

IS AMERICAN CULTURE IN DANGER?

by Vic Berecz

Last month, I asked my readers to watch a video on *A Demographic Problem*. My bad! At least one of you forwarded it around without my words of warning. The video contains many truths, for example “in just three decades, Europe as we know it will cease to exist.” My answer to that is “So what!” Europe as we knew it in the 1930s has ceased to exist. Europe as we knew it in the 1970s has ceased to exist. Remember Hitler, remember the Iron Curtain. Good riddance to both. Times change, usually for the better. Unfortunately, the video also contains misstatements and exaggerations. Rather than informing us, the real purpose of the video clearly was to frighten us about *Islamic immigration*, to make us fear what is happening or about to happen to *American Culture*. I recommended it as a prelude to asking the questions: “What is American Culture?” and “Is it in danger?” Only at the very end does the video show its true motive: “a call to action” ... “to share the Gospel message with a changing world.” That video is the kind of in-your-face militant evangelism that has given Christianity a bad name since the era of the Crusades. I hope my point ... that we must get beyond the scare tactics and analyze our concerns calmly and rationally ... wasn't lost.

All too many of us, when asked to describe “American Culture” simply look in the mirror. Some even go a step further, they look only in the rear-view mirror. As a historian wannabe, I never discourage looking back and learning the lessons of history. But, let's remember what it is we see back there. It's where we've been, not where we're going or even where we'd like to go. In reality, if there is an American culture it's not what we see in mirrors, but rather what we see around us. Look around you and you'll see American culture at its best and at its worst. Cultures change ... they grow ... they evolve. That's good. Stagnation stinks!

My two dictionaries define “culture” as “the esthetic and intellectual achievement of a civilization” and “the concepts, habits, skills, art, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period.” To me, these seem to say the same thing, as they should. Note that these definitions involve a time element and so imply that cultures change and evolve. Likewise they have a place element which raises the question, “Can 300 million people spread over a vast area from arctic tundra to tropical islands possess the same culture?” Clearly, there are differing cultural strains running throughout our great nation, along with many *shades of gray*. The concept of *red and blue states* is only one example of such a cultural divide. That's one of the reasons why I advocate for *States' Rights* and providing government functions at the lowest (most localized) practical level. So, in reality, American culture encompasses diverse strains each separately evolving.

Most Americans would agree with the idea of a diverse, evolving culture up to a point ... as long as the cultural evolution adheres to our *core values*. You know what? I agree, that's why we can speak of an *American* culture and have some confidence that its evolution won't go off in weird directions. The rub may be how differing people define the core values of our American civilization. I see three elements that are at the heart of our civilization: the universal concept of individual freedom; the rule of law; and a common language. I suggest that each of these three core values is itself evolving, and that produces times of greater or lesser diversity between the various strains of our culture. I'll briefly discuss each of these core values before I summarize.

Individual freedom is the heart and soul of American culture. Freedom to do the things that make us happy; freedom to avoid doing things we abhor. Freedom to associate into communities; freedom to disassociate ourselves from those communities. I view freedom as a universal concept toward which all mankind strives today, and always has. It is not the purview of any one religion (i.e. “the Judeo-Christian ethic”) or any one people (i.e. “western civilization”). The evolution of the concept of freedom (and the constraints placed upon it) has focused on protections. Conceptually, freedom has been increasingly constrained where ones

actions cause harm to another. But, historically a high degree of freedom has not been available to all mankind; it has been primarily the privilege of the powerful. In the last few centuries, there has been significant expansion of access to greater degrees of freedom for the less powerful ... women, slaves, the poor, the handicapped, etc. The evolution of freedom continues to move toward greater availability, coupled with greater protections against the abuse of freedom by the powerful. There's still a long way to go.

Law represents the set of rules that a society takes on voluntarily to constrain the powerful who might abuse their freedom by harming the less powerful ... in other words, to avoid anarchy. Our legal system has evolved from the medieval concepts of British "common law" and probably can be traced back to ancient times. But, the uniquely American aspect of "rule of law" is our Constitution and its first ten amendments, the *Bill of Rights*, which established a new starting point in 1789. This keystone of the American legal system is built on two separate views of separation of powers. First, the power of governing through law is divided between a federal government and state and local governments. Secondly, checks and balances are provided between the three historical governmental functions: executive, legislative, and judicial. These two fundamental concepts of separation of powers have served us well. But, both our Constitution and the set of federal, state, and local laws and ordinances that derive from it have evolved significantly over the last two centuries. The greatness of the authors of our Constitution lies in their full realization that the world changes and that the rule of law must likewise change and evolve to maintain relevance. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1816: "I am certainly not an advocate for frequent and untried changes in laws or constitutions ... But, I know also, that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times." Learn from history, don't necessarily emulate it ... we must change with the times ... *original intent* be damned!

The third leg that supports the stool of American culture is a common language. The ancients of Babel knew full-well that language can be a binding force, and that the lack of mutual understanding that comes from a plethora of languages saps the ability of a people to cooperate in achieving common goals. "American English" is a universally recognized language which has evolved away from British English, and continues to evolve to meet our uniquely American needs. Its words and grammar are the mechanisms we use to define American culture ... our esthetic and intellectual achievements.

So, yes, there is an American culture. It exists in several separately evolving strains all bound together by the universal concept of individual freedom and the constraints we impose on that freedom with our system of laws, beginning with the Constitution. Our common language ensures that we have a clear and consistent understanding of what binds us together, while allowing us to cooperate effectively in moving our American Culture forward based on the three principles described above. Is our culture in danger from Islamic immigration or any other boogie-man that fear-mongers put forward? No, that's out of the question, because we as a civilization have three solid legs to rest on. Yes, American culture will change. But, it will change through evolutionary processes guided by our children and grandchildren ... and by "our" I mean all who choose to be a part of the American dream, whether Mayflower descendants or recent immigrants.