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Chapter 3: The American Ethos and National Security Strategy

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Is the American ethos important to U.S. national security strategy? The answer is affirmative. Too often, American policymakers disregard ethos when they consider national security strategy. However, the American public will react, favorably or unfavorably, to policy based on the America ethos.

What is ethos?

- The fundamental character of a country.
- The underlying sentiment that forms beliefs, customs, traditions, and practices.
- The dominant, commonly agreed upon assumptions of Americans in a particular period in time.
- The moral element that impels thought and emotion.
- Recognition that there is periodic and continuing change, but that the underlying fundamental characteristics remain virtually unchanged, although they are adaptive to major shifts in national and global political, cultural, and economic affairs.

Does the American ethos drive U.S. national security strategy policy? Although ethos may be obscured by partisan politics, it is fundamental. Defining contemporary American ethos with any degree of precision is difficult, because we are too close in time to have an uncluttered historical perspective. We can define the historical shifts in the prevailing ethos of the post-colonial period, the U.S. Civil War, World War II, and the 1960s and Woodstock, but a commonly agreed upon definition of contemporary American ethos is elusive.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political thinker, first commented on the formative elements of American ethos in his book *Democracy in America, Volumes I and II*, published in 1835 and 1840. In these books, Tocqueville found:

- “The American has no time to tie himself to anything; he grows accustomed only to change and ends as regarding it as the natural state of man. He feels the need of it, more he loves it; for the instability; instead of meaning disaster to him, seems to give birth only to miracles all about him.
- “The best laws cannot make a constitution work in spite of morals; morals can turn the worst laws to advantage.
- “I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men.
- “In America, as elsewhere, the people move forward by sudden impulses and short-lived efforts.
- “In order to enjoy the inestimable benefits that the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils it creates.
- “In countries where associations are free, secret societies are unknown. In America, there are factions, but no conspiracies.
- “I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.
- “In the United States, the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own.”

What is the nexus between contemporary American ethos and U.S. national security strategy?

The elements of American ethos that motivate U.S. national security strategy policy follow:

- Altruism – the principle of unselfish concern for the welfare of others.
- The humanitarian impulse resulting in *pax America*, pan-democracy, and nation building.
- The presence of ego – the habit of valuing everything in reference to one’s personal interest resulting in the potential for arrogance and the belief in global, enduring U.S. primacy.
- Ethnocentrism – regarding the U.S. as the center of all things. Having minimal regard for the interests, beliefs, or attitudes other than our own. The U.S. transmits its goals but it does not listen to the needs of other countries; hence, international policy coordination is more difficult.
- A belief in global pan-democracy that is premised on the empirical belief that democracies usually do not engage in wars with each other, and that all states would be enhanced by adopting democracy.
- The rule of law is the guiding principle of American civil liberties and a pillar of the functions of national security. All national security policies must adhere to the rule of law as a safeguard for international order and domestic civil liberties.
- Adherence to the rule of law internationally. If the global community is to deal with international instability, a coalition of like-minded nations must forge a robust, flexible international legal framework for dealing with non-state challenges.

What do American citizens really want? And why is this important to U.S. national security strategy? Domestic politics frequently determine U.S. national security strategy. The president

is the apex of the American power pyramid. He makes ultimate national security policy decisions with relatively low constraints imposed by Congress or the judiciary. The major component of the President's decisions is the political climate – will a policy decision be sufficiently popular with his political constituency and a broad swath of voters resulting in the president being reelected or enabling the presidential candidate to be elected? Elections are won and a President's popularity is determined, in large part, by understanding and adhering to the American ethos.

The following is speculation about what Americans want regarding ethos and civil liberties:

- Americans want unified economic, social, and political solutions that will achieve two things: peace of mind and insulation from further harm. A bumper sticker phrase that encapsulates these ethos-related concerns is "Personal Safety and Security" (PSS).
- The reason for the emerging shift towards PSS is the perceived lack of opportunity and safety in America. We are more apprehensive today than in past periods of transition. Because of concerns regarding failure to resolve contemporary problems, there is fear about an undefined future.
- There are contradictions between altruism and self-interest. Fundamentally, however, Americans prefer to view themselves as the "city on a hill," an altruistic country that is a leader in the global community.
- During a January 4, 1941 address to Congress, President FDR announced the "Four Freedoms," which included freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Economic fear and, to a lesser extent, personal safety fear has returned and has become a dominant characteristic of the American ethos.
- Freedom from fear requires a trade-off. Would the public be willing to trade absolute personal privacy for the chance to make them safer from domestic terrorist cells? Would the public be willing to accept financial and economic reforms that, while difficult initially, would strengthen America's ability to compete in the global economy? Freedom from fear requires difficult trade-offs. American ethos may need to adapt.
- Americans want protection from acts of terrorism. A key factor is whether the continued presence of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan will make Americans safer and whether that added security is affordable.
- There is a belief that the American dream is being degraded because of lack of trust in government, political leadership, business leaders, and financial institutions. This is coupled with a lack of confidence in the government's ability to provide a clear strategy to achieve it. Americans want a clear, effective national strategy that will benefit Americans.

The American ethos is rapidly changing. Although the older generation is in power, their version of American ethos may only be temporary. The younger generation is different from the older generation, probably more so than at any other time in U.S. history. The looming confrontation is young versus old. The younger generation has been given a legacy of crushing national debt and the certainty that they will pay higher taxes and that they will not be as well off as the older generation. Most of these wants and likes are components of the American ethos that motivate

U.S. national security strategy. The significance of what Americans really like and want provides insights into the contemporary American ethos. The question is, how will the younger generation redefine American ethos and the value of civil liberties in the years to come?

The American ethos includes the belief that America is a system that rewards hard work, intelligence, sacrifice, and that America is a land of opportunity. This is what unites Americans – a common purpose that ties us together. The dark side of ethos is that failure to reward virtue and ignoring the constituent parts of ethos that diminishes and devalues the American dream. The American ethos does not survive only by words and speeches, because many Americans deem them to be hollow, wooden-headed, and divisive. The danger lies in a creeping anti-ethos based on expansion of government, the rise of crime, and social pathologies over which the individual has no control.