

Understanding American ideals and sense of exceptionalism

Why does the world love and hate the US at the same time? The answer lies partly in what this complex country stands for. An excerpt from a new Straits Times Press book, *America: A Singapore Perspective*, looks at its core values.



Tommy Koh

What unites the people of the United States of America is not race. It is not a common religion. It is a set of values and ideals. The United States of America began its journey as 13 British colonies in North America. In 1776, they decided to fight against the tyranny of British rule and for their independence. It was an unequal battle between a well-trained professional British army and a ragtag army consisting mostly of volunteers from the 13 colonies. The British should have won but they lost to a more determined enemy, which had the support of France.

The Declaration of Independence, issued on July 4, 1776, is one of the three founding documents of the United States. The Declaration proclaims that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights such as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The second founding document is the Constitution of the United States of America, adopted on Sept 17, 1787. The Constitution completed the work of the Declaration by establishing a government, in order to secure the

rights. The Constitution prescribes the separation of the powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government. It contains a system of checks and balances in order to prevent the abuse of power.

The third founding document is often referred to as the Bill of Rights. It consists of the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. Among them: the first amendment which protects the freedom of speech, of the press and the right of peaceful assembly; the second amendment which protects the right to bear arms; and the sixth amendment, which protects a person's right to a fair trial.

THE AMERICAN CREED

Over time, Americans came to believe in these values and ideals: liberty, equality, individualism, populism and a free enterprise economy. Some have called this the American creed. The most important requirement of citizenship is acceptance of these values and ideals.

LIBERTY

Americans treasure liberty or freedom. This value has deep historical roots. On March 23, 1775, the Virginia Convention was debating whether to contribute troops to fight the British. A Virginian, Patrick Henry, is credited with having swung the votes in favour of joining the Revolutionary War when he declared: "Give me liberty, or give me death."

In President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, he said these famous words: "...we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend or oppose any foe in order to ensure the survival and success of liberty". Liberty of the individual is an important aspect of American democracy.

EQUALITY

Unlike most countries in Europe, America did not have a monarchy or an aristocracy. Americans are very egalitarian, even though the society is very unequal.

Americans believe that everyone is equal. They resent people who claim superiority over others, by birth, rank or education. A foreign ambassador in Washington was once caught by a police officer for jaywalking. The ambassador was indignant and said to the policeman, I am so and so and I am the ambassador of country X.

The policeman replied, I don't care who you are, but in this country, everyone must obey the law.

I once did a lecture tour of the state of Indiana, at the request of Senator Richard Lugar. I was very surprised when the senator told me not to mention to his constituents that he had been a Rhodes scholar at the University of Oxford in Britain. The reason is that in America, unlike Singapore, the people want their leaders to be like them. It is better to be an "ordinary Joe" than to be perceived as an "egghead" or intellectual.

INDIVIDUALISM

Most Asian countries are communitarian. In contrast, America is an individualistic country. Americans believe that the individual is the centre of the universe. They believe that whether one succeeds or fails in life is due to one's own efforts.

Americans care more about



America: A Singapore Perspective is a new book by Straits Times Press comprising a collection of 29 essays penned by experts.

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personal freedom than about what the government can do to help them. This explains why the social safety net is not as strong in America, compared with Europe. Social solidarity is not as strong in America as in more communitarian societies.

On the other hand, the individual feels more empowered in America than elsewhere. Americans believe that with hard work and a bit of luck, a person can rise above his humble beginning and achieve his aspiration. Every American hopes to achieve the American Dream.

POPULISM

America is populist in the sense that Americans are open to a leader who comes from a humble background and not from an elite family. Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama came from humble families.

I would, however, observe that although former president Donald

Trump comes from a wealthy family, he ran for office as a populist leader, as a champion of the common people.

FREE ENTERPRISE

Americans believe strongly in a free enterprise economic system.

The free enterprise economic system, combined with a strong belief in science and technology and a willingness to take risks, has produced the world's biggest and most dynamic economy. Some of the most competitive companies in the new economy, such as Microsoft, Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon, are all American. Innovation and creativity are very strong in America.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

What does American exceptionalism mean? It has several meanings.

The first is that America is a special country, created by people from all over the world, united by a dogma of liberty and the primacy of the individual. This leads Americans to believe in the superiority of American values and institutions.

The second meaning is that America is a shining city on a hill, a beacon for the rest of the world to follow. Some Americans believe that their country is protected by God and has a divine mission to spread democracy in the world.

The third meaning is that held by neo-conservatives who believe that America should intervene abroad to promote democracy, unilaterally and, if necessary, by military means. These people have no regard for multilateral institutions, treaties and agreements. The world can accept the first and second meanings of American exceptionalism but not the third. It was the neo-conservatives who led

America into the disastrous war in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.

IDEAL AND REALITY

There is a gap between the ideal and the reality. The US champions the rule of law in the world. It was therefore very disappointing to see the Clinton administration and the US Supreme Court ignoring a decision by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1998 to stay the execution of a Paraguayan who had been sentenced to death for the crimes of rape and murder.

The government of Paraguay had applied to the ICJ for a stay of his execution, pending a review of the case. The court had issued such an order. By a majority of six to three, the US Supreme Court refused to give effect to the ICJ's order.

In most other countries, the national courts would abide by a decision of the ICJ. The behaviour of the Clinton administration and the US Supreme Court is not consistent with the American narrative of upholding the international rule of law.

The behaviour of President George W. Bush's administration is even more shocking. The administration authorised the use of torture and the kidnapping of suspected terrorists from around the world in a so-called rendition programme. It also created the Guantanamo Bay detention centre as a legal black hole.

The world loves and hates America at the same time. The core American values and ideals are much admired by the world. They constitute an aspect of America's soft power. People want to go to America because they see it as a land of opportunity. They want to achieve the American Dream. The world respects America's role as the champion of democracy and human rights.

At the same time, many hate America's double standards and its tendency to act unilaterally.

On balance, however, America is much admired by the world.

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- America: A Singapore Perspective, edited by Tommy Koh and Daljit Singh, is available at major bookstores and the Straits Times Press Books website at \$32.10.