



election



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Americanism

Americanism has two different meanings: it signifies both what is distinctive about the United States (and the colonies and territories that formed it) and loyalty to that nation, rooted in a defense of its political ideals. Those canonic ideals—self-government, equal opportunity, freedom of speech and association, a belief in progress—were first proclaimed during the era of the Revolution and early republic and have developed more expansive meanings since then. Thanks to a powerful civil rights movement, *social* equality, for example, fully entered the canon only in the decades after World War II. But the bundle of ideals associated with Americanism has proved remarkably supple over time, which helps to account for its enduring appeal to people in other lands as well as at home.

Its shifting content is not the only thing that distinguishes Americanism from the patriotisms generated by other powerful nation-states. Love of any country requires attachment to its supposed virtues, past and present. Affection for “Holy Russia”—its fields and forests and Orthodox Church—long predated the Soviet Union and easily survived it. Traditional Japanese patriots revere the uniqueness of their national tongue and of Shinto, a pantheistic faith linked closely with an unbroken imperial house. Americanism, by contrast, has been rooted less in a shared culture than in shared political ideals.

Like Americans, French patriots may pay homage to the Enlightenment-born ideals of their revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—but French patriotism includes a stronger cultural component than does America’s national creed. Americans have always fought more over how to define and apply the national ideals than about the merits of their language or cuisine. As the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote, “It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.” The resulting battles to define Americanism have alternately divided the nation and unified it, producing both internal strife and solidarity against foreign enemies. These two tendencies have often crested together during wartime. Americanism’s propensity to generate both conflict and cohesion continues in the early twenty-first century, when the United States has no rival on the world stage but when “Americanism” is fought about nearly everywhere.

From the Puritans to the Pledge of Allegiance

The concept itself is nearly as old as the first European settlements to endure on the land mass of North America. John Winthrop was thinking about his church, not a nation, when in 1630 he told those fellow Puritans who sailed with him to a New World that “we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” But Winthrop’s notion that America ought to be a model for Christendom and beyond soon transcended the

intra-Protestant dispute that had led to the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1763 another New Englander, John Adams, wrote that America's settlement was "the Opening of a grand scene and design in Providence." Adams believed his young land was destined to break the grip of feudal laws and customs, thus showing how individuals could free themselves from an irrational, often tyrannical past. During and just after the war for independence, such thinking was commonplace in sermons, pamphlets, and even in the diaries of ordinary men and women. The new nation had the potential to be more than what Tom Paine called "an asylum for mankind." It had a mission to liberate the world.

For many Americans, that messianic ambition was fused with religious meaning. The Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century spawned thousands of new Protestant churches and made the passion of evangelicalism the common discourse of most inhabitants, whether free or slave. Since that spiritual upsurge, the idea that anyone, regardless of learning or social background, can "come to Christ" has dovetailed with the belief in equal rights emblazoned in the Declaration of Independence. This synthesis of evangelical Protestantism and republicanism was found in no other nation—at least not with such passionate conviction and for such a long period of time.

Over the past two centuries, Americanism has been put to a variety of uses, benign and belligerent, democratic and demagogic. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the quasi-religious ideal took luxuriant, imperial form. It inspired the notion of Manifest Destiny, which legitimized the conquest of lands occupied by Native American tribes as well as by Mexicans in the Southwest. It was omnipresent among both Jacksonian Democrats, who defined it as the gospel of rough hewn, self-made men in conflict with "the rich, the proud, [and] the privileged," and their Whig opponents, whose "American System" called for higher tariffs and a national bank. It also animated, in the 1850s, the attempt by the new American Party (the Know-Nothings) to drive Irish immigrants from political power wherever the "papists" had established a foothold.

At the same time, the national faith was provoking an equally prophetic critique. In the forefront were abolitionists, both black and white, who scored the hypocrisy of a slave-holding republic. In 1829 David Walker demanded that white citizens "compare your own language" in the Declaration of Independence "with your cruelties and murders inflicted . . . on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation! ! ! ! !!" In the 1850s, William Lloyd Garrison called the Constitution "a covenant with hell," and Frederick Douglass asked, "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?"

Yet few radicals rejected the ideals themselves. At the end of his famous Independence Day speech in 1852, Douglass predicted the abolition of slavery in

his lifetime. He drew his optimism from "the great principles" of that same Declaration of Independence "and the genius of American institutions" as well as from an enlightened spirit he believed was swelling on both sides of the Atlantic. Such figures initiated a vital countertradition. Since the antebellum era, dissidents have routinely cited the gap between America's utopian promise and its disappointing reality.

The Civil War brought two contending versions of Americanism into a bloody conflict, the terms of which were not finally settled until Reconstruction had run its course in the mid-1870s. In many ways, the war's "new birth of freedom" renewed the national faith. Yet no sooner had Reconstruction begun to wane, than anxiety grew about the weakness of Americanism in the fast-growing, culturally fragmented land. On the eve of the war, Carl Schurz, a German-born reformer and foe of slavery, had confidently predicted, "True Americanism, tolerance and equal rights will peacefully overcome all that is not reconcilable. . . ." By the 1870s it seemed that jagged splits along lines of region, race, religion, class, and immigrant status could tear the industrializing society apart.

For national leaders, it thus became essential to Americanize the population if Americanism were to prosper. Never before had patriots made so self-conscious an attempt "to make a religion out of citizenship," as the political theorist Michael Walzer puts it. The massive Grand Army of the Republic created the ritual of Memorial Day to associate love of country with selfless loyalty in battle. Veterans, ministers, and teachers urged that the flag be displayed in every public building and many private ones.

In 1892 Francis Bellamy, a devout Christian attracted to socialism, wrote a short pledge to the Stars and Stripes that he hoped would bind American children to a shared set of beliefs. An admirer of the French Revolution, Bellamy mused about including "equality and fraternity" in the pledge but decided that would be too controversial in a society riven by differences of race and ideology. So he restricted himself to a single line: "one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." His Pledge of Allegiance was quickly adopted by schools throughout the land (Congress added "under God" in 1954).

As that example suggests, a reassertion of Americanism was not always intended to produce political conformity at the turn of the twentieth century. Dissenters could appropriate the national faith as readily as conservatives. Three years after the pledge was drafted, Eugene Debs, the railroad unionist who would soon become leader of the Socialist Party, emerged from jail to greet a throng of his supporters. "Manifestly the spirit of '76 still survives," he declared, "The fires of liberty and noble aspirations are not yet extinguished."

The Armoring of Americanism

Yet as the United States grappled with a flood of new immigrants and became an imperial power, the most

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aggressive promoters of Americanism were eager to prop up the established order. These figures weren't necessarily conservative, as we now define the term. But Theodore Roosevelt's praise of the melting pot and of martial virtues stemmed from his fear that immigrants who retained even a shred of loyalty to their native countries weakened America's resolve in a dangerous world.

Inevitably, such fears intensified during World War I. All but ignoring the First Amendment, the federal government jailed radicals who opposed the war and looked the other way when vigilantes forced German Americans to prostrate themselves before the flag. The new American Legion crafted a "100 per cent Americanism" that stressed only the self-protective, coercive aspects of the creed. In the 1920s, this defensive style of Americanism merged with the desire for cultural homogeneity to produce a spate of restrictive immigration laws. Throughout this period, racists had little difficulty rationalizing racial segregation as an essential component of the "American way of life."

The armoring of Americanism in the early twentieth century produced some unexpected consequences. Wartime service in uniform or in defense industries allowed immigrants to legitimize their struggles for justice by draping them in the mantle of Americanism. Those struggles were further validated during World War I as federal officials enticed ethnic workers with the promise of "industrial democracy" and the idea that, in America, "The People ARE the Government." Even the immigration restrictions of the 1920s, by weakening ties between immigrants and their countries of origin, fostered an Americanization from below that set the stage for a new regime of cultural pluralism.

Patriots Left and Right in the Twentieth Century

During the 1930s and World War II, New Deal liberals managed to daub Americanism with a tolerant, populist hue. The federal government hired artists to paint historical murals in post offices that highlighted the exploits of farmers and workers. It also published guides to every big city and region that documented the riches of local histories and cultures. In the new National Archives building next to the Capital Mall, the founding documents of the United States were displayed as if they were the relics of secular saints. Meanwhile, such film-makers-turned-wartime-propagandists as Frank Capra depicted America as one big friendly house for ordinary people of all religions and races (even if, in most of their productions, the minorities politely kept to their own rooms).

Yet the Left's attempt to marry class-consciousness to nationalism did not fare as well. During the Great Depression, CIO organizers described their nascent unions as expressions of "working-class Americanism," while pro-Soviet radicals portrayed communism as "Twentieth-Century Americanism." But

domestic opponents ridiculed these leftist twists on a common theme, and they all but vanished during the cold war. The new global conflict recast Americanism as the antithesis of communism and identified the national creed as the last best hope of a world threatened by totalitarianism and yearning for freedom.

The subsequent hunt for "un-American activities" brought to a close the long period during which no single political faction controlled the meaning of the national canon. The civil rights struggle of the late 1950s and early 1960s did reinvigorate the dissident tradition, for a time. But by the late 1960s, Americanism had become virtually the exclusive property of the cultural and political right.

The politics of the Vietnam War played a critical role in this change. In a decisive break with tradition, leading activists in the protest movements of the era took issue not just with government policies but also with the ideals from which those policies were supposedly drawn. Young radicals did not seek to draw attention to the distance between America's promise and its reality as much as to debunk the national creed itself as inherently reactionary and destructive.

That cynical view held firm among dissenters through the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond, despite a sprinkling of anti-war posters declaring that "peace is patriotic." In 2001 Noam Chomsky, one of the most popular writers on the left, dismissed patriotism as the governing elite's way of telling its subjects, "You shut up and be obedient, and I'll relentlessly advance my own interests."

Meanwhile, conservatives redoubled their efforts to claim Americanism as their cause. They successfully yoked such rituals as saluting the flag, honoring the Founding Fathers, and singing patriotic songs to their larger purposes. But their success occurred largely by default.

How Exceptional a Nation?

The conflict of words and symbols drew new attention to an ongoing debate about the degree to which, in the context of world history, America has been an "exceptional" nation. From Alexis de Tocqueville to Louis Hartz, leading interpreters, whether admirers or critics, focused on what seemed distinctive about the character and ideology of Americans and viewed the development of the nation as unique. The list of exceptional qualities is a lengthy one. It includes the primacy of individual identity over communal ties, belief in almost unlimited social mobility, absence of an established state church and the consequent flourishing of both diverse denominations and grassroots piety, and a potent tradition of antiauthoritarian and anticentralist politics. One should also add the remarkable self-confidence of most Americans, particularly white ones, that they live in a nation blessed by God that has a right, even a duty, to help other nations become more like the United States. Over the decades, the exceptionalist argument was repeated so

often—by scholars, journalists, and politicians—that it hardened into cliché.

Perhaps some exceptionalisms, some nationalist ideologies, are more equal than others. For over 200 years, the idea of America—as new Jerusalem or new Rome or something in between—has had a uniquely potent meaning for a broad variety of people outside the United States: from French aristocrats like Tocqueville to European Communists like Antonio Gramsci to Islamic terrorists like Mohammed Atta to teenagers all over the world. Recently, non-American scholars have joined U.S. historians in concentrating on the fragmented, disputatious nature of American society and the influence of those factors on the development of nationalist ideology. But there remains a persistent inclination by academics as well as ordinary citizens in other lands to view America as a whole—to examine how “it” uses and abuses its ideology both within the nation’s borders and outside them.

What makes *Americanism* exceptional is thus its confluence with the realities of historical development itself. Ultimately, Americanism demands understanding on its own terms because of the unrivaled power for good or ill that the United States wields in the world. As the historian David Hollinger wrote in 2002, the United States is “the most successful nationalist project in all of modern history. . . . Its significance is measured by its sheer longevity, its influence in the world arena, and its absorption of a variety of peoples through immigration, conquest, and enslavement and emancipation.”

The success of the American nation has, in turn, bestowed tremendous power on the notion of Americanism, with all its contradictions and silences. It allows Mormons from Utah and Pentecostals from Missouri to go into the world, converting people to a faith marked by the material success of its adherents as much as by the appeal of their doctrines and ceremonies. It has also given dissident groups in the United States the ability to inspire analogous movements in other parts of the globe. The U.S. movement for black freedom helped galvanize the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the radical feminist movement (although indebted to texts by non-Americans like Juliet Mitchell and Simone de Beauvoir) to spark like-minded insurgencies on every continent. The same is true of the gay and lesbian rights movement, spawned in the United States at the end of the 1960s.

The recent rise of anti-Americanism notwithstanding, one cannot neglect the worldwide appeal of Americanist ideology in the laudable desire to internationalize the study and teaching of U.S. history. The very perception that such a distinct set of “values” exists was greatly boosted, particularly from World War II on, by the unmatched power and allure of the American nation itself. Of course, no “civilizing mission” proceeds by discourse alone. Yet without a well-developed, internally persuasive ideology,

no national mission, whether civilizing or barbarous, ever gains much sway.

See also conservatism; liberalism; republicanism.

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