

# THEMES OF AMERICAN HISTORY

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All cultures, by definition, have a unique set of character traits. Many historians have tried to delineate the unique American Characteristics, and many others have written tomes about this subject. Since it HAS been perhaps OVERdeveloped, I feel it necessary to add one more such explanation. The themes I will be discussing deal mostly with TODAY, but we will be using today's characteristics to study how the American character has developed over time. This list is neither meant to be all inclusive nor exclusive only to American culture, rather it is merely a useful model designed to help explain America's cultural evolution to date. The general idea behind these themes is drawn from years of reading historical treatises, but is probably most influenced by Professor Stanley Shultz's web page History 102 at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. This is a great site organized in a very creative fashion. It is linked through my WebPages LINKS page.

## The 5 Themes view America as a:

- Organizational Culture
- Racist Culture
- Idealist/Democratic Culture
- Business Culture
- Technological Culture

## I. AMERICA AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Throughout this course we will discover how America developed a public philosophy based on the myth of rugged-individuals competing for economic and social dominance. Yet in order to function within the real world these individuals had to ORGANIZE into larger special interest groups to succeed. Thus America has had to deal with the contradiction of our belief in the primacy of the individual conflicting with the necessity of compromising for the common wealth of the family, community, state, and/or nation. We will see this duality in a myriad of processes:

**SHIFTING POLITICAL COALITIONS:** at different times we will see eastern merchants, western farmers, southern planters, mining states, *ad nauseum* competing and combining in shifting coalitions designed to maximize their political influence without destroyed their own core beliefs and needs.

**SOCIAL ALLIANCES:** We will see how various groups have formed and made alliances for mutual, but usually temporary, benefits: immigrants, elites, middle class, dirt-sucking farmers, etc.

**ECONOMIC GROUPS:** We will understand how workers, businesses, and customers have worked together (and in opposition) to maximize their needs. Additionally we shall see how the government has been used by these various groups as a potential ally.

Throughout this course try to understand how governmental controls (or lack thereof) have been used to increase America's economic power while trying to ensure that no single group assumes a monopolistic control over any part of that production. (Bill Gates)

**SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS:** We will see how different groups arise to protect and further their causes: KKK; Black Panthers; Republicans; Bull Moosers; Boy Scouts; etc. We will study how and why they arose and declined. How they made alliances with other groups; and how they lobby the various governments to help their causes.

**GOVERNMENTAL IDEALS AND DIVISIONS:** We will study how the differing ideas of Loose Vs Strict Construction, and the similar divisions of State vs. Federal power, and Executive vs. Legislative vs. Judicial powers have been (and are) played out in American history.

## II. AMERICA AS A "RACIST" CULTURE

In ALL cultures, the dominant ethnic group (any group of people that define themselves as different from "others") uses their power (economic, social, political) to maximize their power. This difference can take many forms. In India it is by caste (Varna & Jati), in Canada it is by language, while in Africa it is by tribal affiliation. In America this ethnocentrism (belief in the superiority of one's group) has usually taken on "racial" (skin color) characteristics. Thus white people (Anglo-Saxon stock) have attempted to govern through politics and economics to advance their own beliefs

We will see this process repeated as Europeans first encounter indigenous groups, and then watch it in action as different immigrant groups (both voluntary and forced) populate the Americas. The ability of groups to assimilate and thereby reduce (and often join in on) the majority prejudice was/is proportionate to their phenotypical and cultural similarity to white culture. The Old Immigrant groups from North Europe did best, the New Immigrants of Southern and Eastern Europe did ultimately "blend in", but those of Asian, African, Native, or Hispanic origins have defied the "melting pot" theory.

America has always welcomed all immigrants as long as they were needed as cheap labor, and long as they did not succeed. When **both** of these two variables were ignored certain groups of Americans form a coalition to reduce that immigrant group's power base. We shall see that this was usually directed at those least able to "blend-in". During W.W.II the Japanese-Americans were interned, while Germans merely faced verbal abuse. After the transcontinental railroads were constructed America enacted the Chinese Exclusion Acts, only to increase the allotment of Filipinos. The reason? The Chinese had banded together to become merchants, landowners, etc. It was their success combined with their obvious differences that sealed their doom in America. Lately, as second and third generation Asians buy into the American Dream, lose their accents and traditional dress, and consistently graduate as valedictorian and salutatorian they are becoming more and more "acceptable". Ultimately--America accepts those that succeed as Americans.

### III. AMERICA AS A "MORAL/DEMOCRATIC" CULTURE

Ironically, despite this idea of ethnic/racial superiority--or perhaps BECAUSE of it--we will also talk about America as a moral, idealistic, and democratic society. A society that believes that certain standards of morality must be upheld through either governmental legislation or through civil involvement in litigation and/or protest. We will see two distinctly different paths that this "moral" society will take. At its worst, America's sense of itself as the MOST moral and the MOST ethical society, will be portrayed by the prohibition movement, and their drive to try to make all of America conform to the moral views of that particular group. At its best, we will witness America's belief that "all men are created equal" reflected in its movement toward increased suffrage, increased civil rights, and increased economic equality. A nation's future is often defined by its own self-definition. Equality MAY not be possible, but a belief in that possibility has been one of the basic philosophical tenets of America since before the Declaration of Independence.

### IV. BUSINESS CIVILIZATION

Fourthly, we will discuss American society as a business culture. We will spend some time talking about the free market competition that theoretically exists within a capitalist economy. We will talk about how from the first generation of great American businessmen in the 1870s on, corporation leaders in America have attempted, if possible, to pursue monopoly. That is, they have tried to eliminate competition. They have tried to secure, for themselves and for their particular company, the most advantageous position in the economy. We will talk about the trend toward the consolidation of the business enterprise, from John D. Rockefeller to the new communication industries such as Microsoft. In the context of talking about America as a business culture or society, we will talk about what I've labeled the "managerial revolution". That is, big business coming more and more to be run mostly by managers. Men who were not laborers themselves, but men whose skills lay rather in organizing and managing an ever-growing and ever-larger business corporation.

As an outgrowth of that business society, we will spend some time talking about the American people as a consumer society or consumer culture. We will talk about how Americans, in part at least, identified who they were, where they were and what was happening to them in their society by the kinds of material goods they could acquire, consume, and show off. We will deal with America as a business culture from the early days of the organization of corporations to the rise of America as the industrial giant of the world by the early years of the 20th century, to a kind of post-industrial, service-based economy from World War II years down to the present. Americans, and the world's peoples, are evolving into ever larger consumers to fuel the ever growing industrial machine.

### V. TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE

The final way we will look at American society will be as a technological culture. Obviously this connects, in some ways with the business society. For if the "Business of America is business" (Calvin Coolidge) then the driving force of business has surely been TECHNOLOGY. We will study this trend by looking at the impact of new technologies on the Americans' sense of

themselves as a kind of know-how people, a people who when confronted with any problem -- social, economic, political -- could find a technological response to it. We will look at the impact of the railroads on American society in the 1870s and 1880s during that so-called Gilded Age.

Next, we will look at the impact of the mechanization of agriculture and the introduction of new farm machinery and how that revolutionized American agriculture and turned the United States into what late 19th century Americans called "the breadbasket of the world." Then we will talk about the social and the economic implications of the new transportation technology of the automobile, particularly during the 1920s as the driving force in production and then again in the 1950s as the shaper of the suburban landscape and our throw-away society.

We will talk about the rise of new communications technologies: radio in the 1920s, the rise of the motion picture industry in the 30s, the impact of television in the 50s, and finally the possible consequences and the future of the internet. We will talk about those communication technologies not only as a way of informing ourselves of the news, but as a way of learning new lifestyles, new ways of behaving; new attitudes about what is moral and immoral behavior; new ways of deciding who and what we are; new ways of identifying or confirming our self-identity. Finally, we will study our technological culture as a new world-wide phenomena that is both our chief export and our new religion. As technology produces both new opportunities and new problems it becomes both the creation and the solution to the future.

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So, as we study American history, always try to fit that chapter--that section into:

1. America as a business culture
2. a technological culture
3. an organizational culture
4. a racist culture
5. a moral and an idealist culture

All of these together will form a kind of "big picture" theme in which we will try to integrate a discussion of American society from roughly 1500 to the present. GOOD LUCK