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AMERICAN IDENTITY: IDEAS, NOT ETHNICITY

By MICHAEL JAY FRIEDMAN

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.



White House

In 2000, 28.2% of people living in the New York metropolitan area were foreign born. -- U.S. Census Bureau
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. 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

racess of Europe are melting and reforming! A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians -- into 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 grandfathers were 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 each successive immigrant group retains a measure of its distinctiveness and enriches the American whole.

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 he or she has overcome great obstacles to success.

In the United States, individuals craft their own definitions of success.

Americans hold differing political beliefs, embrace divergent lifestyles, and insist upon broad individual freedoms, but they do so with a remarkable degree of mutual tolerance.

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 bemuse, intrigue, and inspire. Walt Whitman wrote of his nation, "I am large... I contain multitudes." (Abridged)

The writer is a historian in the Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State.

Ambassador's Message

Honorable Minister of Foreign Affairs Distinguished guests, partners, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen:

Assalamu aleikum, nomoshkar, and good evening. And a warm welcome to you all.

Thank you for that kind introduction, Catherine.

As I hope you have learned from the décor tonight, the theme of our Independence Day celebration this year is "great rivers." Both our countries are blessed to lay claim to some of the world's legendary rivers. These rivers have sustained and inspired Americans and Bangladeshis for generations.

Rabindranath Tagore celebrated the "immortal music of Jamuna." He memorialized the Padma's "Bengal sky full of light, this south breeze, this flow of the river, this right royal laziness, this broad leisure stretching from horizon to horizon and from green earth to blue sky, all these were as food and drink to the hungry and thirsty." These two rivers, along with the Meghna, complete the mighty triumvirate that defines the beauty and agricultural wealth of this country.

Meanwhile, Tagore's near-contemporary Mark Twain paid tribute to the Mississippi. Twain praised its river towns as "comely, clean, well built, and pleasing to the eye, and cheering to the spirit. The Mississippi Valley is as reposeful as a dreamland, nothing worldly about it...nothing to hang a fret or a worry upon."

The role our rivers play in our lives is just one aspect of the history and culture that the United States and Bangladesh share. We are here tonight to celebrate America's Independence Day, the moment when an extraordinary gathering of renowned thinkers in Philadelphia laid out a vision for a nation grounded in respect for open discourse and differences of belief, faith, and tradition. I would like to underscore how that description applies to both the United States and Bangladesh.

And I cannot resist adding that both our lands were once ruled by the United Kingdom... nice to see you High Commissioner Blake!... a heritage that has enriched our legal systems and cultural traditions... although, for some reason, Bangladesh has been the only one of the two of us to carry forward a particularly deep enthusiasm and talent for cricket!

The founders of our two countries -- and note, I did not say "founding fathers" for women played an equally vital role in the birth of our nations -- understood that there is strength in diversity and the debate of different opinions.

From the moment Quakers in Pennsylvania to the religious dissenters seeking to reform the Church of England -- whom we call Pilgrims -- in Massachusetts, among other European settlers, set foot on what is now American soil, they sought not just trade and material riches, but the greatest treasure of all: freedom of conscience. The freedom to practice the faith of one's choosing. The freedom to read and speak and write, even when



MARCIA BERNICAT
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BANGLADESH

new ideas are at odds with the conventional views of society or government. Such freedoms would later drive important discourse to abolish the practice of slavery, which also accounted for many of our first settlers, and eventually to changes in the treatment of the Native American population, who were already present when the settlers arrived.

Despite the enormous differences in the religious and political beliefs of these early settlers -- beliefs that sometimes led to violence between them in Europe -- they were able to see beyond those differences and identify what could unite them: the conviction that freedom, faith, and tolerance should, for the betterment of all, coexist.

There is an on-going, natural tension as the United States absorbs a continuous flow of newcomers. This is especially visible today, you may be noticing, as we are undergoing a demographic shift and as the economic models of the 20th century are evolving. This process is not gentle, and charting a course forward is proving to be painful at times.

Fortunately, to guide us we have the ideals of our founders, who foresaw the need to acknowledge and embrace such change. The willingness of Americans throughout our country's history to confront the most difficult aspects of ourselves is what has given us our strength.

Such resilience born of founding principles is also legendary among the people of Bangladesh. So much of this country's strength is derived from embracing its own diversity and tolerance of different cultures, religions and opinions. Bangladesh was founded on these principles, has embraced them since its founding and continues to do so as it, too, faces new challenges.

As we all confront the enormous threats that must be overcome in the 21st century, from those posed by climate change to violent extremism, I firmly believe that we are better positioned to address these challenges successfully together, rather than apart.

In 1789, George Washington wrote a letter to Muhammed Ibn Abdullah, Sultan of Morocco, whose country had been the first to recognize the newly independent United States. His words, in part, described a nation very similar to Bangladesh at the beginning of its existence as an independent nation. President Washington wrote, "Within our territories there are no mines, either of gold or silver, and this young nation just recovering from the waste and dissolution of a long war, have not, as yet, had time to acquire riches by agriculture and commerce. But our soil is bountiful, and our people industrious and we have reason to flatter ourselves that we shall gradually become useful to our friends."

It is clear that the United States and Bangladesh have become -- and continue to be -- of tremendous use to one another, eager to find ways we can serve the common welfare of our citizens, and the world, together.

Thank you for coming tonight, and happy Independence Day.

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God Bless America

American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB)
Wishes a Happy Independence Day
to the people of the United States of America
on the eve of 4th of July 2016

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