

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER**

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## AN EXAMINATION OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

A talk prepared for the Chit-Chat Club by Andrew C. McLaughlin III

I am going to take a look tonight at the question of the American character and American values, and I am going to start with a quote from my old mentor, David Potter, who opened an article on the American character this way.

“Unlike most nationality groups in the world today, the people of the United States are not ethnically rooted in the land where they live. The French have remote Gallic antecedents; the Germans, Teutonic; the English, Anglo-Saxon; the Italians, Roman; the Irish, Celtic; but the only people in America who can claim ancient American origins are a remnant of Red Indians. In any deep dimension of time, all other Americans are immigrants....”

Despite this fact, The Economist carried an editorial a few months ago, which started with a Churchill story and concluded that the U.S. and the U.K. do, indeed, share the same value system. The Churchill story is the following:

“Back in 1933, Winston Churchill tried to enliven a dinner party in his country house, Chartwell, with a guessing game. What is your fondest wish? Most of the guests fudged their answers, but the host had no hesitation. “I wish to be prime minister and in close and daily communication by telephone with the president of the United States. There is nothing we could not do if we were together.” Thirteen years later, he told an enraptured audience in Fulton, Missouri that the Americans and the British “must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principals of freedom and the rights of man which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world and which through Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, *habeas corpus*, trial by jury and the English common law find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence.” *The Economist*, November 13, 2004.

The editorial concludes that many scholars are beginning to recognize that America owes a great deal of its identity to its Anglo-Protestant roots. And many

less cerebral folk have noted that America's most stalwart allies in the war on terrorism are all drawn from Churchill's English-speaking peoples. The special relationship still has a lot of life left in it.

Let's see if Americans agree with Churchill. I am going to pay particular attention to the nineteenth century because it was then that the foundation was laid. Any discussion of the American character carries with it an implicit discussion of American values which I shall make explicit as I go along.

Foreigners have been interested in the national character since European immigrants first came to this country. The Puritans came to New England to establish a new society - a society that conformed to the laws of God as the Puritans saw them. The Puritans set out to build a city upon a hill as they called it - a society that would be a model for all mankind. Thus they strove to build something new, something different in America. But it was the reality of an open and largely uninhabited continent more than the pioneering efforts of the Puritans which created a new society, and in Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's words a new man. Crevecoeur asked: "What then is the American, this new man?" He was convinced after this stay of several years in America in the late 1770's and early 1780's - his work was published in England in 1782 - that America had produced a new breed of man. De Tocqueville echoed this sentiment fifty years later in the 1830's. Anthony Trollope and James Bryce, both British visitors, continued to voice the same sentiments in the latter part of the 19th Century.

In the meantime, Americans were at work developing their own concept of the American identity. We shall start with the Jeffersonians, work our way through the Jacksonians, proceed to a talk in 1893 at the AHA convention, and conclude with more recent thoughts on the subject. However, before we delve into the subject, I need to mention that much of the work on the concept of national character has been done by sociologists, social psychologists, and cultural anthropologists. The cultural anthropologists, in particular, have developed the concept of culturally determined behavior. If you can posit that national boundaries encompass a single, dominant culture, then you can

translate the work of the cultural anthropologists directly into the study of national character. Also before we start our discussion of the American character, I need to mention that there are a number of thinkers and intellectual systems which argue that culture has little to do with the formation of character.

Some Christian thinkers believe that character and behavior are largely determined by whether an individual is infused with grace or not. The Marxists believe that one's economic status determines character. Capitalism is evil because it has broken the relationship between man and his work, and the result is an alienated proletariat. Marx and his followers had no use for national boundaries. The nation was an artificial creation as far as Marx was concerned, and it could neither define character nor command the loyalty of the working class. Similarly Freudians believed that all individuals in all ages and in all locations had their character determined by the interplay of the ego, the id, and the superego. Thus early man and a nineteenth century Viennese displayed the same traits. Racists are another group who believe that character derives from other than culture. Racist thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth was buttressed by Darwinian biology and the merging of these ideas grew into the eugenics movement. Eugenists argued that the human species could be improved by careful breeding. Character was determined solely by one's racial group.

With that nod to these dissenters, I want to continue our discussion of the American character. The most persistent and dominant theme in the discussion of the American character among nineteenth century American thinkers, culminating in FJ Turner's 1893 paper was the theme of American individualism. The story begins with Jefferson and his view of American individualism. We can get a good sense of Jefferson's view from the first draft of the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent; that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and unalienable, among which are the preservation of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends governments are instituted

among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed....”

Jefferson’s concept of individualism was political, and it derived from the Enlightenment and more specifically from John Locke. ( Some years back, an historian, J.G.A. Pocock, wrote a book, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, in which he argued that Machiavelli’s civic humanism was the source of Jefferson’s political thought. I find it unconvincing, and am going to disregard it.) Nearly all the political theory that found its way into the Declaration of Independence came by way of Locke. Locke believed that man had existed happily in a state of nature but had come together to form society in order to build a more orderly world in which man could fully develop his talents. When man moved from a state of nature to society, he brought with him a set of natural rights which Locke enumerated as life, liberty, and property. These natural rights preceded society (logically a very dubious proposition particularly with regard to property) and consequently, society could never rob the individual of these rights. If the state should ever attempt to deny these rights to its citizens, it would become illegitimate and the people would have the right to overthrow it. Jefferson echoes these sentiments precisely: man’s rights are inalienable and “whenever any form of government shall become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it....”

Jefferson’s concept of individualism revolves around the idea of individual rights. Man is a natural being who possesses certain natural rights which are inviolate and cannot be touched by the state. All men possess these rights and thus, “all men are created equal and independent.” Jefferson could see that all men were not created equal - even leaving aside the hundreds of black slaves who worked his fields. Not every white in Virginia had 10,000 acres of land, a mansion like Monticello, influence like Jefferson’s, in short, few had his social position. Yet he could write that all men were created equal and independent because he did not see economic and social reality but rather political theory. In his eyes, all Virginians were essentially like Jefferson because they possessed the same natural rights.

Furthermore, Jefferson believed, as a good son of the Enlightenment should believe, that all men had the same potential. All men were created with equal potential and, if one man got ahead of another, it was because he worked harder, got more education, developed his skills more highly or did something of that sort. It was because of his belief in the perfectability of man that Jefferson put such great emphasis on education. Education was to be the institution that would give reality to the Enlightenment's faith in human progress. Education was also the foundation of democracy which needed an informed and learned electorate to function well.

If education was to give reality to the idea of human progress and perfectibility, democracy was to give reality to the idea that men were equal. In Jefferson's democratic state all men would have an equal voice in running the government - one man, one vote - and all would be affected by the state to equal degrees. Since no man's natural rights could be infringed, the state could not bear down harder on some than on others. To make his political theory workable, Jefferson insisted that the state be fairly small. A small republic of yeoman farmers was his ideal state. Jefferson's democracy was closely tied to the agrarian order of his day. He was convinced that a nation of farmers, educated, informed, and blessed with free institutions was best suited to a democratic republic. This society would be orderly and stable for it would be made up of rational, reasonable men all personifications of the Enlightenment man.

In summary, Jefferson's conception of individualism was abstract and political. He saw a mass of equal and independent units existing in a society which could never destroy or even impinge very heavily on these individual units. His concept was abstract because he did not see these individuals in their economic and social setting - a setting which would certainly affect their political power and their potential for social success. For Jefferson, everyone had the natural faculty of reason, and, hence, everyone had the same potential regardless of whether his family could afford a library of 2,000 books, a private tutor, and Harvard College. The essence of Jefferson's individualism is the

concept of individual rights - the individual is more basic than the state - and the concept of equal potential: man is created equal and independent.

The concept of individualism that came to the fore in the Jacksonian period went beyond Jefferson's. Whereas Jefferson saw a mass of individuals each free and independent with a common set of natural rights and natural abilities, he did not celebrate this natural man. It was only the man who had developed his natural abilities, chiefly his reason, who came in for congratulations from Jefferson. Thus, Jefferson retained an elitist and aristocratic outlook. His whole life style was aristocratic - large country manor, life of learning, diplomatic posts in foreign lands, master of several languages, well-mannered and restrained in bearing. Thus R. Hofstadter titles his chapter on Jefferson, "The Aristocrat as Democrat." Jackson was quite different, so different in fact that he scared Jefferson. When Daniel Webster asked Jefferson whom he should support in 1824, Jefferson answered John Quincy Adams; he pictured Jackson as an unrestrained monster.

Jackson had a reputation as being intemperate, arbitrary and ambitious for power. In his military career, he had shown little regard for the law or for international considerations. People believed he had a tendency to act first, and think later, always claiming the prerogatives of a frontiersman - a man who could not wait for the law, for custom or tradition, or for propriety to suggest its way to solve the problem at hand. Jackson was a frontier military chieftain. There was nothing aristocratic, refined, or learned about him. He symbolized the right of the common man to assert himself - or so the legend goes.

John W. Ward in a book titled, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, has explored exactly what Jackson symbolized to his era. He concludes that he represented three concepts and that the "chief implication (of these concepts) is the unchecked development of the individual." First, Jackson stood as the symbol of nature's nobleman. This meant a good deal more than the eighteenth century concept of Jefferson that all men are endowed with certain natural rights. It implied a dynamic relation between physical nature and human character. It lends itself to a preference for the natural over the artificial, the

intuitive over the logical. Americans pictured the man in close touch with nature as stronger, purer, more honest, and more courageous than the man who had matured in cultivated society far from the frontier. Cultivated society corrupted and weakened humans; the task of taming a continent could only be accomplished by men like Jackson. In creating this image of a natural nobleman, Americans had to be careful that Jackson was not confused for an Indian and so the image had to create a figure different from both the native savage and the civilized decadent. This was tricky business. This concept clearly rejected formal learning as important to the development of character. Indeed formal learning of any sort was rejected. It was the untrained, unpracticed, and undisciplined militiamen who defeated the carefully trained British soldiers at New Orleans (Americans conveniently forgot that the decadent British had had the run of the East coast to the point of being able to burn the nation's capitol.) Jackson was a man of action, not of thought. Institutions were unnecessary; unrefined natural wisdom was all that was needed to run this country. This concept raised the individual above all institutions and very nearly destroyed the concept of society itself. The greatest American was the man who lived on the edge of society, on the frontier-neither in nor out of society. The frontier became symbolic of a new type of society as well as a new type of man. To Jefferson, who among other things, was a life-long member of the American Philosophical Society, this would have been heresy.

Jackson represented not only nature's nobleman but also the man of iron will. America needed men with strong wills not well-trained minds. Furthermore, anyone could succeed in America provided he had the will. If the idea of the self-made man was going to have any validity, the twin determinants of character - heredity and environment had to be replaced with a determinant that would not discriminate against anyone and that determinant was the will. Again, here was an individualism that called upon the common people to assert themselves. European society generally had asked its citizens to accept their place. Not American society in the 1830's; it asked Americans to push



themselves forward - alone without the help of society. All they needed were iron wills like Jackson's, and they could be masters of their own fate. Jackson was both the self-made and self-directed man *par excellence*. Like nature's nobleman, this concept came close to destroying the need for society. Instead of working together, man and society clashed and the former was glorified at the expense of the latter. In fact, it was unclear whether the man of iron will was subject to the laws of society at all. The image of Jackson was altered somewhat to accommodate a legal system, but the alteration was not convincing. The symbol left society in a very precarious position vis-a-vis the individual.

The last concept symbolized by Jackson was the idea that Americans sat at the right hand of God. Jackson, it is said, accepted the characterization of himself as God's chosen instrument graciously. The idea that Americans were a chosen race was nothing new. The Puritans had brought the idea with them when they emigrated from England, but the idea was secularized during the Jacksonian period, or perhaps we should say the political system was Christianized. This blended nicely with the revivalist spirit which was sweeping the Protestant Christian religion in this country during the first half of the 19th century. This was the only one of the three concepts which was compatible with the idea of community or society since the U.S., as well as its citizens, was blessed. But we shall see shortly how evangelical religion strengthened individualism and weakened society so that even the idea that American was a chosen race did little to integrate society and the individual.

Two of Jackson's programs best illustrate his support for this brand of individualism. The first was his defense of the spoils system. Jackson had no use for experts - these were the overly civilized products of decadent Europe. Government position did not require expertise; it only required a common sense, tough but honest American born and bred on the frontier. The second program which exemplified his anti-establishment feelings was his attack on the second Bank of the U.S. Symbolically at least, this was a blow struck for individualism and democracy. What it actually was was probably something quite different. But symbolically both these programs put Jackson on the side of

the common man.

Jefferson's concept of individualism was, at heart, negative; he emphasized what society could not do, namely to rob an individual of his natural rights. However, Jefferson expected an individual to be socialized, i.e. to be educated and to develop his natural faculty of reason. Jackson unleashed an individual who had not submitted to any socializing process. Indeed, Jackson and his followers set the individual against society creating in American mythology a false dichotomy between the individual and society which still haunts us today. The Jacksonian era fused the concepts of individualism and equality, liberated the individual from all social restraints, and told him to push and shove his way to success.

The Jacksonian emphasis on the will received strong support from the revivalist preaching of the Second Great Awakening. This great religious happening, which occurred between 1795 and 1835, changed the face of American Protestant Christianity, transforming the Methodists and Baptists from small, insignificant sects into the two largest Protestant sects in America. Its teachings reinforced every important ingredient in the Jacksonian portrait of the ideal American. It deified the strong willed individual, and it had little use for formal learning and for institutions. Its preachers were men of little learning who offered a religion full of emotion but lacking in dogma. They usually preached in the open, and they often held revivals. I want to mention one to give you an idea of the significance of these events. A revival was held at Cane Ridge, Kentucky in 1802-3. At that time, Lexington, with a population of 1795, was the largest city in Kentucky. It is estimated that 25, 000 people gathered at Cane Ridge for that revival.

Frederick Jacson Turner echoed these sentiments half a century later. In his address to the AHA in 1893, Turner wrote " In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life and reacted on Europe.... The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European.... and it takes him from the railroad car and

puts him in the birch canoe.... Little by little he transforms the wilderness , but the outcome is not the old Europe.... The fact is that here is a new product that is American." For Turner, the frontier was an area of rebirth and rejuvenation. In addition, it was responsible for the fluidity and mobility in American life . It promoted both individualism because it destroyed control and authority and also democracy because it set the individual free and, in that process, created the essential American democrat, a free and independent individual. Finally, the frontier acted as a safety valve. It was an escape from bondage of the past and any social injustice which may have been experienced in the East. The safety valve worked as an outlet for social discontent which built up in the eastern, settled regions of the country. Americans went out to the frontier and brought back to the East a new spirit of individualism and democracy which kept the East from solidifying into a European type society. For Turner, the American character was fundamentally different from the European because it was shaped by a force which was absent from Europe, namely the frontier.

One observer has summed up Turner's thesis in this way: "that American history, through most of its course, presents a series of recurring social evolutions in diverse geographic areas as people advance to colonize a continent..... The constant re-exposure of things American to a process of beginning over again made the great West the true point of view in the history of this nation." This professor from Wisconsin was saying that students should stop studying European history and the history of the East coast. If students want to find America and if they want to understand the American character, they should start studying the West and start understanding the influence of the frontier.

Turner's thesis elicited a good deal of reaction over the next few decades, and as you might expect, critics arose. One historian challenged the idea that the West was the cradle of American democracy. This historian examined Western constitutions closely and found that they had been modeled in nearly every case on Eastern constitutions. "So far as I have been able to determine, there was no considerable desire among those who framed the early Western constitutions to introduce governmental forms different from those long well established in the

East." Furthermore, this historian argues that although the Western states supported the extension of the suffrage, the process of extending it had begun in the East and furthermore, the West did not carry the process beyond what was happening in the East at any stage. "In their choice of political institutions the men of this section were imitative, not creative. Their constitutions, like their domestic architecture, was patterned after that of the communities from which they had moved westward." In short, democracy was born in the East and carried westward; the frontier did not resuscitate and rejuvenate the democratic spirit and send that spirit eastward. There is no necessary connection between the frontier and democracy at all. In fact, the southwestern frontier strengthened slavery not democracy.

Others made the point that if the frontier produced democracy, then all the Latin American countries should be democratic which they are not, of course. At the same time, one should be surprised, according to Turner's thesis, to find democracy as vital a force as it is and has been in Britain. One wonders what Turner thought of Britain, and one suspects that he saw it as many 19th century Americans did as too hierarchic, too rigidly divided into classes to be democratic. In other words, he equated democracy with equality and mobility as Americans generally were prone to do.

Turner's belief that the frontier fostered individualism was tied closely to his assertion that it strengthened democracy, and naturally his belief about the connection between the frontier and individualism was attacked along with his belief about the connection between democracy and the frontier. His critics argued that those who went West were not seeking liberty but material advancement and cheap land. Furthermore, the frontier did not isolate the individual and promote self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Rather it promoted a heightened sense of community and a greater need for group effort - to build dwellings, clear land, harvest, and so on. Westerners did not talk about self-reliance so much as they asked for government aid. Internal improvements was the program of the Westerner Henry Clay. Rugged individualism was part of the system of social values worked out in the settled East, not on the Western

frontier.

Finally, Turner believed that the West served as a social safety valve which allowed the US to escape the social friction and the creation of relatively rigid social classes which characterized the European nations. In the United States, a discontented lower class could always escape Westward where they could find cheap land and become members of the capitalist, i.e. property owning class. Critics investigated this argument closely and found very little truth in it. They found that seldom in the early 19th century did the frontier serve as a direct safety valve. Poverty-stricken eastern workers were unable to escape to that land of abundance beyond the Alleghenies for two reasons. In the first place, the lower classes in the Eastern cities usually did not have any agricultural skills. Turner seemed to think that anyone could go out and raise a crop - perhaps the failing of a chair-bound professor. This is simply not true. It takes a good deal of knowledge which is easy to gain if you grow up on a farm, but the urban poor of the East had not done this. As the frontier was pushed farther West and the land became less and less fertile, it became increasingly important to have farming skills. In the second place, the immigration and purchase of land cost money. Land prices of \$2.00 or even \$1.25 and acre might seem low but to an urban laborer earning a dollar a day the purchase of fifty acres was a big project. Moreover, the need to purchase farm machinery, animals and housing added about \$1000 to the cost of starting (1850's) while the cheapest travel rates from New York to St Louis totaled some \$13 per person. The total price was thus more than an urban worker could make in 3 years.

Critics have also discovered that when immigration occurred, it occurred during periods of prosperity, not of recession or depression. In other words, people migrated when they had money, not when economic conditions got bad. For example, during the depression years that followed 1837, immigration slowed to a trickle while the population of eastern cities steadily rose. Finally, critics have pointed out that this was even true after 1862 when the Homestead Act promised free land. Between 1860 and 1900 the farm population of the United States rose from 19 to 28 million while the non-farm population

skyrocketed from 12 to 48 million. If left to itself the farm population would have grown to 48 million during this period by natural processes; hence, one scholar has estimated that 20 persons left farms to move to the city for every single worker who left a city to move to the farm. Thus if a safety valve existed, it was a rural safety valve, drawing off surplus labor from the farm and thus lessening agrarian discontent in the 19th century.

Despite all this criticism, there may be some validity left to the theory. Eastern farmers, who were displaced by the rising cost of land and by soil exhaustion, may have moved West in considerable numbers. In addition, the West may have served as a psychological safety valve. Many may have believed that they and their children would be able to escape the slums of the East. The vision of a plentiful West danced in their mind and kept them from turning to protest movements along the eastern seaboard.

Not everyone, who commented on Turner's thesis, criticized it. One author tried to rescue Turner's frontier hypothesis and give it a wider, not a narrower meaning. He argued in a book that the history of the modern world can be seen in terms of the frontier hypothesis. He writes that until 1492 the social pattern of Europe had remained static for centuries, with a fixed and rigidly stratified society that precluded either the fact or the idea of progress.. Then came the voyage of Columbus and the dawning of the Age of Discovery. Overnight mankind gained access to a Great Frontier which dropped the man/land ratio from 26.7 to 4.8 per square mile. As the resources of this windfall, this great boom, poured into Europe, population rose by 625%, the supply of precious metals 18,308%, and goods by an even greater degree. Amidst this atmosphere of plenty, man adjusted himself and his institutions to an environment of ever-broadening opportunity; capitalistic free enterprise replaced serfdom, democratic governments challenged autocratic rulers, religious freedom over rode religious authoritarianism, and legal practices were adjusted to provide more justice for the individual. Democracy, capitalism, and individualism were all strengthened by the opening of this frontier of the New World just as, according to Turner, the American frontier had strengthened these systems and

values. Above all else, the spread of the idea of progress endowed mankind with a new hope as well as committing him to a gospel of work that would hurry the coming of better times.

This author, who was writing in the thirties, closes his argument by pointing out that the age of the frontier is now gone. In 1930, the man/land ratio reached 29.5 per square mile for the first time since 1500. By then, the controls necessary in compact social units had again begun to reappear and opportunity for the individual had begun to disappear. Democracy, individualism, and free-enterprise capitalism, all systems and attitudes tailor-made for a boom period were threatened.

In fact, the disappearance of the frontier had little impact on the core American values of democracy, individualism [read individual rights], and free enterprise capitalism. My old advisor, David Potter, argued in his book, *People of Plenty*, that it was not the frontier, but economic abundance which supported these core values, and he questioned whether they would be as vigorous in a poor society. It was abundance which allowed American children to be raised as individuals, often with their own rooms, different interests, different clothes, and a sense of themselves as distinct human beings. I think that the more successful democracies are the wealthier countries. Economic abundance does seem to be a necessary foundation, although not the only necessary foundation, for democracy.

We have taken a long look at American individualism with emphasis on two strains- the Jeffersonian and the Jacksonian, strengthened and embellished by Turner's frontier thesis. We have not yet looked, in detail, at the concept of equality and the relationship between equality and individualism. What does the American concept of equality mean? Does it mean that every American should be financially equal or does it simply mean that every American should be equal in the eyes of the law? S.M. Lipsett, a Berkeley and later Harvard sociologist, argued in his book on American values that two values have played dominant roles in American society. One is the value of equality and the other is the value of achievement. There is some tension between the values of equality

and achievement, but they are not mutually exclusive. This society has been committed to the concept that all its members have equal status in the eyes of the law, and it has been equally committed to an economic system that emphasizes competition and achievement. The Jeffersonian concept of individualism incorporated both these ideals. Every individual had inalienable and equal rights, and every individual had the right, really the obligation, to develop himself, or in other words, to achieve. Many nineteenth century American thinkers took great pains to distinguish the U.S. from Europe, and they did so by stressing our commitment to egalitarianism in contrast to Europe's commitment to a hierarchical social structure. In fact, they did not believe that Europe could claim to be democratic while retaining a hierarchical society. Long ago, Louis Hartz wrote a book in which he pointed out, among other things, that America is fundamentally different from Europe because it did not go through a feudal age. It was the feudal age which created the hierarchical social system which has always characterized Europe. This is such an obvious fact, but one that is so often overlooked. Nineteenth century thinkers felt it deeply.

Two other concepts are closely connected with these fundamental concepts of equality and achievement, and they are the concepts of social mobility and freedom. Some have suggested that, in the U.S., the two concepts are linked. Freedom means not only freedom from unwanted government control but also freedom to move up [and also down] the social ladder. In the American value system, the values of freedom, achievement, equality, and social mobility are all related. For Turner, the frontier promoted all of them. Everyone arrived on the frontier equal, and everyone had the freedom to achieve and to advance one's self socially and economically. The commitment to mobility, and its corollary a commitment to prevent the installation of a class system, is central to the American value system. Although statistics can be used to show that classes exist in the U.S., it is fair to say that such a system would never be legitimized. Furthermore, statistics also show that the U.S. is one of the most mobile societies in the world.

I want to close by making a number of observations. I opened the paper by



noting that "in any deep dimension of time" we are all immigrants (except the Red Indians). Is it true then, as one writer has suggested, that the only valid conclusion that can be reached about America is that it is diverse? As he writes "diversity can be shown to be the most fundamental of all American characteristics....Perhaps in today's world it is the most valuable trait Americans possess.' At one time, America was viewed as a melting pot. Immigrants would arrive, and they would be thrown into the melting pot. At some later date, they, or their next generation, would emerge from the pot as Americans. This concept of the melting pot is premised on the existence of a nation, which produced an unique citizen with unique values and characteristics. This was very much the nineteenth century's view of America. It has been severely challenged by the concept of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism argues that whatever America's values are, they are no more valuable than or superior to the values of some other culture. Therefore, we should accept the values and practices of other cultures, including their languages, and make no attempt to throw immigrants from other cultures into a melting pot. In other words, diversity should be the predominant value in this society. However, it seems to me logical that if you argue that the only valid characteristic that you can find in America is diversity, then you have a very hard time arguing that a separate nation exists. If all you have is diversity, then you cannot have unity. E pluribus unum becomes simply pluribus.

I don't think that most Americans are willing to accept the multicultural model for America, and I still think that most Americans would agree with the Jeffersonian concept of individualism with its unique set of values and characteristics. Man has "certain unalienable Rights"; "that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Further, I think that most Americans would agree that equality under the law and equality of opportunity and achievement are fundamental values in this society. There would be less agreement on the Jacksonian extension of what are fundamental American characteristics. The frontiersman - self-reliant, strong-willed, rugged, and largely uneducated

embodies values that some, but probably not a vast majority of Americans, would consider fundamental.

Nineteenth century Americans believed passionately that America was unique. The passion in this belief waned in the last century. The hierarchical structure of European societies has broken down somewhat, classes have become more firmly embedded in our society, the concept of equal opportunity and achievement has spread through much of the industrialized world. All these factors have contributed to the decline in Americans' belief that they live in a unique society. Still our President is reminding us that we have a special mission to spread freedom and liberty and democracy around the globe. It is very unclear how many Americans agree with this.

Finally, I want to make passing note of recent developments in the Netherlands. An outspoken and provocative film director, Theo van Gogh, was murdered in Amsterdam on the morning of November 2nd. A 26-year-old Dutch Moroccan apparently emptied a magazine of bullets into his victim, knifed him as he lay dying, and left a note stabbed into his body. The victim was an outspoken critic of Islam. His killer was a *jallaba*-clad Muslim immigrant and associate of a radical group that Dutch intelligence has been watching. The victim was killed because he had directed a film which featured a Muslim woman in a see-through burqa telling a story of abuse within her marriage; she had text from the Koran condoning family violence written on her naked body. The government labelled the murder an act against freedom of expression. The government condemnation has sparked a sharp debate in the Netherlands. To many Dutch, the idea of building a multicultural society has failed, and to admit immigrants who do not respect individual rights, such as freedom of expression, who do not believe in the concept of equal treatment of men and women, who do not believe that the legal and political systems should be secular, among other things, makes no sense whatsoever. Assuming Churchill was right, and there are common Anglo-American values and these values are embodied in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and in his concept of individualism and individual rights, then this debate in the

Netherlands is directly relevant to us. It is true that nearly every large influx of immigrants has been attacked as a threat to fundamental American values. The Roman Catholic Irish in the 1840's, the Eastern European Jews and Italian Catholics as part of the huge immigration between 1890 and 1915 were so attacked. However, I think it is fair to point out some distinctions between earlier groups and a few of the recent groups. First, earlier groups didn't attack us as one recent group did on 9/11. Second, earlier groups were largely made up of dissidents, rejectionists, and the oppressed. On 9/11, we were attacked by rejectionists and dissidents. We were attacked by the very people for whom we were once a haven. Perhaps, the time has come to question the words on the Stature of Liberty and to join the Dutch in a national debate on this issue.