

The American Creed at Risk: The Clash of Egalitarianism, Community and Individualism

By William Shendow



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Sitting in church on a Sunday morning as my pastor preached a sermon from Luke 13: 1-9 about the biblical fig tree, I recalled that I had frequently referenced this parable in my upper level American Political Culture class. The marvelous thing about the fig tree is not what one sees above the ground, but rather that part of the tree that exists below ground: its system of roots. The fig tree has the deepest root system of any tree in the world. Like the roots of a fruit tree, which provides the subsistence and stability necessary for the tree to bear fruit, our nation depends on the roots of our value system for the fruits of our democracy. As our nation goes through what many consider a crisis of American values, it is an opportunity to reexamine the status of our root system, those political values which provided the impetus for our founding and led our forbears to recognize that they were a unique people.

As a people, we have primarily been defined and united by our commitment to political principles. Unlike countries that define themselves in terms of their racial, ethnic, religious, or some other cultural identity, the basis of America's national identity is political ideas, an American Creed that was present at the founding, sustained us through internal and external conflicts, and allowed us to evolve into an exceptional nation defined by principles, not ascription.

Now many believe that the harsh, divisive political environment of the moment threatens the sum and substance of who we are as a people. Observers of this peril to our identity have been asking whether the damage

to our political value root system is so extensive that we are about to experience a decline, unable to produce the fruits of our democracy we have previously enjoyed.

The history of America's political culture has not been one of unchallenged consensus around certain core values. It has been a history of conflict. Two values important to our collective identity—egalitarianism/community and individualism—have traditionally proceeded along parallel paths, but on occasion they have clashed, creating an imbalance that posed a threat to the American Creed. These clashes have been intense at times. Invariably, in these creedal passion periods, a political movement has surfaced that restores equilibrium and allows our nation to move forward.

For reasons examined below, the state of today's political culture is different from those of past periods of conflict between the values of egalitarianism/community and individualism; nonetheless, there is a path towards a resolution of conflict between these two values, a path that leads through compromise and the political process—a process that is often messy, convoluted, and drawn out, but is fully capable of restoring a balance to the American Creed.

Evolution of an American Creed: Englishmen in the Wilderness

Most of what has been written about our political creed traces its origins to Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, but even before there were Founding Fathers, there were

founding settlers. Samuel Huntington, author of much that has been written about an American creed, says the first notion of a creed can be found in the distinctive and dominant Anglo-Protestant culture of America's early settlers. The prevailing culture of early America combined the political and social ideas and practices inherited from England with the religious values of Protestantism practiced, most notably, by the early Puritans.

The men and women who first settled along the Atlantic seaboard brought with them from England a rich intellectual heritage that influenced the political culture in the New World: not only a common language, but also Lockean concepts about liberty, rule of law, government by consent, individual rights, and freedom of religion. The prevailing culture of the early settlers was equally influenced by their largely Protestant faith, reflecting beliefs in individualism, equality, community, freedom of religion, and a rejection of a hierarchical social, political and religious order. French author Alexis de Tocqueville stated in *Democracy in America* (1835) that the Protestantism of the early Puritan settlers who had fled their native land for the freedom to practice their faith shaped the entire destiny of the new nation.

Americans would not have been Americans if the early arrivals had not been predominantly Anglo-Protestants. Likewise, Americans would not have been Americans were it not for their early experience in a new land.

The early settlers found themselves in a land of great potential and opportunity, but facing challenges associated with a harsh physical and economic environment that often pitted them against a hostile native population and even their fellow settlers. For America's founding settlers, the experience of living at the outskirts of civilization, in a relative wilderness, had a profound effect not only on their

habits of mind and heart, but also on their values and political philosophy. It was survival, not political philosophy, that preoccupied the minds of America's early settlers, but what political ideas they did share were influenced by their environmental experience and included beliefs in government that was close to the people, a non-hierarchical society, security, individualism, and a fierce independence.

Development of a Common Identity

By the middle of the 18th century, with a more stable social, economic and political environment, the settlers who now resided in colonies ruled by the English crown became more aware that their future rested with how they were governed. Political values and ideas came to the forefront. The beginnings of a common identity began emerging among the colonists, fueled in large part by deteriorating relations with England, a deterioration precipitated by issues of trade, taxes, security, and—most particularly—the extent of parliamentary power over the colonies and colonists.

Conflicts over political issues with England fostered a growing belief among colonists that independence was the only solution. Samuel Huntington writes, “in terms of ethnicity, language and culture the Americans and British were one people. Hence, American independence required a different rationale for revolution” (47). The colonists seeking independence sought to justify and legitimize their actions by appealing to political ideas. Somewhat ironically, most of these ideas could be traced to English concepts of liberty, law and government by consent. The early American voices of separation argued that the British government was deviating from its own principles. There was a growing sentiment among Americans that England's treatment of colonists and the failure to provide them the basic political rights

of Englishmen made a separation necessary.

Many colonists were led to ask: what is an American? A growing number concluded that they were no longer simply Englishmen in a wilderness, but a sophisticated, special breed of man transformed by their experiences and selectively drawing upon an inherited tradition of thought and faith. They were neither English nor even European, but, rather a “new man who acts upon new principles, entertains new ideas and forms new opinions,” as Hector St. John de Crevecoeur declared (70). The idea of a collective identity based on certain values, an American creed, was solidified in the American consciousness with the self-evident truths of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, values seconded by numerous other documents, sermons, pamphlets, writings, and speeches that helped to fuel the revolution. Collectively, the values contained in these sources became the basis of an initial American Creed and national identity.

The American Creed

America is a creedal nation. While one can make the case that America cannot be solely defined by a set principles and values, Americans and foreign observers of our political culture primarily define America and Americans in terms of core political values rather than such other cultural identities such as race, ethnicity and religion. Defining the creed is challenging and subjective, since its key words and values lend themselves to different interpretations. My own list consists of ten values.

My list begins with the self-evident truths of the Jefferson's Declaration, namely, that all are created equal and endowed with inalienable or natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Freedom is the overarching value from which most other American values flow. Also on the list are the

values of property rights, rule of law, and security, which can be traced to English political theorists John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and to legal scholar and jurist Sir William Blackstone. Any value list of the American creed must include egalitarianism, the value that Tocqueville said most distinguished Americans from their European ancestors, who remained tethered to a hierarchical social and political order from their feudal past. Finally, the values of individualism and community, which are often at odds but which both go back to the beliefs and practices of the early Puritans, are a necessary and important addition to a list of American core values.

From the late 18th century to the late twentieth century, the values making-up an American Creed changed little, commanding widespread support even during periods of bitter disagreement over their interpretation, prioritization and implementation. The only major exception was the South's effort to re-formulate the value consensus in support of slavery.

The general agreement as to existence of an American Creed prompted an attempt in 1917 by Congress to codify its existence. William Tyler Page, clerk of the U. S. House of Representatives, responded to a contest encouraging American citizens to create a creed to be adopted by the Congress of the United States. Page's selection won the contest and was adopted by Congress the following year. The document, still remembered as the American Creed, reads as follows:

I believe in the United States of America as a government of the people, by the people, for the people: whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed; a democracy in a republic; a sovereign Nation of many sovereign States; a perfect union, one and inseparable; established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice and

humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes.

The American Creed Under Attack: The Rise and Demise of the Long Consensus

E. J. Dionne in his book *Our Divided Political Heart* calls the period beginning with the Progressive period of the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt "The Long Consensus." It lasted for nearly 100 years. The period was characterized by a relative state of creedal passivity resulting from the balance Roosevelt crafted between values that had competed for prominence during our nation's history, the values of egalitarianism/community and self-interested individualism. During the period of progressivism, egalitarian/community interests grew. American capitalism and individualism also flourished. The tensions between these values relaxed and a consensus prevailed because it had been shown that a balance of core values produced shared prosperity.

Rest assured,
the political
environment
will change
again.

The "Long Consensus" ushered in by Theodore Roosevelt continued relatively unabated during World War I, the Great Depression, the New Deal program of his cousin Franklin, and World War II. The period of prosperity between World War II and the early 1970's represented a time of unprecedented economic growth and middle class expansion. Income inequality markedly declined even as the economy posted a nearly unmatched level of annual GDP growth. Between 1947 and 1979 family income grew for everyone, but it grew most for the

poorest 20 percent of the population. In addition, many of the legal and cultural structures that enforced inequality of race and gender were being dismantled. During this period of relative economic prosperity for workers and business alike, conservative politicians (while continuing to emphasize a free market economy, capitalism, and individualism) largely chose not to oppose a robust role for government that served the interests of egalitarianism, community and the common good.

When did "The Long Consensus" begin to unravel? While there is no single event that can be said to have precipitated the decline of the prevailing consensus, George Packer in his recent book *The Unwinding* traces the beginning of its demise to the early 1970s. Joe Klein, describing Packer's book, writes, "Over the period of the past 40 years the middle class began to slide toward dissolution. The wealthy have increasingly become an isolated plutocracy secure in support of a system which favors their interests." Packer goes on to say that the past forty years has been a period of "vaulting individualism and special interests". Economic data from the period support his conclusions. During the period 1979-2007, real family income for those at the lowest income quintile increased by only 17%--not nearly enough to match inflation during the period. During the same period, the income of the top 1% of earners increased 156%, and wages as a share of the national income reached their lowest level since the end of World War II. Taxes grew less progressive.

The State of Our Political Culture: Challenges to Egalitarianism and Community

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, he was astonished to note the importance of egalitarianism in America society. In his book's introduction, he wrote, "The more I

advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that the equality of condition is the fundamental value from which all other values seem to be derived". A century and three quarters later, a fundamental fact about America is the economic inequality gap. The likelihood that a person will remain in the same income bracket as his or her parents is greater in the United States than in France, as well as Denmark, Germany, Australia, Norway, Finland, Canada and Sweden. Record numbers of Americans remain poor. The census bureau reports that 15% of Americans or roughly 46 million people live below the poverty line. An equal number of Americans are without health insurance. This is in sharp contrast with a growing new upper class with advanced education, sharing tastes and preferences that set them apart from mainstream America, and a new lower class, characterized not only by poverty but also by its withdrawal from America's core institutions. Little has changed since the 2007 depression. The realities of societal and economic inequality are so present today that egalitarianism appears to be on the decline.

The value of community in today's society has likewise taken a hit, despite its equally long history as a core value in our culture. The value of community was a part of the Anglo-Protestant culture brought to our shores by the Pilgrims; they and other early settlers recognized full well that the values of community and individualism must coincide if they were to survive in the New World. When an American Creed was first taking shape, both values were embraced, and throughout our history, Americans have been divided not so much over whether these values are valid, but rather on how they are to be implemented in addressing issues of the day. Despite our individual value preferences, we seem to have been rarely comfortable with being all one or the other. The rise to power of the United States of America in the

twentieth century has been attributed in no small part to the balance between our love of individualism and our quest for community.

Today, many observers of American political culture agree that the imbalance between individualism and egalitarianism/community is so pronounced as to constitute a significant break with the past. They contend that for much of our history, even in the most quarrelsome of times, Americans have avoided the kind of polarization we now face. These observers point to the intransigence and unwillingness to compromise on the part of the forces of self-interested individualism as the biggest single contributor to the divisive state of our political culture. They maintain that the current gap in values is not just about the competing values at the center of the divide, but rather is a reflection of a bigger issue: the question of our nation's capacity to maintain an American Creed, a values consensus necessary for our common identity. That two such important core values as egalitarianism and community are under the fiercest attack they have experienced in modern times may lead one to conclude that the state of unity of our political culture is precarious at best.

The Path Forward for the American Creed

The conflict between the core values of egalitarianism/community and individualism that has put the American Creed at risk is real, and its resolution is important to the continuity of our collective identity. While tension has existed between these two values since our nation's founding, we have always been able to resolve our differences and restore a balance necessary for us to move forward as a people united around the shared values of an American Creed. Our past experience in maintaining a balanced American Creed should provide a path towards resolving our divisiveness.

Action aimed at resolving our nation's core value differences and re-establishing a balance is best directed towards the political process in general and future elections in particular. Messy, convoluted and drawn-out though the political process is, it can produce and has produced societal value preferences capable of restoring the American Creed.

The restoration of a balance ultimately rests in the hands of the voter. The past informs us that radicalism outside of the mainstream of our political culture is not likely to persist in our democracy. Change will occur when concerns reach a tipping point, when the electorate is so outraged with the damage of divisiveness to our economic, social and political well-being as to demand change. Historically, when such critical points have been reached, election outcomes have generally been the impetus for change. Rest assured, the political environment will change again. As a people, it is not in our character to move backward in our quest for a balanced American creed. We will move forward on a path that leads through the political process.

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