

## A Place Like No Other

By Michael Barone

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**E**very nation is unique, but America is the most unique. This is the theme of the greatest book written on the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. "The Americans," Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s, "have a democratic social state that has...given birth to a multitude of sentiments and opinions...that were unknown in the old aristocratic societies....The aspect of civil society has met with change no less than the visage of the political world."

Today, the United States is the third-most populous nation in the world, our economy produces nearly a third of the world's goods and services, and our military is more powerful than the rest of the world's militaries combined. We are, as political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset writes, "the most religious, optimistic, patriotic, rights-oriented, and individualistic" country in the world. At the same time, however, we are also the most materialistic, self-absorbed, and swaggering nation on Earth. When we speak of American values we are speaking of something unique, as Tocqueville observed. But they are values that are almost constantly in real or apparent conflict with one another. How, for example, can the world's most egalitarian nation allow such a yawning gap between rich and poor, a gap that grows wider with each passing year? How does a nation of immigrants, with its impulse for inclusiveness, square with its history of division and racial strife?

**Seeds of diversity.** Historians have been seeking the answers to such questions for almost as long as there has been an America, and there is reason for that, for a nation's beginnings tell us much about its character. "Peoples always feel their origins," Tocqueville wrote. "The circumstances that accompanied their birth and served to develop them influence the entire course of the rest of their lives." The British colonies that became the nucleus of the United States were, from the first, diverse in both culture and religion. As historian David Hackett Fischer shows in *Albion's Seed*, the four major clusters of colonies--New England, the Delaware Valley, the Chesapeake colonies, and the Appalachian chain--had cultures and folkways derived from the parts of the British Isles whence most of their settlers came. Their imprint can still be seen today.

Diverse Americans managed to live together, says historian Robert

Wiebe, because they lived apart. Religious dissident Anne Hutchinson fled Massachusetts for Rhode Island. Benjamin Franklin left Puritan Boston for worldly Philadelphia. Daniel Boone, looking for elbow room, left North Carolina for Kentucky and Kentucky for Missouri. The frontier provided an opportunity for a new start for millions until the Census Bureau declared it was closed in 1890. By then, growing cities and suburbs were attracting the ambitious, the luckless, anyone possessed of the sense of get-up-and-go. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks points out in his new book, *On Paradise Drive*, when Americans pulled up stakes and moved to new places, they tended to resettle with like-minded Americans: Cultural liberals flocked to the San Francisco Bay Area, cultural conservatives to Dallas-Fort Worth. We have the space we need to be the kind of Americans we want to be.

American settlers and pioneers were necessarily self-reliant: Government could neither effectively bind them nor give them aid. But they relied on one another, forming unions, associations, civic clubs. "Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite," Tocqueville observed. "Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile. . . . Americans use associations to give fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes."

To the antipodes, indeed. Far from being confined to their new continent, Americans fanned out across the globe, as missionaries and whalers, China traders and explorers, and, later on, as soldiers and administrators in the Philippines, the Caribbean, and Central America. Americans like J. Pierpont Morgan imported European capital in the years before 1914; since the two world wars, Americans have exported their capital to markets around the world.

In the process, they built the world's most productive and creative economy. By the 1740s, the Colonies had the highest per-capita income in the world. In the 19th century, Americans built new businesses and promoted schemes both visionary and larcenous. Brooks calls this extraordinary American drive "energy." In his new book, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, historian Walter McDougall calls it "hustle," in both the negative and positive senses.

One may or may not agree with those who, like Brooks, find a spiritual side to American production and consumption. But there is

certainly a spiritual side to the American character. Many of the original colonies were founded as religious havens, for dissenting sects or for all believers. The preachers of the Great Awakening of the 1740s kindled a spirit, some argue, that helped lead to the Revolution. The evangelical movement sparked by the Cane Ridge revival in 1801 created a sort of spiritual republicanism and huge growth in the nonhierarchical Methodist and Baptist sects.

**Offshore religion.** America's religiosity had implications at home and abroad. Missionaries, Walter Russell Mead writes in *Special Providence*, helped shape American foreign policy. Later, religious enthusiasts insisted on the abolition of slavery, and later still, preachers like Martin Luther King Jr. provided the leadership of the civil rights movement.

Do America's beginnings continue to shape the nation still? In 1976, as the nation celebrated its bicentennial, many feared that America was becoming less special, that we were converging with other nations and becoming more like them. The United States and the Soviet Union, it was said, were both moving toward a similar democratic socialism; America and Europe were converging toward similar secular welfare states.

A quarter century later, it is clear, those fears have been exposed as baseless--and not just because the Soviet Union is no more. Americans have once again shown the energy and hustle to produce economic growth. "America is a country that goes every year to the doctor," Brooks wrote, "and every year it is told that it has contracted some fatal disease--whether it is conformity, narcissism, godlessness, or civic disengagement--and a year later, the patient comes back with cheeks still red and muscles still powerful." Today, the United States has not moved toward a European-style welfare state; rather, much of Europe has moved away from that model. In the late 1970s, it was still believed that the great era of American immigration was behind us. But tens of millions of immigrants have arrived since, the great majority emulating the industriousness of those who came before them.

Conventional theory has it that advanced societies become more secular as they age, but America, once again, defies convention. The past quarter century has seen a surge in evangelical Christianity, reminiscent of the Great Awakening and the Cane Brake revival--and this despite, or perhaps because of--the loosening of traditional moral strictures against abortion, divorce, and single-parenthood.

Since the Revolution, America has expanded, as George Washington and Franklin expected it would. In the process, American values have become the values of millions who are not descendants of the Americans of 1776. And we have spread those ideas around the world.

John Winthrop hoped his Massachusetts Bay Colony would be "a city upon a hill," an example to others; Abraham Lincoln called America "the last best hope on Earth." Today those examples have commended themselves to others: Many more nations are more like us, in liberty, democracy, and energy, than was true 25, 50, or 100 years ago. And Tocqueville saw it coming. "What I have seen among the Anglo-Americans," he wrote, "brings me to believe that democratic institutions of this nature, introduced prudently into society, that would mix little by little with habits and gradually blend with the very opinions of the people, could subsist elsewhere than in America." Every nation is different, but as an example to others, the United States of America remains truly unique.