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Is There an American National Character?

by
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Trenton, New Jersey—There's an old joke that starts: in heaven the French are the cooks, the English are the cops, the Italians are the lovers, and the Germans organize everything. The punch line is that in hell the English are the cooks, the French are the cops, the Germans are the lovers, and the Italians organize everything.

The joke isn't terribly funny, but what humor it contains depends upon the identification of certain character traits with particular countries. The traits are stereotypes, of course, but as generalizations they have a core of truth to them. Now, if the joke were to include Americans, what character trait might it exploit? Is there a generalization that captures the typically *American* character?

After considerable reflection, I have concluded that there is, indeed, a typical American character trait. Moreover, it seems to me that it has been our outstanding trait from the beginning and applies across the entire nation. That characteristic is *competitiveness*.

Right from the start, the settlers in Massachusetts Bay and other colonies set out to build a society that would be better than European society. They started with a competitive outlook that was heightened by their struggle to settle a vast land which presented many natural obstacles to both survival and success. Furthermore, the land was already inhabited by other people, so the settlers learned to fight for it.

From that beginning up to the present, Americans have developed a self-understanding of being the world's biggest and best competitor. That is one of the reasons why so much concern exists today about the nation's ability and willingness to maintain its competitive edge.

Our very identity is at stake.

Perhaps the clearest expression of the American glorification of competitiveness is to be found in our attitude toward sports. The word "sport" connotes something done for fun, amusement, or enjoyment. But the U.S. competitive compulsion has transformed sports into a nonlethal substitute for war. Fans don't merely follow their favorite teams; they vicariously transfer onto their teams the responsibility to achieve the competitive success they want in their personal lives.

By now I can imagine that many readers may be asking, "So what? What if we are a competitive people? Is anything wrong with that? How can you do business or play sports or fight a war without being competitive?"

The problem is that the entire spirit of competitiveness, when understood as "beating the other guy," is forbidden by the law of God. Whereas God commands us to LOVE our neighbor, the U.S. social ethic says BEAT your neighbor. Simply becoming accustomed to a value does not excuse it. During the last century a large number of American Christians became accustomed to buying, selling, and owning other human beings and making them do their work. But it was still a violation of the law of love.

Does this criticism of competitiveness mean that a Christian cannot participate in business or sports without violating God's law? Not at all. There is a big difference between trying to do one's best and trying to beat the other guy. We've all heard the illustration comparing the person who sees a glass as half full and the person who sees it as half empty. The same is true about doing business. If my attitude is one of trying to do my best to supply a product or service to others, and to support my family, that can be perfectly compatible with the law of love. But as soon as my attitude shifts to one of beating the other guy, it is wrong, even if I'm supplying the same product or service.

Similarly, if I run for political office trying to win votes, I can do that with love toward God and my neighbors. But if I run for office thinking only of trying to beat my opponent, I may end up hiring a dirty-tricks squadron or planning a Watergate break-in.

This argument may strike some readers as highly naive. Can we really expect athletes, for example, even Christian athletes, to play simply for enjoyment? How can they do that when it's their living? In the final analysis don't we all have to

(continued on Page 7)

This Issue

THE AMERICAN CHARACTER Roy Clouser says that "competitiveness" marks us both for good and for evil **page 1**

FOOD, FARMING, AND THE WORLD A new book by Marty Strange offers wisdom on agriculture, world trade, and hunger **page 2**

THE SATANIC VERSES Christians should have something more to say about this controversy, argues James Skillen **page 3**

Justice Outlook 4 Just Living 5 The APJ Beat 6 Testimony 8

Is There an American National Character?

(continued from Page 1)

agree with Vince Lombardi that winning is not the most important thing, it's the only thing? The answer to these questions must be found in recognizing that the competitive ethic looks so unavoidable only because we've become used to it.

Our American obsession with competition is clearly seen by others. The attitude of "America First" has often characterized our dealings with neighbors. We seem to want the admiration of other countries for our first-place finish, for our success as the best competitor. Even when we defend human rights or aid disaster victims our spirit of "doing it better than others" seems to shine through.

Now that America's "Number One" status is in question, we should take careful note of the historical record. Nations which have been dominant over others have frequently engendered envy and resentment. While we think of ourselves as good guys simply competing to be Number One, many other countries have regarded our deeds with suspicion and sometimes with hostility.

American Christians have some critical reevaluation to do. We should not want our country to drop out of world politics any more than we should want individuals to turn away from business, politics, and sports. But the spirit with which we approach America's role in the world may need to change. The way we think of ourselves as Americans may need fundamental reform. □

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