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Is Individualism Overdone?

By Dennis Farney

MONTICELLO, Va. — There is serenity in the air itself atop Thomas Jefferson's "little mountain", a sense of optimism, wholeness and completeness. How different from the anxious, fragmented nation just below.

How different, too, from the hidden fault lines of the very human man who shaped this place. Thomas Jefferson: who championed liberty, yet mortgaged his own slaves — an optimist, but bedeviled by savage headaches and depression — whose mansion is an architectural marriage of opposites, sheer romanticism harnessed to mathe-matical proportion.

In the contradictions of his own life, no Founding Father better exemplified the contradictions of the nation he helped create. But none better formulated the secular religion — "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" — that would hold that diverse nation together. Now, as workmen hammer and paint in preparation for next year's 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth, the Jeffersonian religion is triumphant around the globe.

The Cold War is won. Individual liberty and American market capitalism sweep Eastern Europe and the old Soviet Union. Mickey Mouse has invaded France. The world's largest McDonald's has opened in Beijing. So pervasive is American culture that a conference earlier this year at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington-based think tank, debated whether the whole world is "Americanizing" and concluded that, yes, it surely is.

"People everywhere want to share the American experience, to get a bite of the apple of individualism," Ben Wattenberg, a senior fellow at the institute, told the conference. "America belongs in that select company of cultures that have forever transformed the world."

"As much as we — and everyone else — assume that the French make the best perfumes, and the Swiss the finest watches, the suspicion will continue that Americans make the best dreams," said Pico Iyer, a *Time* magazine contributing essayist.

"UPSURGE OF TRIBALISM"

Yet at the moment of victory, a wave of self-doubt sweeps America. Polls indicate fully three-fourths of all Americans believe the country is "on the wrong track." For the first time since the Depression, middle-class parents doubt that their children will have a better life than themselves. In Los Angeles, the nation's worst riots in more than a century erupt in the streets. Some of the country's most thoughtful observers see a nation curdling like sour milk into racial and ethnic groups: separate, unequal and often hostile.

"The United States or Yugoslavia — what's the difference?" asks author Peter Drucker in an interview. Mr. Drucker says "an upsurge of tribalism" threatens to dissolve the shared values that once held American together.

"The use of phrases like African-American is offensive to me! Offensive to me!" declares former Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, unsettling the calm of his study. "Making everybody else a scapegoat. That's what ethnicity does."

"We think every other country is trying to copy us now — and if they are, God help the world," bursts out John Hope Franklin, Duke University emeritus professor of history. The truth is that we're a bigoted people and always have been. Jefferson didn't mean it when he wrote that all men are created equal; we've never meant it. The religion of this country is every man for himself, and getting it, and the devil take the hindmost.

The mood of national pessimism may be a passing phase, but a larger question remains. While America was winning the battle of ideas abroad, what kind of American civilization was America building at home? Walter Lippmann's American Century is nearing its end. When some great historian, the next Gibbon or Toynbee, looks back upon the America of 1992 — its national politics, its precarious multicultural experiment, its arts and literature, the splendor and depravity of its great cities — what will that historian conclude?

"WE'RE WHIMPERING!"

The historian will see a nation unique in all the world, one shaped not by the blind forces of history, but by the Jeffersonian idea of individual liberty. The question the historian will have to weigh is the extent to which the nation still lives by that idea two centuries later.

Kathryn Nelson, program director of St. Louis' Danforth Foundation, fears that the "idea of America" is slipping away. Black and 66 years old, Ms. Nelson has lived through far tougher times than today, times when "folks out there would lynch folks like me." But always before, there was hope, she says. Always there was "the idea of America, the idea that our best notions would take over. It's what kept you alive."

Now Ms. Nelson senses hope giving way to fear — fear that maybe the best notions have exhausted themselves, fear that maybe "there's no way out of where we are ... We're whimpering! We're victims! And we've never been victims before."

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A sense of opportunities lost and ideals compromised crops up in contemporary American literature. In a 1989 novel, *Leap Year* by Steve Ericson, the narrator searches for the soul of 20th century America with the ghost of Sally Hemings, alleged in some accounts to have been Thomas Jefferson's slave-mistress. They discover Jefferson himself in an ancient Indian dwelling in the Southwest — dying, as America itself is dying. Of the American experiment, the narrator concludes: "We made America and scared ourselves, and left."

Jefferson historian Merrill D. Peterson of the University of Virginia takes issue with this thesis. He points out that in one fundamental respect America is attempting something that goes beyond Jefferson even at his most idealistic. "He really couldn't conceive of a biracial society," he says. Jefferson did argue passionately for freeing the slaves, especially in his younger days, but linked that idea to shipping them back to Africa or Haiti. "I think he would be astonished at what we're trying to do."

At bottom, the great central fact of 1992 America remains Thomas Jefferson's secular religion, the religion of individualism. But can there ever be too much individualism? Some argue there can.

"In all areas, the movement of popular culture in recent decades has been away from traditional values and toward highly individualistic values," Robert H. Bork, President Reagan's unsuccessful Supreme Court nominee, told the AEI conference. "To put it simply, a large part of our culture is moving from the idea that `freedom is the space between the walls' to the notion that `there must be no walls.' It is sensible to argue about how far apart the walls should be set, but it may be suicidal for a culture to demand all space and no walls."

THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

And does individualism carry hidden costs? Some say it does. The costs are particularly heavy for women and minorities, argues University of Colorado history professor Patricia Limerick. But she thinks Jeffersonian individualism is "quite cruel" even for favored white males. "They drive themselves to live by this impossible ideal — that we're all our own little vehicles, in control of our own destinies — and end up measuring themselves as failures." In the celebration of individualism, she adds, "what is lost is a celebration of how we're all in this together." What is lost is the older, equally important concept of community. The beginning of national wisdom, she argues, would be to "see our mutual dependence as an opportunity and a strength, rather than as a weakness or a misfortune. The world is too complicated for any one individual to master."

America's loss of community shows up most starkly in race relations. By 1992, the American metropolis, operating like some great centrifuge, has long since sorted out people into suburbs and inner-city neighborhoods delineated by skin color and income. More surprisingly, the traditional ideal of the melting pot is being questioned, and by blacks as well as whites.

Even moderate black leaders are re-examining the 1960s ideal of integration. Some now see it as resting upon an elitist assumption: that blacks would integrate *into* a dominant white culture. They question whether the concept is workable, or even desirable. "When you throw beans into chili they remain beans," says James H. Buford, president of the Urban League of Metro St. Louis.

Mr. Buford's focus — and, some studies indicate, the focus of blacks generally — has shifted from civil rights to economic equality. A 1991 survey by the *Los Angeles Times* found that 47 percent of blacks believe America is "not at all close" to eliminating discrimination against them.

"If we can't be part of the economic action, we won't let the action happen," vows Mr. Buford. Of course, this might mean "we wouldn't have much of a city. But what difference does it make if we have a bad city where we're excluded, or a good city where we're excluded?"

Individualism, working like yeast, has permeated every other area of national life. Arguably, national politics — once a device for achieving consensus — has become a device for driving people apart. The very terms used by political professionals are revealing. They talk of "wedge issues," highly emotional issues designed to split off pieces of rival political coalitions. And the wedge issue, in turn, has been mated to ever-more-sophisticated computer technology to "target" individual voters. Presidential campaigns now address not the electorate as a whole, but an increasingly atomized collection of individuals.

Meanwhile, argues Peter Drucker, a fundamental assumption that had shaped politics since Jefferson's time is on the wane, weakening national politics as an integrating force. This is the idea of "salvation by society" — the belief that "if you change society, you can change the human being."

In his book, *The New Realities*, Mr. Drucker argues that this basic assumption has spawned

everything from Nazism to Communism, from New Deal liberalism to Republican conservatism — wildly different philosophies, but all united in the belief that there is "one right answer" to social problems. Now that certitude has been replaced by a realization that if problems can be solved at all, "they always have several solutions — and none is quite right."

He writes: "Anyone who now proclaims the `Great Society' as Lyndon Baines Johnson did ... would be laughed out of court. ... We are seeing in politics what happened when `modern' medicine first began around 1700: a turning away from panaceas to specific diagnosis and the search for specific remedies against specific ills."

"WANTS AND NEEDS"

On the still-broader scale of national culture, individualism erodes the authority of elites to set standards for the rest of society. Leaders are losing their authority to lead: blame that in part on America's market economy, neoconservative Irving Kristol told the American Enterprise Institute conference. The distinctive feature of that economy is "the sovereignty of `wants' over `needs,'" he said. Elitists exist to emphasize needs over wants, to set goals and standards. But American elites have been in retreat for nearly a century; the result is that "there really is no `high culture' in our country that one can point to." Himself an elitist without apology, fighting a rear-guard action against the Philistines, he concluded with a defiant outburst: "I am not happy that the United States today has been so successful in exporting its popular culture to the world at large. I am not happy that the United States even *has* this popular culture to export."

"`Community has been an American invention. In America the immigrant has been the builder, whereas in other countries the foreigner has been the invader.' — Daniel Boorstin"

What Thomas Jefferson would make of Madonna, Bart Simpson and "Wayne's World" can only be conjectured. But just possibly he would regard them as expressions, however vulgar, of the "boisterous sea of liberty" he never stopped celebrating. Certainly he never lost that special gift of the 18th century Enlightenment — a faith in the idea of continual progress — even as his personal circumstances retrogressed.

His health deteriorated while Monticello sank irretrievably into a swamp of debt, and he worried that only the sweat of his slaves kept him from living out his final years in a hut "like a Negro." Yet in old age he could still write of "the march of civilization ... passing over us like a cloud of light."

Civilization advancing like a cloud of light: today the phrase falls awkwardly upon American ears. Cynicism, made more striking by its backdrop of Cold War victory, has replaced Jefferson's natural buoyancy; doubt has replaced his native optimism. Re-invigoration, says Mr. Boorstin, lies not in looking for new enemies abroad but in re-emphasizing America's historic mission at home: the forging of one people out of many. That is America's gift to history and the world. "Community has been an American invention," he says, sitting in his study. "In America the immigrant has been the builder, whereas in other countries the foreigner has been the invader."

Renewal, says Patricia Limerick, lies also in rekindling the Jeffersonian spirit — "that restless, curious, open, engaging mind" — that makes Jefferson even today so contemporary a man. "Thomas Jefferson was a revolutionary," she says. "To live in his spirit is to take issue with the society around us."

Thomas Jefferson, says Merrill Peterson, believed in "almost unlimited horizons." The horizons remain; it is the belief that wavers. "I don't think we have that kind of faith in progress now," he says. "We're talking about a Baby Boom generation that may not do as well as their parents. And their children may not do as well as they do. And education — we no longer feel as confident about that, do we? We are living with the sense of our own vulnerability." ■