

# **Five American Values**

by Leah Eskin

Historians have called America not one nation, but many. We are black, white, brown, and yellow. We worship in dozens of religions--and in no religion at all. Yet despite our diversity, we all seem to share a unifying thread, a set of values that holds us together.

Not everyone agrees that Americans hold a single set of values. Yet most would say we share a profound belief in such ideals as human dignity, freedom, justice, respect for the law, and honesty.

Our values--the loftiest of our ideals--come from many sources. Some spring from the moral teachings of the Christian and Jewish faiths. Some come from the freedom-seeking Pilgrims. And others stem from philosophers in Ancient Greece and 17th-century Europe, whose writings about democracy and self-rule inspired our nation's Founding Fathers. Our nation's values were passed along in stories of lone cowboys and heroic empire builders. And they were refined in the melting pot of traditions that forms America's heart and soul.

We believe in our values so strongly that we seek to spread them throughout the world. Abraham Lincoln said that our nation and its values represented "hope to all the world for all future time." Even today, U.S. foreign policy is based on our belief that we can--and should--export our values. As President Reagan recently said, America is "a vigorous leader of the free world, a nation that acts decisively and firmly in the furtherance of her principles."

To find out what Americans value, we spoke with numerous philosophers and teachers. These experts said many things, but on all their lists were the five values portrayed below. Together with other beliefs, they form a national self-portrait, an image of who we would like to be in an ideal America.

## **CITIZENSHIP**

When our Founding Fathers envisioned an ideal government, they saw it as being run by and for the people. They believed that informed participation in government; or citizenship, was the key to democracy. Today, we see our belief in citizenship all around us. Each morning, school children recite an oath of citizenship, the Pledge of Allegiance. High-school students prepare for the responsibility of citizenship by taking required "civics" courses. Adults take an active citizenship role by serving on local juries and voting in local, state, and national elections.

## **INDIVIDUALISM**

Americans don't only tolerate their differences, they revel in them. "American folk heroes celebrate oddness and eccentricity," says cultural historian John Groch. "The idea is you can do what you want. You can wear a mohawk haircut and the authorities won't lock you up. We don't just allow people to express themselves. We appreciate and value it." Indeed, the U.S. Constitution helps to foster individualism. The Bill of Rights guards each American's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." "We believe in autonomy," says Richard McCormick of Notre Dame. "We expect government to be protective of that." The spirit of

individualism has fueled our nation's growth. Individualists cleared the frontier, built our cities, and masterminded our greatest innovations.

### **WORK ETHIC**

Americans believe in the value of hard work. Work isn't just a way of making money--it's a virtue to us. Our work ethic stems from the values of our earliest settlers. The Puritans believed people prove their worth through disciplined achievement. In the 19th century, Americans were inspired to work hard by the novels of Horatio Alger. Alger's heroes, with names like Tattered Tom and Ragged Dick, rose from poverty to riches through long hours and sore muscles. Their stories exemplified the "American Dream"--our belief that, through hard work and determination, anyone can overcome the worst of obstacles to fulfill his or her deepest goals.

### **TOLERANCE**

When the Mayflower set sail in 1620, the ship headed in one direction: toward tolerance. Persecuted in Europe for their Puritan faith, the earliest American settlers longed for a homeland that would provide room for all religious beliefs. Tolerance is our nation's oldest value. It means the acceptance of a wide variety of views and traditions. Today, dozens of different faiths flourish side by side in the United States. We also pride ourselves on our ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. Our tolerance evolved, in part, out of necessity. "Given the sheer numbers and different kinds of people who came to America," explains historian Martin Marty, "we had no choice but to live together."

### **JUSTICE FOR ALL**

Americans are confident that justice can--and will--triumph. Crime victims carry that belief into the courtroom, as do people wrongly accused of breaking the law. What's more, our belief in Justice--and in justice for all--extends beyond the courtroom. It has inspired millions of disadvantaged Americans--including women, blacks, and the handicapped--to fight for equal rights under the law. Our Founding Fathers placed a high value on justice. The U.S. Constitution gives all Americans the right to a fair and speedy trial. It guarantees anyone accused of wrongdoing the right to be represented by an attorney. And it bans excessive bail and cruel and unusual punishment.

**Topic:** *Eskin identifies sfive ideals central to the aspirations of Americans. According to your observations and reading, to what extent does America--or your native country--live up to these ideals?*