

American Cultural History, Topic 3: The “Spirit of ‘76” and Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, “What Is an American?” (1782)

Background

In 1782, one year before Britain acknowledged American independence by signing the Treaty of Paris, French observer Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur claimed that an American was a “new man.” He argued that, despite still being “British” on paper, Americans had created a new identity for themselves before their commitment to a new nation-state had ever existed. Indeed, he asserted, an American culture—a set of distinguishing ideas, practices, and creations based on a unique system of values—had developed over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the point that separation had become unavoidable. An American culture, related to—but distinct from—its British heritage, had forged American character, memory, myths, symbols, heroes, and, some would argue, civilization. What does America stand for? What does it mean to be an American? What makes an idea or a piece of art “American”? Though contested, enough of a consensus had emerged by 1776 that violent separation seemed preferable to reluctant remaining. American “unity with union” was possible only after “disunity with division” from Britain.

What were components of this new American identity, the so-called “Spirit of ‘76”? Observers of the cultural revolution that the War of American Independence secured have had different ideas. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson and the Second Continental Congress believed that it included the “self-evident” truths of being “created equal” and being “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Crèvecoeur asserted that “he is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.” “Here,” he continued, “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.” In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville assessed that, in America, “men easily attain a certain equality of condition, but they can never attain as much as they desire.... At every moment they think they are about to grasp it; it escapes at every moment from their hold. They are near enough to see its charms, but too far off to enjoy them.... That is the reason for the strange melancholy that haunts inhabitants of democratic countries in the midst of abundance.” In 1917, Woodrow Wilson declared that America’s duty is to “make the world safe for democracy” by spending “her blood and might for the principles that gave her birth.” In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt asserted that America’s is a quest for a world “founded upon four essential human freedoms”: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. In 1963, John F. Kennedy wrote to Lyndon B. Johnson that “poverty in the midst of plenty is a paradox that must not go unchallenged in this country,” which hearkened back to Jefferson’s belief that “widespread poverty and concentrated wealth cannot long endure side by side in a democracy.” Historian David Hackett Fischer posited that four strains of liberty—“ordered liberty” in Massachusetts, “hegemonic liberty” in Virginia, “reciprocal liberty” in the Delaware Valley, and “natural liberty” in the Appalachian backcountry—became the amalgam of America values, while historian Michael Kammen argued that American identity is a collection of biformities—collective individualism, conservative liberalism, emotional rationalism, godly materialism, and pragmatic idealism—in constant tension with each other. Each observer expressed major themes of American civilization: Christian independence and Christian dependence, faith and works, equality of opportunity and equality of condition, tradition and innovation, potential and prosperity, restlessness and expansion, idealism and mission, rights and responsibilities, charity and compassion, individualism and community, power and service, and hopes and dreams. When woven together in the American tapestry of culture, these contradicting themes create paradoxes. These distinctly American combinations are rooted in the struggle of balancing Christian principles of perfection, and they remain elusive ideals for which Americans continually strive. The greatness of America, however, lies in its ceaseless striving.

What has the Lord, through His prophets, said about the issue of American identity? As Moroni recorded in the Book of Ether, America “is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from

captivity, and from all nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ” (Ether 2:12). Almost a millennium earlier, Lehi prophesied that “there shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord. Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them” (2 Nephi 1:6-7). In an 1833 revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord explained that He suffered the Constitution to be established for the “rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles; that every man might act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given him.... Therefore, it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:77-79). More recently, President Gordon B. Hinckley affirmed that “those early settlers from the British Isles were Christian people who came with the Judeo-Christian concepts of right and wrong, truth and error, which they derived from reading the Bible. They were people who looked to God for strength and inspiration and expressed their gratitude to Him for every blessing.” He also said that he was “deeply concerned” with the rejection of the American identity bequeathed to this generation by the Founding Fathers, stating, “There has been going on in this nation for a good while a process which I call ‘secularizing America.’... We are paying a terrible price for it.” These words from Moroni, Lehi, Joseph Smith, and President Hinckley all confirm the idea of “American exceptionalism”: the belief that the “Spirit of ’76” created a unique and special culture and identity, elements that President Hinckley said formed the “greatest [nation] the world has ever known.” They provide internal motivations for the external conditions described by observers like Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville and historians like Fischer and Kammen. America has, indeed, been exceptional. What remains to be seen is what its citizens will do about it. If America is to continue as a special place for a special people, they will need to keep the commandments of the “God of the land, who is Jesus Christ.”

Questions to Consider as You Read:

- According to Crèvecoeur, what makes America unique and exceptional?
- According to Crèvecoeur, what are characteristics of an American?
- What does Crèvecoeur say about America as a “melting pot”, self-interest as a motivation, the separation of church and state, the irrelevance of the past, and equality of opportunity?

Research: Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, Letter III from Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

As you read, don't forget to mark and annotate main ideas, key terms, confusing concepts, unknown vocabulary, cause/effect relationships, examples, etc.

[In America,] we have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free; as he ought to be; nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are. Many ages will not see the shores of our great lakes replenished with inland nations, nor the unknown bounds of North America entirely peopled. Who can tell how far it extends? Who can tell the millions of men whom it will feed and contain? for no European foot has as yet travelled half the extent of this mighty continent! The next wish of this traveller will be to know whence came all these people? they are mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen. The eastern provinces must indeed be excepted, as being the unmixed descendants of Englishmen. I have heard many wish that they had been more intermixed also: for my part, I am no wisher, and think it much better as it has happened. They exhibit a most conspicuous figure in this great and variegated picture; they too enter for a great share in the pleasing perspective displayed in these thirteen provinces. I know it is fashionable to reflect on them, but I respect them for what they have done; for the accuracy and wisdom with which they have settled their territory; for the decency of their manners; for their early love of letters; their ancient college, the first in this hemisphere; for their industry; which to me who am but a farmer, is the criterion of everything. There never was a people, situated as they are, who with so ungrateful a

soil have done more in so short a time. Do you think that the monarchical ingredients which are more prevalent in other governments, have purged them from all foul stains? Their histories assert the contrary.

In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose should they ask one another what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene of sore affliction or pinching penury; can that man call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments; who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet? No! urged by a variety of motives, here they came. Every thing has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mould, and refreshing showers; they withered, and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war; but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished! Formerly they were not numbered in any civil lists of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as citizens. By what invisible power has this surprising metamorphosis been performed? By that of the laws and that of their industry. The laws, the indulgent laws, protect them as they arrive, stamping on them the symbol of adoption; they receive ample rewards for their labours; these accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freemen, and to that title every benefit is affixed which men can possibly require....

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all; without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord. I lord religion demands but little of him; a small voluntary salary to the minister, and gratitude to God; can he refuse these? The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. —This is an American.¹

Notebook Questions: Reason and Record

- According to Crèvecoeur, what makes America unique and exceptional?

¹ SOURCE: De Crèvecoeur, Michel Guillaume Jean. *Letters from an American Farmer*, reprinted from the original 1782 edition, with a prefatory note by W. P. Trent and an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn. New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904.

- According to Crèvecoeur, what are characteristics of an American?
- What does Crèvecoeur say about America as a “melting pot”, self-interest as a motivation, the separation of church and state, the irrelevance of the past, and equality of opportunity?

Notebook Questions: Relate and Record

- How does the document relate to FACE Principle #1: God’s Principle of Individuality: “Everything in God’s universe reveals His infinity and diversity. Each person is a unique creation of God, designed to express the nature of Christ individually in society. The quality of man’s government is primarily determined in his heart”?
- How does the document relate to Mosiah 29:31-32, 38 and Galatians 6:7?

Record Activity: Multiple Choice Comprehension Check

1. Background: Which of the following are true about American culture in 1782?
 - a. Crèvecoeur asserted that it had created a “new man” called an “American”: a person with a distinct cultural identity that separated him from an Englishman—even though Britain still considered him to be English.
 - b. By that time, an American culture—a set of distinguishing ideas, practices, and creations based on a unique system of values—had developed, which made separation from Britain unavoidable.
 - c. The War of American Independence secured—instead of created from whole cloth—an American identity that had been evolving throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
 - d. This American culture, related to—but distinct from—its British heritage, had forged American character, memory, myths, symbols, heroes, and, some would argue, civilization.
 - e. Though contested, enough of a consensus had emerged by 1776 that violent separation seemed preferable to reluctant remaining. American “unity with union” was possible only after “disunity with division” from Britain.
 - f. three of the above

- g. all of the above but one
 - h. all of the above
2. Background: According to the observers of culture mentioned in the background narrative, all of the following were components of the new American identity, the so-called “Spirit of ’76”, except which one?
- a. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson and the Second Continental Congress believed that it included the “self-evident” truths of being “created equal” and being “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”
 - b. Crèvecoeur asserted that “he is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.”
 - c. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville assessed that, in America, “men easily attain a certain equality of condition, but they can never attain as much as they desire.”
 - d. In 1917, Woodrow Wilson declared that America’s duty is to “make the world safe for democracy.”
 - e. In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt asserted that America’s is a quest for a world “founded upon four essential human freedoms.”
 - f. In 1963, John F. Kennedy wrote to Lyndon B. Johnson that “poverty in the midst of plenty is a paradox that must not go unchallenged in this country.”
 - g. Historian David Hackett Fischer posited that four strains of liberty—“ordered liberty” in Massachusetts, “hegemonic liberty” in Virginia, “reciprocal liberty” in the Delaware Valley, and “natural liberty” in the Appalachian backcountry—became the amalgam of America values.
 - h. Historian Michael Kammen argued that American identity is a collection of biformities—collective individualism, conservative liberalism, emotional rationalism, godly materialism, and pragmatic idealism—in constant tension with each other.
 - i. All of the above are true.
3. Source: Crèvecoeur would agree with all of the following statements about the new American man except which one?
- a. He is unique and exceptional because conditions in America are so different from conditions in Europe. For example, he has no earthly prince, and he suffers from no hopeless poverty.
 - b. He is free and equal and has room to expand.
 - c. He works hard because he reaps the fruits of his labors. The harder he works, the more prosperous he will become.
 - d. He is part of a great melting pot of men. They enter the cauldron as Englishmen, Swedes, Germans, Dutch, and French and exit from it as the change leaders of the world: Americans.
 - e. His model is the citizen of the French Republic, who enjoys liberty, equality, and fraternity under the banner of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The “new man” in America is this French citizen’s ideological younger brother: a kindred spirit who has much to learn from his French mentor.
 - f. He is regenerated by new laws, new ways of living, and a new social system that rewards hard

work. Here, unlike in Europe, he can become a free man, a citizen—and not just a servant, one of the nameless poor.

- g. He is motivated by self-interest and the voluntary nature of religious affiliation.
- h. To him, the past is irrelevant. He celebrates his equality of opportunity because it gives him the freedom to create and become.