

## American Morals and Collective Identity as Tools for Control

As America developed as a country, there were three key elements to the colonies' budding government that set their legislation apart from other countries in the world. Those three concepts first appeared in the Declaration of Independence, written in 1776. Thomas Jefferson wrote the following famous words that would come to frame the national identities and morals of Americans, " ...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness (2001:64)." This excerpt from the Declaration of Independence alludes to one very important device, as well as an important idea, both of which are used by politicians today. As a political official, Thomas Jefferson was able to implement possibly, one of the most important phrases used in creating a unified American "character." **The use of phrases and metaphors is still used today by politicians in order to draw upon this American "character" and unify the country in times of need: think post-9/11 or Obama's campaign.** It is also important to consider Thomas Jefferson's use of capitalization in the aforementioned excerpt. His references to Life, Liberty, and Happiness (rather than life, liberty, or happiness) suggest the dominance that America would come to attain through the country's role as a moral beacon for the rest of the world. Ultimately, the morals upon which America was built have been used to maintain an idealistic American "character," which in turn has been used to

manipulate and control not only Americans, but also other countries that look to America as the top tier of the global hierarchy.

We must first consider the early stages of America. Those who came to build the country were immigrants themselves. If ever they wanted to create a unified land there needed to be certain ideals that linked them all inextricably to one another, and to their new homeland. The Declaration of Independence provided those ideals, and from such ideals, ideas of what it meant to be American were created. It seems that in its early stages, “Americanness” was simply a frame of mind. In J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur’s 1782 *Letter III from an American Farmer*, he wrote that upon one’s arrival to the new continent one of the most important things he or she must do is, “...(S/)He must necessarily feel a share of national pride... (2001:25, parentheses mine).” Crèvecoeur continues discussing Americans with use of the unifying “we” throughout his letter as he describes a sense of pride and openness to opportunity that all Americans share. However, it seems that as America developed further, more was required to be considered American. Other variables became necessary to determine one’s “Americanness” or American “character” as American norms began to manifest; **such as support for the country’s flag (consider the *Pledge of Allegiance*) and religion (in God we trust), race (whiteness vs. other) and gender (maleness vs. other), class (middle as normative) and sexuality (heterosexuality).**

As what it meant to be American grew more complex, the need for ideas that had the ability to unify these Americans increased as well. Just as Crèvecoeur related greatly to a national identity, the same can be said for many American citizens

today, which makes it no coincidence that politicians and other high-standing officials still use Thomas Jefferson's mode of unifying phrases to keep the country together. Two prime examples of this are George W. Bush's speeches after the 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and much of Barack Obama's language during his run for presidency.

After the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Americans were living in chaos and terror. The seemingly perfect makeup of America was falling apart. In an act to end the disorder and confusion that was taking place, President Bush began giving speeches in which most of his language discussed how "we" must not let "them" scare us, and how "we" must embrace "our" country and stand proudly in the face of terror. Despite any negative feelings that Americans had towards President Bush, his speeches helped to calm much of the country by reifying ideas of American unity. By reiterating ideas of American "character" and unity, President Bush was able to gain control over the emotions that many Americans had toward the September 11<sup>th</sup> attackers, changing their emotions from fear of another country to pride in their own country. This allowed for America to appear strong and united in the eyes of the rest of the world, regardless of whatever differences truly existed within the country. Such a façade is important to those in control of America and its government because as long as America maintains its global reputation through its morals, the rest of the world will continue to look to America as a moral beacon of light.

During Barack Obama's campaign for presidency, it was crucial that he gain the so-called "youth vote." In order to do so, he implemented numerous phrases in

order to win over voters. His most popular phrase was, "Yes we can!" Once again, the use of "we" acted as a unifier, invoking not only youth voters, but also many other Americans to vote for Obama under the same veil of patriotic spirit, morality, and character considered to be American since Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. This is another way that ideas of morality and the creation of a national identity have worked to control the masses of Americans who believe so strongly in, and identify so strongly with American "character."

The history of American morality and unity goes back to the country's beginnings and remains as relevant today as it did then. The seemingly strong moral basis of America has earned much respect and dislike from other countries around the world. As one of the most powerful countries in the world, America has made it the country's job to help better other parts of the globe. However, who is to say that these other countries need the help of America? Who is to say that America's morals are better than those of other countries? Morality, especially in terms of government and civilization are relative. It is also important to recognize that America has a history of going to help other countries under the guise of American morality, when in truth their intentions are to gain control; consider Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. When questioning such thing it is necessary to look back to Jefferson's ideas of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. As previously discussed, due to Jefferson's way of structuring the actual written content of those morals, there is an implication that the lives, liberty, and happiness of American citizens is somehow more important than those of other countries, more powerful and dominant even. Such understandings of these revered morals have led to America's dominance over

other countries, as well as the openness, in some cases, of other countries to be dominated by America regardless of whether or not America is true to these core values. The global understanding of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness have also placed American values on a pedestal as something for other countries to implement, which is another one of the ways that ideas of American “character” and moral validity act as tools for control.

America was created with a purpose. From the country’s government to ideas of what it means to actually be American, everything served to ensure that America would be distinguishable from other countries and maintain its global power. This is evident from Thomas Jefferson’s ideas of Life, Liberty, and Happiness, Crèvecoeur’s descriptions of American identity, and furthermore, the ways that these identities serve to unify Americans today. Although I cannot say that these things are either intrinsically good or bad, I can say that throughout America’s history morality and ideas of an American collective identity have been used in order to control not only Americans, but other people around the world who have been enticed by America’s moral orientation and preoccupation with such morality.

### Works Cited

Horwitz, Richard P., ed. *American studies anthology*. Wilmington, Del: SR, 2001. Print.