

["America's Fabric" #3

January 20, 2008

Subject: The Uniqueness of America: The Immigrant Mentality]

Good morning. And welcome to "America's Fabric, a radio series broadcast every Sunday morning for the purpose of promoting patriotism.

Patriotism is a basic strength of every great nation. And the dangers America faces today could destroy our freedom and prosperity if we, the people of the United States, do not cherish and defend our country's heritage.

A large part of patriotism is a knowledge of and sense of gratitude for the deeds that have created and preserved our country. These radio programs called "America's Fabric" are dedicated to fostering a better understanding of the American heritage.

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I'm John McElroy, your host for "America's Fabric."

Our broadcast today is the second of two parts in the story of America's uniqueness. Last Sunday's program described America as a unique place uniquely populated by "self-selecting immigrants."

Today's program describes the character of those self-selecting immigrants and the society they created.

If you were unable to tune in last Sunday, you can still listen to that program by visiting our website americasfabric.com. Let us now recall, however, what it said: namely, that only one of the main areas of European colonization in the Western Hemisphere had an inviting wilderness of continental extent, and only one received immigrants from various kingdoms of Europe and various Christian faiths. The kings of England allowed such immigration to their possessions in North America, but the kings

of Portugal, France, and Spain each limited immigration to Brazil, Canada, and Spanish America to their Portuguese, French, and Spanish subjects who belonged to the one state religion permitted by law in their kingdoms.

This freedom from screening for conformity to a particular standard made the European immigrants to America “self-selecting.” The result, of course, was a rapid buildup in America of a population having a great mixture of nationalities and Christian faiths. Yet this diverse society developed early in its history a strong, unifying sense of an American identity which led America to seek independence far sooner in its history than any other part of the New World. America became independent of Europe after only a century and three-quarters. Brazil and Spanish America remained European dependencies for three centuries, and Canada for three and three-quarters centuries.

What created this early desire among Americans for independence from Europe? The answer to that lies in the character of self-selecting immigrants.

To understand the character of these immigrants, we must ask, what motivated them to undergo the trauma of abandoning everything that was familiar to them, and to cross a perilous ocean to live on an unknown, far distant continent, which for many of them meant joining a society whose language they did not understand?

Each of these immigrants had, of course, their own interests and abilities and particular reasons for leaving their native societies. Yet they were a lot alike. All were dissatisfied Europeans and wanted something they were not getting from their life in Europe; all were self-respecting, in believing that the cause of their unhappiness was no fault of theirs.

Sociologists who study the phenomenon of immigration explain it in terms of the “push” of conditions in the immigrant’s homeland and the “pull” of conditions in the contemplated destination.

There are many kinds of push-pull circumstances. These might include such dire conditions of “push” as a famine, a war, religious persecution, or systemic political tyranny. Or, the “push” could simply have been a sense of intolerable personal failure.

Among the allurements “pulling” an unhappy European to contemplate emigrating were reports from America of more food, lower taxes, higher wages, cheap land, greater political and religious freedom, and better chances of economic and social advancement.

There is nothing wrong with this “push-pull” analysis. It is simply inadequate. It leaves out something that is, I think, crucial to the tremendous decision to uproot one’s self and go live in another society; and that is the character of the person who actually emigrates.

For not every European subjected to the same conditions of “push-pull” emigrated to America. This is to say that not every nonconformist in England who was being persecuted on account of his religion, nor every French peasant in danger of being conscripted to fight in a dynastic war that meant nothing to him, nor all of the men and women of Ireland suffering from the famine that devastated their homeland during the 1840s, boarded a ship for America. It was only persons with a certain kind of character who did that: persons with a strong imagination, extraordinary determination, and lots of self-confidence—in other words, those persons having that spirit we Americans refer to as “get up and go.”

Courage was also indispensable to transatlantic immigration in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early-nineteenth centuries, for the wooden sailing ships that carried immigrants to America often disappeared as a result of storms, badly leaking hulls, and even pirates and were never heard from again. It was also a well-known fact that the death-rate among immigrants on those crowded, unsanitary ships averaged ten percent, a rate of mortality that were it to occur among soldiers in a war would be considered high.

Self-selecting immigrants had the kind of character that could contemplate the dangers and trauma of transplantation to another continent without being paralyzed by fear.

Mrs. Rebecca Burlend, who emigrated to Illinois from England in 1831, relates in her account of the ordeal, A True Picture of Emigration, how her husband's imagination became excited by letters from Illinois that were being received in their county of England and how, as a result of reading these letters, he wanted to leave for America. But when he and his wife and their children were on the dock in Liverpool, at the point of boarding the ship, Mr. Burlend suffered a momentary panic and announced that he was going to retrieve their baggage from the hold of the ship and return home. His wife reminded him that they had no home to return to, since they had given up their house and sold their furniture; besides, she also reminded him, the conditions that had prompted him to want to emigrate still pertained: the fact that after fourteen years of farming leased land in England they had only [quote] "a gradual diminution" of their property to show for their labors. After hearing out his wife, Mr. Burlend recovered his courage and got on the ship.

Their voyage lasted two and a half months, which was typical for an Atlantic crossing in the early nineteenth century. After their arrival in Illinois, the bitter cold of the prairie winter, so different from England's milder, maritime climate, and the unnerving howling of wolves around their Illinois dwelling, made them regret having left their native land.

But after fifteen years of unremitting toil and prudent decision-making, Mrs. Burlend proudly reported, the Burlends owned a big farm of 360 acres of prime black soil, a good house and large barn, every conceivable implement of farming, and an abundance of livestock, including seven horses, twenty cattle, and a [quote] "superabundance of the essentials of housekeeping... [and] no lack of good food, such as beef, pork, butter, fowls, eggs, milk, flour, and fruits" [end of quotation].

Instead of being tenant farmers who were just getting by, as they had been in England, their diligence in America had made them prosperous land-owners. Mr. Burlend's moment of panic on the dock at Liverpool had not aborted his dream of success in Illinois.

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To be an immigrant to America required a willingness to endure difficulties and privation in the hope of future success. It required a willingness to work steadily. It took a man or woman—acting either alone or with the help of a spouse or some other supportive companion, but most often alone—who felt that he or she could obtain in America what they were failing to obtain in Europe. And success in America, perhaps most of all, required flexibility, the ability to adjust to novel circumstances. For

conditions in America were bounded to be different both from conditions in the country the immigrant had left and from what the immigrant had imagined they would be like.

Self-selecting immigrants were discontented with life where they were, but steadfastly believed in the possibility of a better future for themselves or their children somewhere else, a future that could be attained through constant work. Their behavior shows that they wanted to take personal responsibility for their future and that they were unwilling to put up with conditions in their homeland when they believed their lot in life would be improved by immigration. The self-selecting immigrants were unlike their compatriots who did not emigrate in their imaginativeness, hopefulness, and daring.

The society that this type of person created in America, as they accumulated there by the thousands and tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and finally by the millions, was an improvement-oriented, active, innovative society. Self-selecting immigrants and their American-born descendants were the human material from which the American nation was formed.

Ole Edvart Rolvaag, a Norwegian fisherman who immigrated as a young man and became a college professor in Minnesota, wrote an epic novel, Giants in the Earth, about his fellow Norwegians who pioneered the Dakota prairies in the 1870s, a generation before his arrival in America. Of one of his true-life characters in that novel, he said [quote]: “Now and then Tonseten would turn their conversation toward the future; he was more interested in visualizing how things were going to turn out than in making a bare statement of how they actually were.” That sort of hopeful looking forward to the future is the essence of being an American.

What other country in the history of the world has ever declared in one of its founding documents that “the pursuit of happiness” is a God-given right? I refer of course to the Declaration of Independence.

The immigrant’s defining characteristic—his heroic ability to imagine a better future for himself and his children and to work to realize it—is fundamental to an understanding of American history. The freedom to move about in search of opportunities is of course part of the immigrant mentality. Thus: of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, forty percent were either immigrants or born in a state other than the one they represented in the Second Continental Congress: proofs that they had made at least one major move during their lives. And in Boston at the end of the 1830s, around half of that city’s population had not been living there at the beginning of the decade. That rate of turnover in American cities, about forty-five percent every decade, which (besides deaths and births) is caused by residents moving out and newcomers moving in, is still generally true today.

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Last year, 2007, was the four-hundredth anniversary of the first permanent European settlement in what is now the United States of America. During these four hundred years, more than sixty million immigrants (not counting tens of millions of illegal immigrants in recent decades) have come to America from all over the Earth. This represents the largest migration of human beings in the history of mankind. And regardless of the continent, the language, the religion, the race, the political tradition, or the economic status they came from, they believed in the freedom to pursue happiness and the promise of America.

Whether they immigrated in the first years of this century from India, Japan, or China, or from Iran, Nigeria, or South Africa in the twentieth century, or in the nineteenth century from the Ukraine, Italy, or Poland, or from Ireland, Germany, or Holland in the eighteenth century, or in the seventeenth century from Sweden, Scotland, or England: in believing in the pursuit of happiness and the promise of America enough to act on their belief, they demonstrated that they had the makings of a true American.

Largely because of the character traits that the self-selecting immigrants had in common, a diverse population descended from many different nations have historically melded into one nation speaking one language.

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But if these immigrants and their American-born descendants have been pursuing, since colonial times, their personal dreams of success, why hasn't the society they formed become a fragmented, unstable assembly of completely self-absorbed, greed-driven individuals? How did it become a society distinguished by its charity, constitutional government, and teamwork? For that is in fact the kind of society America became.

The experience the immigrants had after their arrival in America also much to do with the kind of society they created.

Is it not likely when two Americans meet for the first time that among the things they will immediately want to know in getting acquainted is what work each of them does, or wants to do? Americans put a great deal of value on what a person does or is ambitious to do. In American society, work and ambition confer respectability more than anything else.

This is an inheritance from our country's history in creating a new nation from a wilderness, because in settling a wilderness, everyone must work: no exceptions. There can be no tolerance for shirkers. In a wilderness, everyone must pull their own weight and cooperate for the good of the community that is being built. A person's usefulness, initiative, and sense of responsibility determine their standing in a frontier community.

Is, too, it not also true that Americans have a penchant for organizing themselves? Get any group of Americans together and give them a job to do, and they will in all likelihood begin by choosing a chairman, and then he or she will politely call for volunteers to perform the various aspects of the job that has to be done and otherwise organize the group.

Americans do not like to be ordered about, especially not by anyone whose authority they have not legitimated by consenting to it. At the outset of the American Revolution, the Prussian drillmaster assigned to teach the American army military discipline soon learned this lesson about our national character. Fortunately, Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben, a professional soldier who had come to America to fight in its war for independence, demonstrated the flexibility of all successful immigrants, and adapted his methods to the character of the American troops he was training. In a letter to a fellow officer in Europe, he said [quote]: "The genius of this nation is not in the least to be compared with the Prussians, the Austrians, or the French. You say to your soldier, 'Do this,' and he [does] it, but I am obliged to say, 'This is the reason that you ought to do that,' and then he does it."

Every American seems to partake of this democratic impulse. It is, so to speak, in our cultural genes to want to give our informed consent to authority. This propensity,

too, can be traced back to our country's experience of making a nation out of a wilderness. For it is also true in settling a wilderness that individuals inherently understand that the safety and general welfare of society depend on abiding by the will of the majority, which they have a responsibility for constituting. Permit me to cite in this regard the work of one historian of the American frontier.

Dale Van Every in his books on the eighteenth-century frontier has remarked [quote]: "The first impulse of every new settlement, before land was cleared, cabins built, or stockade raised, was to hold a town meeting in which every man old enough to bear arms voted by majority rule for regulations governing social conduct, assignment of community tasks, and mutual defense.... The new settlers were in most locations strangers to each other upon arrival, but they were obliged to learn quickly to work together." [end of quotation]

More than a century earlier, when the colonists whom we know as the Pilgrims founded the first permanent settlement in Massachusetts, in November of 1620, they behaved in the same way that Dale Van Every described as the behavior of the eighteenth-century pioneers. A majority of the adult males in this small group of pioneers from Europe met in the great cabin of the anchored ship that had brought them to the North American wilderness, which was soon to return to Europe, and signed a "compact"—or simple constitution—consenting to organize themselves into [quote] "a civil Body Politick" for their "better Ordering and Preservation."

Their situation on that bleak shore, at the edge of a continental expanse of wilderness, with the onset of winter looming and shelters against prowling beasts of prey

and biting frost still to be built, the “Preservation” of that brave band of pioneers certainly made a solemn pledge of mutual support and cooperation appropriate and necessary.

It has been no accident, but rather the result of America’s unique history that Americans gave the world, in 1787, the first example of a written constitution for government produced and ratified by their elected representatives.

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This is your host, John McElroy, thanking you for listening to “America’s Fabric,” and reminding you that only contributions from listeners like you make it possible for “America’s Fabric” to be on the air.

To listen to our previous programs, please visit our website americasfabric.com to hear our previous programs, which you can do by clicking on “Archives.”

You will also find at our website americasfabric.com the address to which you could mail a tax-deductible contribution to support this effort to encourage patriotism.

Next Sunday’s program will be an interview with Dr. Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of constitutional law at Princeton University, who will share with us his understanding of natural law, the informing principle of the Declaration of Independence.

Be sure to tune in for that program, and the programs on February 3rd and February 10th, which will be discussions with immigrants on what America means to them.

Until then: be proud—and grateful—to be an American; and remember, America is the land of the free because it is the home of the brave.

