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## Chapter 1

# THE NATIONAL CHARACTER

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### INTRODUCTION

*What then is the American, this new man?*

CRÈVECOEUR

*To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education, and a career.*

GEORGE SANTAYANA

*France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still the quality of the idea, was harder to utter — it was the graves at Shiloh, and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.*

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

IT IS HARD ENOUGH to talk about the character of an individual; it is even harder to talk about the character of a nation. Yet Americans have been talking about their own for close to 200 years.

St. John de Crèvecoeur, the French-American farmer, posed the question — though he was not the first to do so — as early as 1782. "What then is the American, this new man?" he asked. Thousands — both natives and visitors — took turns at answering. The experience of coming to a "new" world that had no previous history, civilization, or institutions in the Western European sense — a "virgin" land both so-

cially and physically — produced a remarkable self-awareness. Since the beginning of their national existence, Americans have asked: "What are we? What does it mean to be an American?" They have set themselves off from the rest of the world (usually the European world from which they or their ancestors came) and have pondered the question of a national identity or "character." This self-questioning itself may be taken as a characteristic American trait.

At the beginning it was not universally conceded that the Americans had a distinct character. "The Americans cannot be said as yet to have formed a national character,"

said Joel Barlow in 1792, because they still followed the European ways of life. The Revolution had been political and not social; it had not shaken "the whole fabric of human opinions" and set up a whole new pattern of communal life. Hence, Barlow declared of the Americans, "though their government is American, their manners are European." He looked forward to their learning new ways from the revolutionary social changes and reformations of manners then going on in the European nations — not from the native scene.

Barlow's emphasis on the European component of the American inheritance and on the continuing European influence on American life and culture has been echoed by many historians and commentators down to the present day — in opposition to those who have emphasized the purely native aspects of American character. D. H. Lawrence, indeed, regarded this dependence on Europe as a sign that Americans had no character at all. He said of the American in 1922: "He was a European when he first went over the Atlantic. He is in the main a recreant European still. . . . For the American spiritually stayed at home in Europe. The spiritual home of America was and still is Europe. . . . Your heaps of gold are only so many muck-heaps, America, and will remain so till you become a reality to yourselves."

Charles J. Ingersoll prefigured the European skepticism about the existence of a peculiarly American character. "The question there," he wrote in 1810, "is whether they [the Americans] have any national character at all; and the common impression is that they have not." Most Europeans thought that the Americans had displayed a noble character during the Revolution but had degenerated into characterlessness in the easy peacetime that followed. Such foreign judgments of American character have continued to be expressed down through the life of the nation and, when embodied in books,

have even sold well in the United States, as well as abroad.

By the end of the nineteenth century it was commonly, although not universally, said that the Americans possessed a national character. Henry Adams, looking back at American history from the vantage point of the 1880s, maintained that 1815 was the decisive year — the watershed — in the making of the unique American. Up until that time it was not clear that the United States would follow its own path and be distinct from the older societies of the Western world. After that time, said Adams, it was clear that the Americans would set up "a single homogeneous society" over a vast expanse of territory, peopled by "a new variety of men." In his view, it was because the United States constituted "one uniform and harmonious system" of common life — in contrast with the discord among the European states — that national character became the central theme of American history, as it could not elsewhere. In the United States, Adams declared, it was the common or typical that was significant, not the individual or heroic, as in Europe. American popular heroes were merely representative types of the American character. (The same point had been made by Tocqueville half a century before.) In contrast to Barlow, Adams thought that if there were to be any borrowing in the future, it would be Europe that would imitate America and not the other way around.

The Englishman James Bryce, writing in 1888, also remarked on the uniform and typical aspects of American life and character, as compared with those of Europe. He concluded that generalizations about "the national type" could be made more certainly about the United States than about the European nations. Despite regional, social, and intellectual variations, according to Bryce, there was a basic similarity of thought and action, of attitudes and tastes throughout the country that could not be

duplicated anywhere in Europe. Bryce saw this remarkable uniformity, or "happy monotony," of American life as owing both to the novel circumstances of the new nation's beginnings and growth and to the permanency of the external aspects of American life.

Yet many observers, from George Washington's day to our own, have nevertheless denied that there is any common character in American life. "There is no uniformity to the character of the Americans," declared Moreau de Saint-Méry in 1798, although he then proceeded to list many general or universal traits, most of them unflattering. Even in that comparatively homogeneous era, long before the great flood of immigration around the turn of the century, Moreau noted that "one of the factors that make American character hard to understand is the circumstance that [the Americans] originated in different nations and have kept some of the marks of that original influence." Other observers were baffled by the seeming contradictions and clashes of interest between the various sections, economic classes, and political movements of the early era (up to about 1837). To them the United States seemed inchoate, unformed, not all of a piece.

André Maurois, another French observer, still had this feeling of uncertainty a century and a half after Moreau. The first impression of the foreign visitor, Maurois noted in 1939, was of "an immense country made up of overpopulated islands sprinkled among the prairies, the forests, and the deserts," with "hardly any common life" or interests. However, on mature reflection, Maurois concluded that there *was* a "unity of habits and thoughts . . . innumerable common memories and brotherly thoughts . . . a common faith" among these variegated breeds and classes living on their separated islands — in short, a common American character.

Not everyone concurred, of course. The

twentieth-century American economic historian Fred Shannon dismissed all of the talk about an American character as "highfalutin nonsense." Instead, he said, there were 162 million American characters — one for each person in the country (when he wrote, in 1952). The point had been made before, notably by philosopher George Santayana. "I speak of the American in the singular," he wrote in his *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), "as if there were not millions of them, north and south, east and west, of both sexes, of all ages, and of various races, professions, and religions. Of course, the one American I speak of is mythical; but to speak in parables is inevitable in such a subject, and it is perhaps as well to do so frankly."

Let us assume, then, that there *is* such a thing as an American character, leaving aside the question of whether any actual American typifies all of the characteristics that are said to make up the breed. In short, what kind of fellow is this mythical "American"?

#### 1. EQUALITY, SELF-RELIANCE, AND CONFORMITY

ALMOST ALL OBSERVERS of the American scene have agreed that equality of some sort has been the central value in the American way of life. Foreigners in early times observed the relative absence of social ranks and distinctions, as compared with Europe, and visitors continued to remark on this down to the twentieth century. It was not only the fact of equality that was so important; this might have been ascribed to the particular conditions of a new country in its early, raw stages. What was even more significant was that equality was held to be a supreme value in the popular consciousness.

Equality emerged early as the main element in the American ethos. This country was dedicated, as Lincoln said in the Get-



From "The Bookman"; courtesy, Library of Congress

Walt Whitman inciting the Bird of Freedom to soar

tysburg Address, to the proposition that all men are created equal — despite the class system and attitudes originally brought over from Europe, despite aristocratic tendencies both North and South during the pre-Jacksonian era, despite the grim fact of chattel slavery. The core-value of equality was expressed in the pervasive manners and social tone of American life for most white Americans. According to Francis J. Grund, in 1839, those Americans who wanted to express fully and freely their pretensions to gentility and contempt for the masses had to go to Europe to satisfy their desires.

Crèvecoeur, in his pioneer description of the American character, emphasized that in America was a new society that, unlike any in Europe, had no class distinctions and titles. Here was a land where every man

could be free, independent, and respected. Here the farm hand sat down at the table as an equal of the farmer who employed him. Here everyone worked to serve his own interests and not those of a master class, with all the bowing and scraping that such service involved. Here, according to Crèvecoeur, almost anyone who wanted to, and who worked hard enough, could purchase land and become an independent freeholder — and thereby enjoy fully the status of "this new man," the free and equal American.

Equality, according to Tocqueville's classic description of American democracy in 1835, was the central value and attitude in the American character. It was not only "the peculiar and preponderant fact with which all others are connected," but "the ruling passion of men . . . is the love of this equality." Americans valued equality, they chose it, they cherished it, they demanded it.

What Tocqueville called "equality of condition" did not connote economic equality. He and others noted that the making of money was highly valued in American society — and that there were richer and poorer here, too (though, unlike Europe, the great majority had a moderate sufficiency). The equality of condition lay in the fact that in ordinary human relations the wealthier had no sanction to treat the poorer as underlings nor to expect a show of deference from them.

With equality went independence or self-reliance. It was on this quality of character that Thomas Jefferson rested his hope for a sound and virtuous democracy. It was this characteristic that was the hallmark of the frontiersman, the trapper, or scout. Both Jefferson's farmers and the pioneers described by James Hall, Timothy Flint, and James Finley were earlier versions of a highly valued American type. "This is a country of *self-made men*, than which noth-

ing better could be said of any state of society," noted Calvin Colton in 1844. This was a country, in the estimation of early commentators, where a man's achievement depended only on his own powers and application, not on inherited privileges or the favor and support of the privileged — or of social and political institutions.

Some writers emphasized the aspect of *self-centeredness* in this characteristic, what Tocqueville was one of the first to call "individualism" — independence from others. Individualists, he said, feel that "they owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands." Others emphasized the note of *self-realization* as well, the fulfillment of individual potentialities, becoming a self, counting for something in one's own right. "From nothing to start into being," said Crèvecoeur of the transformation that occurred when a European became an American.

Still others internalized self-reliance and removed it from the realm of external achievement. This was true of the Transcendentalists, such as Emerson, whose main moral teaching may be said to depend on the virtue of self-reliance. His was not a call to become a success in the world and make one's way in society, but rather to look inward to one's own special quality and way of seeing the world — to one's own uniqueness. It was a call to intellectual and spiritual independence and against the way of the crowd, against imitating the words and thoughts of others. This was true too of Thoreau, who went to the woods "to front only the essential facts of life," not to compete in either the agrarian or commercial ways of making a living or gaining a success.

The voices of Emerson and Thoreau, however, were not intended as celebrations

of the common manifestations of the American character in their day, but rather as protests against them. According to many observers, writing at various times, the American emphasis on self-reliance in economic achievement was coupled with a marked conformity and docility in thought and opinion — or at least in their expression. "I know no country in which there is so little true independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America," said Tocqueville. The sanctions against such independence were not physical or legal, he noted, but social ostracism or disapproval. In America the man who spoke out and was ostracized felt guilty himself and subsided "into silence, as if he was tormented by remorse for having spoken the truth." Tocqueville had the impression that "all the minds of the Americans were formed upon one model" and that rarely if ever were there true individuals.

This remarkable disposition of Americans toward conformity and caution in the expression of opinions, coupled with their dread of being regarded as peculiar and dissimilar, was also remarked on by Grund, Bryce, Harriet Martineau, Max Weber, and other noted European visitors. Apparently this docility and submissiveness to majority opinion was a fairly constant characteristic, at least from the early 1800s on, though some observers looked back longingly to an earlier time when, they asserted, Americans spoke their minds. So Tocqueville in the 1830s spoke of "that manly candor and that masculine independence of opinion which frequently distinguished the Americans in former times." Sociologist David Riesman and his associates, who thought they had discovered a brand-new tendency toward "other-direction" in American life in the 1950s, pointed back to the nineteenth century when Americans, they were sure, were "inner-directed" and nonconformist. Historian Henry Steele Commager held that

nonconformity — at least in conduct, if not in opinions — was permitted while America was still a rural country, but declined by the end of the nineteenth century, save in the South, “where the tradition of individualism was strongest and where an inferior class indulged its masters.”

The causes of this tendency toward conformity and its role in various aspects of American life have been discussed frequently by interpreters of the American character. Most of them have viewed conformity as derived from the basic value of equality. How, then, is it to be coupled with self-reliance or individualism, another trait derived from equality? Can real contraries, truly opposite characteristics, go together in a national character? Psychologist Erik H. Erikson asserted in 1950 that such opposites or “polarities” do exist in the American character and in all national characters — indeed, are typical of national character. Other interpreters prefer to talk of “contrasts,” which are not necessarily contradictory.

Another such contrast or polarity is provided by the presence of cooperation as well as competition among the American characteristics and values. Since the beginning, Americans have been impelled to compete for the prizes, material and otherwise, offered by a free and equal society that was not restricted by traditional or legal privileges and prerogatives. But they have also demonstrated a remarkable spirit of cooperation and a capacity for voluntary association in all kinds of practical and socially useful activities; and they have placed a high value on cooperativeness as opposed to mere self-concern and self-interest.

“In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America,” Tocqueville observed in 1835. He saw the spirit of association fostered in infancy, demonstrated on

the school playground, and exemplified in the way Americans organized spontaneously to handle a traffic obstruction (long before the days of the transcontinental truck drivers). Americans, he said, hoped to accomplish almost every kind of thing “through the combined powers of individuals” united into an association. Things that were done elsewhere by the government or powerful persons, Tocqueville claimed, were done in the United States by voluntary associations. (Voluntary association, however, was also a marked English characteristic, and was probably brought over by the Anglo-American colonists.)

H. C. Carey, writing in 1848, pointed to the house-building bee as a typical example of the American “habit of voluntary association.” People got together to help one another build a house, a church, a school, or a hospital, and establish banks, insurance companies, cultural associations, temperance societies, fraternal organizations, and all the various groups that constituted American society, edified it, and made it go.

It has been observed that Americans not only joined organizations to get needed things done, to do good, and to reform the world, but also just to get together. If Americans were individualists, they were apparently gregarious individualists, “a nation of joiners,” who found in their fraternal societies a satisfaction that in older communities was provided by more traditional forms and symbols.

It should be noted at this point that the centrality of equality, with its attendant qualities, is part of an ideal model of the American character. It is an element in the image Americans have of themselves and that other peoples have of them. This central value, however, has often been flagrantly flouted in practice, politically, socially, and economically — in the treatment of racial minorities, in the Southern social system both before and after the Civil War, in

a hidden elitism, class system, or "pecking order" supposedly permeating American society in the twentieth century. The key to the executive washroom became one of the symbols of the hierarchical order and privileges in the "managerial" industrial system that came to dominance after World War II. And social analysts of the period pointed to an "American business aristocracy" and a "Protestant Establishment" as occupying the top layers of American society and having special privileges and opportunities in the real world of social and economic life in mid-twentieth-century America. [For much more extensive discussion of several of the subjects touched on in this section, see Chs. 2: FRONTIER, 9: EQUALITY, 10: PLURALISM, 11: INDIVIDUALISM, 12: MINORITIES, and 22: RELIGION.]

## 2. MATERIALISM, PRACTICALITY, AND OPTIMISM

FROM THE BEGINNING, Americans had to work hard to wrest a living and a civilization from the wilderness. The sturdy yeoman of American fact and dream has always been a working farmer, not a country gentleman. The habit of hard work, however, was regarded not merely as a necessity in the struggle for existence but also as an intrinsic value, an attribute of good character. "Not only is labor not dishonorable among such a people," said Tocqueville, "but it is held in honor; the prejudice is not against it, but in its favor." Productive work was expected not only of the tiller of the soil and the urban workingman but of all classes of society, including the established and well-to-do.

"Idleness is a condition so unrecognized and unrespected with us," observed A. J. Downing in 1848, "that the few professing it find themselves immediately thrown out of the great machine of active life which constitutes American society. Hence, an idle

man is a cipher. Work he must, either with his head, his hands, or his capital; work in some mode or other, or he is a *dethroned sovereign*. The practical and busy spirit of our people repudiates him." Even the Southern planters ran productive business enterprises, rather than playing at being aristocratic lords of the manor.

Nature, as a consequence, was looked upon as something to be exploited for human use and gain, rather than as a beautiful backdrop or a means of communion with the cosmos. The land, for most Americans, was something to be "mined" rather than to be handled with loving care — hence the ensuing wastefulness of natural resources remarked on by so many writers. The emphasis was on productivity — here and now.

This emphasis and its tangible results, in material goods and a high standard of living, brought forth almost from the beginning the charge of "materialism" — that Americans idolized money and material well-being. This stereotype was a favorite, not only of foreigners, who might have been envious, but also of native Americans. It was Washington Irving, in 1836, who coined the phrase "the almighty dollar," and described it as "that great object of universal devotion throughout the land." It was generally asserted, with or without invidious comment, that Americans were, in Alexander Hamilton's words, "absorbed in the pursuits of gain." In America everyone, it seemed, was interested in getting ahead, making more and more money, and becoming more and more comfortable.

Tocqueville ascribed the American pursuit of wealth and comfort to the basic principle of equality. In an equal and open society, he said, the main, indeed, the only prizes were physical comforts and material wealth. Hence the chief passion derived from equality is "the love of well-being," the pursuit of "physical prosperity." He saw this love

of wealth as "a principle or accessory motive, at the bottom of all that the Americans do," that accounted for the monotonous uniformity of their character and social life. "I know of no country, indeed," he said, "where the love of money has taken stronger hold of the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is expressed for the theory of permanent equality of property." So the equality of social conditions, according to Tocqueville, fostered the inequality of wealth by stimulating its pursuit.

The typical American, in this view, is the businessman, and America is best described as a business civilization. Francis Parkman lamented in 1869 that in America "the material basis of civilization is accepted for the entire structure," and that "money-making is the only serious business of life" for most people. Calvin Coolidge put it more tersely and approvingly in the 1920s, when he declared that "the business of America is business." However, even if this was accepted as an accurate description, it did not necessarily follow that Americans were impelled only by materialistic motives, by mere greed. Coolidge himself added immediately after that famous remark that idealism was the main motivation of American activity. And many observers have noted the romantic adventurousness with which Americans have approached business enterprise.

It was a naturalized U.S. citizen, Hugo Münsterberg, who in 1904 provided one of the most cogent defenses of the American passion for economic gain. The American, he said, is not primarily interested in accumulating money, in being wealthy, but rather in money as a measure of his ability and productivity. He scorns money that is not made through his own work or capacity — money from dowries, for instance. He is also more interested in the getting — the pursuit — than in the having. "He would not for any price give up the occupation of making money."

Nor, contrary to what Tocqueville said, is the American interested primarily in material comforts, according to Münsterberg. "Material pleasures are less sought after for themselves in the New World than in the Old. It always strikes the European as remarkable how very industrious American society is, and how relatively little bent on pleasure." The American gets his pleasure out of working, using his abilities, exercising initiative — not out of spending money and having a good time — in this estimate made in 1904.

Finally, declared Münsterberg, the American values economic activity as an intrinsic good, as the creative source of new values, as an original contribution to civilization. "It is, therefore, fundamentally false to stigmatize the American as a materialist, and to deny his idealism. . . . The economic life means to the American a realizing of efforts which are in themselves precious." In this view, the main business of America has been business because the main work of Americans has been the economic development of a new continental country to a position of world dominance and a state of unexampled prosperity for the average individual.

Santayana, trying in 1920 to assay the balance between materialism and idealism in the American character, concluded that the American is a practical idealist, "an idealist working on matter," with a great enthusiasm for getting things done in a workmanlike manner. In this zestful pursuit, the American develops a "moral materialism, for in his dealings with material things he can hardly stop to enjoy their sensible aspects, which are ideal, nor proceed at once to their ultimate uses, which are ideal too." Actually, he declared, it is not money that the American is obsessed with: "To my mind the most striking expression of his materialism is his singular preoccupation with quantity. . . . This love of quantity





Library of Congress

"A Compulsory Religion"; drawing by Art Young from "The Masses," 1912

often has a silent partner, which is diffidence as to quality. The democratic conscience . . . reduces all things as far as possible to the common denominator of quantity."

One result of this cast of mind, Bryce noted in 1888, was "to apply a direct practical test to men and measures; to assume that the men who have got on fastest are the smartest men, and that a scheme which seems to pay well deserves to be supported." "When he asked what was a man worth," observed Commager of the nineteenth-century American, "he meant material worth, and he was impatient of any but the normal yardstick. His solution for most problems was therefore quantitative — and education, democracy, and war all yielded to the sovereign remedy of numbers."

One of the outstanding expressions of the

American's practical attitude was his remarkable resourcefulness and ingenuity with machines — "Yankee ingenuity," as it was often called. The task of cultivating and settling a continent called forth a stock of practical inventiveness that had been untapped and unrevealed under European conditions.

The pioneers were as dependent on this quality as on physical endurance and bravery for their survival. The farmers were interested in laborsaving machinery from the first years of the republic. And at the same time that the virtue of hard work was being emphasized, Americans were demanding and inventing mechanical devices to perform practically all the operations that had been done for thousands of years by human hands and muscles. Seed-sowers, cotton gins, harvesters, milling machines, eggbeat-

ers, shoeshiners, and power saws — anything that could save human effort and time and afford increased productivity was avidly sought and usually found.

“The Broxodent toothbrush can do a job you can’t do: it brushes more than 7,000 strokes a minute. Up and down. It would take over half an hour to do that by hand. What’s more, it’s better for your gums than ordinary toothbrushing.” So read a 1965 advertisement for an electrically powered toothbrush, an advertisement that was quite in the spirit of what Ingersoll, in 1823, called “the philosophy of comfort,” in which, he said, the Americans surpassed all other peoples.

With this orientation toward productive activity, economic enterprise, and practical ingenuity went the spirit of optimism and faith in unending progress. Belief in progress and the perfectibility of man was among the common stock of ideas of the eighteenth-century European culture that early American intellectual leaders shared. But in America the belief in progress was more than a philosophical idea; it was also the result of the tremendous advances that ordinary Americans experienced in their own lifetimes. They witnessed constant technical improvements, the mastery and mining of nature, and the creation of a society free from the “artificial” and “irrational” barriers of the past. Effort was tangibly consummated in individual and national achievement. The term “effort-optimism,” invented by a twentieth-century anthropologist, aptly describes this American characteristic. With it went a positive valuation of novelty and mobility (or “motility”) — a preference for change rather than permanence.

Here again we must recall that we are setting up an ideal model and remember instead the “polarities” in the American character — the coexistence of opposite qualities. Thus there is a characteristic American pessimism, too, which is expressed in the

literary works of Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, Faulkner, Nathaniel West, Joseph Heller, and others. It has been the expected American way to be a “booster” and to “keep smiling,” but underneath the sunny exteriors, if serious literature provides an image of the inward state, is a good deal of darkness, gloom, cynicism, bitterness, and disillusion.

As for the solemn devotion to productive activity, with little thought of pleasure and relaxation, many changes took place in the half-century after Münsterberg made his observations. The American who found all his joy in working hard, producing things, and making money was still a familiar figure, but the ever increasing expenditures on commercialized amusement, including gambling and spectator sports, showed that “fun” was strongly contending with productive work as the most prized activity. For many Americans, amusement, play, pleasure, and consumption had become the main aims of life. Moreover, by the 1960s a significant number of young people, joined by some older persons, were deliberately dropping out of the traditional work-and-production, striving-and-competition game as not worth the candle. These “hippies” sought instead a life of personal, emotional, sexual, and spiritual fulfillment, with a bare minimum of material goods and services. [For further discussion of some of the matters treated in this section, see Chs. 15: FREEDOM OF ENTERPRISE, 18: STANDARD OF LIVING, and 24: PROGRESS.]

### 3. CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL ATTITUDES

OBSERVERS OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER have maintained from the beginning that the orientation toward practical achievement was accompanied by a lack of interest in, or even downright hostility to, intellectual and aesthetic creativity. It would not surprise

Tocqueville to discover that the only original American contributions to philosophy have been "pragmatism" and "instrumentalism," philosophies that emphasize the practical utility of thought. Even where theory was intended to facilitate productive activity, as in agriculture, Americans expressed an earthy scorn for "book learning" or "book farming," although they welcomed the labor-saving devices provided by mechanical inventors. "Our greatest genius in pure science, Josiah Willard Gibbs . . . lived out his life in public and professional obscurity," historian Richard Hofstadter noted in 1962, while the inventive genius Thomas Edison became a national folk hero.

From Tocqueville's time down to the present day, writers have ascribed this non-speculative or antispeculative cast of the American mind to the basic conditions and prized activities of American life. The "valued personality type" among Americans, noted Florence Kluckhohn in 1952, is the man who gets things done, not the man who thinks things through — the man of action rather than the man of reflection. This means the man of economic action, the businessman, who is seen as the ideally "practical, hardheaded, and efficient" type as over against the ineffective and scorned "long-hair" or "egghead" — the scholar or professor. The "urge for economic activity" has been and "still remains a chief characteristic of Americans," declared Mrs. Kluckhohn; hence, the nonuseful realms of art and intellect were assigned to women and their culture clubs.

Tocqueville thought that while the Americans of his time had to concentrate on material productivity, leaving the task of creative work in the arts and sciences to their English cousins, the day would come when the works of the mind would attain a luster among Americans. Then, under the equal-competitive conditions of American society, the more enterprising would be encouraged to find fame and fortune through cultural



Courtesy, Herb Lubart, "The Washington Post"

"You read books, eh?" Herb Lubart cartoon, 1949

pursuits. Similarly, Bryce, a half century later, closed his rather negative estimate of America's "creative intellectual power" with the assertion "that for a nation so abounding in fervid force there is reserved a fruitful career in science and letters, no less than in whatever makes material prosperity."

One of the best indications of the American attitude toward intellectual and aesthetic values, and indeed of the American character as a whole, is the American's attitude toward education. "Education was his religion," Commager noted in 1950, "and to it he paid the tribute both of his money and his affection; yet, as he expected his religion to be practical and pay dividends, he expected education to prepare for life — by which he meant, increasingly, jobs and professions."

The devotion of Americans to education, and eventually to public education for all children, is a remarkable phenomenon, unrivaled in world history. Even the poorest communities, on the outskirts of civilization, with hardly anything to spend on things not directly concerned with physical surviv-

al, made sacrifices to establish schools for their children. An unexampled extension of literacy and elementary mental skills characterized the new nation. If the foreign observer "singles out the learned, he will be astonished to find how few they are," Tocqueville observed in 1835, "but if he counts the ignorant, the American people will appear to be the most enlightened in the world."

Yet Tocqueville noted that the main emphasis and aim of American education was practical — to make good citizens out of the students rather than to develop their ability for abstract thought, or to impart an understanding of nonuseful culture and art. A study of schoolbooks in the nineteenth century shows that they inculcated the simple moral virtues and denigrated intellect, art, and learning as fads and frills of corrupt European culture. There was also a demand that the schools, including even institutions of higher learning, as a Yale report of 1828 shows, be transformed to fit "the business character of the nation" and to prepare the students for practical industrial vocations.

John Dewey, in 1899, opposed the idea of a merely technical education for the lower classes "as a narrowly practical tool with which to get bread and butter enough to eke out a restricted life." Yet he welcomed the contemporary denigration of "the merely intellectual life, the life of scholarship and learning," and defended the introduction of the manual arts into the public schools as a broadening rather than a narrowing of education. Instead of restricting education to a narrowly academic curriculum, he urged that we should "introduce into educational processes the activities which appeal to those whose dominant interest is to do and to make," and relegate "the merely symbolic and formal to a secondary position." Further, in the tradition earlier observed by Tocqueville, he sought to make the school "an embryonic community life," which would prepare the child directly for partici-

pation in the larger society, and also to reform it — to make it "worthy, lovely, and harmonious."

Herbert Croly, on the other hand, criticized the American faith in education in 1909, not because it was narrowly pragmatic and anti-intellectual but because it was unrealistic and simple-minded about how cultural uplift is obtained. Hardheaded and practical businessmen, he said, proceed on the naïve assumption that culture can be created by "a combination of good intentions, organizations, words, and money." In education, as in religion and welfare, according to Croly, the American is convinced that he can accomplish ideal aims by material means — that heroes, saints, and artists can be manufactured through the spending of money, direct action, and efficient organization.

But, Croly noted, the actual social milieu in which these "subsidized good intentions" are expressed is inimical to the fostering of art and culture. Nowhere else in the Western world, he observed, was the highly educated man held in such low regard. "This fact," he concluded, "is in itself a sufficient commentary on the reality of American faith in education." Similarly, Commager said of nineteenth-century Americans: "No people was more avid of college degrees, yet nowhere else were intellectuals held in such contempt or relegated to so inferior a position; and in America alone the professor — invariably long-haired and absentminded — was an object of humor."

Yet the twentieth century was not necessarily fated to repeat the nineteenth, and there were indications that the hopes expressed by Tocqueville and Bryce for a later development of American culture were being, to some extent, fulfilled. Commager himself asserted that "within a century and a half of the founding of the republic" America had taken the "indisputable lead in science, medicine, law, education, and the social sciences and made contributions of

lasting merit to art, architecture, literature, and philosophy." Walt Rostow noted in 1957 the rising intellectual level of American life between World Wars I and II, as indicated by the increased amount of schooling, an inferred elevation in "the whole realm of public taste, opinion, and manners," and, notably, "a sharp increase in the American contribution to theoretical concepts in both the physical and the social sciences." And Hofstadter began the final chapter of his *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963) with the guardedly hopeful words: "Anti-intellectualism in various forms continued to pervade American life, but at the same time intellect has taken on a new and more positive meaning and intellectuals have come to enjoy more acceptance, and, in some ways, a more satisfactory position." [For a different treatment of several of the points discussed in this section, see Chs. 21: EDUCATION and 23: THE ARTS.]

#### 4. CHANGE IN THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

HAS THE AMERICAN CHARACTER changed in recent years — say, since World War I? Is it likely to change in the foreseeable future? Have essential traits been retained, though expressed in new forms, or have some of them been dropped and replaced by entirely new traits, and has a distinctively new set of characteristics emerged?

The decisive cause of American uniqueness in the past, according to almost all commentators, was the unique physical and social setting provided by the New World. The fact of a really new, open, and empty land, without any previous social forms, traditions, or barriers, has generally been considered the most important factor in the making of the American character. All of the traits outlined in the above sections have been ascribed to this basic "frontier" situation. However, most interpreters have

not spoken of the wilderness as the only formative influence in shaping American character. Even Frederick Jackson Turner and his followers modified the original, extreme expression of their theory of the influence of the frontier on American history.

After all, Latin America too was originally almost all open land and wilderness, and it too was settled by Europeans (though they faced more Indians and a more advanced native culture), yet the spirit, attitude, and culture of the new Latin-American nations are quite different from those of the United States. Despite the various "democratic" revolutions that have occurred, the South American nations retain a feudal, authoritarian character and a culture closer to that of Europe than to that of the United States. The Russian eastward advance on the Siberian frontier offers another example of similar conditions with vastly different results. The particular kinds of people who settled North America, their special cultural and political orientation, and their special, dominant spiritual tendencies, such as Puritanism, must also therefore count heavily among the causative factors of the American character. Both the people — with their cast of mind and stock of key ideas — and the physical setting must be taken into account.

The particular new land to which these particular people came favored the development of a comparatively classless society, marked by economic enterprise and abundance and by an optimistic attitude toward life's problems. The conditions of frontier and agrarian existence, as well as of commercial competition, put a premium on individual resourcefulness, industriousness, and boldness. The setting encouraged an openness to change, mobility, and novelty, a practical, operational cast of mind, and an expectation of plenty and fulfillment as the result of exertion. The down-to-earth realism in practical affairs and the easy and open intercourse among persons were natu-

rally balanced by a downgrading of speculative and aesthetic qualities and by what Bryce called "irreverence" for superior wisdom and knowledge.

There have been many changes in at least the outward appearance of American life in nearly two centuries of national existence. Have there been comparable internal changes in the American character? When the frontier disappeared forever, the farmer became a vanishing American, and a solid structure of economic and social institutions confronted the individual American. Did his character change at the same time?

The majority of historians and social scientists who take the concept of an American national character seriously have said no. A small and influential school of interpreters, represented mainly by Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and William H. Whyte, Jr., has said yes. This school emphasizes what it considers the almost total modern docility of Americans to group thought and feeling, as compared with an assumedly more independent attitude in previous eras. Thus Riesman contended in 1952 that the transformation of American society between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries resulted in a significant change in American character. This change was from the "inner-directed," achievement-oriented, self-reliant individual to the "other-directed," service-oriented, cooperative individual — the good "team" man.

Social scientists and historians such as Seymour M. Lipset and Carl N. Degler have vigorously challenged this thesis. The writings of foreign observers in the nineteenth century demonstrated, they said, that Americans were always "other-directed" and remarkably submissive to the opinions of the community. In a society that was both egalitarian and competitive, people were anxious not to offend, to keep the goodwill of others, and not to stick out as conspicuous deviates in opinions or man-

ners. According to Degler, even the nineteenth-century American captain of industry, who is traditionally supposed to have had an inner-directed, "public-be-damned" attitude, actually worried about conciliating the public and not arousing its antagonism. Degler saw "a marked continuity" in the political, social, and economic practices and the social characters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Lipset, the pattern of permissiveness in child-rearing and education, which Riesman thought to be characteristic of twentieth-century, other-directed America, was established in the nineteenth century and was remarked on constantly by foreign travelers at that time.

Lipset's main contention was that basic values shape a nation's character and way of life, and that these remain essentially the same under changing social conditions. In the case of America, the equality-uniformity axis, observed by Tocqueville and a host of others in the past, was still the decisive factor in the mid-twentieth century, rather than a new "managerial" system of dealing with economic affairs. Thus, according to Lipset, a nation with a decided character, just like an individual, could be expected to react and adjust in characteristic fashion to social, economic, and technological changes.

Erik Erikson, in 1950, saw the American identity as historically characterized by a conflict between a permanent set of principles, formulated by an "intellectual and political aristocracy," and a set of changing slogans, propagated by the press and public opinion, to suit "a powerful mobocracy." A dynamic and rich polarity, rather than a uniform sameness, has typified American life — on the one hand, Thomas Jefferson, on the other, Joseph McCarthy, both of them typically American. "The problems of present-day America," said Henry Bamford Parkes in 1947, "are due largely to certain contradictions that were always inherent in the American cultural pattern but that did

not become acute until the twentieth century."

As America entered the final third of the twentieth century and found itself in a position analogous to that of the great world empires of the past, the question of whether it would retain its historic national character was increasingly asked. With the daily threat of nuclear annihilation, the claim of communism to the loyalty of the masses of the world, and their own military involvement in colonial areas, could Americans still retain their optimism, their belief in endless progress, their attitude that all men are basically equal and have the right to govern themselves as they see fit?

In an urbanized and industrial society, where farming was no longer the national way of life, what was to become of the virtues previously associated with the agrarian tradition? Would hard work be supplanted by "fun" as a prime value, or would the old habits flower in constructive social and cultural activities? Would the crusty independence and self-reliance of the Yankee yeoman be supplanted as an ideal by the amenable submissiveness of the "team-player" and a mimicry of the tastes and ideas inculcated by mass communications in an electronic age? Or would the so-called agrarian virtues be expressed in another form by experienced and city-cultured workers and idealistic and astute urban intellectuals, who would still demand and expect freedom, equality, and opportunity as essential ingredients of the American way of life? Could the combination of self-reliance and cooperation that had been exemplified in times past on the frontier be repeated in a new form under new conditions in a new day? Or were Americans bound to become anonymous particles of a giant, bureaucratized, computerized, social machine?

All over the world vast changes in the patterns of everyday life and possibly even of "temperament" were being wrought by



Courtesy, "The Wall Street Journal"

"I'm not sure whether I need a calm-down pill or a pep-up drink"; cartoon from "Sorry — No Budget"

social and technological revolutions of a momentous character. Henry Adams' prophecy had proved correct and the world was becoming more and more like America, the model in material and technical matters equally for the old highly cultured and the new, raw, communist countries. Could America itself remain unaffected by the new revolutions in the techniques of economic and social activities — revolutions that went to the very core of thought, planning, and decision, and very likely would abolish the conditions that had once fostered the prized American virtues?

The traditional American ways and attitudes were being challenged, if not reversed. There almost seemed to be a new culture among some of the most respectable segments of American society — which some had dubbed a "fun morality." Puritanism, which almost every foreign visitor had been able to observe, seemed to have been pushed into the background, or at least seriously threatened by the new wave of sexual candor and permissiveness — the so-called sexual revolution. And the old individualistic ethic had apparently been replaced by

new social and economic attitudes and methods since the New Deal era of the 1930s. Yet it must be noted that a Barry Goldwater or a Ronald Reagan, appealing to the old-time morality and social philosophy, could draw surprisingly fervent support from millions of nuclear-age Americans in the 1960s.

What would happen to the American character in these changing circumstances was still open to discussion. One could side with those who believed in an essential

character that would adjust to and master these new conditions while still remaining the same. Or one could side with those who believed that the new technical, social, and cultural revolutions had already changed and would go on changing the American character in a significant way, and that something really new and different was emerging. [For discussion of other topics that might have been treated in this chapter — for example, the character of American women — see Ch. 20: FAMILY.]