

What is an American?

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While grappling with ideas for a book on American identity (*Journey into America*, Brookings Press, forthcoming) I've been trying to figure out what actually defines an American and would be grateful for any assistance by readers of this column.

The primary definition involves the legal citizenship of the United States. This ensures the protection guaranteed by the Constitution and, in turn, obliges the citizen to accept the philosophy underlying the Constitution. The concept and practice of checks and balances is fundamental to the Constitution. The citizen can also assume the protection of the military and the other security agencies from different kinds of threats.

Being a legal citizen is more than the acquisition of a passport, it is also the recognition of the ideas that were forged by the Founding Fathers of the United States. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin were extraordinary statesmen by any standards and had a collective vision of a new society in a new world. Jefferson's eloquence and imagination are clearly reflected in the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence. It is that Declaration that Americans celebrate on the Fourth of July with fireworks.

A more visible and therefore more obvious definition of Americanness comes from a sense of belonging to American culture. Movies, television shows, and sports create heroes, a language, and references for Americans. Expressions are picked up from television shows and become part of mainstream language. Bart Simpson's expression "eat my shorts" from the 1990s, for example, is now a recognized part of the American lexicon.

American culture was more unified in a general sense a generation ago when television was still a relatively new phenomenon. The glow of the Second World War and its victory still suffused the nation. Americans had fought a just war and triumphed over some of the most evil men in history. Americans saw themselves, and were largely seen by the world, as the good guys.

Today, American culture appears much more fragmented. There is a bewildering range of shows, music, religious and political discussions available to the viewer. There are equally bewildering role models. The excesses of the consumerist culture are embodied in figures like Paris Hilton, who is a caricature of herself. Many people are seduced by the idea of consumption for the sake of consumption, excess for the sake of

In addition to marking the text, answer in your own words:

What is the primary definition of being an American?

What is a more obvious definition of being an American?

How does the author see American culture today?

excess. This zeitgeist also feeds into the idea of being American, the notion that every American has the absolute right to do what they will of their lives.

America's fragmented culture also means that superstar politicians like Barack Obama are seen so differently by so many Americans. To some, he is almost Christ-like in his virtues and promise. To others, he is the Antichrist and is set to destroy America itself. The extremity of these opinions reflects the fragmented nature of America today. Different opinions in the arena of politics is the very essence of democracy and the debates between Jefferson and John Adams were as acrimonious as they are between Democrats and Republicans today. The difference is that after the bitter political exchanges, Jefferson and Adams could spend years as kindred souls, exchanging letters and ideas about a variety of subjects. The atmosphere around Obama today is becoming dangerously brittle and I suspect will become even more tense in the coming months as the economy and international affairs challenge him further. The debate around Obama then will expand beyond politics to the realm of the irrational and the subconscious which will include race and religion.

Great moments of achievement and catastrophe also bring Americans together. These special moments in a nation's life capture the imagination and focus on that special meaning of being American. These are the moments that Americans will remember and put away in their minds in the category of "where were you when...?" The moon landing forty years ago is one of those great achievements which only Americans were capable of pulling off and therefore it was a uniquely American achievement. Similarly the assassination of JFK in 1963, the American diplomats taken hostage in 1979, and the attacks of 9/11 brought the nation together in grief and shock.

There is a fourth definition which comes from non-Americans. Because America is a superpower -- currently the superpower -- it attracts both admiration and envy. Most foreigners, when asked to spot Americans in Paris, Cairo, or Delhi would say they are taller, fatter, and louder than anyone else. Even America's neighbors see it as bullying and arrogant. Ask Mexicans or Canadians what they think of America.

The question of defining a large country, indeed a continent, is a challenge. I have been traveling the length and breadth of the country with a team of young American researchers to discover the answer. What we found was a sense of vitality, openness to discuss issues, and belief in the vision of America inspired by the Founding Fathers. We also found uncertainty and anger.

In addition to marking the text, answer in your own words:

What does the author see happening in differences of opinion today compared with the past?

What are other ways that can define being an American?

What do you think the author's opinion of America and Americans is, and why?