

The American Character

Contributed by Erik D. Aker
Wednesday, 17 January 2007

What makes Americans tick? Answers from de Tocqueville to Obama.

American history—and its politics—is replete with references to the country's "national character." The Framers themselves hoped that America's pluralistic society would evolve into a shared political and social destiny, ultimately serving as a counterweight to the country's cultural diversity. But what of the "American character" today? The concept, however important to our shared destiny, continues to challenge those who wish to define it.

The list of observers is a long one: DeTocqueville, Frederic Jackson Turner, Margaret Mead, William Whyte and Gordon Allport have all tried their hand at explaining just what it is that makes Americans who they are. Depending upon whom you ask, Americans are great joiners or rugged individualists, optimists possessed by the pioneer spirit or "organization men" bent on conformity; decadent party animals or dedicated to puritan moral values, materialism and abundance. Whatever it actually is, it has always been—and continues to be—a political rallying cry. "I think that an effective politician has no problem talking about national character," argues political science Professor Anne Norton of the University of Pennsylvania. "There is a moment in representation where you are supposed to represent something. You really are a symbol, and part of your job is to represent not only a set of people, but also a set of policy positions and qualities. They need to do that. They need to talk about national character."

In other words, whether or not we have a clear sense of who we are, successful politicians must try to tell us. When pressed for examples, Norton offers a few: "Two early examples leap to mind: Jefferson and the shaping of agrarian democracy in the United States, and Jackson's turn to a mass politics, in which the politician himself embodies a kind of ordinary guy demeanor and is egalitarian in his practices and his daily life." According to Norton, Jackson's, "gestures like opening up the White House to working men: that was a real moment of change in the national character, where the national character becomes attached to a notion of America as fundamentally inhabited by ordinary people who are like one another."

Ordinary people

This "ordinary people" idea is common and powerful, and it appears in interesting ways. "When you think about it," Professor Norton argues, "that has an enormously profound and pervasive effect. Very wealthy people in the United States, when they build a house, they build a gigantic ranch house." This ranch house, Norton believes, is symbolic of the ordinariness that even the ultra-wealthy aspire to. "The desire to mark yourself out and develop refined tastes that set you off from the rest of the polity," she thinks "is still anathema in the United States."

At the very least, among politicians, appeals to ordinariness sound pretty familiar. How many public officials work harder than their opponents every election season to present themselves as just like everyone else? In 2004, for instance, John Kerry wind-surfed, snowboarded and rode Boston ferries in a struggle to craft himself as an ordinary guy. This, in response to George Bush's powerfully crafted persona of the wood-chopping, brush-clearing, pickup truck-driving rancher. The legacy of this "ordinary people" idea, then, is that it has become one of the most important for crafting our sense of the American character, and we want our leaders to be ordinary as well. This sense of the national character extends not only to elected officials but also to their policies, as well. For an example, consider the subject of food.

American attitudes toward food are currently undergoing dramatic changes: Wal-Mart is selling organic produce and milk, and fast food restaurants are struggling to redefine themselves. Policies like this, Professor Norton thinks "are really driven by the agrarian myth." In other words, it comes out of the celebration of the farmer as the most ordinary type of people we can be. Consequently, Norton argues, "We think something is deeply wrong if we're a nation of agribusinesses. We don't mind being a nation of small farms, but we don't want to be a nation of agribusinesses, and of course we are."

The divisions of ideology

Of course, the idea of Americans as a nation of ordinary people stands in direct contrast not only to the realities of our pluralism, but also to a more popular recent interpretation of the national character: Americans bitterly divided by ideological differences. Indeed, a new study in *American Psychologist* by John T. Jost, a professor of Psychology at NYU, may lend some psychological credence to the ever-widening divisions between liberal and conservative voters.

Jost argues that the red-blue divide is a powerful ideological construction that can be discerned in everything from the self-identification of political attitudes to the way in which people organize their bedrooms (conservatives are neat, while liberals are messy). Jost uses data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) as well as data from the recent studies of other psychologists. His own research looks at things like attitudes towards new experiences or fears of death (not to mention the bedroom surveys). In every instance, Jost concludes, ideological association with liberal or conservative values can be easily predicted and runs much deeper than we would probably like to admit.

"My colleagues and I discovered, for example," Jost writes, "that the bedrooms of conservatives were significantly more likely to contain organizational supplies such as calendars, postage stamps, and laundry baskets, whereas the bedrooms of liberals were more likely to contain art supplies, books, CDs, maps, and travel documents. Results such as these imply that left-right ideological differences permeate nearly every aspect of our public and private lives." In short, the red-blue difference runs so deep that there are distinct personality types corresponding to the different ideologies. Jost further concludes from this research that, "As a general rule, liberals are more open-minded in their pursuit of creativity, novelty, and diversity, whereas conservatives tend to pursue lives that are more orderly, conventional, and better organized."

American convergence

Still, there are quite a few opponents to Jost's idea of the competing red-state and blue-state characters. Barack Obama argues in his new book *The Audacity of Hope*, which takes its name from his 2004 speech, "We are becoming more, not less, alike. Most Republican strongholds are 40 percent Democrat, and vice versa. The political labels of liberal and conservative rarely track people's personal attributes."

Congressman Brian Baird of Washington agrees. "My experience has been, we do these red-to-blue things and there's a tendency to polarize. My experience has been that most of the voters I talk to, the majority in the middle, are actually quite tired of the parties bickering at each other and Democrats and Republicans fighting for party superiority."

Baird sees an example of this moderation in the uproar over the open primary in Washington.

In 2003, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decided that Washington's open primary was unconstitutional on the basis that it violated the political parties' right of free association. What followed was unanticipated backlash on the part of the electorate. "We lost that and it has been a very contentious issue in our state," argues Baird. "The fact that it is so contentious says to me that people like being able to vote for the person more than the party."

Congressman Baird gives a further example in the form of President Bush. "The fact that he ran as a uniter and was elected on that platform suggests that people would actually like to be united."

Matthew Dowd, lead strategist for Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's successful re-election campaign, argues a similar point to Senator Obama and Congressman Baird. In a recent interview with BBC News, Dowd argued, "Americans hate this partisan bitterness, they hate extremes. They feel more comfortable with leadership from the center." Dowd worked on Schwarzenegger's re-election campaign, but in 2004, he helped President Bush get re-elected. He would probably be hard-pressed to argue that Bush presented himself as a leader from the center.

What may make more sense, then, is not talking about the fuzzy center of the political spectrum, but the power of a national character. The above examples all return to the ordinary people narrative, and show the ordinary desire to pick and choose candidates not based on ideology, but with a kind of agrarian common sense.

Senator Obama's opposition to these red-blue differences is probably most vocalized in his speech at the Democratic National Committee Convention in 2004. "There are those who are preparing to divide us," he said to the conventioners, "the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America - there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America."

Yet, the vision of the United States that Obama is resisting is so pervasive that almost a hundred books have been lightheartedly and seriously dedicated to the subject since the 2000 election. If Americans are united around a national conception, what divides them into these two ideological camps?

In Congressman Baird's opinion, negative campaign advertising in part enforces the differences. "When you look at the ads that are run, those ads can do nothing but foster distrust and disrespect," he notes. Beyond that, Baird thinks, if we expect voters to be easily divided into two camps, we will be deluded by a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"It's the verbal equivalent of WWF," argues Baird, "and while WWF may be a popular spectator sport, people like to leave that in the ring. People expect these guys to smash each other over the head with chairs when they're in the wrestling ring, but they would like to see something better in politics and the problem is that consultants and candidates themselves tend to mistrust the voters." Worse than that, argues Baird, "They tend to appeal to only the lowest common denominator instead of our highest, most positive aspirations and ideals. This is self-reinforcing because to the extent that you do that, it lowers the standard."

In other words, sums up Baird, "The way we conduct our politics shapes the national character and in turn our perceptions of the national character shape the way we conduct politics." At the very least, the idea of a national character gives some hope that a unified populace is still possible, while preserving the strengths of a pluralistic and diverse society.

About Erik D. Aker

Erik D. Aker is a professor of humanities and freelance journalist from San Diego, California.