

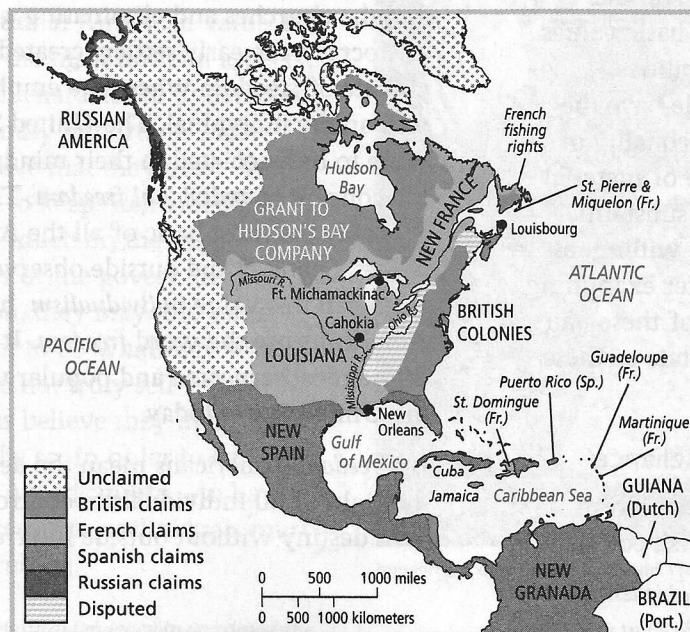
THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL AMERICAN VALUES: RACIAL, ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS, AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

- 1 From the beginning of the history of the United States there has been diversity—Native Americans throughout the North American continent, Spanish settlers in the Southwest and in Florida, French missionaries and fur traders along the Mississippi River, black slaves brought from African countries, Dutch settlers in New York, Germans in Pennsylvania, and of course the British colonists, whose culture eventually provided the language and the foundation for the political and economic systems that developed in the United States.
- 2 Most early Americans recognized this diversity, or pluralism, as a fact of life. The large variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious groups meant that accepting diversity was the only practical choice, even if some people were not enthusiastic about it, or were even threatened by it.

However, in time, many Americans came to see strength in their country's diversity. Today, there is widespread recognition of the value of cultural pluralism, particularly among young people.

- 3 When we examine the system of basic values that emerged in the late 1700s and began to define the American character, we must remember this context of cultural pluralism. How could a nation of such enormous diversity produce a recognizable national identity?
- 4 John Zogby, an American pollster who surveys public opinion, says that what holds the United States together is that "we all share a common set of values that make us American. . . . We are defined by the rights we have. . . . Our rights are our history, why the first European settlers came here and why millions more have come here since."

NEW WORLD COLONIES IN 1750



Source: <http://web.uccs.edu/~history/index/151maps.html>.

5 Historically, the United States has been viewed as “the land of opportunity,” attracting immigrants from all over the world. The opportunities they believed they would find in America and the experiences that most people actually had when they arrived nurtured a unique set of values. We will examine six basic values that have become traditional American values. Three represent traditional reasons why immigrants have been drawn to America: the chance for individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and material wealth. In order to achieve these benefits, however, there were prices to be paid: self-reliance, competition, and hard work. In time, these prices themselves became part of the traditional value system. This system of values, then, consists of three pairs of benefits and the price people paid to have these benefits:

- individual freedom and self-reliance,
- equality of opportunity and competition,
- material wealth and hard work.

6 These three pairs of values have determined the unique culture of the United States and its people. Another way of thinking about these basic values involves rights and responsibilities. Americans believe that people have the right to individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and the promise of material success, but these all require substantial responsibility: self-reliance, a willingness to compete, and hard work. After examining the historical origin of each of these pairs, we will discuss the current state of these values in the United States.

Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance

The earliest settlers came to the North American continent to establish colonies

¹ aristocrats: people who belong to the highest social class

² defied: refused to obey someone or do what was expected

³ profound: important and having a strong influence or effect

that were free from the controls that existed in European societies. They wanted to escape the controls placed on many aspects of their lives by kings and governments, priests and churches, noblemen and aristocrats.¹ To a great extent, they succeeded. In 1776, the British colonial settlers declared their independence from England and established a new nation, the United States of America. In so doing, they defied² the king of England and declared that the power to govern would lie in the hands of the people. They were now free from the power of the kings. In 1787, when they wrote the Constitution for their new nation, they separated church and state so that there would never be a government-supported church. This greatly limited the power of the church. Also, in writing the Constitution they expressly forbade titles of nobility to ensure that an aristocratic society would not develop. There would be no ruling class of noblemen in the new nation.

8 The historic decisions made by those first settlers have had a profound³ effect on the shaping of the American character. By limiting the power of the government and the churches and eliminating a formal aristocracy, the early settlers created a climate of freedom where the emphasis was on the individual. The United States came to be associated in their minds with the concept of *individual freedom*. This is probably the most basic of all the American values. Scholars and outside observers often call this value *individualism*, but many Americans use the word *freedom*. It is one of the most respected and popular words in the United States today.

9 By *freedom*, Americans mean the desire and the right of all individuals to control their own destiny without outside interference

from the government, a ruling noble class, the church, or any other organized authority. The desire to be free of controls was a basic value of the new nation in 1776, and it has continued to attract immigrants to this country.

- 10 There is, however, a cost for this benefit of individual freedom: *self-reliance*. Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom. They must take responsibility for themselves. Traditionally, this has meant achieving both financial and emotional independence from their parents as early as possible, usually by age eighteen or twenty-one. Self-reliance means that Americans believe they should take care of themselves, solve their own problems, and “stand on their own two feet.” Tocqueville observed the Americans’ belief in self-reliance in the 1830s:

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 to⁴ imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.

- 11 This strong belief in self-reliance continues today as a traditional American value. It is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the American character to understand, but it is profoundly important. Most Americans believe that they must be self-reliant in order to keep their freedom. If they rely too much on the support of their families or the government or any organization, they may lose some of their freedom to do what they want. Even if they are not truly self-reliant, most Americans believe they must at least appear to be so. In order to be in the mainstream of American life—to have power and/or respect—individuals must be seen as self-reliant.

⁴ are apt to: have a natural tendency to do something

⁵ charity: an organization that gives money, goods, or help to people who are poor, sick, etc.

- 12 For example, if adult children return home to live with their parents because of economic conditions or a failed marriage, most members of the family expect this to be a short-term arrangement, until the children can find a job and be self-reliant. Although receiving financial support from charity,⁵ family, or the government is possible, it is usually expected to be for a short time, and it is generally not admired. Eventually, most Americans would say, people have a responsibility for taking care of themselves.

Equality of Opportunity and Competition

- 13 The second important reason why immigrants have traditionally been drawn to the United States is the belief that everyone has a chance to succeed here. Generations of immigrants have come to the United States with this expectation.



Immigrants on Ellis Island around 1900

They have felt that, because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Of particular importance is the lack of a hereditary⁶ aristocracy.

14 Because titles of nobility were forbidden in the Constitution, no formal class system developed in the United States. In the early years of American history, many immigrants chose to leave older European societies because they believed that they had a better chance to succeed in America. In “the old country,” the country from which they came, their place in life was determined largely by the social class into which they were born. They knew that in America they would not have to live among noble families who possessed great power and wealth inherited and accumulated over hundreds of years.

15 The hopes and dreams of many of these early immigrants were fulfilled in their new country. The lower social class into which many were born did not prevent them from trying to rise to a higher social position. Many found that they did indeed have a better chance to succeed in the United States than in the old country. Because millions of these immigrants succeeded, Americans came to believe in *equality of opportunity*. When Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he was impressed by the great uniformity of conditions of life in the new nation. He wrote:

The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that . . . equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived.

16 It is important to understand what most Americans mean when they say they believe in equality of opportunity. They do not mean that everyone is—or should be—

equal. However, they do mean that each individual should have an equal chance for success. Americans see much of life as a race for success. For them, equality means that everyone should have an equal chance to enter the race and win. In other words, equality of opportunity may be thought of as an ethical rule. It helps ensure that the race for success is a fair one and that a person does not win just because he or she was born into a wealthy family, or lose because of race or religion. This American concept of “fair play” is an important aspect of the belief in equality of opportunity.

17 President Abraham Lincoln expressed this belief in the 1860s when he said:

We . . . wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life.

18 However, the price to be paid for this equality of opportunity is *competition*. If much of life is seen as a race, then a person must run the race in order to succeed; a person has the responsibility to compete with others, even though we know not everyone will be successful. If every person has an equal chance to succeed in the United States, then many would say that it is every person’s duty to try.

19 The pressures of competition in the life of an American begin in childhood and continue until retirement from work. Learning to compete successfully is part of growing up in the United States, and competition is encouraged by strong programs of competitive sports provided by the public schools and community groups. Competitive sports are now popular with both men and women.

⁶hereditary: can be passed from an older to a younger person in the same family



Shaking hands may be a polite acknowledgment of your competitor as well as a greeting.

20 The pressure to compete causes Americans to be energetic, but it also places a constant emotional strain on them. When they retire, they are at last free from the pressures of competition. But then a new problem arises. Some may feel useless and unwanted in a society that gives so much prestige⁷ to those who compete well. This may be one reason older people in the United States sometimes do not have as much honor and respect as they have in other less-competitive societies. In fact, generally speaking, any group of people who do not compete successfully—for whatever reason—do not fit into the mainstream of American life as well as those who do compete and succeed.

Material Wealth and Hard Work

21 The third reason why immigrants have traditionally come to the United States is to have a better life—that is, to raise their standard of living. For the vast majority of the immigrants who came here, this was probably the most compelling reason for leaving their homeland. Because of its incredibly abundant natural resources, the United States appeared to be a land of plenty where millions could come to seek their fortunes. Of course, most immigrants did not “get rich overnight,” and many of

them suffered terribly, but the majority of them were eventually able to improve upon their former standard of living. Even if they were not able to achieve the economic success they wanted, they could be fairly certain that their children would have the opportunity for a better life. The phrase “going from rags to riches” became a slogan⁸ for the “American Dream.” Because of the vast riches of the North American continent, the dream came true for many of the immigrants. They achieved material success and many became very attached to material things. *Material wealth* became a value to the American people.

22 Placing a high value on material possessions is called *materialism*, but this is a word that most Americans find offensive. To say that a person is materialistic is an insult. To an American, this means that this person values material possessions above all else. Americans do not like to be called materialistic because they feel that this unfairly accuses them of loving only material things and of having no religious values. In fact, most Americans do have other values and ideals. Nevertheless, acquiring and maintaining a large number of material possessions is still of great importance to most Americans. Why is this so?

23 One reason is that material wealth has traditionally been a widely accepted measure of social status in the United States. Because Americans rejected the European system of hereditary aristocracy and titles of nobility, they had to find a substitute for judging social status. The quality and quantity of an individual’s material possessions became an accepted measure of success and social status. Moreover, as we shall see in the religion chapter, the Puritan work ethic associated material success with godliness.

⁷ *prestige*: the respect and importance that a person, organization, or profession has

⁸ *slogan*: a short, easily-remembered phrase used in advertising or politics

24 Americans have paid a price, however, for their material wealth: *hard work*. The North American continent was rich in natural resources when the first settlers arrived, but all these resources were undeveloped. Only by hard work could these natural resources be converted into material possessions, allowing a more comfortable standard of living. Hard work has been both necessary and rewarding for most Americans throughout their history. Because of this, they came to see material possessions as the natural reward for their hard work. In some ways, material possessions were seen not only as tangible⁹ evidence of people's work, but also of their abilities. In the late 1700s, James Madison, the father of the American Constitution, stated that the difference in material possessions reflected a difference in personal abilities.

25 Most Americans still believe in the value of hard work. Most believe that people should hold jobs and not live off welfare payments from the government. There have been many efforts to reform the welfare system so that people would not become dependent on welfare and stop looking for jobs to support themselves. However, a larger question is how much hard work will really improve a person's standard of living and level of material wealth. Is it still possible to work hard and get rich in America?

26 As the United States has shifted from an industry-based economy to one that is service- or information-based, there has been a decline in high-paying jobs for factory workers. It is now much more difficult for the average worker to go from rags to riches in the United States, and many wonder what has happened to the traditional American Dream. As the United States competes in a global economy, many workers are losing their

old jobs and finding that they and their family members must now work longer hours for less money and fewer benefits. When the economy weakens, everyone suffers, and there are greater numbers of the working poor—those who work hard but have low-paying jobs that do not provide a decent standard of living and may not provide health insurance and retirement benefits, and many have to rely on some outside assistance from the government or other sources.

American Values and the State of the American Dream

27 In recent years, as the economy has declined, many observers have asked if the American Dream is really dead. For the most part, the American Dream has not meant that the average American can really go from rags to riches. It has traditionally meant that by working hard, parents can enable their children to have a better life when they grow up. Every generation could be a little more prosperous and successful than their parents. While the distance between the very rich one percent and the rest of the population has dramatically increased over the last years, the overwhelming majority of Americans still believe in the ideal of the American Dream—that is, if they work hard, they and their children can have a better life. The ideal of upward mobility still exists in America. However, we must distinguish between idealism and reality in understanding the relationship between what Americans believe and how they live. Some who find that they are working longer hours for less money still hope that the American Dream will exist again, if not for them, then for their children.

28 American values such as equality of opportunity and self-reliance are ideals that may not necessarily describe the reality of American life. Equality of opportunity, for

⁹ *tangible*: concrete, able to be touched

example, is an ideal that is not always put into practice. In reality, some people have a better chance for success than others. Those who are born into rich families have more opportunities than those who are born into poorer families. Inheriting money does give a person a decided advantage. Race and gender may still be factors affecting success, although there are laws designed to promote equality of opportunity for all individuals. And, of course, new immigrants continue to face challenges unique to their situation.

29 The fact that American ideals are only partly carried out in real life does not diminish their importance. Most Americans still believe in them and are strongly affected by them in their everyday lives. It is easier to understand what Americans are thinking and feeling if we can understand what these traditional American cultural values are and how they have influenced almost every facet¹⁰ of life in the United States.

30 It is important to remember two things about these values. First, they are cultural values; they are the cultural engine that drives the United States and continues to power a nation where people from all over the world come and become "American." Secondly, putting these six values together into a system creates something new. As Aristotle said, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The relationship among these values—the rights and the responsibilities—creates the fabric¹¹ of the American society. It is this fabric that defines the American Dream—the belief that if people take responsibility for their lives and work hard, they will have the individual

freedom to pursue their personal goals and a good opportunity to compete for success. These values are so tightly woven together that if any one of them is pulled out or even disturbed, the entire fabric is affected and may come apart.

31 Finally, these six cultural values—individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, material wealth, and hard work—do not tell the whole story of the American character. Rather, they form the basic structure or framework of the American culture. They enable a nation of enormous diversity to create and maintain a national identity.

32 In the next three chapters we will examine three historical factors that reinforced and helped to shape these values: the religious heritage, the frontier heritage, and the heritage of abundance. The remaining chapters will explore how these values appear in aspects of American culture: business, government, ethnic and racial diversity, education, leisure time, and the family. The final chapter will discuss the challenges facing the United States and their potential impact on the future of the country and its values.



To some, owning a beautiful house means they have achieved the American Dream.

¹⁰ facet: one of several parts of someone's character, a situation, etc.

¹¹ fabric: basic structure and way of life