

# American Cultural Values

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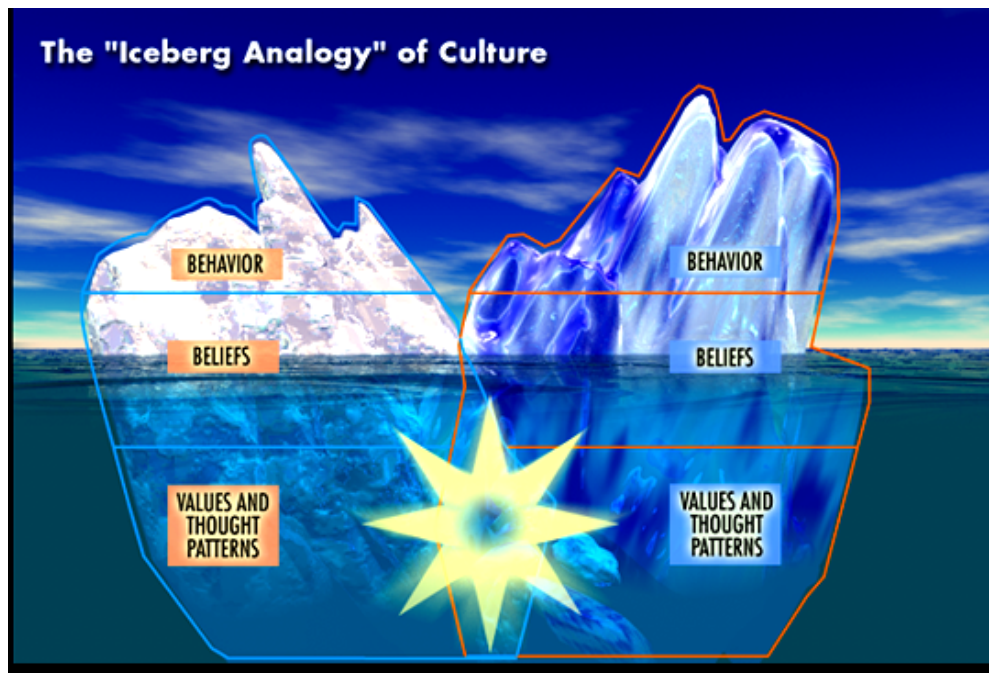
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To understand the political, economic, social and even personal behavior of any group of people, we must first know the dominant values of their culture which are passed down from one generation to another through learning. There is no way to explain the behavior of Americans unless you know their dominant or mainstream culture.

Culture is like an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg is the smallest part. Most of the iceberg is submerged. The same is true for a culture. That which you can easily see – the behavior of people – is the smallest part of culture. It is external while the greatest part, internal culture, is beneath the water level of awareness. It is inside people's heads.

This internal culture includes our way of thinking and perceiving. Most importantly, it contains the values and beliefs unconsciously learned while growing up in a particular culture. These values and beliefs determine most behavior.



The illustration above represents two cultural icebergs coming together as people come together from different cultures. Note that the largest part of a person's culture is internal or beneath the water level of awareness.

As the two icebergs collide, most people would see the differences in behaviors. They might be overly concerned about such matters as greeting people incorrectly or wearing the wrong clothes. Mistakes at this level of culture are relatively minor. Most

people expect those from other cultures to make mistakes at the behavioral level. On the other hand, the real collision of cultures occurs at the unconscious, internal cultural level where there are basic cultural values.

The collision of internal cultures causes us to become more aware of the differences and similarities between cultural values. More importantly, by understanding the internal culture, especially the significant values, we have a system for analyzing and interpreting behavior.

### **The United States is not a “melting pot.”**

Many people believe that the United States is a mixture of many different cultures without a dominant or mainstream culture. The metaphor which is often used to reflect this assumption is the “melting pot.” People from around the globe bring their cultures here and throw them into the American pot. The mixture is stirred and heated until the various cultures melt together.

There is some truth to this idea. The U.S. is a culturally diverse society. However, there is also a dominant culture and immigrants became a part of this culture by giving up their differences so that they could fit into the mainstream of the society. A more historically accurate metaphor is that the U.S. has had a cultural “cookie-cutter” with a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male mold or shape.

In the early 1900s, a German Catholic immigrant could learn English and blend into the Protestant Christian community. He might change his name from German to a typical American Anglo-Saxon name – Wilhelm Schmidt became William Smith, or simply Bill Smith. Those who could fit the cultural cookie-cutter mold advanced more easily and quickly than those who could not. Even today, the most economically successful Arab Americans are Lebanese Christians. Because they are Christian, while most other Arab Americans are Moslem, they could more easily fit into the dominant American culture.

American Indians, Mexican Americans and African Americans could not fit the mold. Regardless of how much they acted like white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, they could not change their skin color or hair texture. Even if they mastered English and mainstream values and behaviors, nonwhites were identifiably different and therefore were easily excluded from the dominant culture.

**Americans are not Europeans.**

Some people think of the United States as simply another European culture. But, the first immigrants who came to America in large numbers were not “typical” Europeans. Many were fleeing Europe to avoid religious or political oppression. Others were criminals who were sent to the “New World” by the British.

Most of these immigrants had values and beliefs that were not at all common in Europe. They arrived in an area of the world where their values and beliefs were very highly rewarded or reinforced. Some social scientists would even claim they were exaggerated and perpetuated in America because of its unique physical and social environment.

**Religion in America**

Those immigrants who had the most dramatic impact on American culture were Calvinists, who were persecuted for their religious beliefs in Europe. They were religious minorities in Europe who were opposed to the Roman Catholic Church or the official religion of their country. They were often willing to go to jail in defense of their religious beliefs and thus they were often considered religious fanatics.

Religion has always been an important value for Americans. Many of the first independent states were formed by particular religious groups that later merged into the United States where all religions were valued. Even today, about 70 percent of all Americans would categorize themselves as Protestants, and church attendance in the U.S. today is higher than any other country in the industrialized world. A recent poll found that 94 percent of Americans expressed faith in God, as compared with 70 percent of Britons and 67 percent of West Germans.<sup>1</sup> Almost 80 percent of Americans surveyed report that religion is very or quite important in their lives, while only 45 percent of Europeans (German, French, Britons, Italians, Austrians, and Dutch) on average give similar answers.<sup>2</sup>

Americans expect their leaders to value religion and they expect the President to end his speeches to the country with the phrase “God bless America.” The phrase “one nation under God” can be found on the dollar bill.

While religion is a very strong cultural value, it is also considered a somewhat personal value. There is no official state religion in America. The Constitution forbids the government from supporting any religion or interfering with any religious practices.

Ironically, in European countries where there are state or national religions, religion has become less important over the years.

### **Risk-Taking**

During the 1700 and 1800s, there was little physical mobility in Europe. Most people lived in the same house as their parents. Immigrants to the U.S. were willing to leave their homes to go half way around the globe while knowing that 20 percent of them would die en route. They risked their lives to go to the new world where there was religious and political freedom. Most importantly, there was opportunity to advance economically if one was willing to take the risk to go to the “New World.”

The willingness of the individual to take risks is a basic aspect of the American culture even today. In Europe, there was no realistic hope of escaping poverty and oppression. There was little change in life. If you were born poor, you died poor. Yet these immigrants believed that change could take place if they were willing to take risks.

The “American Dream” of economic advancement and success is still shared by immigrants today. While many arrive and live their lives here in relative poverty, their children attend school in America and learn English. These first generation native-born Americans usually pull the family out of poverty. In their homelands, this was perhaps impossible.

### **Upward Economic Mobility**

Calvinism was revolutionary in Europe in the 1700s because it did not support the economic status quo. Basic to its beliefs was the assumption that change is good and that it is the responsibility of the individual to take the initiative to bring about change.

In Europe, there was a very rigid social and economic class system with little mobility between the classes. Yet the Calvinists believed that God rewards the individual who works hard, and that one can easily move from one economic class to another through individual effort.

The beliefs and values that are most important in all cultures are those that are rewarded. These immigrants happened to land in an area of the world that was isolated from the wars going on in Europe. There were unlimited natural resources and a very small population. Indeed, in this environment, if an immigrant was willing to work hard, he could

be successful. These beliefs and values were very highly rewarded, and are certainly among the most important cultural values even today.

### **Egalitarianism, Individual Achievement and Action**

No politician in the U.S. would campaign using an academic title such as Ph.D. Even the President or an American Ambassador can only be addressed as Mr. President or Mr. Ambassador, not “your excellency.” Americans do not like titles and will often use their first name. We associate title with Europeans where status was often given by one’s birth. Americans assume everyone is equal in status or at least ought to be given an equal opportunity to achieve status through hard work.

Status is earned in the United States based upon what an individual does. The emphasis Americans place on individual achievement can be traced back to the Calvinist belief that each individual is equal in the eyes of God and can accomplish whatever is desired if he or she is willing to work hard.

Success in the U.S. is the sweetest if it is individual success and based upon hard work and action. American heroes are always individualists who accomplish whatever they do in life through action... Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, Paul Bunyan or Rambo. There is no politician who would say “vote for me because of my family and all the important people I know.” Almost every politician in the U.S. portrays himself or herself as some sort of Abraham Lincoln – a self-made man who grew up in poverty and became President through his own efforts without help from others.

President Clinton grew up in a poor family, worked hard to earn money to go to school, graduated with a law degree from Yale University and was a distinguished Rhodes Scholar. Because of his individual accomplishments and his ability to compete with other politicians, he earned the support of the American people and was elected President.

It was no accident that the bible of capitalism, Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations, was published in 1776 when the U.S. was founded. Free enterprise, market capitalism and political liberalism were built upon assumptions of individual achievement, social mobility within a class system, and an anti-government philosophy. These ideas also grew in the greenhouse environment of an America with an abundance of natural resources, limited population and a continually expanding economy.

### **Self-reliance and Independence - - Frontier or Pioneer Values.**

If you were an immigrant coming to the U.S. from Europe in the mid-1800's, you would probably begin your American experience living in an overcrowded urban area in poverty, as is true of many immigrants today. Most worked hard to save money to take advantage of economic opportunities in the West where there was land, natural resources, gold and employment.

There were wagon trails going west. But, these were not group tours. Each family had its own wagon, ate alone and had a separate destination. To survive on the frontier the pioneers had to be very self-reliant and independent. These pioneer values were added to the European Calvinist values to form the core cultural values of America.

Almost every politician wants a picture of himself or herself wearing a cowboy hat. Why? Because when Americans think of a cowboy, they picture a lone individual sitting on a horse out on the prairie. Cowboys never traveled in groups. They were men of action, self-reliant and independent individualists who survived without any help from anyone else. For Americans, the cowboy is a Calvinist on horseback and represents the dominant values of this society.

As a result, one of the worst insults in America is to suggest that someone depends upon or relies upon others. When we help others, it is often done indirectly or circuitously through anonymous charities, but seldom directly because it would offend the receivers.

The average American gives about five hundred dollars to charities each year, and the poorer the person the greater the percentage of his or her income is given to charity. And, about 48 percent of the population volunteered an average of four hours per week to various organizations and causes.<sup>3</sup> They volunteer their time and efforts to help others who are disadvantaged – the poor, the elderly or children. Volunteerism is a basic cultural value.

Again, this help should never be given too directly or it will offend the recipient. Ideally, the help should give receivers an opportunity to do something to better themselves. For example, many of the early American philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie did not give money directly to the poor. Rather he built universities and libraries so the poor could study and, through their own efforts, raise themselves economically. His help did not take away individual self-reliance and independence.

The typical family throughout American history has been the nuclear family which included the husband, wife and children, but not the grandparents, aunts uncles or other

relatives. This small family was highly mobile. Even today, the average American moves fourteen times in his or her lifetime, primarily to take advantage of economic opportunities elsewhere in the country. At the age of eighteen or nineteen, if a child has finished high school, many parents expect their children to leave home to go to the university or begin a career. They should not be economically dependent upon their hardworking parents.

### **American Liberalism and Capitalism**

The dominant political philosophy in this country is what many Europeans call “liberalism,” although in the U.S. it is often considered a form of “conservatism.” It is the belief that less government is better government and government ought not interfere in the lives of the individual. This is a logical extension of Calvinism.

Most Americans distrust a strong central government. This is why we do not have a Parliamentary system where the executive and legislative branches are the same. There has always been a belief that the branches of the government—executive, legislative and judicial – must be separate and balanced in terms of political power.

The dominant economic belief is *laissez faire* capitalism, in which government should not interfere in the economy and it is up to the individual to succeed or fail. This is also a logical extension of Calvinism. Unlike most European countries, and even Canada, the U.S. does not have a socialist party and, compared to other industrialized countries, there is much less support by the federal government for health care, child care, the unemployed and the elderly. Even education is mostly a local, rather than federal, matter.

### **Americans identify themselves in terms of what they do.**

If you encounter an American at a party, he or she will often greet you in the following way: “Hello, my name is Gary Weaver. I’m a professor at American University. What do you do? We identify ourselves in terms of *what we do*.

People from many other cultures identify themselves in terms of *who they are*. A East African might greet you by saying, “Hello. I’m Amos Ntimama, the son of William Ole Ntimama, from Narok in the Masai Mara.” The primary source of his identity is who he is – his father and his birthplace. Status is based upon family and heritage, not what he does as an individual.



In many traditional, rural nonwestern cultures, children learn that relationships or affiliations are more important than what one achieves as an individual. In fact, achievement for the sake of family or friends is what is important. Having stable, harmonious long-term friendships are highly valued, and people want to depend upon and rely upon others. Cooperation, rather than competition, is admired and rewarded at home and in the workplace.

Because of the great emphasis placed on independence, self-reliance and individual achievement, when a person fails in his or her personal or economic endeavors, an American feels individually responsible. One often feels *guilty* for not trying harder, being more competitive with others or taking advantage of an opportunity. In many nonwestern cultures where the extended family and heritage are important, when one fails there is a sense of *shame* because the failure affects all those associated with the individual.

These values also affect the way in which Americans conduct business meetings. They tend to “get down to business” in a meeting much more quickly than in cultures where relationships are important. In many traditional, rural cultures, time must be allowed to get acquainted with others and to determine their status before beginning to discuss business. Some Americans think that Africans or Mexicans are “wasting time” when they socialize before discussing business. On the other hand, Africans and Mexicans sometimes perceive Americans as “pushy” and always in a hurry to conduct business before developing relationships.

### **The U.S. is becoming a “salad bowl”**

Of course, the U.S. has changed. Most would no longer accept a melting pot or a cookie-cutter culture. The metaphors that have become popular suggest that it is acceptable to keep one's differences and still be part of the overall society. In a salad, each vegetable adds its own texture and taste just as men and women or black, white, yellow or brown races combine to create a society where individual differences in gender, race religion, or ethnic background are valued.

There are some Americans who fear that the mainstream culture will be destroyed by large numbers of immigrants coming from non-European cultures. Since 1964, approximately one million immigrants each year have come to the U.S. – the overwhelming majority from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa.

There is no evidence to justify these fears. While the increase in non-Hispanic white Americans is almost zero, those who advance in this society behave like white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They tend to value hard work, individual achievement and action. However, many want to retain their cultural, racial or ethnic identities and see no reason to give them up to advance in the contemporary American culture.

### **Positive and Negative Aspects of American Cultural Values**

When we consider cultural values we must generalize. These values do not apply to everyone in every situation in America and there are exceptions to all of the dominant values. For example, Americans need to feel that they belong to a group just as the Japanese value belongingness and collectivism.

The need to feel we are all one big family – a collective – may be even greater in the U.S. because of the overemphasis on individualism. Consequently, during times of national holidays or international crises, Americans come together with great strength and unity. Patriotism in the U.S. is very important and it is often referred to as America’s “civic religion.”<sup>4</sup> And, as with people who convert to a religion, immigrants are often more fanatical about their allegiance to America and its values than natives of the U.S.

Earned status, individualism, self-reliance and independence were all necessary values for those who wanted to survive and prosper in the American frontier society of the 1800s and 1900s. These values allowed them to succeed and were vital for the country to grow economically. But, will these values serve the U.S. well in the new millennium?

Rugged individualism in America has meant that many elderly would rather live alone – self-reliant and independent – than rely or depend upon their children. Many of our young people may have difficulty cooperating with others and forming intimate relationships because they cannot stop competing as individuals. Siblings and friends, even husbands and wives, sometimes compete with each other. Today, this form of competitive individualism may be excessive and counterproductive. It may have a very negative impact on the psychological well-being of our families. After the year 2000, we may have to depend and rely upon our family members to provide economical and psychological stability and support.

The most popular movie in the U.S. during the summer of 1996 was entitled “Independence Day.” The most patriotic day in the U.S. is July 4<sup>th</sup> – the day Americans

celebrate their independence from the British. This movie was a classic example of dominant American cultural values. Aliens from outer space were trying to conquer earth and the President flew the plane that led the attack against them. Americans loved this modern-day science fiction cowboy movie.

However, in the economically and politically interdependent world that we live in, cowboys may be dangerous. Perhaps in the new millennium, Americans need to balance their overemphasis on individualism and competition with collectivism and cooperation.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Greeley, Religion Around the World: A Preliminary Report (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Inglehart, 1990 World Values Survey (Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, 1990), question 3 F.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Morin, "So Much for the 'Bowling Alone' Thesis: A compilation of data suggest that Americans actually are becoming more involved," The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, June 17-23, 1996, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 18, 63-64.