

THE “AMERICAN WAY”

*Family and Community in the
Shaping of the American Identity*

Allan C. Carlson

canonpress 
Moscow, Idaho

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Allan C. Carlson, *The "American Way."* Copyright ©2003, 2022 by Allan Carlson.

Second edition: 2022. First edition published by ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware

Cover design by James Engerbretson.

Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost.

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the King James Version.

Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Carlson, Allan C., author.

The "American way" : family and community in the shaping of the American identity / Allan Carlson.

Family and community in the shaping of the American identity

Second edition. | Moscow, Idaho : Canon Press, 2022. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. .

LCCN 2021045273 | ISBN 9781952410949 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: United States—Civilization—20th century. | National characteristics, American. | Families—United States—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC E169.1 .C2725 2021 | DDC 973.91—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021045273>

CONTENTS

Preface ix

1. Home and Nation:
The Family Politics of Theodore Roosevelt 1
 2. Hyphenates, *Hausfraus*, and Baby-saving:
The Peculiar Legacy of German America 25
 3. “Sanctifying the Traditional Family”:
The New Deal and National Solidarity 85
 4. Luce, *Life*, and the “New America” 121
 5. Cold War and the “American Style” 167
 6. From Maternalism to Reaganism, and Beyond 229
- Endnotes 263
- Index 299

PREFACE

In the fall of 1999, the Wirthlin Worldwide polling organization conducted an international survey regarding social values. Nearly 2,900 randomly selected persons in five global regions responded to the following question: “If you could create society the way you think it should be, what would that society be centered around?” The choices offered were family, government, business, church, and individual.

The results were surprising. In the United States, fully 67 percent of persons chose “family” and another 20 percent chose “church.” If we add these numbers together to form a kind of “communitarian index,” the figure of 87 percent is as close to unanimous as polling usually gets.

The U.S. participants, moreover, chose “family” and “church” more than did those in any other region of the world. In Europe, for example, 58 percent of respondents

chose "family" and only 4 percent chose "church." In the predominantly Islamic Middle East and North Africa, only 50 percent chose "family" and 16 percent their faith community.

Eight percent of Americans would build their ideal society around the individual, compared to 21 percent of Asians and 12 percent of Latin Americans. "Business" was the choice of a mere 3 percent in the U.S., compared to 14 percent in Asia and 7 percent in the Islamic world. "Government" was the answer of just 2 percent of Americans, but a hefty 25 percent of Asians.¹

In sum, nearly nine out of ten Americans in 1999 claimed to believe that the social order should be centered on families and religious communities, and Americans' overwhelming attachment to this ideal distinguished them from the rest of the world's peoples. Moreover, the Wirthlin poll occurred at the very height of the "dot.com" investment frenzy, at the apotheosis of the sex-scandal-scarred Clinton presidency, and in the wake of the notorious "me-decades" of the 1980s and 1990s. Some questions undoubtedly arise from this: How might the cultural analyst square this poll result with Calvin Coolidge's oft-cited aphorism that "the business of America is business"? Or with the supposed grounding of American political culture in Lockean individualism? Or with the contemporary claim that the essence of America lies in its commitment to "cultural diversity"?

Part of the answer can be found in the realization that for a long time now America's public leaders and intellectuals have trafficked in a distorted reading of the American past. In his provocative book, *The Myth of American Individualism*,

political historian Barry Shain shows that “Americans in The Revolutionary era embraced a theory of the good life that is best described as reformed Protestant and communal.” He explains that the American cause of 1776 had more to do with the retention of “familial independence” than it did dreams of personal liberation. The founding generation did not consist of the nascent individualists and proto-capitalists presumed in contemporary liberal and libertarian thought. Instead, they were a people bound by family, spiritual community, and social convention.²

This new study of the “American way” argues that “family” and “religiously-grounded community” also served in the twentieth century as the dominant imagery for American self-understanding, with important consequences. Now cast in the context of an industrial order, carefully cultivated concepts of “the American family” and “the American home” became powerful vehicles for the assimilation of new immigrants into national life. In the universality of maternal love and family affections, nation-builders found powerful emotions that united an otherwise diverse and polyglot people. In doing so, they pushed aside rival visions of American self-understanding: a racist Anglo-Saxonism and a “cultural pluralism” that celebrated ethnic and lifestyle diversity. These same architects of twentieth-century ideals of citizenship and nationhood then erected a distinctive social welfare system that was intended both to reflect and reinforce “the traditional American family.” These policies contributed in turn to the historically unique revitalization of marriage and fertility in the U.S. during the

middle decades of the twentieth century. The same images of social rebirth and family strength undergirded much American policy in the Cold War against communism. When, somewhat later, "the American family" system came under critical assault and exhibited signs of profound distress, American foreign policy began to unravel as well: a relationship more than coincidental. Some coherence was regained only when national leaders tentatively restored the rhetorical bond between nation and family. And with the United States of America now sitting astride the globe as the last superpower, the metaphors of "the American home" and "the natural community" have gained new and even more urgent import.

This book examines six episodes in the crafting of a family and community-centered national identity. The first chapter explores the ideas of early twentieth-century American preeminent nation-builder, Theodore Roosevelt. T.R. emerges as the first American president to grapple with the challenges of modernity as they confronted the family; the first to articulate a family-centric worldview; and the first to link the stable, child-rich family with American patriotism. Chapter 2 uses the story of the German-Americans, America's largest ethnic group, to dissect the crisis over immigrant assimilation in the early decades of the twentieth century and the resolution found in a common celebration of home and motherhood. The third chapter shows how a remarkable group of women, labeled here the "maternalists," successfully turned the New Deal into a policy vehicle to promote "the traditional American family,"

which is built on the bread-winning father and the homemaking mother. Chapter 4 traces how the imagery of “family” and “faith” were used by master promoter and publisher Henry Luce to shape a portrait of “the New America” that defined, in turn, “the American Century.” Chapter 5 underscores how the chief architects of American foreign policy between 1946 and 1965 all presumed the existence of a family-centered, religious people at home, who provided a stable base for their “grand designs” abroad. It also describes how mounting perceptions of disorder at home subsequently led to foreign policy failure. The final chapter explores the collapse of maternalist ideals in the mid-1960s and emphasizes the internal weaknesses that made this end likely. The chapter also describes the tentative recovery of a family-centered national identity during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The volume concludes with a reformulation of the language of “family,” “community,” and “nationhood” that might be more appropriate for the new circumstances of the twenty-first century.

Expressions of gratitude are in order. Archivists in a number of locations graciously assisted in the crafting of this work. These research centers included: the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (Austin, Texas); the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Boston); the Caroliniana Collection at the University of South Carolina (Columbia); the Time, Inc. Archives (New York); the Archives of Princeton University; the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies (Madison, Wisconsin); and the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

My colleagues John Howard, Bryce Christensen, and Bill Kauffman read chapters and offered valuable comments and cautions. Heidi Gee managed the word processing chores. Barry Shain of Colgate University gave the project a special boost at a critical time. The Earhart Foundation of Ann Arbor, Michigan, provided a generous grant for research, travel, and time. And the Pew Charitable Trusts encouraged the work through this author's involvement in Pew's remarkable "Nature of the Human Person" project.

CHAPTER 1

HOME AND NATION: THE FAMILY POLITICS OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT

I do not wish to see this country a country of selfish prosperity where those who enjoy the material prosperity think only of the selfish gratification of their own desires, and are content to import from abroad not only their art, not only their literature, but even their babies.

—Theodore Roosevelt, 1911

With regard to the family, Theodore Roosevelt can be called the first “modern” American president. He grappled openly with a range of new social and cultural issues surrounding the home, and was the first president to describe in philosophical terms the importance of family life to national life. He was the first to document and analyze an emerging crisis among American

families and the first to understand the vast import of feminism, and to embrace it—albeit on his own terms. Roosevelt was also the first president to understand the powerful challenges to family life lurking within the new biological sciences.

How might we explain this interest? To begin with, Theodore Roosevelt had an amazing intellect, which embraced a vast range of subjects. He may have been the greatest mind ever to inhabit the White House (with the ritual “possible exception” of Jefferson). He was a voracious reader, reading at least one book a day, even during his Presidency (from 1901 to 1909) and over five hundred a year. “Reading with me is a disease,” he reported. Roosevelt was a prolific writer as well, and produced an amazing body of writing between his graduation from Harvard in 1880 and the middle year of his presidency (1905) alone. The contemporaneous Elkhorn Edition of *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, which already numbered 23 volumes by 1905, covered history, natural history, political philosophy, biography, and essays. Critics considered two of his works, *The Naval War of 1812* and the four-volume *Winning of the West*, as definitive on their subjects. Roosevelt’s published book reviews numbered over one thousand. His memory amazed all those who met him.¹

Roosevelt was also a student of numbers, particularly census numbers. He pored over U.S. Census reports from 1890, 1900, and 1910, commenting frequently on the strong evidence of mounting family decay. There was much to worry about. Between 1890 and 1910, the number of divorced Americans rose threefold. Among 35- to 44-year-olds, the increase was even greater. The U.S. birthrate fell by over 30 percent between 1880

CHAPTER 2

**HYPHENATES, HAUSFRAUS,
AND BABY-SAVING: THE
PECULIAR LEGACY OF
GERMAN AMERICA**

The alternative before Americans is Kultur Klux Klan or Cultural Pluralism.

—Horace Kallen, 1924

Approached from the neighborhood and family and met squarely, the problem of Americanization can be solved adequately.

—Frances Kellor, 1918

“There is disloyalty active in the United States and it must be crushed,” declared President Woodrow Wilson before hundreds of thousands of Americans at a “preparedness” rally held

in Washington, D.C., on Flag Day, June 14, 1916. The disloyalty he spoke of came from a minority "who are trying to levy a species of political blackmail, saying 'do what we wish in the interest of foreign sentiment, or we will wreak our vengeance at the polls.'" Wilson predicted that the American nation "will teach these gentlemen once and for all that loyalty to this flag is the first test of tolerance in the United States."¹

Speaking in the Midwest on the same day, former President Theodore Roosevelt was less circumspect about the identity of the disloyal: "No good American...can have any feeling except scorn and detestation for those professional German-Americans who seek to make the American President in effect a viceroy of the German Emperor." Roosevelt blasted that "adherence to the politico-racial hyphen which is the badge and sign of moral treason."²

One day later the Democratic Party, during its convention in the heavily German-American city of St. Louis, adopted a platform plank on "Hyphenates" and "Americanism." Together, these stood as "the supreme issue of the day," the document declared. Anyone "actuated by the purpose to promote the interests of a foreign power in disregard of our own country's welfare" created "discord and strife" among Americans; obstructed "the whole sum process of unification;" was "faithless to the trust...of [U.S.] citizenship;" and stood as "disloyal to his country." Any "division" of Americans into antagonistic racial groups destroyed "that complete...solidarity of the people and that unity of sentiment and national purpose so essential to the perpetuity of the nation and of its free institutions." In his reelection campaign, President Wilson pledged to make

CHAPTER 3

“SANCTIFYING THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY”: THE NEW DEAL AND NATIONAL SOLIDARITY

*At the base of American civilization is the concept of the family and
the perpetuation of that concept is highly important.*

—J. Douglas Brown, 1939

A curious quality of the recent historical treatment of 1930s America has been the uniform loathing shown by feminist scholars toward the New Deal. They do not object simply to some of its parts; they indict and condemn the broad domestic policy of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration.

The ironies here are significant. To begin with, the New Deal contributed the persona of Eleanor Roosevelt to

American mythology, a prominent woman who is usually cited as blazing the trail for women in policymaking roles. Husband Franklin, meanwhile, is commonly hailed as the very model of enlightened progressive liberalism. He also holds the role of chief twentieth-century villain in the American conservative narrative. Nonetheless, contemporary feminist authors find the couple and their New Deal work loathsome.

These judgments rest on barely contained fury. Historian Lois Scharf emphasizes the “victimizing effects” of New Deal actions, the manner in which “female dependency” was “institutionalized in sweeping federal legislation.”¹ Mimi Abramovitz deplores the way in which the New Deal “upheld patriarchal social arrangements.”² Gwendolyn Mink argues that the architects of the New Deal “inscribed...gender inequality” in the American welfare state and “codified women’s secondary status.”³ Alice Kessler-Harris condemns the New Deal for “locking men and women into rigid attitudes” and for “stifling a generation of feminist thought.”⁴ Suzanne Mettler fumes that “New Deal policies...institutionalized” an array of new discriminations, enshrining them “with political significance.”⁵ And Winifred Wandersee laments the “damage that must have been done to this generation of women”—a catastrophe so great that it “can never be measured.”⁶

These historians are even more troubled by the fact that women in powerful positions—including the sainted Eleanor—were to a considerable extent the architects of the New Deal. Scharf acknowledges this, and laments that in contrast to other periods of reform in American history (e.g., the eras of

CHAPTER 4

LUCE, LIFE, AND THE “NEW AMERICA”

The great significance of Life is that it includes among its readers all manners and kinds of Americans.... Life is for high-brows and low-brows, for women and for men and even for children, for Easterners and Westerners, for “rich” and “poor” in the American sense. This could only happen with pictures.... Here is the society bound together in broad and deep consensus yet not a conformist society.

—Henry Luce, 1956

Few modern nations are natural creations, the expressions of some primeval tribal unity. Rather, divided by regional, religious, racial, and ethnic differences, most nations are ideal constructs, shaped by human intelligence and sustained by shared symbols and learned understandings of history and place.

The American nation has drawn its symbolic shape from the ideas found in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, and Wilson's Fourteen Points. Yet by the middle decades of the twentieth century, a number of influential Americans had reached the conclusion that these symbolic statements of American identity were no longer adequate to the challenges posed by the modern world—and by “modernity.” The nation's new global responsibilities and opportunities, they said, demanded a fresh, modified vision of the American experience, one that would mobilize the mass of citizens for sacrifice at home and abroad.

Perhaps the most prominent and most misunderstood of these modern nation-builders was Henry Robinson Luce. Between 1940 and 1964 he guided his publishing empire, and more specifically *Life* magazine, toward two goals: (1) the creation of an American nation sufficiently unified to bear the responsibilities of international power; and (2) the shoring-up of Western civilization, which involved planting the Western heritage within popular consciousness on this side of the Atlantic. In order to fulfill these goals, family and religious reconstruction were the central tasks.

Indeed, *Life* in this era was a conscious response to Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray's call for “a new act of intellectual affirmation” that would provide Americans with “the basic consensus that we need.” Creation of this consensus, Murray had said, would not be the result of public opinion or philosophical brooding by the masses. Rather, it would be

CHAPTER 5

COLD WAR AND THE “AMERICAN STYLE”

[The] success of the whole doctrine and strategy developed in this paper...depends on the capacity of the U.S. to sustain a performance at home which reaches deeply into our domestic arrangements and which requires widespread understanding and assumption of responsibility and sacrifice for public purposes by our people.

—“Basic National Security Policy,” 1962

The tension between cultural pluralism and national unity became an acute problem in the mid-twentieth century for the architects of American national security policy.

While it was relatively isolated from great-power politics in the hundred years after 1815, the American republic had little compelling need to impress a common identity onto the dozens

of immigrant communities scattered throughout the country. The existence of a free, largely unregulated economy; the decentralized nature of the era's print media; the emptiness of a vast frontier; the overshadowing of national politics by state and local concerns; and the maintenance of only a tiny peacetime army further diminished both the necessity for and the means of achieving national integration. Beneath an Anglo-Saxon veneer, and notwithstanding the "Americanization" efforts of the Settlement House and public school movements, the great wave of immigration after 1840 created a multilingual, culturally diverse society. The minimum measure of American unity that did exist arose from the primacy of the English language; a common (if not universal) European cultural heritage; and popular reverence for those ideals—freedom, democracy, social equality, respect for law, individual rights, and the self-directed pursuit of happiness and virtue—that animated the nation's founding documents and were reflected in analyses such as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

America's entry into the Great War and its postwar flirtation with international responsibility put new strains on the nation's domestic arrangements. "European questions" of national identity became critical American questions as well. "It is not how people will live in the future," German sociologist Max Weber wrote in 1895, "which stirs us when we think about the conditions lying beyond our own graves, but rather who they shall be. Neither peace nor the pursuit of happiness but the eternal struggles for the preservation and development of our national identity are the goals we have to bestow to our

CHAPTER 6

FROM MATERNALISM TO REAGANISM, AND BEYOND

It is the power of the family that holds the Nation together, that gives America her conscience, and that serves as the cradle of our country's soul.

—Ronald Reagan, 1988

On February 8, 1964, the American political order experienced a seismic shift. It was a day of high drama. The occasion was the debate taking place in the U.S. House of Representatives over the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In order to rush this unusual and controversial measure through, the chamber had turned itself into the Committee of the Whole. The language of the bill on that Saturday morning—as first drafted in the Lyndon Johnson White House—aimed at ending discrimination “on

the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin" in the areas of voting, public accommodations and education, federally assisted programs, and private employment. Reading between the lines, it was clear that the latter provision, Title VII, would renew an old maternalist goal from the interwar years: to remove those job barriers that prevented African-American men from being good fathers, husbands, and breadwinners. Advocates used an argument that would surface again one year later in the Moynihan Report: if the traditional family home was the basis of American civilization, then full citizenship for African Americans required shoring up the economic side of their faltering family system. Disproportionately characterized by matriarchy, female-headed households, and illegitimacy, the need was for the African-American family to be reconfigured on the prevailing breadwinner/homemaker model found among whites. If this could be done, racial equality would result.

Yet the white segregationists in the House chamber, their backs to the wall, had resolved on a desperate and portentous strategy. Seeking a "killer" amendment, these "Dixiecrats" sought a change in the language of Title VII that would reveal the danger, even absurdity, of the concept of "equality." They also may have dimly seen that if their strategy failed, they might at least refocus the future civil rights enforcement apparatus away from concern for the well-being of African American males (about 5 percent of the population) toward attention to the economic status of white females (45 percent of the population), thereby compromising the Act's real purpose.