

Are Americans Different? You Bet They Are

By **Richard Reeves** *Universal Press Syndicate*

WASHINGTON - Are Americans different? The question has been asked by scholars and writers at least since Alexis de Tocqueville wrote "Democracy in America" in the 1830s. His answer was, "Yes, they are" - and he became the father of regularly emerging theories of American "exceptionalism."

The American, de Tocqueville thought, was exceptional because he lacked a feudal past, was more socially egalitarian, more meritocratic, more individualistic, more rights oriented and more religious.

Now, in our globalizing world, ideas like that should be moving toward anachronism. If you listen to all the talk of free market or e-market democracy, all people are becoming more like each other - at faster or slower rates depending on where they began the journey. Depending on who is doing the talking, everybody else (usually) is becoming like Americans, or (less often) they are becoming like everybody else.

Maybe. In a provocative article in the current issue of *The Wilson Quarterly*, Seymour Martin Lipset, argues that other Westerners may or may not be becoming like Americans, but Americans sure don't seem to be becoming like anyone else.

He argues that even as globalization rises and industrialism declines in developed societies, ideas and self-images have not followed proportionately. For instance, from 1960 to now, the number of workers in American manufacturing declined from 26 percent to 16 percent. During that period the number in Swedish manufacturing declined from 32 percent to 19 percent. But while the Swedes are more tolerant of capitalism and individualism than they were 50 years ago, they and almost all other Europeans have only combined American notions about income inequality as a prerequisite of economic growth with their continuing belief in egalitarian and communitarian values.

On that one, Mr. Lipset reports that survey research indicates that about half of Americans say they would choose earnings based on production, while two-thirds of British, French, Spanish and German respondents said they would choose fixed salaries. Along those same lines, he reports that in surveys conducted in 1991 only 31 percent of Americans said they agreed with the statement, "What you achieve depends largely on your family background."

The comparable figures for Britain and Italy were, respectively, 53 percent and 63 percent.

Interesting. I do think Americans are different and I am certain I will not see a time when they are not. My own unscientific list of what makes Americans different would begin with this:

- We Americans are the only people I know of who raise their children to leave home - to find themselves. Others raise kids to serve the family, the tribe or the state. Italians, for instance, don't waste energy debating family values. They have the classic kind. Americans don't.
- Americans believe in the right to fail - and move on. That is why they are so mobile and why the bankruptcy laws are so lenient.
- Americans believe they are who they say they are. That is why half the résumés in the United States are phony.
- They are anti-history. The past is just that, past. And that is not always a bad thing by any means. Americans don't kill each other over something that happened hundreds of years ago. They don't even know what happened hundreds of years ago. They try things that have failed before - and sometimes they work now.
- They are much more religious - perhaps because they believe they are so superior that they must have been created by something far greater than man or chemistry.
- They are vividly bipolar, believing in good and bad, Democrats and Republicans, and that there are two sides to every question. There are, of course, more sides than they understand, but it is easier to work with two.
- They believe in continuing education. Most other adults think the idea of going back to school is daft; school is for children.
- They believe they are going to get rich one way or another. Genius. Hard work. Luck. One way or another it's going to happen - if not to them, to their kids.

That's why they're Americans. I'm not sure globalization can change that.
