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“Change and Continuity in American Values in the Nineties”

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Discussions of contemporary society and politics are dominated by a sense of overwhelming newness. Internationally, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its 45-year-old empire in Eastern Europe encourages our preoccupation with change. So much that has been a familiar part of the international scene and its challenges seems to be ending. Indeed, Samuel Huntington, the Harvard University political scientist who in 1977-78 served as coordinator for security planning in the National Security Council of the Carter Administration, has identified a whole body of recent social commentary by its preoccupation with "endism."

In 1989, for example, Francis Fukuyama, a State Department official then unknown to the public, wrote an essay on "The End of History?" Fukuyama saw history's demise as good news. What was happening, he argued, was nothing less than the victory of the West. The collapse of Soviet Communism sealed, in his view, the triumph of the liberal, democratic idea.¹

Fukuyama was optimistic about change, but much of the contemporary discussion of it has been characterized by great unease. Americans have been bombarded with accounts of their nation's decline. Historian Paul Kennedy kicked things off with his "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers."² The most persistent of the "end of the American era" recitations sees the withering of US economic prowess, especially in the face of Japan's challenge. American decline has, however, been found almost everywhere: in the schools, which now don't educate students properly, it is argued; in moral and ethical standards, which are seen eroding; in families, which are held to be falling apart; in religion, which is reportedly becoming trivialized. Given all this, some Americans are, of course, becoming more than a little discouraged, and highly critical of those who are supposed to be minding the store. In particular, they have become critical of politicians. In this view, the country is failing because contemporary politics is failing. *Washington Post* columnist, E.J. Dionne, Jr., has advanced this theme, telling us "Why Americans Hate Politics."³

Changes in American values are often discussed in the context of generational experience. Writing in 1970, Charles A. Reich, then a Yale University law professor, saw America being transformed by the new social and political values of the "Sixties" generation. "There is a revolution coming," Reich wrote in "The Greening of America."

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"It will not be like revolutions in the past. It will originate with the individual and with culture, and it will change the political structure only as its final act... It promises a higher reason, a more human community, and a new and liberated individual. Its ultimate creation will be a new and enduring wholeness and beauty -- a renewed relationship with man to himself, to other men, to society, to nature, and to the land. This is the revolution of the new generation. Their protest and rebellion, their culture, clothes, music, drugs, ways of thought, and liberated life-style are not a passing fad or a form of dissent and refusal, nor are they in any sense irrational. The whole emerging pattern, from ideals to campus demonstrations to beads and bell-bottoms, to the Woodstock Festival, makes sense and is part of a consistent philosophy. It is both necessary and inevitable, and in time it will include not only youth, but all people in America."⁴

A decade later, the Sixties Generation had faded from view as an agent of basic value change, only to be replaced by the "Baby Boomers." Boomers -- persons born in the high birth-rate years from the end of World War II through the early 1960s -- have been seen by commentators all across the spectrum, from politics to advertising, as different from their predecessors in important ways. Cheryl Russell argued recently that a large portion of America's current woes are thus explained: "The core reason for the upheaval in American society," she writes, "lies in the maturation of the enormous baby-boom generation. It's more than a coincidence that America's social fabric began to tear just as the baby-boom generation ... came of age in the late 1960s. Boomers' attitudes and values are profoundly different from those of older Americans. At the root of these differences is a strong sense of individualism instilled in baby-boomers by their parents."⁵ The literature published on the Boomers over the past decade is immense.⁶

Now, however, the Boomers themselves are being shoved aside as the putative agent of Great Social Change. Enter their successors -- the "Busters" or, as they are called most commonly these days, the "Twenty somethings." Novelists, advertisers and assorted social gurus are all agog about the transforming properties of the roughly 45 million Americans now between the ages of 18 and 29. *Time* magazine apparently was the first to discover the "Twenty Something Generation" three years ago.⁷ *The Atlantic* told us more recently that the twenty something's emergence is producing a big generation gap, as the more sober Baby Boomers confront the "carnival culture" of the new generation, built on "physical frenzy and spiritual numbness," a "revelry of pop, a pursuit of high-tech, guiltless fun."⁸ Michael Lee Cohen traveled coast to coast interviewing numbers of the new pacesetters, seeking their innermost thoughts and deepest yearnings.⁹ Douglas Coupland has celebrated the generation in a novel.¹⁰ And, last summer, several dozen twenty somethings met in Washington to announce formation of a new group to redress the sins of their elders. Reporting on the formation of this group, the "Third Millennium," Knight-Ridder's Gary Blonston called its agenda "a hybrid blend of Ross Perot, the Sierra Club and the National League of Cities."¹¹

Missing the Real Story

The US has, of course, experienced a steady stream of extraordinary social changes in its relatively brief existence. When George Washington became the country's first president in 1789, the US was a farming society of four million people, who were mostly scattered along the eastern seaboard. Now, just two centuries later, more than a quarter-billion Americans stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific, in a complexly interdependent "postindustrial" economy and society. Amidst all the resulting changes in physical conditions, there surely have been some, as well, in social and political values.

The big news in American values, though, involves the exceptional continuity, not the change. This is surely true of political ideas. The Constitutional Convention which convened in Philadelphia in the spring of 1787 set about drafting a new basic law for the young republic. The product of the convention's labors, ratified a year later, put in place a unique form of representative democracy predicated upon the idea that government must be at once strong and energetic, and limited and constrained. To this end, the Constitution of the United States introduced for the first time in history in full-blown form something we call the separation of powers -- in which three branches of the national government are at once empowered and set in constant, balanced conflict one with another. "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition," Madison wrote in justifying his handiwork in "Federalist Paper #10." Today, more than two centuries later, these arrangements, of separate institutions sharing power, continues to dominate every aspect of our political life. For all the swirl of economics and technology, the Constitution of 1787 remains the Constitution of 1787.

The world has no parallel in modern times to this continuity in political institutions. In the same span in which the US has been governed under one constitution, France has, for example, experienced five republics, two empires (under the two Napoleons), two traditional monarchies, the strange plebiscitary kingship of Louis Philippe and assorted transitional regimes. America's institutional continuity reflects -- and would have been impossible without -- a profound stability in underlying political values.

The American Ideology

This extends far beyond the constitutional system itself. A distinctive new ideology took shape in the US over the 17th and early 18th centuries, and by roughly the middle of the latter it had assumed full form. For well over 200 years now, American society and politics have reflected the dictates of this dominant, and domineering, system of ideas and values. Political historian Louis Hartz called it a "Lockean monolith," referring to British theorist John Locke's philosophical contributions, but the ideology is in no sense largely Locke's.¹²

Before proceeding, I should note that the most curious thing about America's reigning ideology is that, for all its control of national direction, it still does not have a proper name. It has been called many different things -- from labels which simply associate it with the US ("Americanism," the "American Creed"), to others which seek to link it to its distant European parentage (for example, "classical liberalism"), to yet others which specify one or another of its core elements (equality, democracy, freedom, property rights, and so on). In abject defeat and disgrace the old reigning ideology of the former Soviet Union is at least properly recognized in

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terms of origins, development, leading lights, and central philosophy. It is *Communism*, set forth first in coherent form by Marx, translated into a governing philosophy by Lenin, triumphant in Russia in late 1917, and entombed in the revolutions of 1989-91. But America's ideology, far older than Communism and vastly more influential in national development and in shaping this planet's future generally, is little recognized in formal terms. In a sense it is as Louis Hartz wrote in "The Liberal Tradition," a "stranger" in the land of its overwhelming triumph.

No name which we can give it now will seem just right because none is familiar. We should, then, opt for one which is at least analytically correct. The American ideology is "Liberal Individualism." That is, it originated in European liberalism, with the latter's emphasis on property rights and limited government. But it was transmogrified by North American conditions and experience over the 17th and 18th centuries: Among them, the vast open territory and the easy availability of property; the distance from European aristocratic institutions and the weakness of the aristocratic forms which were transplanted here (and which, with the exception of slavery, quickly died); and the religious and social tenants of Puritanism -- which played so huge a role in American development and which, secularized, are diffused today throughout American values.

At the heart of what resulted is an extraordinary and far-reaching individualism, which pervades and shapes all the other components of the core American values, giving each its distinct cast. Alexis de Tocqueville in his "Democracy in America," correctly saw this sweeping homage to the individual as the dominant feature of American culture.

What makes American individualism distinct from its European roots is its thorough-going character and wide reach. The individualism of 17th and 18th century European liberalism was crabbed. It had to struggle to carve out a place in the institutional and philosophic fabric of aristocratic society. John Locke felt compelled, for example, to argue at length that the privileges of king and aristocracy were not divinely ordained. Similarly, he strove in his "Two Treatises of Civil Government" (1690) to establish the modern idea of individual-centered rights to private property in a social setting still distinguished by the collectivism of the old feudal order and by the mercantilist control of trade and commerce imposed by the centralizing monarchs.

In the early US, in contrast, the confining and distorting influences of Europe's aristocratic and feudal past were largely absent. It was possible for Jefferson to write in the Declaration of Independence about the "self-evident" character of all people's God-given claims to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as, in a profound moral sense, beings "created equal." Abundant land in North America made the mass ownership of private property as easy and natural as the collectivist economic institutions of feudalism had been in Europe. The middle class fragment which broke off from European society in the 17th and 18th centuries and came to predominate in British North America, comprised precisely those segments of the population most in revolt against the gradually crumbling old European order. The extreme religious individualism of the Puritans, for example, in defiant opposition to the established norms and practices in England, became the majoritarian orthodoxy of colonial New England.

In this process, the constricted, embattled individualism of early European liberalism became the enlarged, self-confident, unchallenged individualism of the American ideology -- a bundle of assumptions permeating the entire fabric of this society.

Confusions About What "Individualism" Really Means

An adequate understanding of American liberal individualism has been set back by the fact that in everyday usage words like "individualistic" and "rugged individualist" have connotations so different from what, as a large public philosophy, individualism really means. In common usage an "individualist" is a person who shows great independence of thought and action. It connotes a kind of strength of individual personality and character -- attributes surely not peculiar to Americans. Tocqueville argued at length in "Democracy in America" that independence of personality was in fact more widely found in European aristocratic society than in individualistic America. He thought that the absence of fixed status in the US left people uncertain about just who they were and groping for an acceptance which could, then, come only from bowing to majoritarian standards. He thus gave rise to the idea, since repeated by many analysts, of America as intensely conformist. The European aristocrat, Tocqueville maintained, so sure of his social place, which prior to the break-up of aristocratic society was seen ordained by God as part of a natural order, was the true individualist -- though aristocratic society rejected entirely the premises of philosophical individualism. Also, in common speech, "individualistic" is often permitted to take on connotations of egocentrism or selfishness. Yet Americans have never been notably egocentric. "Egoisme," Tocqueville wrote, was well known to all previous types of society. It involves "a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself and to prefer himself to everything in the world."¹³ Highly egocentric and selfish people are found in the most collectivist of systems; and the most selfless of men and women in the most individualistic.

So, to understand the American ideology, we need to dispense with these everyday connotations and see individualism not as a dimension of individual character, but rather as a moral standard by which social institutions and practices are judged. "Selfishness as a vice is as old as the world," Tocqueville wrote, "which does not belong to one form of society more than to another; individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of condition."¹⁴ Individualism sees each person as, in a fundamental sense, the equal of every other. The worth of the society is to be judged by how well it serves the needs and interests of all the individuals making it up. Individuals have claims to life, liberty, property and happiness which involve not merely wishes but fundamental rights. No institution which thwarts these claims can be legitimate. These are among the central tenants of America's public philosophy of liberal individualism -- a moral system first, and only secondarily a political one.

In economic terms the American ideology has insisted on the institution of private property. To realize my claims as an individual, I must have broad leeway in gaining and disposing property. In the political arena, the ideology has placed high value on both democracy and limited government, even though the two are at times at odds. The idea that each individual has a right to be counted in the basic acts of political decision making the same as every other person leads naturally to majoritarianism: free elections, majority rule, "one person, one vote,"

and so on. The American constitutional system rejected pure majoritarianism in 1787, however -- and rejects it still today. The Bill of Rights is a forceful statement of things majorities, no matter how large, are to be prevented from doing, in order to preserve individual rights. American individualism has thus generated political institutions which are an unusual amalgam -- government strongly majoritarian in many regards, but with imposing curbs on majority action.

The American idea of freedom is of the "leave me alone" variety. It sees freedom as a condition achieved when individuals are permitted to make their own choices as much as possible. It's "negative" in the sense that it is achieved in the absence of something -- government intervention -- rather than by adding "positive" governmental guarantees. "Don't tread on me," the old Revolutionary War Flag proclaimed. That's freedom: When I'm not being tread upon.

In social values, America's public philosophy posits a broad commitment to equality -- which includes rejecting ideas of rank and deference in social relations, extending individual opportunity, and recognizing individual achievement. If individuals work hard, display competence, catch a break, and thereby manage to acquire wealth, they deserve to keep it, the American ideology has always insisted. Policies such as high, confiscatory taxation of income, or inheritance levies that prevent the passing on of fortunes, have rarely found much acceptance in American beliefs. The early US was a country without great concentrations of wealth. But when, in the industrializing era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, great fortunes were introduced, they elicited relatively little popular disapproval. "Equality of result" of the socialist model never found favor in American individualism. A strong and confident individualism assumes that some will do better than others, even markedly so; preventing them from enjoying the fruits of their labors is an unacceptable curb on their rights as individuals.

Still, if American society today is quite inegalitarian in its economic distribution and, reflecting the historic values of the underlying ideology, reconciled to this, the country remains socially egalitarian. Its ideal of equality, on which Tocqueville and an entire parade of 19th century European visitors remarked, insists upon the absence of "rank" or claims to "social precedence." Having a lot of money, for example, is OK. But it's not OK to act as though you think you are better than someone else. "I'm as good as you are"-- that's the American ideal of social equality. In this ideal, if society is properly arranged, people will rise and fall largely on their own efforts. There will be mobility, up and down, based on natural talent, not inherited or governmentally-decreed privilege and status.

Religion and American Values

In seeking to understand the American ideology, we properly pay close attention to economic and political individualism. But in the development of American ideas and values, both were preceded by individualistic claims centering in religion. The Protestant Reformation involved a great surge of religious individualism, positing the fundamental moral worth and equality of each person before God, and the requirement that each accept personal responsibility for his moral standing.

Churches reflecting the Reformation's religious individualism predominated in colonial America. The place of the Puritans is especially important. "Puritanism," Tocqueville saw, "was not merely a religious doctrine, but corresponded in many points with the most absolute democratic and republican theories." That is, commitments begun in a religious world view carried over and suffused civil action. Tocqueville cites the development of public education in colonial New England as a prime example. *The Code of Laws* promulgated by the Connecticut General Court (legislature) in 1650 stipulated, for instance, that all children must be given a basic education for their essential moral development. The *Code* required the establishment of schools in every township "after the Lord path increased them to the number of 50 householders" and obliged the inhabitants of each township to support them. As Tocqueville saw, out of recognition of the individual rooted in this religious world view, a democratic social and political order emerged. If people could read the Bible, they could, of course, as well read newspapers and follow discussion of public affairs. If they really were in some substantial sense equal before God, how could they be less in the operations of civil society? Thus in Puritan New England, "a democracy more perfect than antiquity had dared to dream of started in full size and panoply from the midst of an ancient feudal society."¹⁵

Religiously, the United States does not today behave as it "should," given its economic, technological, scientific, "postindustrial" development. Political scientist Walter Dean Burnham has observed that "the proposition suggests itself that the higher the level of development in a given society (the closer, that is, it is to the advanced industrial society end of the developmental continuum), the smaller will be the fraction of its population for whom religious beliefs are of great importance."¹⁶ Testing this proposition, Burnham located a host of countries by two measures: their degree of economic development and the extent to which their citizens profess that their religious beliefs are important in their lives. "Two things are immediately visible on inspection," Burnham wrote. "First, the overall relationship is not only as positive, it is nearly linear and extremely strong." The more "developed" the country is, in other words, the lower the importance citizens attach to religion. "Second, the United States in particular does not fit the main sequence at all." There is a very nice regression line, along which most countries are clustered -- and then there is the United States way off in a corner-- highly developed, but very religious.

Writing on "religion and American values," Seymour Martin Lipset noted how for two centuries foreign observers have been struck by the strength of religious beliefs and practices in the US. Summarizing various data, Lipset concluded that "the one empirical generalization which does seem justified about American religion is that from the early 19th century down to the present, the United States has been among the most religious countries in the Christian world."¹⁷

And now, when I review major cross-national surveys of social values conducted by Gallup affiliates in 1981, and other surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates in 1991, I see these same conclusions reaffirmed and reiterated. Whatever the dimension examined -- church membership, attendance, voluntary work for religious organizations, religious participation through prayer, the sense of drawing strength from religion, belief in a personal God, etc. -- America appears consistently at or near the top of the field as the "most religious nation." The

Scandinavian countries and other northern European nations such as France and Germany cluster at the other end of this continuum.

Seeking to explain the strength of religious values and institutions in the US, Lipset emphasized "the effect of the separation of church and state, which resulted in American churches being voluntary organizations in which congregational self-government was the predominant form of church government."¹⁸ A related explanation notes the importance of competition and free markets. With the establishment of an official church proscribed by the First Amendment, and government for the most part eschewing special assistance to any of the many competing denominations, a religious equivalent of an economic free market resulted -- only more so, because the market place in religion has much less been subject to regulatory control than the economic marketplace. The result has been a direct parallel of what we see from market competition involving the economy -- in the case of religion, a more dynamic, participating denominational life. When older, established churches have lost touch with important segments of their "markets," new "firms" have been more than ready to fill the void. We have seen this worked out in the contemporary denominational experience, as Evangelical churches have grown, often dramatically, while the old mainline Protestant churches have declined.

In short, religion is an important part of the American value system. It has both contributed to and accommodated the dominant American ideology. The churches that predominated in colonial America were, disproportionately, those drawing upon the strong currents of religious individualism which launched the Protestant Reformation. Their ideals and commitments helped shape the emergent nation's public philosophy. And at every subsequent stage in US development, religious bodies proved themselves allies of the liberal democracy, not opponents as they were for so long on much of the European continent.

A Special Set of Problems

To say that the US has for more than two centuries been distinguished by the ascendancy of a distinct political ideology, whose central tenants involve a far-reaching and insistent individualism, is to explain in large measure why continuity in social values, rather than change, has been the main story. It's not to say, however, that the country has been left with smooth sailing. Many observers have remarked upon flaws or blind spots in the dominant value system.

In the 19th century, for example, visitors to the US often came away arguing that individualistic America was in fact a place of stifling conformity. Tocqueville wrote about a "tyranny of the majority."¹⁹ Cut loose from secure social status anchored in institutions of traditional society, Americans, Tocqueville thought, were especially exposed to pressure to yield to majority standards.

In recent years, criticism of the "dark side" of individualist America has more often centered on another theme -- that American individualism is too narrow, self-serving at the expense of social needs. When this argument was advanced in the 19th century, it was usually "business greed" that was seen typifying the excesses of individualism. Charles Dickens made much of this charge in his "American Notes."²⁰ So did H. G. Wells in "The Future in America."²¹

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Current versions of this argument focus less on business. Instead, they charge that individualism has become too much caught up with a gratification of self over the needs of various important social institutions including, above all, the family. In "Habits of the Heart," Robert Bellah and his colleagues grant that "our highest and noblest aspirations, not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for our society in the world, are closely linked to our individualism." Still, Bellah, et al, insist, "some of our deepest problems both as individuals and as a society are also closely linked to our individualism." It has become, they argue, far too unrestrained.²² At issue now, "is not simply whether self-contained individuals might withdraw from the public sphere to produce purely private ends, but whether such individuals are capable of sustaining either a public *or* a private life." The self has become, for many, too radically autonomous.

"Varying the Consequences of Known Principles"

The point, then, is not that American individualism and its many manifestations across national values is an unmixed blessing, or guarantor of a good society. Individualism is, rather, as Tocqueville saw it, the horse America has ridden and probably must continue to ride throughout its history. We can try to saddle and tame the animal, but we can't get off him.

Whatever one thinks about them in praise-blame terms, America's core values have endured. More than in any other country, the value system guiding today's generations in the US is the same one that guided their predecessors. It's simply nonsense, for example, to write as Cheryl Russell did in "The Master Trend" that the "Baby Boom" generation of Americans is distinguished from its predecessors by "a strong sense of individualism...." *Every* American generation has been distinguished by a strong sense of individualism. Every American generation has pursued this idea and elaborated it in the circumstances of its own time.

As on so many things, Alexis de Tocqueville got this right. One may agree or disagree with the wisdom of the American public's value positions, of course, but one cannot properly dismiss them, he recognized, as flight or erratic. They are, instead, obdurate.

I hear it said that it is in the nature and habit of democracies to be constantly changing their opinions and feelings. This may be true of small democratic nations, like those of the ancient world, in which the whole community can be assembled in a public place and then excited at will by an orator. But I saw nothing of the kind among the great democratic people that dwells upon the opposite shores of the Atlantic Ocean. What struck me in the United States was the difficulty of shaking the majority in an opinion once conceived of.... [The public] is engaged in infinitely varying the consequences of known principles ... rather than seeking for new principles.²³

A mountain of recent empirical research bears out this brilliant assessment. Americans stay with and elaborate a few basic, deeply held values, rooted in the ideas of individual rights and choice. Today, the words "pro choice" refer to a particular side in the controversy over abortion. But in a

larger sense, America is and has been from its inception the "pro-choice" society. This commitment to the individual is, warts and all, our distinguishing national value.

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