

Obama: The First Hundred Days (III)

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In two previous meetings, we have looked at domestic and foreign policy in the first hundred days of the Obama administration. In this final session, we will consider whether the economic crisis and international conditions, coupled with the measures the administration is taking to deal with them, are likely to have any effect on American cultural values. By the catch-all term cultural values, I mean both basic political beliefs and attitudes on controversial social issues. Much will depend, of course, on whether the President's leadership will be judged successful. If he is perceived to be setting a good course, attitudes and expectations will adjust to the tone he sets. FDR had that effect, and so did Reagan. It remains to be seen whether there will also be an Obama effect. If he succeeds, the country could well emerge from this period renewed and reformed, as it did at earlier critical junctures in our history. I don't mean to suggest that other factors are not also at work in influencing our ways of life and thinking or that values can mutate as readily as women's fashions or even with electoral cycles. But attitudes do change with altered circumstances and hard experience, and this may be one of those times when adaptations are likely because so much of conventional wisdom is now in question.

To review the prospects, I will address them in four parts. I will look first and only briefly at the most obvious change that the election itself signifies, which is of course the evolution in American attitudes about race. Second, I will review other potential changes in public opinion that are reflected in the President's actions so far on a variety of cultural issues. Third, I will look at the major ethical theme sounded in his speeches. And fourth and finally, I

will try to link these contemporary developments back to the cultural values that took root when this country was founded and that have shaped its subsequent character and uniqueness – and to ask whether we are once again in a period of renewal and reinvigoration.

On the significance of the election itself, little needs to be said, though that little speaks volumes. The single, most striking fact about this election is the American people's choice, by a clear majority, of the first-ever president of African descent. That in itself is a striking testament to the influence of the belief in human equality announced in the Declaration of Independence but violated from the start by the continuation of slavery. The belief in equality of rights was reaffirmed in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address but bitterly contested for a century thereafter, when slavery was replaced by racial discrimination, persecution, and segregation. Lincoln may have emancipated the slaves, but the new birth of freedom he announced was a long time in coming. Come it did, at least symbolically, on that historic day this past January when Barack Obama took the oath of office -- clumsily administered by a white Chief Justice, as fickle fate would decree. Finally, once and for all time, real life caught up with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of an America in which people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. On that day, all those who struggled for civil rights, who kept their eyes on the prize despite the resistance they met along the way, had their triumph. And this, needless to add, was a triumph not just for them but for people everywhere who believe that civilization means a way of life that transcends the primordial hatreds of tribe, ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality. The effects are reverberating throughout the world. It is hard to exaggerate the impact of this election on attitudes toward America among people who have accepted the stereotype of America as an irredeemably racist society. And the impact could be just as great in promoting

attitudes of greater tolerance in areas of the world like the Middle East and Africa where such hatreds remain incendiary.

Second, apart from that singular historic consideration, other cultural developments in the early days of the Obama administration are also possible signs of change. Frank Rich, the *New York Times* columnist, has made an interesting comparison between the cultural change that accompanied the New Deal and what seems to be happening now. In the 1920s, the economic boom was accompanied by the advent of Prohibition, a cause promoted by a powerful fundamentalist movement that “pushed anti-evolution legislation as vehemently as it did the war on booze.” The condemnation of a school teacher for teaching evolution in the Scopes monkey trial in 1925 came from the same Bible Belt forces that insisted on banning alcoholic beverages. But the 1929 stock market crash did more to sober Americans up than Prohibition, which, at least in the big cities, was more honored in the breach than in observance. One of the first moves FDR made on taking office was to call on Congress to legalize consumption of beer and wine, and the bluenoses simply gave up without a fight, though I don’t suppose they cried in their beer or whined in their wine! The rest of the country seemed to feel that in view of all they had lost in the crash, they had a right to get a lift from a bottle of beer.

If the crash and the New Deal were the scourges of that form of religious fundamentalism, could the current crisis and Obama’s New Deal.2.0 have similar effects? Rich thinks so, because again, the cloud of economic crisis has a silver lining: “Americans have less and less patience for the intrusive and divisive moral scolds who thrived in the bubbles of the Clinton and Bush years. Culture wars are a luxury the country—the G.O.P. included – can no longer afford.”

Rich backs up this contention with impressive evidence:

Shortly after taking office, Obama repealed another prohibition – the Bush administration’s ban on the use of embryonic stem cells in bio-medical research. And there was hardly a ripple of protest because “the family values dinosaurs that once stalked the earth – Falwell, Robertson, Dobson and [Ralph] Reed – are now either dead, retired, or disgraced.” Polling shows that nearly 60% of Americans agree with the decision to end restrictions on stem-cell research.

And that announcement by Obama came after he had reversed Bush’s restrictions on the use of federal money by organizations offering abortions overseas and at the same time as he was appointing as Secretary of Health and Human Services Governor Kathleen Sebelius, a Roman Catholic who supports abortion rights. The two anti-abortion Kansas Republicans in the Senate, Sam Brownback and Pat Roberts, both voted to confirm her. Some members of the church hierarchy muttered about denying communion to such politicians, as they did some years back to our own Lucy Killea, but that talk quickly quieted down. A protest has been mounted over the invitation of the President to speak at Notre Dame, but the invitation was not rescinded.

Again reversing Bush, Obama announced that the U.S. would join 66 other nations in endorsing a UN statement calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality. How long will it be, Rich wonders, before Obama also reverses the “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” on gays in the military? Prominent military veterans have called for the change and 75% of Americans now believe that gays should serve in the military. One poll showed that 55 % support either gay civil unions or same-sex marriage. The most recent poll shows that while 31 % of respondents over the age of 40 support gay marriage, it is supported by 57% of those under 40, a pretty clear

indication that it will gain public acceptance in time. And since Rich's column appeared, the Supreme Court of Iowa has joined the courts of two other states, including California, in deciding that the constitutional guarantee of equal protection rules out denial of civil marriages for homosexuals. It remains to be seen how our Court will rule on Proposition 8, but even if the proposed amendment to the Constitution is allowed to stand, the trend toward acceptance of civil marriage gays is well established and sooner or later it seems likely to be accepted in law. Where once this was a useful wedge issue for Republicans, now it is coming to be a liability because it no longer carries enough weight to overcome economic concerns, makes the party seem intolerant, and detracts from its central appeal to voters opposed to big government and favoring a stronger stance in foreign affairs.

Religion itself, only recently so powerful a factor in our politics that Karl Rove made the church-going vote the cornerstone of Bush's campaigns, seems to be losing its saliency. The latest American Religious Identification Survey found that most faiths have lost ground since 1990 and that the fastest-growing religious choice is "None." The faithless triumvirate of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, successor to such voices in the wilderness as Tom Paine, Robert Ingersoll, and Madelyn Murray, is evidently gaining converts. The historian Frederick Lewis Allen pointed out, Rich observes, that in the aftermath of the Great Depression religion also lost ground. The new American faith that emerged then was the "secular religion of social consciousness" – or what was called the Social Gospel. The split within the Evangelical community over the need for active environmental stewardship is an indication that this change is occurring even within the religious communities.

Rich does not mention one other possible change that may be in the offing, and that is in attitudes toward the decriminalization and perhaps the legalization of some of if not all psychotropic drugs. The press is beginning to carry opinion pieces suggesting that marijuana be legalized. They point out that pot is not much different from alcohol, that some 47.5% of arrests are made for marijuana-related offenses, that a third of those incarcerated are in for non-violent drug offenses, and that legalization could yield impressive tax revenues. Several leading former Latin American political leaders, including a former president of Mexico, have urged Americans to recognize that the war on drugs cannot be won by trying to choke off supply, but only by addressing the demand for the products. They suggest we adopt some combination of decriminalization and recognition that addiction is a medical problem. It will take brave politicians to take up this contrarian cause, but the administration is inching toward it with the Attorney General's announcement that federal law enforcement would not target those dispensers of medical marijuana who adhere to state and local laws that may not follow federal guidelines. The alarming failure of the Mexican campaign against the drug cartels, now coming to a neighborhood near you, may yet compel a more nuanced view of the whole issue.

And now, the libertarian CATO Institute has published a really illuminating study of the experience of Portugal. Portugal decided a few years ago to decriminalize all drug use. Drugs were not made legal and drug pushers but not users remain subject to criminal prosecution. Special commissions may impose penalties on addicts if they don't accept treatment, but where an individual uses marijuana, for example, in private but not in public, the offense is ignored. And contrary to all the warnings that decriminalization would create more users and make Portugal a haven for drug tourism, the rates of drug use in Portugal have gone down and the drug tourists have stayed away. Other EU countries are reviewing their policies because there is a

growing recognition that criminalization doesn't work. The U.S., which is very punitive of drug use, except lately in some states for marijuana, has a much higher rate of drug use than most European countries. So it is entirely possible that we will at least consider following suit.

There remains the question of whether this turn away from Puritanical fundamentalism that Rich identifies will again prove temporary, as it did in the aftermath of the New Deal, when the excesses of the 1960s and '70s – the psychedelic counterculture of the hippies, yuppies, and potheads, and the climate of violent protest that swirled around the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the general revolt against authority triggered another of our “Great Awakenings.” The country swung back toward a belief in the old time religion and “law and order,” enabling Nixon to appeal to “the moral majority.” Even now, as we mark the 150th year of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a shocking percentage of Americans still believe in the literal truth of the Biblical account of creation rather than the biological account of it. Megachurches that combine spiritual uplift with childcare and fun for the entire family are thriving and obviously fill a need that secular institutions apparently cannot. If the sense of crisis persists and produces an erosion of confidence in the country and its leadership and a hunger for a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose that humanistic science and secularism cannot provide, another return to blind faith could be in the offing.

A third question naturally arises from the second, and this is the third issue I want to examine. Is Obama promoting an alternative set of values to go with his program? The moves he has made that Rich cites may point toward some sort of moral and political outlook, but Obama himself has hardly sought to weave his positions on these specific issues into a coherent ideology or creed. On the contrary, he seems to want to take them one by one and let them speak for

themselves, in order not to antagonize voters who identify with an ideology these moves might not suit. His predecessor proudly described himself as a compassionate, which always seemed to me to imply that other conservatives are heartless. Obama resists any label, including Liberal or Progressive.

As a candidate and as president, he has made only one call for a change in values, and it is a significant one, even though the word he used was so ordinary as almost to escape notice. He has asked repeatedly that we all put renewed emphasis on “responsibility.” A report in the *Washington Post* noted how frequently he has used this word. He did so three times in his inaugural and eleven times in his first speech to a joint session of Congress. He used it nine times in a talk to Marines at Camp Lejeune when he announced plans to withdraw troops from Iraq. And the budget proposal he submitted to Congress in February carried the legend on its cover, “A New Era of Responsibility.”

Obama is a thoughtful, articulate man who uses language carefully and deliberately. To make sure he stays on message, he relies on a teleprompter even though he is the most skillful political ad libber since Bill Clinton. So we should take this choice of a word seriously.

To call for responsibility, however, is to issue a plea that can be interpreted in many different ways. My linguist brother George has noted that it is one of those terms classified as “essentially contested,” which means that it is irreducibly ambiguous or at least open to differing interpretations. Gun owners determined to protect their families and advocates of gun control, anxious to prevent more senseless killings, can both claim they are being responsible citizens. Champions of educational vouchers will contend that allowing private schools to compete with public schools is the most responsible way to improve education, whereas the advocates of

public education will contend that to abandon this great agent of Americanization and equal opportunity in favor of a splintered system not publicly accountable is the height of irresponsibility. Conservatives bristle when they hear Obama talk of his commitment to “fiscal responsibility” at a time when he is piling up more debt than ever. One complains that Obama’s use of the term responsible is intended to disguise rather than illumine his true agenda. No matter what his policies, he seems to be saying, “I’m not extreme, I’m responsible.” And after all, this piqued critic asks rhetorically, “What’s more mainstream than that?”

Despite the ambiguity, artful or not, I think we can understand what Obama is driving at in making responsibility a theme of his presidency. He is implying that the country has been suffering from an epidemic of morally irresponsible behavior. In Iraq, we have been plunged into a long war that was unnecessary and ill-advised, in other words the result of an irresponsible decision by our political leadership. Businessmen have persuaded themselves that greed is the highest good. As a result of that greed and of deliberate government policy, influenced by well-heeled big-business lobbies, economic inequality has been allowed to increase. As the miseries of the homeless and the inner city poor have worsened, many of the most affluent have ignored their plight not just by escaping to the suburbs but by walling themselves off in gated communities. Our government has downplayed warnings about the danger of climate change and done nothing to wean us from dependence on fossil fuels and foreign supplies of oil; it has allowed the nation’s infrastructure to crumble and decay; and it has ignored the pressing need to reform our system of health care. That, I think, is some of what he means by irresponsibility, and many more examples could be cited.

When he gave a typically thoughtful and moving address to mark the remembrance of the Holocaust only a week ago, the President emphasized the importance of taking moral responsibility. He began by praising the courage of five surviving Poles who were honored for saving Jews at great personal peril. He also spoke of the people of a small mountainous French village, Le Chambon sur Lignon, in the area of southern France known as the Haute Loire, who took in and saved Jewish refugees during the German occupation of France. This is a Huguenot community which was led by a pastor who took the Christian message of brotherly love seriously. Throughout the years of German occupation, the people of the village sheltered Jewish refugees. When the Nazis or their Vichy agents came looking for them, the villagers hid them in the forest until it was safe for them to return. On Sunday in Los Angeles, I was a guest of a documentary film maker named Pierre Sauvage at the premiere of his latest work. Twenty years ago Pierre did a documentary in which he interviewed the people of that village. It was a labor of love and a testimonial, because he was born in that village during the war in 1944 to two of those Jewish refugees, his father from France, his mother from Poland. And in the discussion period after the showing of the film, he read, in a voice choked with emotion, what President Obama said of Le Chambon:

We also remember the number 5,000 – the number of Jews rescued by the villagers of Le Chambon, France – one life saved for each of its 5,000 residents. Not a single Jew who came there was turned away, or turned in. But it was not until decades later that the villagers spoke of what they had done – and even then, only reluctantly. The author of a book on the rescue found that those he interviewed were baffled by his interest. “How could you call us ‘good’?” they said. “We were doing what had to be done.”

That is the question of the righteous – those who do extraordinary good at extraordinary risk not for affirmation or acclaim or to advance their own interests, but because it is what must be done. They remind us that no one is born a savior or a murderer – these are choices we each have the power to make. They teach us that no one can make us into bystanders without our consent and that we are never truly alone – that if we have the courage to heed that ‘still, small voice’ within us, we can form a minyan for righteousness that can span a village, even a nation.

That too is what Obama means by a sense of responsibility, even in the most trying times. By calling for responsibility, he is asking us all, whether we are in government and business, professionals, parents, neighbors, citizens, individuals, to take more account of the impact of our decisions and our behavior on the welfare of others and the good of the country. Politicians by transcending partisanship; corporate executives by establishing a better balance between their rewards and performance; educators by abandoning resistance to improvement; lawyers by accepting restrictions on frivolous law suits and grotesque jury awards; doctors by giving up questionable deals with pharmaceutical companies and weighing whether costly tests and procedures are really necessary; fathers by not abandoning their children; individuals and families, by becoming more frugal, adopting healthier life styles, tolerating different ways of life like homosexuality, and doing their bit to save the planet.

Responsibility must not only be personal; it must also be political or collective. For just this reason, Obama has tripled the size of AmeriCorps, so that young people will engage in hands-on projects to help those in need. And that is why he is asking all of us to pitch in and help alleviate the problems that are impeding our progress as a nation. As he said in February, “The

only way this century will be another American century is if we confront at last the price of our dependence on oil and the high cost of health care; the schools that aren't preparing our children and the mountain of debt they stand to inherit. That is our responsibility.”

The message has obviously not yet sunk in as fully as it needs to. In Congress, politicians remain sharply divided along partisan lines, despite Obama's calls for bipartisanship, at least with respect to the economic crisis. The budget appropriation is larded with earmarked pork at a time when the deficit is already reaching unprecedented heights. Executive salaries have come down some, along with corporate profits, but are still grossly out of proportion to the earnings of wage earners, and on Wall Street they are going right back up. The CEOs of the financial institutions that have asked for and received massive federal bailouts continue to award themselves and their fellow executives huge bonuses, sparking predictable outrage from taxpayers providing all this corporate welfare. Now that gas prices have fallen, sales of hybrid cars are slumping. Some homeowners who are managing, if only barely, to pay their bills, are bitter because the government is bailing out only those facing foreclosure – never mind Fed Chairman Bernanke's warning that if you do nothing to stop your neighbor's home from going up in flames, the fire may spread to yours. New Hampshire's motto is “live free or die,” which I have often thought really means no state income tax. Now its latter-day Green Mountain Boys are protesting a law that would end the state's status as the last holdout against mandatory seat belt laws. The governor of South Carolina, true to the state's history as the Confederate firebrand that began the great conflagration by seceding from the Union, now pledges to refuse federal funding to extend unemployment benefits. You have to wonder if the reason is that all those poor people are Democrats, and the governor wouldn't mind seeing more of them leave for the north.

Or maybe he wants to lure more companies to his low-tax state away from those states that care for the welfare of the unemployed.

Some critics claim that Obama's call for responsibility is really a code word masking a radical conspiracy to undermine traditional and cherished American beliefs, in keeping with the subversive views of his onetime friends the America-damning Reverend Wright and the unrepentant terrorist William Ayers. Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich hope Obama fails insofar as his aim is to get us to turn our backs on the tradition of rugged individualism and self-reliance that has made the country great. The critics conjure up images of Armageddon. Are we to become socialists, with government running everything from the banks to the auto makers to the doctors' offices? Are we to be no different from the European countries in adopting confiscatory tax policies to redistribute wealth? Will we deny businessmen the freedom to run their own businesses by shackling them with the constraints of a strong labor movement? Where will it all end? One can only imagine. Will we nationalize major league baseball so that the Yankees' financial lock on talent will be overthrown and even the Padres will be able to win a pennant more than once every thirty years? One is tempted to revise Cicero's famous lament for the loss of republican virtue in ancient Rome: *O tempora, o mores*, O'Reilly!

It is easy enough to say that these fears are greatly exaggerated, indeed caricatures, but at least the critics force us to ask what we mean by traditional American values. And this is what I want to turn to as the fourth and final part of my inquiry today.

In the subtitle and epigraph to my biography of Max Lerner I used a quotation from a remarkable series of letters, written in 1782 to a friend in England by Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, a French farmer who had settled in Pennsylvania. In these letters, he sought to

convey something of the character of the former British colonies as he was personally experiencing it. I cite Crèvecoeur's insights here because they can help us understand better the cultural implications of the journey we have taken as a people and the crossroads at which we may now stand.

Crèvecoeur begins by describing the immensity of the country and the delight he felt in its simple well being, but he quickly emphasizes that this not due to the fecundity of the land so much as to the character of its cultivators. This society, he observes,

is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess every thing, and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and poor are not so removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself.

The self-reliance of the common man, he says, is something quite new and worthy of being celebrated. "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." And if a visitor

would wish to know where these people come from he will find that they are mixture of “English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans and Swedes.” Apart from New England, it is from this promiscuous breed that the race now called Americans have arisen...In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together...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.”

“What then is this new man, this American,” he asks. He answers:

Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors 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, vigor 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.

The American knows that his labor will be rewarded. It is founded on the strongest of nature, which is self-interest.

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles...From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample sustenance. – This is an American.

To be sure, conditions have changed and we are hardly all farmers. Most of us live in big cities or suburbs. We are divided by gradations of wealth that grew up as a result of the industrial revolution and the Gilded Age. The nation suffered through a terrible civil war, became isolationist, and has now become a global superpower. And yet, this beautiful encomium remains worth pondering because it was the beginning of an effort by the first Americans to construct a national mythos, to make up for the fact that unlike most nations, we did not have a narrative that recounted the history of a single people surviving the vagaries of time and bound up with its own peculiar memories and mores. The national mythos that was adopted assumed a life of its own and survives despite the disappearance of the conditions in which it came into being. Crèvecoeur's version of it can be parsed in many ways but I want to single out several of the main themes.

First, there is the American rejection of social hierarchy in favor of social equality. He was certainly on to something here. Early on, we got rid of titles and the rest of the trappings of feudalism, including primogeniture – the system whereby landholding was kept concentrated by being passed to the eldest son. The Declaration of Independence enshrines the belief that all of us are created equal, not in the sense that we are all exactly alike or equally gifted or hard-working, but in the sense that we ought to enjoy the same civil and political rights.

Second, the mythos celebrates the fact that unlike other peoples, ours is a nation of immigrants, or, as Walt Whitman would later say, “a nation of nations.” Oscar Handlin said famously that he set out to write a history of immigration and discovered that that the history of the country was the history of immigration. Americans like Crèvecoeur made a virtue of what European racists would soon decry as our miscegenation. In the 1840, Count Arthur de Gobineau

wrote a several-volume book called *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* – a book that inspired the rise of racist thinking that culminated in Nazism. In it he observed of Americans:

They are a very mixed assortment of the most degenerate races of olden-day Europe. They are the flotsam of all ages: Irish, crossbred Germans and French, and Italians of even more doubtful stock. The intermixture of all these decadent ethnic varieties will inevitably give birth to further ethnic chaos. This chaos is in no way unexpected or new; it will produce no combination which has not already been, or cannot be, realized on our continent. Nothing productive can result from it, and even when the ethnic combinations resulting from infinite unions between Germans, Irish, Italians, French and Anglo-Saxons join in the south with the blood there composed of Indian, Negro, Spanish and Portuguese essence, it is quite unimaginable that anything could result from such horrible confusion but an incoherent juxtaposition of the most decadent kinds of people.

With Crèvecoeur, not Gobineau, we celebrate the fact that a great nation has been made out of the rest of the world's flotsam and jetsam, the wretched refuse that washed up on our teeming shores, in Emma Lazarus's memorable phrase. Even Obama noted in passing reference to his children's quest for a dog, that he was himself a mutt, not a pure-bred specimen.

And third theme that Crèvecoeur stressed is the belief in self-interest or what came to be called individualism. Individualism was a word coined in the 1830s that Tocqueville thought very much suited the American character, though he hastened to add that it was an enlightened self-interest, one that was *bien entendu* – literally, well understood. Americans recognized, in other words, that their own individual well being was bound up with the welfare of all.

It is hard to exaggerate the lingering force of the American belief in individualism. Louis Hartz showed, in a magisterial account of our political thought, that at the time of our founding we were altogether enthralled by the natural rights social contract theory of John Locke and Algernon Sidney. According to this theory, society is composed of atomistic, self-interested individuals who enter into a social contract with each other to protect their natural rights, surrendering to government only the limited power to enforce those rights, and making that government rest on the consent of the governed to insure that it could not tyrannize over them. Key phrases in the Declaration and in the pamphlets of the champions of revolution are drawn straight from Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. So engrained did Lockianism become in our political thinking that it came to be referred not by its own name or merely as one theory among others but as Americanism or the American Way of Life. Our politicians and parties may have fought tooth and nail over the means to achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness but they have never disagreed about the ends. All anti-Lockian creeds have been condemned as un-American. In Europe the labor movement produced Socialist parties and many of them have come to power. Not here. Huey Long once said, with keen insight, that if fascism came to America it would have to be called Americanism.

American individualism informs the Declaration and the Bill of Rights and our resistance to big government and overcentralization of power. It shows up in countless images, from those of the frontiersmen Daniel Boone and Paul Bunyan, in Huckleberry Finn, in the western hero of the town marshal in *High Noon*, the lawyer in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, The Lone Ranger, the Horatio Alger hero who succeeds by luck and pluck, the political heroes, Abe Lincoln, Mr. Smith who goes to Washington, and of course in such mass cultural icons as Superman, Batman, Dirty Harry, and Rambo. Real and unreal, they are all larger than life and what makes them

stand out is that they do in fact stand out: they go against the grain, they are upright, incorruptible, and succeed against all odds, sometimes because being Americans they are endowed with supernatural powers. At its best, individualism produces a striving for excellence and a pride in self-reliance. It has its dark side too. America has the worst record among comparable countries on the score of gun violence, and that comes from resistance to the regulation of firearms in the belief that it denies individual liberty and prevents the individual homeowner from protecting himself and his family. It shows up too in the desire to accumulate more wealth and more symbols of prosperity than our fellows. Greed is a common human passion, but it is given legitimacy in our culture by the adulation of individualism.

The elements of the mythos have shaped our self-image even when they have been starkly at odds the reality. This should not be surprising. Nor is it hypocritical. The values we profess are aspirations toward which we strive. Lincoln knew perfectly well that the spirit of the Declaration had been grossly violated by slavery. When Stephen Douglas in one of their celebrated debates charged that words all men are created equal in the Declaration had been intended to apply to white Europeans and not to Negroes, Indians, or immigrants from Asia. Lincoln answered, with an admirable display of clear thinking, spare eloquence, and political adroitness,

I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctiveness in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal with ‘certain inalienable rights, among

which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ This they said, and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit.

Or take the assertion of our diversity. The truth is that until comparatively recently the American character and system of government were shaped by one group of immigrants far more than others. The Americans, Tocqueville, said, were that part of the English race sent to explore and populate the forests of the New World. Anglo-Saxon Protestants not only made up the bulk of the first immigrants but were also the most energetic, the best educated, and the most fervently religious of the settlers. They set the pattern to which other immigrants then and later adapted. American law was at first English common law. American political theory was built on the republican theories of Harrington and Milton and the natural rights social contract theory of Locke and Sydney. Our religiosity was built on the foundations of Puritanism, Anglicanism, and Congregationalism, with touches of Quakerism and Anabaptism. Challenges soon emerged to this hegemonic paradigm. Later immigrants came from other parts of Europe, many of them Roman Catholics whose loyalty to their church caused fear among Protestants that they would somehow put the Pope in charge of the country. That fear lingered until the spell was broken in 1960 by the election of John F. Kennedy. By transporting and enslaving Africans, fully a fifth of the first American population, the early settlers not only created a problem that would only be resolved by civil war, but they settled a group of people among them they regarded at first as sub-human. For much of American history, many Americans, at times a majority, were

consumed by xenophobic nativism, against the Irish, the Italians, the Jews, the Asians, and especially lately, Hispanics. It has taken two hundred years for us to become comfortable with our diversity. One great virtue of a cultural mythos is that it gives people something to strive to fulfill and to feel guilty about not living up to.

The role of self-interested individualism, too, has been greatly exaggerated in our mythos. The belief that individual interests and social responsibility must be linked is deeply rooted in the values that have animated Americans. When Tocqueville, born a French aristocrat, came here in the 1830s, he recognized that America represented something new in Western history and something very different from the old order that the French Revolution had overthrown. He set out to fathom the animating spirit of the country -- the basic set of mores he called "habits of the heart." To describe it he used a newly coined word. He said that what was most striking about the Americans was their tenacious belief in individualism -- but he quickly added that this was an individualism "bien entendu" (rightly understood) -- or in other words an enlightened self-interest built out of a recognition that the good of each is linked to the good of all:

Citizens who are bound to take part in public affairs must turn from the private interests and occasionally take a look at something other than themselves.

As soon as common affairs are treated in common, each man notices that he is not independent of his fellows as he used to suppose and that to get their help he must often offer his aid to them.

When the public governs, all men feel the value of public goodwill and all try to win it by gaining the esteem and affection of those among whom they must live.

Those frigid passions that keep hearts asunder must then retreat and hide at the back of consciousness. Pride must be disguised; contempt must not be seen. Egoism is afraid of itself.

...The free institutions of the United States and the political rights enjoyed there provide a thousand continual reminders to every citizen that he lives in society. At ever moment they bring his mind back to this idea, that it is the duty as well as the interest of men to be useful to their fellows. Having no particular reason to hate others, since he is neither their slave nor their master, the American's heart easily inclines to benevolence. At first it is of necessity that men attend to the public interest, afterward by choice. What had been calculation becomes instinct. By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires a habit and taste for serving them.

In urging us to be responsible, Obama is continuing a great American dialogue, founded on our experience as a pluralistic and egalitarian liberal democracy. He is not breaking with tradition but renewing it. His call for responsibility resembles Lincoln's appeal to the better angels of our nature and John F. Kennedy's call to think not of what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country. It is a plea not to abandon our traditional values at all but to reinvigorate them so that, as I suggested in the opening lecture, America will become a more efficient, fairer, and exemplary country, once again a source of hope to the rest of the world. And

with this in mind, I think his presidency could have a very profound effect on our cultural values, an effect that does not reject the ideals that have inspired generations before ours, but that will restate our national sense of purpose so that it inspires for the generations to come. Edmund Burke once said that the real social contract is one between the dead, the living, and those yet unborn. As I said in the first of these three lectures, Obama's reforms may well rewrite our social contract and so lay the foundation for our future well being. Some pessimists have said that America is bound to lose its preeminence in the world, just as other empires have in the past. When Max Lerner wrote his book on *America as a Civilization* in the 1950s, he looked at this doomsday forecast seriously and said that he doubted it because this country had discovered the secret of persistence. I want to end these lectures by reading from it a passage in which he described the country as it was originally and in which I explain why he thought we would not go through a decline. (Read pages 168-169.)