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THEY SAID IT

Cultures exist to serve the vital, practical requirements of human life -- to structure a society so as to perpetuate the species, to pass on the hard-earned knowledge and experience of generations past and centuries past to the young and inexperienced in order to spare the next generation the costly and dangerous process of learning everything all over again from scratch through trial and error -- including fatal errors. Cultures exist so that people can know how to get food and put a roof over their head, how to cure the sick, how to cope with the death of loved ones, and how to get along with the living. Cultures are not bumper stickers. They are living, changing ways of doing all the things that have to be done in life.

Thomas Sowell, "Cultural Diversity: A World View," *American Enterprise*, May-June, 1991.

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EUROPE, BRITAIN, AMERICA, AND NATIONAL CHARACTER.

We have had occasion over the last few weeks to spend some time thinking about the upcoming European elections. French President Nicholas Sarkozy is the first of the two heavy-hitters that are going up to the plate. Preliminary elections are in April, followed by final elections a month later. Early next year, Angela Merkel will, presumably, run for a third term as chancellor in Germany's federal parliamentary elections.

Now, we don't pretend to be European elections analysts. But at this point, it looks to us as if at least one and maybe both Sarkozy and Merkel will be looking for work, which, in addition to Europe's other worries, may cause some uneasiness amongst global investors. *But it shouldn't.* Not to belittle Mr. Sarkozy or Frau Merkel or to minimize their contributions to stabilizing the Eurozone in the face of crisis after crisis over last two years, but the fact is that these two are, in the long run, little more than bit players in a much grander game. And whether he wins or she loses, or, more likely, she wins and he loses, the fate of the Euro will not be decided by their respective fortunes.

Chancellor Merkel, for example, remains popular at home, though the leftist parties (the Social Democrats and the Greens) hold out hope of picking up enough seats in the next Bundestag to form a coalition government and wrestle the chancellorship back from her Christian Democrats. They may well do so. Or they may not. Either way, it won't mean schnitzel. The Germans will still be the Germans. And they will still, rightly, think that their Mediterranean Euro-partners are an enormous pain in their backside, and a drain on their wallets. And they will do nothing to bail out their profligate pals unless and until these pals do what the Germans have been wanting them to do, more or less, for the last 150 years, namely to give up their sovereignty and start acting like proper German vassals.

For his part, Sarkozy appears destined to lose to his Socialist rival, Francois Hollande, who is currently running roughly 10 points ahead of him in most polls. Indeed, it is theoretically possible that Sarkozy may not even make the final ballot in May (which pits the top two finishers from the April preliminary against one another), given that he is only a few points ahead of Marine LePen and her right-wing National Front, which is frankly shocking for this stage in a presidential contest. But it won't matter whether Sarko ultimately wins, loses to a Socialist, who will resist German-imposed austerity because he hates the idea of austerity, or loses to an ultra-rightist who will resist German-imposed austerity because she hates the very idea of Germans. The French will still be the French, and they will never agree to the Germans' terms. No matter who is president. At least that's the lesson history teaches us.

Turn back the clock, almost a century-and-a-half. Early in 1871, late in the Franco-Prussian war, Parisians were starving as a result of Bismarck's siege of the city and the French army was in shambles. French President Jules Trochu had sworn that he would never surrender to the Germans. When it became clear that France had no choice, he resigned and was replaced by Jules Favre. Bismarck demanded concessions that Favre opposed. The exchange with Bismarck, at Versailles, went as follows:

Favre: "Are you not afraid to drive us to despair? Are you not afraid of making our resistance ever fiercer?"

Bismarck: "Your resistance! . . . You have no right – please listen to me carefully -- you have no right, before man and God, for the sake of so pitiable a thing as military renown, to give over to famine a town with a population more than two millions! . . . Don't talk of resistance. In this case it is a crime!"

Favre caved. But only in the face of mass starvation.

That's the funny thing about Europe. These people have spent the last nearly 70 years engaged in a bizarre Millenarian scheme to rid themselves of the "plague" of nationalism and to become "European." And they have done nothing of the sort. The Greeks are still the Greeks. The Italians are still the Italians. The Swedes are still the Swedes. The Belgians are . . . well . . . who the hell knows? But other than that, national character remains firmly ingrained in the nations of Europe. And if you need one more reason to expect this silly common currency experiment to prove a failure, there you have it. The French will never be Germans, the Germans will never be Portuguese, the Portuguese will never be Irish, etc., etc., etc., and none of them will ever be merely *Europeans*.

This is all well and good for the egos of the Germans and the French, the Greeks and the Irish, and so on. But, in the grand scheme of things, it has little real impact on the rest of the world. Or at least it will have little impact once the Utopian mess that is the Euro is resolved. The age of the European-fueled world wars is over, thankfully, which is to say that perhaps European integration did its job. More likely, we suppose, globalization did its job. But that's an argument for another day. The argument for today revolves around the issue of national character and how it matters.

What is most interesting about all of this is that while the Europeans have been trying desperately to bury the characteristics that are unique to each member country and have failed, the two nations in the world that may be critical in maintaining global order going forward are struggling desperately to do the opposite, to maintain their unique indentifying characteristics and are also failing.

We are referring, of course, to the intimately related and deeply intertwined national characters of Great Britain and the United States. These respective characters are not identical, obviously. And in many ways, the differences between them are as significant as the similarities. Still, what the two share – or shared, more accurately – made them critical to the development of capitalism, human rights, and

representative democracy, and provided the engine of growth for the global economy for the last four centuries.

Today, though, both cultures and both national characters are in deep trouble, and their loss – or even merely their modification – will result in tragic consequences, not just in Britain and the United States, mind you, but throughout the world.

The cause of cultural decline is, naturally, far too complicated to be given a comprehensive airing in a publication such as this. So if you will forgive us, what follows is abridged considerably.

Ironically, in the case of both Britain and the United States, the collapse of national character springs at least in part from the outsized success of that character relative to the character of those of almost any other people. In the case of the Brits in particular, but the Americans to a lesser extent, national character has, for centuries, been associated with strength, advancement, progress, and globalism unmatched in human history. Queen Victoria, it is said, ruled over an Empire on which the sun never set. And there was a reason for that. Or, as we put it nearly five years ago, several reasons for that:

For the last several years, we, among others, have made our long-term forecasts about this century and about the nations that will dominate it based on one simple rule, namely that those who speak English are far better positioned to do well than those who don't. From Great Britain to Ireland to Canada and the United States; from Singapore to Hong Kong to India; from Australia to New Zealand, the most successful nations of the world share a common thread, and that's the English language.

It's not that there is something magical about speaking English. It's that those nations in which English is spoken by some significant percentage of the population are likely to have been British

colonies at some point, which means that they had the great fortune of having British common law, British customs, and British institutions imposed upon them. It is fashionable in the West these days to deplore colonialism and everything that it entailed. But the fact of the matter is that those nations that were colonized by the British have, by and large, reaped immeasurable benefits from their purported subjugation.

The unique blend of influences on British culture – from the Catholic scholars Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, to the Christian reformer John Calvin and the Scottish Presbyterians, to philosophers like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo – combine to foster an ethos uniquely suited to individual liberty, individual resourcefulness, political liberalism, and economic progress . . .

The British were able to defeat infant mortality because of the traditions, laws, and institutions that they had developed over centuries – respect for the individual, equality under the law, the value of thrift and of hard work, the importance of trade, representative government to check executive authority, transparency in government and business, etc. – which lent themselves nicely to individual and societal initiative and which, in turn, promoted “progress” that was previously unimaginable in all of human history. Included in this progress, of course, were medical and other scientific advances that facilitated a steady increase in the percentage of live births and a decrease in infants dying from difficult deliveries. The Brits' demographic victory was anything but coincidence.

Nor is it coincidence that the very same customs, principles, and institutions that enabled that victory were the ones that the British exported to their colonies and which predisposed those colonies to success. For nearly four hundred years, the world's centers of industry, finance, and individual liberty have been found either in Great Britain or its former colonies. Even today, the nations (or erstwhile city-states) that have transitioned from the third world to the first are those which have benefited from English traditions and institutions, either directly (Hong Kong, Singapore) or indirectly, through American occupation and reconstruction (Japan, South Korea) . . .

The Royal British Navy was the first truly successful modern military, the first military capable of global force projection, the first military capable of enforcing global norms of behavior and of likewise enforcing the wishes of the Crown. For two hundred years, the Royal British Navy not only enabled the spread of English values through conquest, but did so as well through the creation and protection of free shipping lanes. The Brits defeated Napoleon at Trafalgar; they single handedly ended the Atlantic slave trade; and they enabled global commerce to emerge and thrive.

And just as it is no mere coincidence that former British colonies are uniquely positioned to emulate the mother country's economic and political successes, it is no mere coincidence that they have been likewise uniquely positioned to emulate her military success. Again, take a look at the world's most successful militaries. Nearly every efficient, powerful military capable of

global force projection belongs either to Britain or to its former colonies. And it has been this way for at least a century.

Every major war in the past one hundred years – from World War I to World War II; from Korea to the first Gulf War; from Afghanistan to Iraq – has involved some combination of British, American, Canadian, and Australian forces, who have almost always been overwhelmingly successful in their undertakings.

In the wake of the collapse of this empire, feelings of guilt inexplicably overcame the elites of British society, who grew embarrassed both by their nation's imperial past and by the culture and character that had produced it. Why this would be the case, exactly, we can't say for certain. Again, this is a subject beyond the scope of this essay. But for our purposes today, it should suffice to say that it had a great deal to do with the rejection of traditionalism, concomitant with the collapse of the Empire, and especially of traditional morality, and its replacement with the morality of post-modernism – the morality of the intellectual and the Marxist – which abhorred (and still abhors) the notion of English (or American) cultural supremacy. The philosopher (and philosophy professor) Stephen Hicks put it this way in his 2005 classic *Explaining Postmodernism*:

Metaphysically, postmodernism is anti-realist, holding that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about an independently existing reality. Postmodernism substitutes instead a social-linguistic, constructionist account of reality. Epistemologically, having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality, postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring objective knowledge of that reality. Having substituted social-linguistic constructs for that reality, postmodernism emphasizes

the subjectivity, conventionality, and incommensurability of those constructions. Postmodern accounts of human nature are consistently collectivist, holding that individuals' identities are constructed largely by the social-linguistic groups that they are a part of, those groups varying radically across the dimensions of sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth. Postmodern accounts of human nature also consistently emphasize relations of conflict between those groups; and given the de-emphasized or eliminated role of reason, postmodern accounts hold that those conflicts are resolved primarily by the use of force, whether masked or naked; the use of force in turn leads to relations of dominance, submission, and oppression. Finally, postmodern themes in ethics and politics are characterized by an identification with and sympathy for the groups perceived to be oppressed in the conflicts, and a willingness to enter the fray on their behalf.

Whatever the cause, the success of the Anglo-American national characters bred contempt, particularly from within the cultures themselves. From the end of the Second World War through the 1970s – and especially during the 1960s – the post-modern “counter-culture” attacked the dominant culture and did its very best to lay waste to the ideas and the spirit that had given birth to the modern, globalized world.

It is clear that in England the post-modern order has, by and large, succeeded in completely destroying what was left of the old order, the order that fostered the emergence of the modern world.

England today is but a shadow of what it once was. During last summer's riots, it became clear to the world that the erstwhile first among nations had grown decrepit, backward, and lazy. The England that once ruled the world, that had once led the world, that had created the world as we know it, simply no

longer exists. In the amusingly depressing style that has become his trademark, the inimitable Mark Steyn described the “new” Britain thusly:

The London rioters are the children of dependency, the progeny of Big Government: They have been marinated in “stimulus” their entire lives. There is literally nothing you can't get Her Majesty's Government to pay for. From page 205 of my book:

“A man of 21 with learning disabilities has been granted taxpayers' money to fly to Amsterdam and have sex with a prostitute.” Hey, why not? “He's planning to do more than just have his end away,” explained his social worker. “Refusing to offer him this service would be a violation of his human rights.”

Why do they need a Dutch hooker? Just another hardworking foreigner doing the jobs Britons won't do? Given the reputation of English womanhood, you'd have thought this would be the one gig that wouldn't have to be outsourced overseas.

While the British Treasury is busy writing checks to Amsterdam prostitutes, one-fifth of children are raised in homes in which no adult works — in which the weekday ritual of rising, dressing, and leaving for gainful employment is entirely unknown. One tenth of the adult population has done not a day's work since Tony Blair took office on May 1, 1997.

Likewise, Theodore Dalrymple, the pseudonymous retired British prison physician, psychiatrist and political commentator, echoed both Steyn and Alexis de Tocqueville in his examination of the riots and the pathologies behind them:

The riots are the apotheosis of the welfare state and popular culture in their British form. A population thinks (because it has often been told so by intellectuals and the political class) that it is entitled to a high standard of consumption, irrespective of its personal efforts; and therefore it regards the fact that it does not receive that high standard, by comparison with the rest of society, as a sign of injustice. It believes itself deprived (because it has often been told so by intellectuals and the political class), even though each member of it has received an education costing 80,000, toward which neither he nor—quite likely—any member of his family has made much of a contribution; indeed, he may well have lived his entire life at others' expense, such that every mouthful of food he has ever eaten, every shirt he has ever worn, every television he has ever watched, has been provided by others. Even if he were to recognize this, he would not be grateful, for dependency does not promote gratitude. On the contrary, he would simply feel that the subventions were not sufficient to allow him to live as he would have liked.

All of this, of course, comes in addition to the degradation of the culture and of the institutions that once served as the unifying and driving forces among the various English classes. Consider, for example, the following, noted recently by *National Review's* religion writer Michael Poterma:

There'll Always Be an England! . . . but it is changing, and rather rapidly. I was just listening to radio stations in various parts of the world on the Internet, through the invaluable TuneIn service (click on Browse, then choose By Location to surf stations the world over). My heart soared when I discovered that

there was a radio station based in Luton, England, streaming on the Internet. When I was a boy, I would hear the Monty Python team poking gentle fun at this town 30 miles north of London, and the name Luton has come to have great sentimental associations for me.

So when I learned that “105.1 Inspire FM,” referred to on TuneIn as a “Variety” station, was broadcasting out of Luton, I checked it out. What sort of entertainment do the hapless but lovable Lutonians of Monty Python's 1970s gags favor today? Well, it turns out Inspire FM is a Muslim station, featuring English-language songs, in low-key folk-music, reggae, and hip-hop styles, on Muslim themes . . .

[I]t still sounds incongruous to me when the LutonMuslims website says Inspire FM is “the first full-time Muslim station in Luton.” First? Full-time? To think of Luton as a place with more than one Muslim radio station, along with some part-time ones, violates my mental image of it.

Could anyone possibly be surprised by any of this? The Archbishop of Canterbury himself, Rowan Williams, has repeatedly fawned over his nation's growing radical Muslim population, saying, for example that he believes that it is “inevitable” that at least some aspects of Sharia law can and will be integrated into British law, arguing that this is not only inexorable but constructive as well. As long as four years ago, according to the *Telegraph* of London, the government began officially recognizing polygamous Muslim marriages performed outside of Britain and, more to the point, paying extra welfare benefits for each spouse who claimed them.

Perhaps there will indeed always be an England, but it will not, for much longer, even vaguely resemble the nation that conquered the world and advanced all that we understand today as modern, liberal society.

As for the United States, compared to our brothers across the pond, we are in infinitely better shape. But that is changing, and changing fast. Once upon a time there was a generally unified American ethos that defined the nation and differentiated it even from its Anglo-cousins. And for a long time that distinction has remained. Even when the post-modernists encroached on academia and into the arts, the realm of politics remained fairly well insulated. And certainly the nation's political class has always felt obliged at least to pay public respect to the classic American character. Or at least it did up until about thirty-five years ago.

Interestingly, the disintegration of the classic American character has taken at least two distinct paths. The first of these is that which you might expect and that which has plagued Britain as well, namely the post-modern attack on the nature and exercise of Western military and cultural power. We won't dwell on this, since it is an issue that we have discussed before and which has occupied a great deal of the time and imagination of the political right in this country.

Once again, for our purposes today, it should suffice to repeat what we have written countless times in these pages before, namely that Barack Obama is the first "post-Western" president in America, a man who has always been associated, both personally and intellectually, with the strains of American leftism that have always tended to see the United States and its Western progenitors as forces for evil rather than good in the world, the pseudo-intellectual types whom the late Ambassador Kirkpatrick famously described as the "blame America first" crowd. Several years ago, when she was still writing for *Commentary* magazine, the *Washington Post's* Jennifer Rubin described Obama this way:

Obama plainly embodies that mindset of liberal elites. America is flawed. America has no distinct message or values, and its interests are entitled to no more weight than Belgium's or Cuba's. It's wrongheaded to assert

our national interests. We should be seeking consensus and righting the great wrongs that America has done to other nations—both its stinginess in redistributing wealth and its failure to cater to other nations' geopolitical and psychological concerns. Russia needs reassuring. The Arabs need validation. And it's the president's job to lower America's profile so as to not incur the wrath of hostile powers.

Four years ago, when her husband was first running for president, Michelle Obama declared that the success of his campaign represented, for her, "the first time in my adult life that I am proud of my country," causing quite a stir, particularly among conservatives. The standard response was that right-wingers were overreacting and nitpicking a generally positive comment. And perhaps that was indeed the case. Still, one can be forgiven for noting that Mrs. Obama's sentiments – or at least those reflected in what she actually said – are those that expose and signal a rather pronounced distaste for the traditional culture and the established character of the United States. And it is easy to see why, given her husband's ideological predispositions – since born out in office – that such statements would have been viewed with trepidation by a great many Americans.

The fact of the matter is that the "goodness" of this nation tends to vary for many – particularly those on the left – with the choices it makes at the ballot box. Elect a conservative and America is a dim and brutal place. Elect a "progressive" and it is not quite so dim and not quite so brutal, though *clearly* far less enlightened than its European cousins. All of which is to say that there is a strong, leftist prejudice against the traditional American character that is of a fairly recent vintage, dating probably only to the last half century or so.

For the most part, we have never worried much about that prejudice. As gloomy as we may sound in these pages sometimes, we have always been long-term optimists about the prospects of the United

States, largely because we know that there is something unique and defining – something truly exceptional – about this country that will permit it to overcome all obstacles in its path. We have always believed that there is an indomitable American spirit that can and will harness the cultural, historical, religious, and political foundations of this great nation, irrespective of its leaders and regardless of the roadblocks set up by its post-modern intellectual class. In so doing it will maintain the unique American character and unleash the economic vibrancy for which that character is best known.

And while we continue to believe that broadly, we have, over the last several years, begun to worry that the threat the American character is not merely ideological but class-based as well, which is distinctive in American history and therefore potentially more destructive.

Last week, in our piece on “Obama, the Senate and the New Authoritarianism,” we mentioned this class conflict and specifically its cultural aspects, citing “Charles Murray’s new book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, which examines the cultural bifurcation of the nation and such election-relevant topics as the work ethic, family breakdown, and various other effects of the welfare state.” A brief look at Murray’s work – and at the introduction to his book – explains why we think this is important and what it has to do with the class-based assault on American character. To wit:

American exceptionalism is not just something that Americans claim for themselves. Historically, Americans have been seen as different, even peculiar, to people around the world. I am thinking of qualities such as American industriousness—not just hard work, but the way that Americans have treated their work and their efforts to get ahead in life as a central expression of who they are. There is American neighborliness. Many cultures have traditions of generous hospitality to guests, but widespread voluntary mutual assistance among unrelated people who happen to live

alongside each other has been rare. In the United States, it has been ubiquitous. I am thinking also of qualities such as American optimism, present even when there doesn’t seem to be any good reason for it; our striking lack of class envy; the assumption by most Americans that they are in control of their own destinies; and our famous naïveté in assuming the best of a random person that we come across. Finally, there is the most lovable of exceptional American qualities: our tradition of insisting that we are part of the middle class, even if we aren’t, and of interacting with our fellow citizens as if we were all middle class . . .

The exceptionalism has not been a figment of anyone’s imagination, but nothing in the water made us that way. We have been the product of cultural capital of two kinds. The first is the system the Founders laid down that I shall refer to as the American Project: national life based on the Founders’ idea that the “sum of good government,” as Thomas Jefferson put it in his first inaugural address, is a state that “shall restrain men from injuring one another [and] shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement.”

The second source of cultural capital has been a set of qualities about Americans that made the American Project feasible. Tocqueville’s disquisitions on these qualities are better known, but another early European observer of America, Francis Grund, summed it up nicely in his book *The Americans in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (1837):

The American Constitution is remarkable for its simplicity; but it can only suffice a people habitually correct in their actions, and would be utterly inadequate to the wants of a different

nation. Change the domestic habits of the Americans, their religious devotion, and their high respect for morality, and it will not be necessary to change a single letter of the Constitution in order to vary the whole form of their government.

What did Grund have in mind when he wrote of “habitually correct in their actions”? Different observers stressed different aspects of the topic, and they could be parsed in several ways. But if there is no canonical list, four aspects of American life were so completely accepted as essential that, for practical purposes, you would be hard put to find an eighteenth-century Founder or a nineteenth-century commentator who dissented from any of them. Two of them are virtues in themselves—industriousness and honesty—and two of them refer to institutions through which right behavior is nurtured—marriage and religion. For convenience, I will refer to all four as the Founding virtues.

As recently as half a century ago, Americans across all classes showed only minor differences on the Founding virtues. When Americans resisted the idea of being thought part of an upper class or lower class, they were responding to a reality: there really was such a thing as a civic culture that embraced all of them. Today, that is no longer true. Americans have formed a new lower class and a new upper class that have no precedent in our history. American exceptionalism is deteriorating in tandem with this development.

America has never been a classless society. From the beginning, rich and poor have usually lived in different parts of town,

gone to different churches, and had somewhat different manners and mores. It is not the existence of classes that is new, but the emergence of classes that diverge on core behaviors and values—classes that barely recognize their underlying American kinship.

This, more than anything, we think, is the threat to the great American experiment and to global capitalism. American exceptionalism is predicated on American character. And American character is predicated on specific virtues – civic and personal. And if those virtues are allowed to be extinguished in a majority of the population, while at least half of the upper class is unaware of the ultimate ramifications of the disappearance of those virtues, then the national character is doomed. And American exceptionalism, in turn, is doomed.

We hate to say that. Heck, we hate even to think it. But it strikes us that the current path of American society is one fraught with severe dangers – of many different varieties. In order to avoid these dangers, of course, the battles must be fought and won, as we have always said, at the state, county, local, and FAMILY levels. The national level is where the modernists, the pre-modernists, and the post-modernists can duel. But in order for the nation and its hallowed culture to survive, civic and personal virtues must be restored as well. And that can only be done at the more personal levels of government and even beyond government.

As we said at the top of this piece, in the end, the entire world is counting on us, for without the restoration of at least the American version of the Anglo-American culture, the future looks mighty bleak indeed.

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