

American identity: Ideas, not ethnicity

Since the United States was founded in the 18th century, Americans have defined themselves not by their racial, religious, and ethnic identity but by their common values and belief in individual freedom.

"I'm in a New York state of mind." - Billy Joel

In 2000 28.2 percent of people living in the New York metropolitan area were foreign born.

- U.S. Census Bureau

MICHAEL JAY FRIEDMAN

IN 1782, barely six years after the United States of America declared its nationhood, Benjamin Franklin offered certain "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America." Among the constellation of outsized historical actors Americans came to know as their "founding fathers," Franklin was in many ways the most typically American: If George Washington was inapproachably august, Thomas Jefferson bookish, and John Adams dour, it was Franklin that practical inventor, resourceful businessman, and ever-busy civic catalyst who best understood that his countrymen were, as the historian Walter McDougall would later call them, a nation of hustlers. In such a land, Franklin instructed the would-be immigrant:

People do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do? If he has any useful Art, he is

welcome; and if he exercises it, and behaves well, he will be respected by all that know him.

Franklin's remark was grounded in first-hand observation: As early as 1750, German immigrants outnumbered English stock in his home colony of Pennsylvania. The newcomers were perceived as industrious and law-abiding. Skillful farmers, they improved the land and stimulated economic growth. In 1790, when Congress set the first national standard for naturalized citizenship, it required no ethnic or religious test, no literacy test, no property requirement just two years residence, good character, and an oath to uphold the Constitution. Because American identity is, as Franklin understood, grounded in actions and attitudes rather than racial, religious, or ethnic identity, Americans differ from many other peoples both in how they define themselves and in

the kinds of lives they choose to lead. Membership in the national community, as cultural scholar Marc Pachter has written, "demands only the decision to become American."

This communal American identity embraces a pluralism that spans racial, religious, and ethnic divides. It also encompasses a strong civic commitment to individual freedom and to a representative government of limited and clearly defined powers that respects that freedom.

Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

The American self-image has always harnessed a creative tension between pluralism and assimilation. On the one hand, immigrants traditionally have been expected to immerse themselves in the American "melting pot," a metaphor popularized by the playwright Israel Zangwill's 1908 drama *The Melting Pot*, in which one character declares:

Understand that America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.

Nor were Zangwill's sentiments new ones. As far back as 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French immigrant and keen observer of American life, described his new compatriots as:

... a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes ... What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American... leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners...

The melting pot, however, has always existed alongside a competing model, in which



Traditionally dressed immigrants join together in 1959 in front of the Statue of Liberty. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

he or she has overcome great obstacles to success. The late 19th-century American writer Horatio Alger, deemed by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* perhaps the most socially influential American writer of his generation, captured this ethos in his many rags-to-riches stories, in which poor shoeshine boys or other street urchins would rise, by dint of their ambition, talent, and fortitude, to wealth and fame.

In the United States,

Americans hold differing political beliefs, embrace (often wildly) divergent lifestyles, and insist upon broad individual freedoms, but they do so with a remarkable degree of mutual tolerance. One key is their representative form of government: No citizen agrees with every U.S. government decision; all know they can reverse those policies by persuading their fellow citizens to vote for change at the next election.

Another key is the powerful guarantees that protect the rights of all Americans from government overreaching. No sooner was the U.S. Constitution ratified than Americans demanded and received the Bill of Rights: 10 constitutional amendments that safeguard basic rights.

There simply is no one picture of a "typical" American. From the powdered-wigged Founding Fathers to the multiracial golf champion Tiger Woods, Americans share a common identity grounded in the freedom -- consistent always with respecting the freedom of others -- to live as they choose. The results can be amusing, intriguing, and inspire. Cambodia's biggest hip-hop star, born on a Cambodian farm, lives in southern California. (He goes by the name "prach.") Walt Whitman, the closest Americans have produced to a national poet, would not have been surprised. "I am large," Whitman wrote of his nation, "I contain multitudes."

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Barack Obama's vision for the future

The following is excerpted from the U.S. Department of State publication *Barack Obama: 44th President of the United States*.

Excerpts from "The American Moment," Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 23, 2007

I believe that the single most important job of any President is to protect the American people. And I am equally convinced that doing that job effectively in the 21st century will require a new vision of American leadership and a new conception of our national security a vision that draws from the lessons of the past, but is not bound by outdated thinking.

In today's globalized world, the security of the American people is inextricably linked to the security of all people. When narcotics trafficking and corruption threaten democracy in Latin America, it's America's problem too. When poor villagers in Indonesia have no choice but to send chickens to market infected with avian flu, it cannot be seen as a distant concern. When religious schools in Pakistan teach hatred to young children, our children are threatened as well.

Whether it's global terrorism or pandemic disease, dramatic climate change or the proliferation of weapons of mass annihilation, the threats we face at the dawn of the 21st century can no longer be contained by borders and boundaries.

Many Americans may find it tempting to turn inward, and cede our claim of leadership in world affairs.

I insist, however, that such an abandonment of our leadership is a mistake we must not make. America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, but the world cannot meet them without America. We must neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission we must lead the world, by deed and example.

We must lead by building a 21st century military to ensure the security of our people and advance

the security of all people. We must lead by marshaling a global effort to stop the spread of the world's most dangerous weapons. We must lead by building and strengthening the partnerships and alliances necessary to meet our common challenges and defeat our common threats.

And America must lead by reaching out to all those living disconnected lives of despair in the world's forgotten corners because while there will always be those who succumb to hate and strap bombs to their bodies, there are millions more who want to take another path who want our beacon of hope to shine its light their way.

America is the country that helped liberate a continent from the march of a madman. We are the country that told the brave people of a divided city that we were Berliners too. We sent generations of young people to serve as ambassadors for peace in countries all over the world. And we're the country that rushed aid throughout Asia for the victims of a devastating tsunami.

Now it's our moment to lead our generation's time to tell another great American story. So someday we can tell our children that this was the time when we helped forge peace in the Middle East. That this was the time when we confronted climate change and secured the weapons that could destroy the human race. This was the time when we brought opportunity to those forgotten corners of the world. And this was the time when we renewed the America that has led generations of weary travelers from all over the world to find opportunity, and liberty, and hope on our doorstep.

From the American people to the people of Bangladesh

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greater investment, particularly for women and young adults. Our clean energy program expands access to solar energy and promotes the use of bio-gas while training young women in rural areas to install solar home systems and earn income in the process.

USAID provides assistance to local communities and the Government to protect forest and wetlands and encourage the wise use of aquatic and tropical forest resources. USAID also works with the national government, NGOs, locally elected governments and municipal associations to improve the management of public funds through participatory planning processes. Our Anti-Corruption project, PROGATI, works with members of Parliament, civil society organizations, media outlets and journalists to assist them with the management of national budgets, monitoring of government expenses, and establishment of a center for investigative journalism. Our food security

program provides technical assistance regarding food and agriculture policy, and supports homestead gardening, the creation of seasonal jobs, and income opportunities such as poultry raising and tailoring in resource poor areas. USAID also helps communities plan and prepare for disasters and construct small scale disaster mitigation infrastructure while providing emergency relief after natural disasters.

After Cyclone Sidr, the U.S. supplied U.S. military personnel and equipment to work in tandem with the Government of Bangladesh to provide immediate humanitarian assistance for those affected by the cyclone. Operation Sea Angel II combined U.S. technology with Bangladeshi knowledge of the region to save countless lives in the aftermath of the disaster. The U.S. military continues to provide humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh through the construction of multi-purpose shelters and capacity building in disaster mitigation.

The U.S. Embassy also supports English language instruction and madrasa education in programs designed to make students better prepared to meet the world's challenges in the job market and in institutes of higher education. Through educational exchanges and in-country training, Bangladeshis gain knowledge and experience to better prepare Bangladesh's future. We also help facilitate travel to the United States by Bangladeshis. America is open for business, tourism, and exchanges. We are particularly pleased that the number of students who want to study in the United States continues to grow each year. We also help those eligible to reside permanently in the United States.

We have a vibrant and growing relationship with Bangladesh. We have been friends for many years. The United States Government will continue to be a strong and close partner of the Bangladeshi people.



Immigrants sworn in as citizens in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2007 (© AP Images)

each successive immigrant group retains a measure of its distinctiveness and enriches the American whole. In 1918 the public intellectual Randolph Bourne called for a "trans-national America." The original English colonists, Bourne argued, "did not come to be assimilated in an American melting pot ... They came to get freedom to live as they wanted to ... to make their fortune in a new land." Later immigrants, he continued, had not been melted down into some kind of "tasteless, colorless" homogeneous Americanism but rather added their distinct contributions to the greater whole.

The balance between the melting pot and transnational ideals varies with time and circumstance, with neither model achieving complete dominance. Unquestionably, though, Americans have internalized a self-portrait that spans a spectrum of races, creeds, and colors. Consider the popular motion pictures depicting American troops in action during the Second World War. It became a Hollywood cliché that every platoon included a farm boy from Iowa, a Brooklyn Jew, a Polish millworker from Chicago, an Appalachian woodsman, and other diverse examples of mid-20th century American manhood. They strain at first to overcome their differences, but by film's end all have bonded as Americans. Real life could be more complicated, and not least because the African-American soldier would have served in a segregated unit. Regardless, these films depict an American identity that Americans believed in -- or wanted to.

Individualism and Tolerance

If American identity embraces all kinds of people, it also affords them a vast menu of opportunities to make and remake themselves. Americans historically have scorned efforts to trade on "accidents of birth," such as great inherited wealth or social status. Article I of the U.S. Constitution bars the government from granting any title of nobility, and those who cultivate an air of superiority toward their fellow Americans are commonly disparaged for "putting on airs," or worse.

Americans instead respect the "self-made" man or woman, especially where

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