



INTOLERANCE and the AMERICAN CHARACTER

Dr. King V. Cheek

Professor, New York Institute of Technology
Chairman, International Foundation for Tolerance



INTOLERANCE and the AMERICAN CHARACTER

“A man told his grandson: ‘A terrible fight is going on inside me...a fight between two wolves. One is evil and represents hate, anger, arrogance, intolerance and superiority. The other wolf is good, and represents joy, peace, love, tolerance, understanding, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity and compassion. The same fight is going on inside you, inside every other person as well.’ The grandson then asked: ‘Which one will win?’ The old man replied simply: ‘The one you feed’”.

Intolerance, reflected in racism, sexism, religious bigotry, political polarization and just plain hatred of the other, has infected and poisoned the American spirit.

America’s brand is land of the free and the home of the brave. Its motto is “E Pluribus Unum – Out of many comes one.” How and why did such a country so defined become victimized by the disease of intolerance?

With pride, on July 4, 1776, America was born. We pronounced the American Creed to the world. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and The Pursuit of Happiness___That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the Consent of the Governed.” These were gifts from the divine creator. America proclaimed itself a new nation with a custodial obligation to extend the blessings of liberty, equality and democracy to all people.

Hate crimes in America are now classified as domestic terrorism that warrants major attention from the Department of Homeland Security. The categories of hate expressions and crimes include intolerance toward different races, religions, sex, different points of view, the other and diversity in general.

America is confused about causes, level, depth and solutions. We are a polarized and divided nation.

I share a point of view regarding the causes and suggest a framework for solutions.



The American people fight to close the gap between the idealism of our CREED and our behavior. *On the day of our birth "We the People" were white, primarily land-owning men over the age of 25. "We, the People" now includes virtually the entire adult population regardless of race, gender, religion, or other socioeconomic indicators. Our nation continues to evolve to "form a more perfect union."*

Americans are self-righteous. We insist our system serve the people. When it fails, American morality will modify and provoke change.

America's major asset is diversity. A lady stands in the harbor of our largest city and eloquently speaks.

"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp, cries she with silent lips.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,

Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me.

I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

They came and built America. Except for the natives already here, all of us got off a boat. We are a diverse family of immigrants bonded only by devotion to a single creed of liberty, equality, democracy and the pursuit of happiness. Does the spirit of Lady Liberty still live? Has she been replaced with intolerance and hate?

Because of our diversity of heritages, ethnicities and values, America is not a single community. We are, instead, multiple communities, co-existing- as if in a flower garden. We are not a soup puree. We are a salad bowl, "a framework for many communities and different kinds of communities we, the people, desire to create for ourselves." No demagogue can successfully arouse American patriotism by appealing to a "general will" of the American nation.

What holds Americans together? The real focus of our patriotism and common loyalties is not a single national state, apart from the dimensions of law, geography and population. Instead, it is the SYSTEM-the dimensions of *which are liberty, equality and constitutionalism (rule of law)*. *There is no one American way of life. There are ways of life. America's major strength is its diversity of people and interests-labor, business, rich, poor, religions, classes, parties and others. It is our endless diversity that keeps the American people and our government*



working overtime in search of consensus and balance. There is no interest group that can hijack democracy. Even majorities are temporary. The American people are at work, spotting gaps in the American Creed of liberty and equality, and constantly striving to achieve its ideals.

America is a nation of many firsts and complex contradictions. We are a nation of complex contradictions. Liberty, equality, the pursuit of happiness and power of the people are admirable ideals. Hypocrisy accompanied the proclamation of these ideas. Race based human bondage and sexism inherent in the exclusion of women from civic participation (voting rights) were evils that could not occupy the same space with liberty, equality and democracy. The good news is that hypocrisy was known. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, remarked to a colleague. "I tremble for my country when I reflect that GOD is just."

Awareness of a deficiency is the first step to a solution. Americans have always been determined to close the gap between word and deed. The spirit of revolution never dies. It is a permanent agenda, which extends beyond rhetoric.

To protect the integrity of its CREED, America declares war on itself. Its self-righteous spirit insists the system serve the people well. Change is America's only constant. The key movers of change have always been the American people-as individuals and groups-the young and old, the rich and poor, the slave and free, men plus women-working in coalition with one another to aspire to the American ideal of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. America is a country in a state of "continuous revolution. It is a nation not fixed in time but is, instead, a process in a constant state of becoming, a people determined to balance the tensions between the ideal and the practical-to bring the two together.

America endures because of the internal tension among its people to debate, lobby their leaders, create movement, raise awareness, ask questions and challenge-all in an effort to achieve a common consensus on 'Liberty, Equality and Democracy.

This is the America I admire and love.

Why has Intolerance infected and poisoned a country defined by a CREED expressed in a word-liberty, an aspiration-equality and a system-democracy?



There are demons in the room. They feed the bad wolf and, if permitted, will hijack liberty, equality and democracy.

These demons are:

- Economic Determinism
- Religion
- Manifest Destiny
- Progressive Imperialism
- Nativism
- Ignorance
- Partisan Politics
- Anti-Globalism

Economic Determinism is a demon. It is the origin of racism and sexism in America. Contrary to popular perception, racism did not produce the American system of race-based slavery. Economic determinism did. Slavery was the most economic and practical route to address the challenges of an agrarian world that characterized the Southern states. Slavery also existed in the Northern states and disappeared because it was an economic disutility. The tension between the economic interests of the South and the American Creed produced the compromises of 1787 in Philadelphia that depersonalized and defined the slave as 3/5 of a person. Federal law further depersonalized the slave by declaring him/her a piece of property to be bought and sold in the capitalist market. The denial of the right to vote for women is attributed to economic rationale. Women could not own property and were not viewed as having a critical vested interest in the economic fabric of the country.

Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* highlights the theme of a people possessed by their love of money. "As one digs deeper into the national character of the Americans, one sees that they have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: how much money will it bring in". Materialism and the quest for acquisition of the object became a core element in the value system of America.



Economic determinism is the foundation for Indian removal in America and was the foundation for America's late nineteenth century "quest for empire" that branded it an imperialist nation.

RELIGION is another demon. "The nation's expansion was divinely ordained." This view and the term, which defined it- Manifest Destiny-, are used to justify the Mexican American War, slavery and Indian removal.

The conquest of the western frontier was not the only object of divine inspiration for America's development. This concept of divine inspiration is a complex force in America's development. Manifest Destiny justifies America's primacy on the world stage today. America's mission and foreign policy is simply stated. America has a moral obligation to promote and extend the blessings of liberty and democracy to all people throughout the world.

Some people still believe America is destined and commanded by GOD to civilize the rest of the world.

America's quest for empire presumably originated after the Spanish American War. Becoming an imperial power and joining the ranks of Great Britain, France and Germany was a major contradiction for a country and former colony, founded on the principle that the "right to govern is derived from the consent of the governed".

Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden" could not philosophically justify abandoning the American Creed of self-determination, a right accorded people of all nations. How then does a country founded on such august principles justify its entry into the imperialist world with its control of the Philippine Islands? Now enters the concept of "Progressive Imperialism", a term used to justify and explain President William McKinley's remarks to an audience of ministers at a White House prayer breakfast. They were assembled to protest what they believed to be a policy of colonization and imperialism. For them this action was an affront to the American Creed. President McKinley explained how he dropped to his knees to talk to GOD who explained to him that the Philippine people were not yet fit for self- rule. GOD gave him a moral command to "take them over, Christianize and prepare them for self- rule."



Thus, was born America's obligation to "spread democracy throughout the world." Even if Kipling's command had fallen on deaf ears and hearts there were other forces beckoning America to join the imperialist family. Progressive Imperialism became both an attitude and a policy. Its supporters argued that America's presence in the Philippines was not to colonize another country but only to assist them in their development of self- government. We could help them build their house without taking title to it.

The advocates of Progressive Imperialism describe America as a champion of human liberty and an opponent of tyranny wherever it exists.

The belief still exists that America is a "city on a hill" destined by God to Christianize the universe. The mission is both secular and spiritual.

I summarize and repeat. The source of this moral authority is GOD who intended for liberty, equality, democracy to be universal entitlements given to all humans on planet earth. Thus, America's role is that of a "custodian" holding these principles in custody for all humanity.

I counter that God would not grant any nation the right to expand at the expense of people whose land would be taken and the lives of those who would die in wars over territory. Neither would God smile kindly upon the idea that destruction of a civilization nor the enslavement of other humans robbing them of their personhood was divinely inspired or mandated.

A careful and honest study of this subject requires us, regardless of ethnic heritage or nationality to seriously reflect upon the beliefs and attitudes, which helped formulate so much of U. S. policy and continue to challenge the issues of the future.

My students raise questions that I share with you.

- Is it okay to go to war just for the purpose of spreading democracy? Should we put democracy on the tip of a bayonet.
- How and why is democracy in another country good for America?
- What is the evidence that 'American values' will always work well in other cultures and societies?
- Why not let people in other countries decide their own value systems?



- Does the American form of people-centered government and people power work for all cultures?
- For example, was the U.S. policy of “making aid and grants to African countries conditional on their acceptance of anti-life or abortion values’ an ethical one?
- Before promoting ‘progressive imperialism’ abroad should we try to make democracy work better in America?
- Is the policy of promoting a policy of ‘regime change’ in countries a modern version of ‘progressive imperialism’?
- Should America engage military interventions in other countries to force its way of life and values upon them?
- Is America’s intolerance of Cuba as a Socialist country existing ninety miles from the U. S. border a justification for U.S. Cuban policy for more than 75 years?

Nativism, intense nationalism, is another demon that seeks to hijack diversity, one of America’s most important assets.

America is a global village. We cannot reverse this reality

Diversity in America is more than ethnic. Americanism is a matter of mind and heart. It is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry.

E PLURIBUS UNUM is *America’s Motto*. The source of this motto is Virgil. He describes a recipe for salad-“garlic, parsley and raw vegetables, seasoned with cheese, salt, colander and sprinkled with vinegar and oil. The ingredients remain separate but harmonious.”

AMERICA IS A SALAD BOWL. IT IS NOT A SOUP PUREE OR FRUIT SMOOTHIE”.

The challenge in the American character is to find harmony between individual aspirations and achievement of the common good. All Americans have a stake in this goal, and all have a fair chance to win and to rise as high as their abilities will take them.

Each American individual as a candle and each candle has a right to shine and to acquire the capacity to shine, as well. The responsibility of ‘the group-the government’ is to assist in the acquisition of this capacity? We, the group, must provide the equal opportunity for this candle to



shine. We are morally obligated to provide access to the match so that everyone who wishes may light his/her candle? This is the challenge and meaning of the inalienable right to “the pursuit of happiness.”

There is no single American way of life. There are American WAYS OF LIFE. Diversity in America is not just about ethnic heritage. We are a country with diversities of cultures. To become an American, you do not have to abandon your cultural history. In America we promote cultural pluralism and inclusion. We are not a nation of one culture but a federation of different nationalities and culture groups.

THE GLUE THAT HOLDS ALL THESE AMERICAN WAYS OF LIFE TOGETHER IS THE CREED, EXPRESSED IN A WORD- LIBERTY, A QUEST EQUALITY AND A METHOD- DEMOCRACY. THIS CREED MAKES DIVERSITY WORK. THIS IS ALL THAT DEFINES THE “AMERICAN RACE”.

We describe America as a “melting pot”. A dentist in Australia describe an American.

“An American is English, French, Italian, Irish, German, Spanish, Polish, Russian or Greek. An American may also be Canadian, Mexican, African, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Australian, Iranian, Asian or Arab, or Pakistani or Afghan.

“An American may also be a Comanche, Cherokee, Osage, Blackfoot, Navaho, Apache, Seminole or one of the many other tribes known as Native Americans

“An American is Christian, or he could be Jewish or Buddhist or Muslim. In fact, there are more Muslims in America than in Afghanistan. The only difference is that in America they are free to worship as each of them chooses.

“An American is also free to believe in any religion. For that, he will answer only to God, not to the government, or to armed thugs claiming to speak for the government and for GOD.

“The root of AMERICA’S prosperity is the Declaration of Independence, which recognizes the GOD given right of every person to the pursuit of happiness.....



America cannot permit NATIVISM to demonize diversity and feed the bad wolf.

Nativism is predicated upon a point of view that America is so special it must not be corrupted by the values of external groups whose ways of life are different from home grown Americans. It is a combination of the fear and hatred of “aliens”.

The sources of “nativism” are many. They include:

1. **ETHNIC ORIGINS.** The earlier settlers were European Anglo Saxons who gifted the values, which underlie the American Creed. Many held the perception that their ethnic origins were superior to other groups. Therefore, they should be the dominant players in shaping the future of America.
2. **PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS.** There existed and still prevails a fear that people from “authoritarian cultures” are likely to betray the spirit of democracy and a people centered government and society.
3. **RELIGION.** In America’s earlier history, Catholics were the targets of attack. There was the fear the Catholics would be apostles of the Pope and America would become a puppet of Rome. Of course, this was a fear without a foundation. In the current time, we have replaced that fear with Islam phobia. Again, ignorance is the fuel that drives is fear. Most people who are so possessed do not have a clue about the religion of Islam.
4. **RACISM.** This source of nativism stems from America’s *creation of a system of racism*. America was the first country in the history of the world to legislatively create and judicially endorse a “race based slave system”. America created this system to serve two purposes. The first was to justify a system that was fundamentally at odds with the American Creed. The second purpose was to make the race based system of slavery work. The emphasis of this “system” was faked belief in the *‘biological superiority’ of white/Anglo Saxon Europeans*. The ‘system’, in creating a culture of hate and exclusion, actually enslaved all Americans.
5. **POWER.** People who hold power will resist its loss. In a republic or representative democracy, such as America, power has a direct relationship to population diversity and demographics. As the Anglo - Saxon population begins to lose its majority status



- in America, the fear of the loss of power dominates the nativist agenda and fuels the fears associated with it. Thus, there is an elevated resistance to “foreigners” immigrating to America.
6. **NATIONAL SECURITY.** The most blatant example of this form of nativism is reflected in times of war. World War 1 and World War 2 are great examples. Even citizens of the ethnic origin associated with combatant countries were officially and unofficially targeted and penalized. Today, with the high interest on fighting terrorism and belief that ‘religious terrorism’ is America’s major enemy nationalism is on the rise. Cultural mythology fuels this storm and targets individuals as well as groups we perceived to be national security threats only because they are members of a group.
 7. **ECONOMIC COMPETITION.** Throughout America’s history, there has been the fear that immigrants who are obliged and willing to work for low wages will negatively affect the economic welfare of other citizens. This was the foundation argument of the Chinese Exclusion Act of the 1880’s and the Japanese Exclusion Act at the beginning of the twentieth century.
 8. **DIVERSITY/THE OTHER.** Diversity has become America’s greatest asset as it becomes a global village. In spite of that fact, many people label diversity a curse and fear it. “E Pluribus Unum,” out of many comes one, is America’s motto. Many people see “diversity color blindness” to be the answer. Is it? We need to find a way to promote “appreciation of the other”. When we do so, America will have matured. Tolerance, as well as appreciation and inclusion of the other will prevail and enrich America’s spirit.

IGNORANCE is another demon. Hate and intolerance are often the products of ignorance. Ignorance is not a sin. It is simply a state of not knowing, of being uninformed or mis-informed.

America’s education system emphasizes mind control and sometimes does not serve us well.



“A teacher is a king in his castle, incapable of error and immune to criticism. Instead, he should be a coach whose attitude is to help students win. He should not be a referee empowered and determined to throw the flag at every infraction of the rules.

A philosopher reminds us “an unexamined life is not worth living.” I strongly assert an unexamined life is a threat to democracy.

America is a country owned by its people. It is defined by the people’s values. For example, the recent electoral process in America was not a referendum on the president. It was a referendum on the American people and the American System.

Many people do not even know or understand their values or what they believe. After the recent elections I dialogued with several colleagues. They told me they hated and voted against socialism. I asked them to explain socialism. They could not. I responded with the question-How can you hate something you do not know. The answer was a shrug of the shoulder and I don’t know. I just hate it. Several indicated they voted to support America’s values. Again, they could not tell me what the values were. A few others were disciples, promoting God’s will.

The American education system is deficient in giving enlightenment on the American idea and system. It focuses on career skills and ignores the need to inspire students to engage examination of their values.

The information system is also defective. *Most people get their news about government from the electronic media: from network news (ABC, NBC, CBS), cable news (CNN, C-SPAN, Fox), from the Internet (a huge range from Time and the New York Times online to the Drudge Report and others), and social media.*

News magazine shows and many media outlets are more interested in scoops so that they are the first to air or report an event. This often leads to increased reporting of scandals and rumors that often turn out to be incorrect. The "24/7" or instant news report nature of the current media also limits thoughtful commentary and encourages shallow reporting. The visual nature of the electronic media also leads to stories covering interesting images instead of important issues of the day. This explains why so many in our society today are uninformed and pessimistic.

PARTISAN POLITICS is another demon that threatens to hijack democracy. “It is driven more by hatred of the other side rather than devotion to ones own. Its less that



we love our own party and more that we hate the other one. A generation ago partisan politics was something people took to the ballot box. Today, people take it to work, school, church and even to bed.”

A poll by the non-partisan group PRRI that studies the intersection of culture, religion and public policy found in their 2019 survey that 35% of Republicans and 45% of Democrats would be very unhappy if their sons or daughters married someone who was a member of the other political party.

We demonize our political enemies, engage in name calling and shout “lock her up” if there is a difference in opinions or ideologies.

This culture is a danger for the future of democracy that thrives on respectable discourse.

In spite of vocal opposition to socialism, Americans have high and increasing expectations of government. When people have problems, they often demand that the government fix them. Campaigning also leads Americans to expect more of government because of promises offered by candidates. When government fails to keep promises or solve problems public cynicism increases.

The political and economic systems have become far more complex, and the educational system no longer plays the same socialization role it once did. Many Americans have no idea what government actually does. In addition, personal responsibility has declined. People blame the government for problems rather than accept their own failings.

Many Americans distrust politicians and believe they are crooks. Yet, many politicians are hard-working and honest people committed to making their country better. As public servants they take pride in helping their constituents and country. Why there is such a disjuncture between opinion and reality?”

We also label people thoughtlessly and dogmatically. We place them in boxes, left, right, liberal, conservative without even knowing what those boxes mean

Labels obscure our ability to see gray areas and common interests and instead polarize political debate. They are often highly misleading. Most people often have conflicting and mixed views instead of a true ideology. Their views are hybrid, a mixture of all categories. For example, a person may believe the government should do more to help the poor (a "liberal" view) and yet strongly favor more defense spending (a "conservative" view). He may believe civil rights for



minorities are very important as are rights for the elderly ("liberal") and argue that government regulation of the economy should be very minimal ("conservative"). The use of these labels often divides, rather than unite us.

The campaign process has its flaws. I was once approached to run for political office. I had to make a choice between being an honest man or a politician. I chose to be an honest man.

What are the remedies/solutions- How do we feed the good wolf?

I give America the following advice.

First, understand the recent election results. America is still a polarized and divided country. How do we heal the divide? Laws and new policies will not achieve this goal. The American people must return, with sincerity, to the discourse that respects diversity of points of view and believe that process will produce enlightenment, compromise and consensus. That is the heart of the American story.

With regard to religion, be aware of what Blaise Pascal reminds us. "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions."

History teaches us that religions can kill. We must stop using God as an excuse to justify evil and intolerant behavior.

God is the ultimate source of values in the universe. Believe that we are all God's children. Be faithful to and heed the power of God's love.

The one constant that connects the human species throughout our history, across cultures, geography and time has been our eternal and consistent and common reach to touch the hand of GOD. We may give God different names, but for all of us GOD is the ultimate source of values in the universe. For all of us God is our creator, For all humanity GOD is love.

If you love God do you really need a religion? If you do, use your religion to spread love that is God's essence. The Golden Rule is positively imbued in almost all religions in the world. Almost all religions give guidance on the treatment of other people and promote the spirit of oneness. As children of God we all share and deserve equal respect.



- Buddhism—“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”
- Christianity—“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”
- Hinduism----“One should not behave toward others in a way which is disagree able to oneself.”
- Islam-----“Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”
- Judaism----“Thou should love thy neighbor as thyself.”
- Native American Spirituality----“All things are our relatives; what we do to everything, we do to ourselves. All is really one.”

We must reform the American culture of education. We must replace mind control and intellectual enslavement with a culture that promotes the inquisitive mind and self-directed learning. An old Chinese proverb teaches us that if you give a man a fish he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.

We must engage a process that also promotes the self-examined life and enables people to know and respect their values.

America’s core problem is that the nation is in a state of bondage. The systems of racism and sexism, attitudes of hate, exclusion and intolerance not only enslave the oppressed but the oppressor as well.

We should be less arrogant and embrace more shame for all our transgressions at home and abroad. Without shame there can be no redemption.

We must appreciate diversity as an American strength and asset and cure the broken immigration system to ensure that people fleeing persecution find safety in the United States. People who have long lived in this country should retain legal security regardless of the documents they hold. This is the only home they know.

Acknowledge and reject the meaning some people give to the political slogan- “Make America Great Again.” For too many people this means “make America White again. The reality we cannot reverse is that America is becoming less white and more



culturally diverse, even beyond ethnic heritage, religion and other dimensions. This trend will strengthen rather than weaken the country as we experience the beauty of diverse cultures and learn from others who are different.

We must promote global citizenship in attitude, policies and behavior. We must rejoin the world and understand that our neighbors are also thousands of miles away and are not just the people who live next door.

A few weeks ago a student challenged me to identify a red line. “Is there a time or moment when intolerance is necessary?”

I reflected. Yes. Be cautious in accepting my belief that what happened in Germany in 1933 cannot happen in America. That belief is not the absolute truth and only reflects my view of America’s strength and its character. Stay alert. I hate all hate. If the seed of hate sprouts into a plant I will rip it from the root.

I end this message on a note of optimism.

We will feed the good wolf when we embrace and imbed in our human souls the spirit and belief that we are one human family. That spirit is expressed by JOHN DONNE- “No man is an island entire unto himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod of sand be washed away by the sea Europe is the less as if a promontory were. Everyman’s death diminishes me for I am a part of mankind. Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”