 years. (Daily Mail Reporter 2010)

What has happened to America? Commager notes, "But after the pioneer and the builder . . . came the exploiters and the spoilers." (Commager, 1950: 153.) He goes on to say,

"Dazzled by the concept of infinity, prodigal of the resources of nature and of his own resources, greedy and reckless, he did more damage in a century than nature could repair in a thousand years. From Maine to Oregon he left forests in ruins; instead of cultivating, he mined the soil; he killed off bison and pigeon, polluted streams, wasted coal, oil, and gas. His habits of waste he transmitted to a generation that could no longer afford them . . ." (Commager, 1950:18).

Greed and a tolerance for mediocrity seemed to have overridden that part of the American dream that says that to be the best, one must work hard and be motivated by something other than simple personal greed. It reminded me of Mark Twain's description of "the King" in the book *Huck Finn*: "That old fool had made a trade and got forty dollars, and when we found him in the doggerly the loafers had matched half-dollars with him and got every cent but what he'd spent for whisky;" (Twain, 2008: 31)

## 5. Self-Reliance.

Americans, as we have seen, pride themselves on being self-reliant. Robertson observes,

"The image of the cowboy riding alone is an image in American heroic mythology. It is available to Americans: it comes to their minds easily, in many variations; it is rich in associated images and ideals; it grows from thousands of tellings and retellings of cowboy stories which are part of life in America. Almost intuitively, Americans know it explains American loneliness, independence, conviction, and the need for approval, while at the same time it reconciles some of the contradictions among those characteristics." (Robertson, 1980:6)

The rugged individual makes his own way. He provides for himself and doesn't expect anyone to get involved with him. In relation, as noted earlier, American women (except in the South) typically did their own housework, even though they could afford to hire help. Americans didn't go looking for help.

But all of that has changed. After the Great Depression of 1929, it remained changed for good. During the Great Depression, it was clear that economic markets couldn't put America back to work by themselves. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt used government policy and government money to help individuals get back on their feet, Americans began to realize that sometimes self-reliance was not enough. And with the Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson, and our nation's "War on Poverty," there began to be a feeling that government aid was necessary when situations were dire.

Has this undermined the traditional American identity of self-reliance? I believe it has. Charles Sykes suggests,

"[P]erhaps the most extraordinary phenomenon of our time has been the eagerness with which more and more groups and individuals—members of the white middle class, auto company executives and pampered academics included—have defined themselves as victims of one sort or another. This rush to declare oneself a victim . . . suggests a more fundamental transformation of American cultural values and notions of character and personal responsibility." (Sykes, 1992: i)

What Sykes is saying is that Americans no longer take as much responsibility for their personal circumstances as they once did. This may be a natural reaction to the increasing levels of income inequality in our society and the creeping realization that justice may be bought by the rich, as I have mentioned in a previous section. If the game is rigged, how can you expect a person to feel responsible for the outcome?

Even if this movement is justified by inequality, it is harmful in its effects. For one thing, our society became much more touchy about the law:

"[There is] a new attitude toward litigation. Where lawsuits had traditionally been viewed as an avoidable but perhaps necessary evil, law schools and courts now embraced a more benign view of the lawsuit as an acceptable and even desirable weapon in the protection and extension of basic rights. But the rise of the litigator in American society also reflected a larger social phenomenon. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people had more or less accepted the vagaries of fate. Sudden reverses could ruin farmers or businessmen; death, disease, and accident were familiar presences. Faith cushioned many of the shocks, but it could do nothing to eliminate them. But with the decline of religion and the rise of technology and science, society began to lose its belief in both the inevitability of suffering and the need for stoicism in the face of adversity . . . Over time, the public's expectation of what government could accomplish blended with its expectations about life in general. 'Slowly people have come to expect more out of government, out of law, out of life,' . . . And if they didn't get it, there were always lawyers and the courts." (Sykes, 1992: 125)

Even when courts are invoked, it is becoming much more difficult to suggest a person has committed wrongdoing. One of the best illustrations of this was when

San Francisco Supervisor Dan White invoked the “Twinkie” defense to explain why he was not guilty in his murder of Harvey Milk. Other murderers have been given lesser sentences due to claims of fetal alcohol syndrome, or abuse in childhood. Americans seem to increasingly believe that wrongdoing is not the product of a bad choice, but rather a bad circumstance that was not the perpetrator’s fault.

Polls have showed that almost all college students cheat. (Caveon 2008) Why? Because they expect their classmates will cheat, and do not wish to be disadvantaged by that fact. This decline of personal responsibility also has another unintended consequence: the breakdown of civil dialogue within our nation:

“A community of interdependent citizens has been displaced by a society of resentful, competing, and self-interested individuals who have dressed their private annoyances in the garb of victimism. . . . [this] accounts also for the increasingly shrill and carping tone of social debate—and for the distrust and unease in our day-to-day relations. At times it seems that we can no longer talk to one another. Or rather, we can talk—and shout, demand, and vilify—but we cannot reason. We lack agreed-upon standards to which we can refer our disputes. In the absence of shared notions of justice or equity, many of the issues we confront appear increasingly to be unresolvable.” (Sykes, 1992: 15)

It’s hard when living in a society, where millions listen to Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Rachel Maddow, Keith Olbermann, and the like, not to feel that there is something to Sykes’ analysis. When we do not take responsibility for ourselves as well as our actions, we let others tell us whom to hate and blame for that fact.

## 6. America’s Mission to the World.

From the days of the Pilgrims, America has been seen as a “shining city upon a hill,” a beacon of light to all other nations lingering in darkness. Commager notes, “The moral superiority of his country was axiomatic to the American. The assumption of superiority was accompanied by a sense of destiny and mission. Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century every American knew it was westward the course of empire took its way.” “Jefferson called his country the world’s best hope, and Lincoln, the last best hope of earth.” “Successive generations were equally eager to spread the American idea over the globe and exasperated that foreign ideas should ever intrude themselves into America, and the legal term, alien, carried almost invariably a connotation of repugnancy.” (Commager, 1950: 11).

The Manifest Destiny leading Americans westward eventually became our Global Destiny to spread democracy to the world. Robertson notes,

“Most Americans agree that the United States is among the most powerful nations on earth. They would also agree that that power ought to be “good for something.” They believe America has a mission and that is destiny is not simply to be rich and powerful and big, but to be so for some God-given purpose. Few believe that America arrived at its present state of wealth and power by accident . . . most Americans believe America can do *something*



about the state of the world: America has a responsibility. . . America, the crusader, was the champion of the people, guardian of the fundamental rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, defender of the free world and of human rights." (Robertson, 1980: 25, 26).

This is a noble, to be sure. But our legacy of spreading democracy to the world is not necessarily a shining legacy. The "neo-cons" of the George W. Bush administration brought war in Iraq, even when Iraq was not involved in the events of 9-11. This war has been costly in terms of American blood and treasure. Even the Obama Administration's recent involvement in bombing Libya has Americans wondering whether we have overstepped our bounds. And there are other places we could discuss, such as Vietnam, Nicaragua, Somalia, Haiti, and others, where the US's actions produced outcomes that differed from our intentions.

This reminds me of Steven Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*:

"The men dropped here and there like bundles. The captain of the youth's company had been killed in an early part of the action. His body lay stretched out in the position of a tired man resting, but upon his face there was an astonished and sorrowful look, as if he thought some friend had done him an ill turn." (Crane 5) It seems to me that some of my generation are also astonished and sorrowful concerning what foreign wars have brought us.

My generation has begun to wonder whether democracy is something that can really be shared, or whether it must be self-produced. We wonder whether a nation of 300 million was meant to be a policeman to a world of 7 billion. We wonder whether our ideals must be spread by force of arms. America's mission to the world seems a lot less self-evident, and a lot less appealing, in 2011 than it has in years gone by.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, as a young person in America, I feel torn. The American Identity I have been taught and have observed from my upbringing is a very attractive identity. But as I look around me, and as I contemplate my life ahead of me as an American, I feel discouraged. In some cases, parts of that identity are clearly no longer true. In other cases, parts of that identity do not seem to be as attractive in reality as they are in the vision.

I do worry about my country and its future. Even though I know I will never be president of the United States (I wasn't born a multi-millionaire), if I had a voice in my society, I would try and resurrect what is good about America, and disintegrate those parts of the American identity that don't seem to be working well anymore.

As I look at the six parts of the American identity that I have discussed in my paper, I think the main problem is #3. Americans really aren't equal before the law anymore; we really don't have equality of opportunity as we might have had in the past. This, in turn, undermines the American dream that hard work will pay off, leading to a diminishment of our desire for self-reliance and a lessening of our optimism. It also leads us to embrace mediocrity. If I could get rid of anything in America's true Identity, it would be America's inequality. I would create laws that

re-established accountability, fairness, and equity among the American people. I would ensure that America did not develop the type of class system that so dragged down the countries from which our ancestors came.

I have no idea whether my voice will make a difference. But I will raise my voice insofar as I am able, because the American Identity can still, in large part, guide our society to a brighter future; a future for my children.