

1936

Americanism My Definition: A Symposium

University of New Mexico Press

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Recommended Citation

University of New Mexico Press. "Americanism My Definition: A Symposium." *New Mexico Quarterly* 6, 4 (1936).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol6/iss4/12>

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Americanism—My Definition

A SYMPOSIUM

CONTRIBUTORS to this symposium were requested to write their definition of *Americanism* in from fifty to two hundred words. Since the last few months have stirred up so much talk on an *American way* of political life and an *American plan* for economic society, the QUARTERLY intends here to bring together interpretations of Americanism which may offer clearcut points of view as to just what representative Americans consider fundamental to the life of our nation.

* * *

Americanism, according to my belief in it, means first of all, not only my own freedom but the other fellow's—within, of course, the agreed limitations of such laws as may be adopted by a majority but are always subject to change by a later majority. And this freedom means freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of action, and even, if necessary, the free right—which Lincoln maintains as Americanism—to revolt and take the consequences.

The second most vital quality in Americans, as I see it, is the principle that every citizen of age shall be protected in his free use of the secret ballot to register political judgment, so that the remedy of conditions shall always potentially lie within the hands of the majority and not of any so-called benevolent minority whatsoever.

At the present moment in our affairs, a timely quality of true Americanism would seem to me to be a strong sense of our constitutional right to change the constitution whenever the changing needs of the country so warrant. At the present moment also a timely quality of true Americanism would seem to me to be as vigilant guard against the burrowing from within by such organizations as the Daughters

of the American Revolution as against attacks from without by such organizations as Fascism and Communism.

Santa Fe, N. M.

WITTER BYNNER, *Poet.*

Americanism is an adherence to a system of government, in which the citizen is free to live, do, think, speak, write, and worship (or not worship), as he pleases, limited in the exercise of his freedom only by the equal right of every other citizen; and in which those limits are clearly defined and enforced by general law, deliberately adopted by the majority acting through duly constituted forms and agencies—all under a written constitution, by which rights generally deemed fundamental are guaranteed, and which can be changed only by processes giving ample opportunity for general approval or disapproval.

Albuquerque, N. M.

C. M. BOTTS, *Lawyer.*

Taking into consideration the caliber of the individual, true Americanism affords the opportunity to participate in the great adventure of life on a fair competitive basis.

The American Ideal envisions a government that considers the viewpoint of youth, maturity, and age. A government without paternalism, except such as is necessary for the reasonable protection of the child in youth, the opportunity for education to prepare for future citizenship, and a reasonable security in old age.

Americanism should afford protection to civil liberties and property rights under a constitutional government guaranteeing at all times the rights of the minority as against the majority.

At its best Americanism should call for a fair contribution from each citizen, and in turn afford a reasonable opportunity for individual betterment in accordance with ability. Such a government and the social order hereunder in spite of imperfections, are the best man has yet devised.

Albuquerque, N. M.

PEARCE C. RODEY, *Lawyer.*

Americanism is a composite characteristic or picture of one hundred twenty-five million different individuals, ranging from the rugged individualism of the waterfront gangster or the Wall Street banker to the meekness of Mahatma Ghandi or the lowly Nazarene.

JOSEPH GILL, *Lawyer.*

Albuquerque, N. M.

Americanism does not mean loud, blatant, assertive pseudo-patriotism, nor does it imply one hundred percentism, Chauvinism, flag-waving, or Red-baiting. It does mean a fervent love of this America of ours, a quiet yet firm conviction that its institutions, though permitting many inequalities and injustices, do offer greater opportunities for "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" than do those of any other country; and a deep determination to develop and to maintain those institutions at any cost. While recognizing the importance in our lives of bath tubs, automobiles, radios, and the hundred other material conveniences, it holds to the belief that sympathy, tolerance, brotherhood, and the love of spiritual beauty, are still more essential to our people. Finally, in the splendid lines of Euripides, as translated by John Milton, it believes that

This is true liberty, when freeborn men
Having t'advise the public, may speak free.

GEORGE ST. CLAIR, *Dean of Fine Arts College.*

*University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque.*

Personal liberty is to me the most valuable part of the American tradition. Personal liberty in America has been attacked in recent years, and it has even been curtailed, but this country nevertheless remains, as it always has been, a land of liberty. I believe there is more intellectual liberty in America today than in any other major nation. The social taboos and legal censorships that once hampered the artist and writer have been almost completely removed, and free-

dom of political expression, although it is menaced by the forces of reaction, still obtains. A radical speaker may be denied a hearing in some localities, but in print an American can still exercise his constitutional right to say what he thinks and can get a respectful hearing. At a time when a large part of Europe is regressing toward barbarism under military dictatorship, this is something to be proud of.

Intellectual liberty is the first essential of civilization because without it the growth of human consciousness, which creates and sustains civilization, is impossible.

This country faces the necessity of a great economic readjustment. It cannot be made without a struggle, but if we hold fast to our tradition of intellectual liberty—of free speech and a free press—it can be made without violence and without the tyranny which violence begets.

HARVEY FERGUSON, *Novelist.*

Berkeley, California.

A realistic definition of Americanism should run in terms of what Americans profess and do. Opposite and diverse things seem to be the rule. Thus, etudes, and swing music; patriotic ideals, and selling munitions to warring nations; "love thy neighbor," and "devil take the hindmost"; "the greatest good to the greatest number," and protective tariffs; government hands off, and protection against "un-fair" trade practices; Harvard, and Hollywood; Shakespeare and the pulps; government largess, and lower taxes; a melting pot, and race riots; Ku Klux Klan, atheistic cults, Liberty League, League for Better Relations with Soviet Russia, Single Tax League, Birth Control, Fundamentalism, donkeys and the more abundant life, elephants and sun-flowers. But through it all an uncritical belief that perfectibility is in the offing, perhaps near, perhaps remote, depending on the degree of faith.

VERNON G. SORRELL, *Professor of Economics.*

*University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque.*

Whether thought of as principle or as goal, Americanism, at root, means the right of every citizen to full development and expression, no matter what his origin or social status. America was founded by people passionately intent upon such a right. They thought specifically in terms of religion, or government, or economics, but, fundamentally, they thought of self-expression through these avenues. However, because of conditions surrounding the country's growth, Americans have tended toward both romanticism and naïveté; extent of territory and hugeness of natural resources have led us to believe that there was room for all and plenty for all, without serious collisions of purpose. Now we begin to live more crampedly, physically and mentally; we face clashes of interest; and we discover that unchecked expression of one strong will may make, not only for inadequate expression, but even the complete throttling of many wills.

So, America, at the threshold of the life of a more congested population, finding that equal opportunity no longer resides in broad spaces and the lavishness of Nature, is confused. America clings to its long-precious belief, but blindly. The country has changed, but Americanism, so defined, has not. The task of the present generation is to make that old principle valid in modern and in future America.

JAY C. KNODE, *Dean of the General College.*

*University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque.*

I'd say Americanism amounted to a superlative interest in co-operation and organization. I'd call it almost a superfluous interest if it wasn't indisputable that Mother Nature permits men and nations a great play of possibilities from which to choose a few to make something out of. We doubtless have in this characteristic of ours something we can turn to remarkably beneficent use as we grow more settled in our landscape and more homogeneous in blood or in understanding.

It's extraordinarily hard to know anything about one's country, of course, because it's extraordinarily hard to know anything about oneself. The above is the only idea I'd care to hazard about Americans, as apart from Europeans and Asiatics. The habit of joining has been a human characteristic from the first, but certainly we push it to an extreme. We join for the sake of joining, and partake of movements which basically conflict with one another. Deacons of the church light the flares of the Ku Klux Klan, and political racketeers lead the cohorts demanding social justice.

Santa Fe, N. M.

HANIEL LONG, *Poet.*

Americanism is that way of life which seeks the highest degree of individual freedom of thought and action that is consonant with the greatest welfare of society. This ideal lived in other times and other climes before it became the American shibboleth. Society itself connotes the surrender of a measure of individual freedom. Two bodies may not simultaneously occupy the same space; hence ever increasing population reduces each individual's quantity of freedom while modifying, if not enhancing, its quality. Always individual freedom must yield to the paramount social welfare. Many liberties of three million American pioneers have been surrendered to the social welfare of their hundred million descendants. But that same social welfare has provided many new compensatory freedoms. Sane restriction may actually increase freedom. In 1793 social welfare did not require regulation of railroads. Today traffic must be regulated, the leper must be quarantined. In order that motor traffic may be free to move at all, it must observe prescribed rules. Such appropriate regimentation is applied Americanism. Unrestricted freedom, excessive individualism would destroy Americanism. Changing restrictions appropriate to changing conditions are essential to the realization of my ideal of Americanism.

Albuquerque.

GEORGE C. TAYLOR, *Lawyer.*

The disposition is strong to define Americanism in terms of my aspirations for my country and its people, rather than in terms of what the word has actually come to connote to me. I should like to be able to say, and honestly so, that Americanism means allegiance to the best in American life as I see that best.

But I am afraid the word has no such significance to me. The word has been ruined by the company it has kept, or, better, by the low purposes it has so often been used to bless and conceal. During my undergraduate days Americanism was the patent slogan employed by Ku Kluxers to mask their intolerance of Catholics and foreign-born citizens. Of late years it has been overworked by a certain group of short-sighted men in an effort to make disrespectful in this country intelligent thinking on the subject of our increasingly important foreign relations. More recently it has been used in a manner designed to condemn those who patriotically try to serve their nation by removing the causes of discontent in the lives of the humble. Because these and similar sins have been committed in the name of Americanism, the term has been spoiled for me.

Americanism, as I see it, is a word commonly used to induce all sorts of people who think differently to act, and at times, to vote alike. It is a vague word of high-emotional content, a symbolic word that means all things to all men, a "weasel" word in the sense Theodore Roosevelt used the term—a word that conceals rather than conveys meaning. In short, Americanism, in common usage, is a kind of lowest common denominator by which leaders, generally fakirs, attempt to establish contact with a following they desire to lead to no good end.

Without meaning to be facetious or enigmatic, let me conclude by saying, that Americanism, instead of representing a standard to which all men might repair has become a symbol all honest men ought to repair.

THOMAS C. DONNELLY, *Professor of Political Science.*
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

I do not know what Americanism is; the term is used in different senses by different people. To a nit-wit flag-saluter, it means one thing; to a humanistic student of history, it means another.

But I can make a guess as to what Americanism ought to be.

It ought to be a reasonable but not fanatical affection for the land in which we were born, and a feeling that our friends and neighbors and fellow-countrymen are our possible sympathetic fellow-workers toward the future. It ought to include a profound sense of humiliation, in view of the hideous and cruel mess we have made of things in the past. It ought to be eager to accept such lessons as are adaptable to our land, and it ought to be bright enough not to condemn an idea just because it originated in Russia or elsewhere. It ought to insist that every man, woman, and child be given a decent chance to lead a decently happy life—no matter what they may cost the people who pay inheritance taxes.

I do not believe that Americanism necessarily involves the need for a bloody revolution. But I do believe that it involves a reconstruction of our social structure to an extent that is not even yet clear to the eyes of most Americans.

Though America has achieved wonders, I believe that George Washington would look with his famous, cold glare of contempt on any present-day American who admitted that he thought that there were not terrific changes still to be made. Unfortunately, I know a great many Americans who regard any change as a low form of treason.

I am not a Red: the Red Flag is not tattooed on my chest. Nor is the American flag. I am simply one of the millions of quiet, native-born Americans who are dissatisfied with the present, but who have a vague hope for the future. And I refuse to believe that Americanism is a belligerent thing, or that it is incompatible with a respect for the citizens of other nations and a hearty desire to co-operate with them.

Hillsdale, New York. ARTHUR DAVIDSON FICKE, *Poet.*

What Americanism is escapes me.

I should like to state what I wish it were.

1. Equality: in the courts, in education, in health and work.

2. Freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to criticize the government and to advocate its change.

3. A standard of values which would rate other gifts higher than acquisitiveness.

4. A sense of citizenship which would make every citizen feel that he owed some thought, time and effort to public affairs.

5. Courage to face change, readiness to try the untried, ability to go ahead with a changing world.

6. Freedom from snobbery.

ERNA FERGUSSON, *Southwestern Author, Lecturer.*
Albuquerque, N. M.

Americanism means more than certain specific rights and duties. It is an ideal—a vision of the increasing democratization of life, bringing greater freedom, opportunity, and abundance to all men. The truly American way would be to rescue the original republican ideal and intention from its grave in the letter of the law, so as to give it life and meaning in terms of changed conditions. Any doctrine, any "ism," even Americanism, without intelligent re-interpretation and re-adaptation, becomes a straight-jacket instead of being the liberating force it was originally intended to be.

DUDLEY WYNN, *Profesor of English.*
University of New Mexico.

America—The New Englander thinks of maples on a hill; the Floridian of shrimp boats coming through green marshes; the Chicagoan of blue shadows under the bridges; the Southwesterner of the smell of desert rain . . . America is home.

FRANCES GILMORE, *Southwestern Author, Teacher.*
University of Arizona, Tucson.

To me, *Americanism* symbolizes an attitude toward life and an end to be accomplished under our system of government. It embodies a principle that is as universal in its meaning as the concept of the brotherhood of man. For the origin of this attitude and the nature of the social end to be realized, I look back first to my childhood environment; and back of this to the ideals and hopes which made possible the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. It was these ideals which gave my parents the basis for their faith in the future of America. Accordingly, my *Americanism* is an inherited attitude, ideal, and method. It embodies the progressive realization of the dream of great thinkers and the hopes of oppressed men. In practice it is a rationally planned program for realizing a fuller, freer, and more secure life for all citizens than has ever been realized by men at any other time or in any other land. The idealistic conditions of this full and free life are best stated in the Preamble of our Constitution, which declares that the purpose and end of our system of government is to "establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity." Our Constitution, our representative form of government, our secret ballot, and our legal institutions are our American instruments and agencies through which we may realize these ends by peaceful, lawful and orderly methods.

This is my *Americanism*. It commands that I shall not consciously barter it away for temporary advantage or personal gain, and that I shall fearlessly live and labor for its progressive realization.

A. S. WHITE, *Professor of Political Science.*
University of New Mexico.

We must insist upon Americanism in terms of the land, the forests, the water, the minerals, the man power of the nation—not of any one hereditary right or group of rights. Slave owners in the South once held a property interest in

the bodies of scores of human draft animals, and the United States Constitution had to be amended to deprive them of that interest. If other amendments have to come to emancipate men, land, or the resources of the land from the tyranny of so-called vested rights, then it is Americanism to bring about that emancipation. Americanism is just the well-being of Americans. We are wresting sovereignty from the money barons and their independent sovereignties within the state. Utopia will round a corner if an American way can be found to place on these feudal estates the social responsibility which wealth must be made to shoulder.

T. M. PEARCE, *Professor of English.*

*The University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, New Mexico.*

Becalmed

By JOHN DILLON HUSBAND

Strained eyes will find no star above this sea,
To hold the mind upon a fixed course,
To steer for one far star when no wind blows,
Is task to tax the weight of all man's force
More dreadfully than any storm he knows.

This agony of dark, of light that's ended,
Cuts against the marrow of the soul
Unlike the quiet light and darkness blended
That guides the nervous scraping of the mole.

Strained eyes will find no star above this sea,
And stars without a wind were futile find!
Yet helms in hand we watch for what may be,
And wait for some far wind to lift the mind.