



Individualism in American Society

The independence and expansion of the United States in the early 19th century evinced the growth of a growing American nation as well as an emerging American character. One of the strongest aspects of this character was individualism. Americans were resolute in their determination to assert their individual capacities and to exercise their personal liberties. Emphasis upon individualism had thus resulted from several developments within American history.

Puritanism had been the earliest tradition in American culture, with its strict impositions upon each member demanding moral responsibility and discipline. Without clerics, rituals, or ecclesiastical organization, each individual needed to show through a particular conduct that one was fit for salvation. Although the Enlightenment lessened stress upon faith and religion, it placed greater emphasis upon individualism. Focusing on the rational capacity of each human being, it inspires the individual to fully develop his/her intellectual capabilities thereby expressing individual strength and value.

Various economic factors, besides religion and culture, came together to produce an active American individualism, inexpensive, rich soil was the greatest attraction that brought immigrants from Europe to America. Millions of landless peasants sailed over to the United States in order to buy the fertile and cheap land and establish themselves as independent farmers. Such freedom provided a great sense of individual value and achievement. The effort to settle and develop the land reinforced their feeling of personal accomplishment. The boundaries of settlement moved farther and farther westward as more and more people arrived in the

New World. The settling of the frontier was a trial for the individual, who had to rely upon himself. The frontier removed class distinctions as well, in favor of the equality of the common and ordinary men.

Agriculture as well as business expressed this individualism. The ever expanding country offered numerous opportunities for investment. Many individuals risked small fortunes and great effort in establishing new enterprises which were often rewarded by the fast-developing economy. The determination of these investors and small businessmen was such and the possibility of personal profit so high that no initiative of government was needed and its interference or regulation was undesired. Thus individualism and capitalism worked together in the development of the American economy.

Individualism was itself reflected and encouraged by the government. The Constitution through the right to vote guaranteed personal participation in government. Numerous personal liberties were guaranteed, such as freedom of speech, of assembly, of religion, and of the press. Each citizen could express himself. This created the dynamic political activity of American democracy,

A peculiar and valuable aspect of American character, individualism, contrasted particularly to Europe where a small group of nobles controlled the most of the land; and aristocracy and class distinctions thwarted the ambitions of personal development of many people. Nevertheless, American individualism had negative consequences by creating an aggressive and violent atmosphere and a vicious, competitive attitude among people.

Henry David Thoreau (1817 ~ 1862)



Henry David Thoreau
Culver Pictures

Henry David Thoreau, like no other writer, thoroughly expressed and practiced the tenets of individualism. He was born in New England and became a member of the American Transcendentalist movement. For some time he even lived with Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Little of what he wrote in his own lifetime was published. He never really developed a profession nor held any job for long. He was a pencil maker for a some time but as soon as he had learned to make the best pencils he quit. His real life was life itself, experiencing existence as fully as possible. He visited New England extensively and recorded his often sensitive and perceptive observations of nature on a daily basis. The possibility of man living independently in nature intrigued him and he decided to test the possibility of such a life.

In order to discover the simple essentials of life and thus clarify its meaning for himself Thoreau moved to a crude hut on the shores of Walden Pond, where he devoted his time to studying nature, meditating on philosophical problems, reading classic literature, and holding long conversations with his neighbors. As seasons went by, he put down his observations of nature, along with his daily activities, building his cabin, planting the garden, chopping wood for fire. These records were later published as his most famous book, *Walden*. The following selection contains one his observations of nature, an ant fight.

“Walden”

One day when I went out to my wood-pile, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a duel, but a war, a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The legions of these warriors covered all the hills and vales in my woodyard, and the ground was already strewn¹ with the dead and dying, both red and black. It was the only battle-field I have ever witnessed, the only battle-field I ever trod² while the battle was raging; internecine³ war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast locked in each other's embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at noon-day prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out. The smaller red champion had fastened himself like a vice to his adversary's front, and through all the tumblings on that field never for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers near the root, having already caused the other to go by the board⁴; while the stronger

black one dashed him from side to side, and as I saw on looking nearer, had already divested him of several of his members⁵. They fought with more pertinacity than bulldogs. Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle-cry was Conquer or die. In the mean while there came along a single red ant on the hill-side of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had dispatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; perhaps he was some Achilles⁶, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus⁷. He saw this unequal combat from afar - for the blacks were nearly twice the size of the red - he drew near with rapid pace till he stood on his guard within half an inch of the combatants; then, watching his opportunity, he sprang upon the black warrior and commenced his operations near the root of the right fore-leg, leaving the foe to select among his own members; and so there were three united for life, as if a new kind of attraction had been invented which put all other locks and cements to shame. I should not have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs⁸ the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants. I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference."

While at Walden, Thoreau was arrested and thrown in jail for a night because he refused to pay a tax. He made this gesture of civil disobedience in order to oppose the government's tolerance of slavery. His explanation of this refusal later became a famous essay on individualism and non-violent opposition to government, "Civil Disobedience". The following selection is the concluding plea for individual rights by means of "Civil Disobedience".

“Civil Disobedience”

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to - for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well - is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarch to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher⁹ was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement Possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the

rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."

DISCUSSION:

1. Name the historical factors which were responsible for the development of American individualism.
2. How does society benefit from having a strong sense of individualism? What are the dangers?
3. Name the lesson Thoreau derives from his observation of the ant fight.
4. How does Thoreau's see governments?
5. What importance could Thoreau have for society?

¹ covered

² walked upon

³ Causing or capable of causing death

⁴ to be put aside

⁵ limbs

⁶ hero of Greek epic poem, the *Iliad*

⁷ friend of Achilles

⁸ hymns

⁹ Confucius

Did you know that:

- Thoreau chose to go to jail rather than to support the Mexican War?
- Thoreau's pacific method of protest was later adopted by Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi as a tactic against the British, and by civil rights activists fighting racial segregation in the United States?