



# THE BRADLEY PRIZES®

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY:

## Why Self-Discovery Requires Belonging

It humbles me to stand in an assembly of giants looking eye to eye. I am reconciled to the circumstance only by the reflection that I stand on the shoulders of giants. Moreover, the thoughts that hold my attention at present are amplified by the reflection. For, while our nation boasts a long succession of heroes, it remains the curious fact that it does not receive its dynamic thrust from its heroes. The dynamic thrust of the United States derives from those ordinary souls whose extraordinary patience and self-confidence constitute the foundation of such longevity as we have enjoyed. This was manifested most dramatically in the great struggle to end the scourge of slavery, but it has been a recurrent theme from the origins of American civilization.

In 1791, as the newly formed government under the Constitution was gaining its footing and the people began sensibly to feel a rising prosperity, George Washington took note of the circumstance in a letter to Gouverneur Morris (one of the most important members of the Constitutional Convention). He described the impressions he formed during an appraising progress through the southern states. He wrote:

I experienced great satisfaction in seeing the good effects of the general Government in that part of the Union. The people at large have felt the security which it gives and the equal justice which it administers... [They] have seen their several interests attended to, and from thence they unite in placing a confidence in their representatives, as well as those in whose hands the execution of the laws is placed. Industry has there taken place of idleness, and economy of dissipation. Two or three years of good crops and a ready market for the produce

of their lands, has put everyone in good humor, and in some instances they even impute to the Government what is due only to the goodness of Providence.

We find here no boasting “I did it,” but a readiness to recognize the people’s labors – a “you did it.” How far from the 21<sup>st</sup> century reality, when there is no good that is not fathered by boasting leaders. Today a president is far more likely to look upon ordinary citizens as unemancipated wards of a benevolent guardian. Quick to declaim “I did it,” they inevitably depreciate the contributions of the citizens themselves. Political leaders today fail to see – let alone praise – the decency, generosity, and compassion so pervasive among the citizens of the country.

In the face of politicians’ dismissive characterizations of ordinary Americans as unworthy, complacent, lazy, bigoted, etc., ordinary Americans themselves still do not lose sight of that human dignity that originally gave rise to the spirit of self-government. President Reagan sought to introduce the country to that reality when he initiated the celebration of ordinary heroes in the manner he did with Lenny Skutnik (who rescued Priscilla Tirado from the freezing waters of the Potomac River after a plane crashed into the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge). He called him a hero and did so to highlight the virtue of ordinary citizens. Since Reagan, ordinary citizens have become a staple of state of the union addresses but almost exclusively as representatives of suffering rather than as examples of worthy contribution. The heart and soul of American national character is twofold. It proceeds from the ordinary American’s heroic insistence upon the freedom of conscience and acceptance of personal responsibility. And by freedom of conscience I do not mean the license to do whatever one wishes but rather the obligation owed to God, respecting which we must be free of secular restraint.

It distorts the character of our nation to magnify the reality of suffering (or victimhood) in human life at the expense of praising the conscientious acceptance of the duties of civic life. I focus on this in particular because Colleen Sheehan, Stephen A. Cambone, and I have explored for a little more than a decade the question: is there an American national character? In the course of our studies and conferences we have begun to construct a response. I wish still to see such a consummation of these labors as will recover an appreciation of the ordinary American as the real exceptionalism in the United States.

The appreciation I suggest here is not intuitive, at least if we consult the familiar behavior of Americans who have traveled abroad in significant numbers ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For, far from the image of the “ugly American,” I have often observed a palpable sense of deference against the backdrop of ancient civilizations. That may result, however, from a propensity to look upon the people of the United States not as “a people” at all but rather as an agglomeration of peoples understood only in terms of ancestral lineage. The consequence of that posture is that we derive meaning not from our *received* inheritance but rather from mythical beginnings. However, I also find upon meeting Americans abroad a deeply communal, mutual recognition that does not result, I am sure, from the particular accidents of our race, skin tones, etc. – which so many want to look to as the signal of our national character. No, it reflects a clear thought that there is a common belonging amongst us so pervasive that the particular accidents of our ancestral lineage recede to insignificance. We do not derive this meaning from the mythical beginnings of ancestors. We derive it from a uniquely shared

appreciation, which the rest of the world often struggles to understand, that our ordinary American commitments to freedom of conscience and self-responsibility are the real exceptionalism. There is perhaps good reason for such an orientation. For, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many experts have cultivated a vision of pluralism rather than unity – falsely deriving the theory from James Madison’s reference to a “multiplicity of interests” as essential to the healthy functioning of an extended republic.

Beyond the misdirection of political science and sociology, there is perhaps a still more powerful explanation for our failure to recognize an American national character. That explanation centers on the acquired habit of distinguishing citizens and residents by particular identities. An illustration of this tendency surfaced in the studies I mentioned, when one contributor (who in some ways has advanced this inquiry quite far indeed) began with a focus on “the peoples” of the United States rather than “we the people.” Colin Woodard began with the disaggregate rather than the aggregate, and that is highly revealing. Effectively, many people today generally disguise the American people as a collection of peoples – even proceeding so far as to parse the people’s collective role into a cheshire grin (diminishing to the point of vanishing), as we do with the term “people of color.” Have you ever met a person without a color? Can the term convey any substantial meaning apart from a refusal to believe there is a common belonging so pervasive among a people that their particular accidents recede to insignificance?

Such habits have substantially eroded our capacity to recognize and identify an American national character. But those habits can be overcome. When we observe the tendency of those who wish to “save democracy” by nullifying the “people’s choice,” we identify the remedy required – namely, to reinforce the authority of the ordinary souls who express the only legitimate public will. That is the lesson we derive from revisiting the American founding. They are mistaken who have imagined that we have engaged only in fostering opaque repetitions of slogans from the Revolution. Rehearsing the professions of revolutionary resolve do not foster mastery of the terms of discourse at the founding. We revert to the founding to find fresh insights into the original questions.

We have fresh questions, sure, but we believe that fresh insights will emerge with greater clarity if we pose those questions in the context of the original insights. That contrasts meaningfully with approaches that counsel starting anew and founded in conceptual hypotheses of a brave, new future. The former approach is capsulized in the argument for “a revitalized civic national narrative for the United States.” That appeal responds to the aimless musings about other possible nationalisms (conservative, Christian, liberal, cultural, ethnic and what not). Moreover, it would be easy to conceive of a reconstruction of the naturalization test that would serve to foster civic nationalism.

How might we summarize these inquiries? We highlight a fresh inquiry into the dynamic thrust of American civilization, beginning with a focus on the meaning of the term itself. It is, after all, not a place name. The prevailing use today identifies a specific way of life, founded in an identifiable national character. That national character can be elicited from a careful consideration of the grounds upon which that nationality was initially founded, which is to say, the grounds of humanity. After all, the Declaration of Independence opens with the phrase “When in the course of *human* events” – not “When in the course of events.” The distinction is fundamental. The American claim was and remains

rooted in the willingness to govern moral reflection with reference to the definition of the human. It does not admit of open-ended transfigurations of the human (if such things be possible they must be regarded as alien and outside the scope of American nationality).

This recognition of the definitional foundation of American nationality opens the pathway to the identification of specific characteristics and functions, and none is more important than the insistence upon the freedom of conscience. That moral derivative is the spawn of liberty and the source of the dynamic thrust of American civilization. Upon it we built a stronghold within which every ordinary American finds shelter from imposition and authoritarian insult. Moreover, the freedom of conscience by definition includes every faith. At the same time that any nation – including the United States – must make expedient decisions regarding admission to citizenship, in the United States eligibility for citizenship (that is the ability and opportunity to become a consenting member of the society) is in principle open to any human. Nor should that surprise us, when we reflect that God owes us nothing yet gives us everything.

What each citizen embraces upon admission into or acceptance of citizenship is the responsibility of self-government. George Washington declared in 1783 that “We have a national character to establish.” What he invoked, however, was not a legislative agenda but an agenda of personal responsibility. The national character centered on the separate while not separable exertions of each citizen to attain that degree of self-control which is called self-government. How, you may wonder, can a thing be “separate but not separable.” The answer is that individual exertions can only attain fruition within the context of the collective guarantee of opportunity for each to perform on his or her own, free from coercion and fraud as far as possible. That is, the individual discovers him or herself *as an individual* only within the crowd. There is no “I” without “you.” Accordingly their separate performances are effectual only when they are inseparably united in a community of self-governing souls. (This explains, parenthetically, why the burden of this address is not “civic education” for the young but, rather, adult-to-adult conversation or discourse.)

The philosopher Montesquieu expressed the substance of both virtue and liberty when he observed that “every person thought to have a free soul ought to be self-governing.” What that means is that the principle of self-government is at once an ethical principle and a political necessity. That is the reason it characterizes the role of the ordinary citizen, and that is the reason we derive from it the fuel that drives our society. Any policy, practice or juridical rule contrary to that necessity is inconsistent with the American national character.

W. B. Allen