

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHARACTER – THE GREATEST ASSET OF AMERICA

LESSON 04 SESSION 01

3.1 The Greatest Asset of America

Diversity of opinion as to what is America's greatest asset creates a discussion which leads into every section and every activity of our country. Each individual is governed by the interest that lies closest to his heart.

The doctor declares: "The greatest asset of America is found in our medical schools, hospitals, and our great accomplishments in saving life and insuring the health of our people, for without health there could be no other great achievement."

The teacher asserts: "Our common-school system, our colleges, universities, and our press constitute our greatest asset, for without education industry would stop and our Government disintegrate."

The captain of industry states: "Industry is our greatest asset. What would America be without New England, New York, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, and the thousands of other industrial centers giving employment to millions while they supply the needs of the world?"

Likewise, the inventor, the chemist, the scientist, each makes the claim that the fruit of his labor is the greatest asset of America, for what great things in America would have been possible without the creative genius?

The farmer insists that the doctor, the teacher, the industrialist, the scientist, and all the others would not get very far if he failed for a single season to provide the means for clothing and food — to him the greatest asset of America.

They all are right; there are elements of greatness in all the varied endeavors of our country, the coordination of which has brought prosperity and wealth in such measure as to make us envied of all people.

3.1.1 Cooperation

Fifty States extended between the Atlantic and the Pacific, independent, self-governing Commonwealths, rich in resources, engaged in their own affairs; congested industrial areas of our great cities, pouring out their products to the enrichment of the Nation; millions of farmers providing food and clothing; teachers, preachers, merchants, laborers, lawyers, and clerks, contributing their part; all are working together in the spirit of cooperation.

3.1.2 Character

What unites a people composed of all the racial stocks of the world? What composes our differences, harmonizes our relationships? What inspires confidence, insures credit, and promotes organization? What, in the last analysis, guarantees protection of person and property, gives assurance of peace and prosperity, and inspires America to greater adventures and larger achievements?

The answer is not to be found in the sum of all her natural resources, factories, farms, homes, schools, hospitals, and churches. These are created by man and by man can be destroyed.

The security of our property, the continuation of our institutions, the increase of our possessions and the perpetuity of the principles of individual rights, justice, and freedom, the observance of which has made America, lie in character — the greatest asset of America.

3.1.3 National character

3.1.3.1 The ideals of the American colonists

The national character of America is grounded in the Puritan stock of the early colonies. From these original settlers, numbering in 1640 a total of 26,000, there has descended to the present time nearly one-fourth of our total population. Up to 50 years ago their descendants and immigrants from the same racial stock composed over 80 per cent of our population.

The outstanding traits of their stalwart characters were defined in the commonplace affairs of their daily lives. They made no play for heroics, were not primarily seekers of fame nor fortune. Lovers of liberty, they boldly fought to maintain their rights.

Their dominant trait was the worship of God, a God to be feared, yet a God of justice, A God who punished, yet a God who loved, Bigoted and narrow to the verge of superstition, intolerant of all faiths save their own, they built a character which to following generations will ever prove their richest heritage.

A stern will, born and bred of necessity, hard as the "stern and rock-bound coast" near which they lived, deep and cold as the seas that beat upon their rugged shores, they knew no compromise with duty — it must be done. No easy way was sought, nor excuse accepted for duty unperformed.

3.1.3.2 Community life, church, and town meeting

They established schools, churches, and town meetings, always dominated and often ruled with the iron rod of church authority.

In time, bigoted religious intolerance gave way to religious liberty, yet not with the slightest change in the high standards of moral and spiritual rectitude required of every member of the community.

Possessing pride of race, proud of their ancestry, they inspired in the hearts of their children a reverence and respect for family and race which left no room for lax conduct or easy habits. Severely disciplined within their homes, carefully supervised in their education, the children were taught the obligation of participation in community affairs and were obliged to submit to the severe restrictions imposed by their elders through the laws enacted by the local town meeting.

The restrictions of these laws and the severity of punishment imposed for the slightest infraction are cause for astonishment in these days of easy morals and lax law observance, yet their value as conducive to upright living, strict morals, and honest endeavor is strikingly evidenced by the pronounced influence of the New England community, the church and town meeting, in molding the national character of America.

The New England town was founded for and grouped about the church, which was the clubhouse of the time. But the glory of the New England town was its town meeting, a combination of neighborhood, society, caucus, legislature, and council meeting. This was the most successful political institution of the time, served as a private school in debate, and a nursery of American statesmen. — *National Ideals Historically Traced* — A. B. Hart.

3.1.3.3 The pioneer spirit

In defining the character of America, we find one trait so strong and pronounced as to manifest itself in every period and department of our national development — the "pioneer spirit."

Mixed motives inspired immigration to America. Regardless of why they came, the spirit of the pioneer seemed quickly to possess them with its urgent demand to go forth and conquer the wilderness. In that spirit the New England pioneers, and those from the Middle Colonies and the South, peopled in succession the States beyond the Alleghenies and the Cumberland, advancing by successive steps until they reached the boundaries of the continent.

The pioneer from New England and his cousins, the Scotch-Irish in Virginia and North Carolina, loved a struggle. To them the wilderness held no terror too great nor hardship too severe to hold them back. Life was a

joyful adventure and the dangers were enticing. Life held the stern duty of making provision for family and posterity.

Life was work, and the great forests were there to be cleared. Life was full of promise; there were the vast free lands — theirs for the taking. Life was the gift of God and, never forgetting, they set the stamp of their God-fearing character upon each succeeding community, in school, church, and local government.

People from New England, the Middle Colonies, and the South, flowed together to form neighboring or joint communities, and thus varied the Colonial farmer type. This mixed population produced interesting combinations of local government; Michigan, settled largely by New England people, set up the town meeting; in Illinois, first reached by southerners, the county system was established in 1818, and later an option was allowed between town and county. — *National Ideals Historically Traced* — A. B. Hart.

3.1.3.4 Tenacity of purpose

The very compelling forces of hardship, privation, danger, and isolation bred a spirit of unrestrained freedom which has had a pronounced influence in forming our national character. Compelled to rely upon individual effort in providing and protecting his means of livelihood, the early American quickly acquired the knowledge of individual rights and the determination to maintain them. What was his, won by honest toil or by right of discovery, he was ever ready to defend against all odds.

Their tenacity in what they undertook has never been surpassed by any people, not even the Romans.

*“I remember that half the Plymouth colonists died the first winter, and that in the spring, when the long waiting Mayflower sailed again homeward, not one of the fainting survivors went with her — and I glory in that unflinching fortitude, * * * our stiffest muscle is limp and loose beside the unyielding grapple of their tough wills.”* — Doctor Storrs.

This tenacity went far in possessing and saving to America the whole region west of the Mississippi River. The future welfare of the Nation, the preservation of representative government, and the principles for which it stands lie largely today within the hands of the citizens of the West, for into that section has traveled the center of our population, and there is to be found over one-half of the descendants of our Colonial forefathers.