

AMERICAN PROMISE AND WORLD DEMANDS

Our Universal Vision Must Be Diversely Applied

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The question "What does America stand for?" ultimately asks "What is American Civilization?" Americans have usually replied with a confidence and optimism that did not wholly mask uneasiness. In the American Republic's early days its citizens felt an urgent necessity to identify their new nation in the international community. A later history of uprooting and rapid change kept the sense of newness and the question of identity alive and quick.

Today, this almost perennial question is asked more demandingly and, oddly enough, Americans have raised it for others to answer. This anxiety and doubt arise from the recent experiences of the United States in international affairs. We see that a large part of the world is in ferment, fusing in nationalist movements aspirations for self-government and for the fruits and tools of Western industrialism and science. We know that we have been an important cause and model of this global restlessness. As a result we have been concerned with the means and ways of helping other nations with our spiritual and material resources.

Anxiety and doubt are sometimes compounded when we recognize that we are engaged in a world struggle with the Soviet Union, a regime which offers a simple explanation of history, a philosophy, and a program and promises expediently adapted to the demands of the people of the world.

Those who in response to this challenge call for or propound an all-embracing "American ideology for our side" are untrue to our greatest traditions as well as to the pluralism of contemporary America. Our inability to blueprint humanity's future does not stem primarily from our differences but from our respect for the dignity of man and his political communities. Human dignity and freedom are inseparable, and in affirming them we directly meet their difficult consequences. These are that we cannot manufacture a simple global faith to rival Communism and that we must soberly remind the restless people of the world that ultimately each nation makes itself to its own flourishing or undoing.

This may be lukewarm or even cold comfort to the ardent nationalism which mingles beyond all

capacity for distinction demands for independence with desires to compress decades and centuries of economic change into a single generation. But we are not limited to sober words of caution. The American outlook is quick, indeed over-quick, to favor independence movements and envisages a great body of independent nations, each largely responsible for its own affairs. Within this great republic of the world America is prepared for a generous sharing of experience and skills.

What, then, is American civilization? What are its unique elements, its general elements and its points of universal significance?

American civilization has developed from the responses of European colonists and immigrants to the unique opportunities of a sparsely settled continent. The mainly English founders of our first settlements came from a Europe which had experienced the Renaissance, an important source of our optimistic humanism, and the Reformation, the source of the pervasive Protestantism of our society, its secular dynamism, and its religious diversity. From the foundation of our country there was pluralism rather than unity and from the beginning, especially in New England, many of the settlers came from English and European religious minorities. But when the American colonies and Britain quarreled over conflicting interests, the colonists based their Declaration of Independence from Britain on a universal statement, the rights of all men.

This eloquent apology for a revolution is the foundation document of our political belief. And the liveliness of this belief, supported by the apparently endless opportunities of the American continent, has been proof against the regular and often disturbing discovery that these simple statements of the natural law tradition are never assured social realities but are aspirations which present challenges to every generation.

The American experience has been expressed in a social faith, and this faith, historically of Protestant origin, has generally been limited enough not to become a substitute religion and broad enough to allow Jew, Protestant and Catholic to share it and to acquire a very pronounced American character. This social faith, "the substance of things hoped for,"

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is the central force of American civilization and its basic vision.

American civilization, then, is not something already wrought out and achieved; it is something aspired to, the promise of American life.

The United States may be the land of our fathers, but far more is it the land of our children. Its promise has vague features, even though it has been spelled out with drab literalness in a multitude of utopias. The content of demands based on man's inalienable rights have differed with the years. At one time it involved a vision of simple agrarian democracy; at another it evoked the ardor of those who sought the Kingdom of God on earth.

The human, and especially the American, imagination is earthbound and deals familiarly with material images. Thus, the American future is too often presented in materialistic terms of comforts and horsepower abounding. Moreover, the dream is constantly belied. But the hope and faith persist, and the public expression of doubt about the continued validity of the dream is political suicide.

This is not the naive optimism with which some European critics have charged us. As faith in the future, it is as much a striving and dutiful hopefulness as it is a matter of temperament. Arnold Toynbee has suggested that those who came to America often thought they had sloughed off the burdens of Original Sin as well as of the Old World by their migration. This would have been startling news to the seventeenth century Puritans, to John Adams and the authors of *The Federalist*—and still seems perverse to the numerous Americans whose religion goes beyond emotionalism to include theology.

America was a new world, where men thought that they could start anew. Here men could even act out the social contract in the Mayflower Compact, thus making a historical reality of a European theory. Historical developments, for example, the transformation of New England theology into a more secular and optimistic creed, paralleled the opportunities in fostering the vision of a better world. Ultimately, when American conditions were bad, as they frequently were, perhaps the most severe criticism was expressed in the charge that the United States was reproducing the inequalities and injustices of the Old World.

Only Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have had a comparable opportunity. The American continent provided something unique, and this uniqueness suggests the greatest caution in offering the American experience as a model for other nations. This experience has wearied, exhausted and inspired generations of men, who in the intensity of their domestic preoccupations have professed political principles for all men but given little thought to the world impact of those principles. The material abundance, which rewarded the labors of those who

professed these principles, gave the American way of life an attractive force that has disturbed the whole world. But this abundance has been maintained by a continuous uprooting of the American people, by a disruption of the settlement, accumulation and continuity that in the past has fostered culture, and finally by the general acceptance of the immediately convenient and the standardized.

Each of these four points requires elaboration.

The first, the contrast of American political universalism and American preoccupation with domestic tasks, appears with the independence of the Colonies. To this day the American is overwhelmingly inclined to devote himself to his pursuits in society, and society is the great overlord of the state and the person.

In becoming an independent nation the American people preferred to withdraw into the gigantic tasks of their domestic life. But the American Revolution and the new American nation, though turned in upon itself, had a remarkable effect on world history. The American War for Independence was won in the course of fighting that raged around the globe. The spectacle of a new nation coming into political existence stirred the nationalist sentiments of a number of European people, notably the French, Irish and Poles, and heralded the age of national revolutions, which has not yet ended in Asia and Africa.

This anti-imperialist struggle is the foundation legend of the American people, and it explains their general readiness to respond sympathetically to the struggles of other people which are presented as risings against imperial powers. Indeed, the very demands of justifying the Declaration of Independence have caused Americans to underrate their long colonial training in governing themselves, a source of the political wisdom of the Constitution and *The Federalist*.

Such an unhistorical approach, which readily becomes a kind of cosmic Jacksonianism, suggesting that people can begin at once to govern themselves, is greatly strengthened by the terms in which the Americans proclaimed their independence to the world.

These terms were universal. Thus, we have one of the major paradoxes of American history—the establishment of a nation, largely preoccupied with its own affairs, on the basis of principles which are stated to be universal. "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The American political tradition, then, consists of the affirmation of principles and the giving of examples—a kind of preaching universalism. This tradition and American isolation help to explain the

moralizing strain which is so prominent in American statements on foreign policy. Woodrow Wilson voiced the American vision of both universality and uniqueness: "We are the mediating nation of the world. We are compounded of the nations of the world; we mediate their blood, we mediate their traditions, we mediate their sentiments, their tastes, their passions; we are ourselves compounded of those things. We are, therefore, able to understand all nations."

The sense of uniqueness and concern about our identity was supported by the constant uprooting of people and undermining of regional ways of life that accompanied the dynamic settlement of a continent. This, my second point, wrought an obliteration of history and the sense of continuity. In the promise of American life each person should have his opportunities. But this was made possible only by the dynamism that so frequently meant a starting from scratch or near it.

In our own land we have been *conquistadores* of the soil and its resources. Region after region advanced toward distinctive local cultures only to undergo challenges from new settled areas or economic changes, that in turn cut off the regional development. The very sweep of this movement, which so wholly changed the character of old towns and cities, created multitudes of new ones, and ruthlessly proliferated ghost towns as well as boom towns, reveals American dynamism at its purest, and this process meant the constant uprooting of people.

No one has adequately described the massive uprooting of people which industrial changes caused in Europe. These changes met fewer obstacles and inhibitions in the United States. The promise of American life was the sustaining faith but many Americans found the process of change painful and on occasion turned against the immigrant as the cause of change. Nativist movements sought to limit the numbers and influence of the newcomers. But, as a rule, they met with little success, because it was impossible to formulate a narrow and acceptable definition of Americanism.

The United States, then, shared most intimately in another European experience, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' wandering of people. Between 1820 and 1930, thirty-eight million people migrated to the United States, about sixty per cent of the European movement.

The subject of uprooting and mobility leads to my third point: the general acceptance of the immediately convenient and the standardized, the uniform. The criticism of American standardization has been made very frequently, and often without qualification or understanding. A nearly venerable tradition of commentary pictures our country as a society of mechanized humanity, of drab and uniform robots. The criticism has never had much effect on us because we know how much diversity it ignores.

There are, however, three principal sources of the uniformity which *does* characterize much of our way of life. The first is the process of Americanization of the immigrant and the ceaseless process of uprooting which the American and the immigrant alike experienced. On both, the active demands of America's promise have imposed a certain common character, a concern with becoming rather than with being.

The second source has been the desire of our people for material abundance and comforts. Adam Smith wrote of the wonders to be achieved from the division of labor. In our country this division, which means standardization and interchangeable parts, was carried out most fully. There were few solid traditions of craftsmanship and craft privileges to delay the triumph of industrialism. Moreover, American industrialism was initially conceived as a national system and thus served a market that did not make demands for high quality.

The third source is the consideration of the same mass market applied to cultural matters—the newspapers, entertainment, radio and television. Here effectiveness in reaching the largest audience is so important because the problem of financial support nakedly stalks all these enterprises. Britain and other countries with more definite traditions of culture may establish state systems of broadcasting and of artistic patronage. Here, partly in consequence of American pluralism and partly out of mistrust of concentrated political power, the same policy has been unacceptable. As a result, these activities generally must be commercial.

Uniformity and mechanization produce comforts and abundance but they involve perils to the person and spirit. The prevalence of uniformity in goods leads us to look for uniformity in people. The regularity of machines induces us to look for an extra-human regularity in people. This has consequences for us in our foreign affairs. In dealing with large numbers of men we are driven to mechanical classifications of them and may yield to the temptation that people should conform to them, as though the classifications represented the true idea of man. Abundance of material things may also make men oblivious of the spirit.

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The spirit cannot be measured but, if it is therefore ignored, it takes its own revenge in perverse and demonic ways. Man's unquiet heart, his spirit, makes him a pilgrim to eternal life. I have suggested that Americans tend to look on things with the eyes of transients, who seek more *things*. Where this quest possesses them into forgetting the person and spirit, they are lost pilgrims who have mistaken becoming for being.

American activism, moreover, has generally tended to oppose cultivation and refinement. In 1779 John

Adams wrote of his impressions of Paris: "I cannot help suspecting that the more elegance, the less virtue, in all times and countries." Adams may be considered a Puritan but even Jefferson expressed American self-consciousness about art. Our third president said that he was an enthusiast and patron of the arts in order to further the fame and reputation of his countrymen.

This is the self-consciousness of people who, thinking in national terms, were less interested in the past than in the future. But the culture of the West is ours, and only the parochial outlook of nationalism causes us to neglect that heritage and some Europeans to think that it is their special achievement. The study of the cultural sources of the West is a necessary preliminary to discerning the spiritual dangers with which part of our civilization may threaten us. And this knowledge of our own spiritual resources is the only basis for responding meaningfully to the diverse cultural traditions of our world that meet today.

With cultivation we may learn to make distinctions, to accept uniformity where it serves us and, at the same time, to rejoice in the diversity of nature and people. We cannot deny our universal political affirmations, but we can learn that they are only abstractions, which cannot be universally, immediately and mechanically applied.

Are we, for example, promoting the rights of man to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness when we urge the transference of authority from a colonial government to a partly detribalized people, who will at once be ruled by an oligarchy? How can we answer this complaint of a Hungarian refugee quoted in James A. Michener's *The Bridge at Andau*: "For six years you fed us propaganda. But when we rose in rebellion for the things you wanted us to fight for, who helped us? Some Russian soldiers, some Russian tanks. Not one American. If America wants to flood Eastern and Central Europe with words, it must acknowledge an ultimate responsibility for them. Otherwise you are inciting nations to commit suicide."

Today, our universal affirmations and our industrially and scientifically produced abundance, the latter the result of a unique development, have contributed powerfully to the modern international crisis. People of diverse heritages seek to borrow Western science and industrialism. Our world has been brought together as in a community but a community without a moral consensus other than a fear of war and a desire for independence and economic improvement. The ultimate resolution of this crisis involving the meeting of several civilizations and many cultures attempting to share in some common political ideas and industrial and scientific techniques is surely a long way off.

But in this work we have certain advantages: our own experience as well as our few traditions may permit us to improvise imaginatively and creatively in

an unprecedented situation. Our interest in the response to other people, shallow as it has sometimes been, should also help us. The pluralism of American society can also assist us, first in that we can draw on Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Negroes, Chinese and Japanese, in short on the diversity of American society, for special work, where their origins or understanding may serve, but, above all, in formulating the terms of the solution, which must be pluralist. Finally, American optimism chastened enough to have lost impatience, will be the necessary sustainer of this long labor.

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The promise of American life, our civilization, now confronts two almost contradictory demands. We must recognize the universal influence it has and maintain with flexibility and responsibility our universal affirmations. In the past many American spokesmen insisted, as Woodrow Wilson did, that "America must have this consciousness, that on all sides it touches elbows and touches hearts with all the nations of mankind."

Here our dilemma is that America cannot become an empire and, yet, cannot content itself with a preaching universalism, preoccupied with domestic affairs. The world's peace and future probably depend on our solution of the dilemma. We cannot escape the dilemma, because the very influence of Western ideas and techniques throughout the world today reveals a general sentiment in Asia and Africa that their traditional civilizations and cultures have failed or are inadequate.

This source of global restlessness makes the second demand upon our civilization all the more urgent. The demand is to strengthen our universalism with spiritual depth, and the richness and understanding of the human person. Here our experience suggests that rapid industrialization and transformation are paid for heavily in human cost.

Indeed, this caution clearly points to the conclusion that the United States itself faces many of the problems of Western civilization, and some of those problems, materialism, mechanization, and mass culture, are now also world problems. But the world may learn from our optimism and the promise of American life that men often rise to their opportunities and in the common life inspired by this pursuit may create a new society as firm and as pluralist as our own.

The two demands made on us are heavy, and the voice of the European past may seem to suggest that, as only one can be fulfilled, a choice must be made. But what the past suggests is a contradiction may not be so for the future. The recognition that heavy demands are made of us should draw from us the whole energies and resources of American society and American man.