





Preface

In the fall of 1999, the Wirthlin Worldwide polling organization conducted an international survey regarding social values. Nearly 2,900 randomly selected persons in five global regions responded to the following question: “If you could create society the way you think it should be, what would that society be centered around?” The choices offered were family, government, business, church, and individual.

The results were surprising. In the United States, fully 67 percent of persons chose “family” and another 20 percent chose “church.” If we add these numbers together to form a kind of “communitarian index,” the figure of 87 percent is as close to unanimous as polling usually gets.

The U.S. participants, moreover, chose “family” and “church” more than did those in any other region of the world. In Europe, for example, 58 percent of respondents chose “family” and only 4 percent chose “church.” In the predominantly Islamic Middle East and North Africa, only 50 percent chose “family” and 16 percent their faith community.

Eight percent of Americans would build their ideal society around the individual, compared to 21 percent of Asians and 12 percent of Latin Americans. “Business” was the choice of a mere 3 percent in the



U.S., compared to 14 percent in Asia and 7 percent in the Islamic world. “Government” was the answer of just 2 percent of Americans, but a hefty 25 percent of Asians.¹

In sum, nearly nine out of ten Americans in 1999 claimed to believe that the social order should be centered on families and religious communities, and Americans’ overwhelming attachment to this ideal distinguished them from the rest of the world’s peoples. Moreover, the Wirthlin poll occurred at the very height of the “dot.com” investment frenzy, at the apotheosis of the sex-scandal–scarred Clinton presidency, and in the wake of the notorious “me-decades” of the 1980s and 1990s. Some questions undoubtedly arise from this: How might the cultural analyst square this poll result with Calvin Coolidge’s oft-cited aphorism that “the business of America is business”? Or with the supposed grounding of American political culture in Lockean individualism? Or with the contemporary claim that the essence of America lies in its commitment to “cultural diversity”?

Part of the answer can be found in the realization that for a long time now America’s public leaders and intellectuals have trafficked in a distorted reading of the American past. In his provocative book, *The Myth of American Individualism*, political historian Barry Shain shows that “Americans in The Revolutionary era embraced a theory of the good life that is best described as reformed Protestant and communal.” He explains that the American cause of 1776 had more to do with the retention of “familial independence” than it did dreams of personal liberation. The founding generation did not consist of the nascent individualists and proto-capitalists presumed in contemporary liberal and libertarian thought. Instead, they were a people bound by family, spiritual community, and social convention.²

This new study of the “American way” argues that “family” and “religiously-grounded community” also served in the twentieth century as the dominant imagery for American self-understanding, with important consequences. Now cast in the context of an industrial order, carefully cultivated concepts of “the American family” and “the American home” became powerful vehicles for the assimilation of new immigrants into national life. In the universality of maternal love and family affections, nation-builders found powerful emotions that united an otherwise diverse and polyglot people. In doing so, they pushed aside rival visions of American self-understanding: a racialist Anglo-Saxonism and a “cultural pluralism” that celebrated ethnic and lifestyle

diversity. These same architects of twentieth-century ideals of citizenship and nationhood then erected a distinctive social welfare system that was intended both to reflect and reinforce “the traditional American family.” These policies contributed in turn to the historically unique revitalization of marriage and fertility in the U.S. during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The same images of social rebirth and family strength undergirded much American policy in the Cold War against communism. When, somewhat later, “the American family” system came under critical assault and exhibited signs of profound distress, American foreign policy began to unravel as well: a relationship more than coincidental. Some coherence was regained only when national leaders tentatively restored the rhetorical bond between nation and family. And with the United States of America now sitting astride the globe as the last superpower, the metaphors of “the American home” and “the natural community” have gained new and even more urgent import.

This book examines six episodes in the crafting of a family- and community-centered national identity. The first chapter explores the ideas of early twentieth-century American preeminent nation-builder, Theodore Roosevelt. T.R. emerges as the first American president to grapple with the challenges of modernity as it confronted the family; the first to articulate a family-centric worldview; and the first to link the stable, child-rich family with American patriotism. Chapter 2 uses the story of the German-Americans, America’s largest ethnic group, to dissect the crisis over immigrant assimilation in the early decades of the twentieth century and the resolution found in a common celebration of home and motherhood. The third chapter shows how a remarkable group of women, labeled here the “maternalists”, successfully turned the New Deal into a policy vehicle to promote “the traditional American family,” which is built on the bread-winning father and the homemaking mother. Chapter 4 traces how the imagery of “family” and “faith” were used by master promoter and publisher Henry Luce to shape a portrait of “the New America” that defined, in turn, “the American Century.” Chapter 5 underscores how the chief architects of American foreign policy between 1946 and 1965 all presumed the existence of a family-centered, religious people at home, who provided a stable base for their “grand designs” abroad. It also describes how mounting perceptions of disorder at home subsequently led to foreign policy failure. The final chapter explores the collapse of maternalist



x The “American Way”

ideals in the mid-1960s and emphasizes the internal weaknesses that made this end likely. The chapter also describes the tentative recovery of a family-centered national identity during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The volume concludes with a reformulation of the language of “family,” “community,” and “nationhood” that might be more appropriate for the new circumstances of the twenty-first century.



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