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Constitution, Character, and National Identity

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A recent best-selling book raises the question whether we are losing our national identity or character. Something central to us, it posits, is being obliterated by a world of change: change in opinion and understanding, change in technology, and change in economics and demographics.

This claim is worth taking seriously, not only because change is now the rule to a degree, and moving at a pace, never seen before. It is worth taking seriously also because the status of national identity or character in our country is, by older standards, ever a question.

The term “identity” comes from a Latin term meaning sameness. The term “character” comes from a Greek term meaning to inscribe or engrave, to make a mark that is indelible. The thing we fear losing is therefore something that is not easy to lose if we have it. It is marked deeply upon us, and it makes us the same.

These classical terms remind us of some characteristics of the classical world that are not so common in this modern world. In the classical world, the character or identity of the people was shaped by their laws and institutions. These laws and institutions were comprehensive in their direct influence upon the manner of life. Religion and politics were one. The gods were the source of the law. Public institutions had profound effects upon the closest particulars of private life. What the law did not permit, it forbade.

The United States of America is the archetype of the liberal society, the society in which the private sphere is protected as the very purpose of public life. By clas-

Talking Points

- The United States is the archetype of the liberal society in which the private sphere is protected as the very purpose of public life.
- The genius of limited government is to be found in the manner of granting authority, alongside the manner of withholding it.
- The Constitution restrains government and the people together, all in the interest of the practice of virtue. Through this practice, we learn to subordinate our wills to what is right, and ultimately to higher purposes.
- The United States is a polity built in the name of the rights of man, as those rights are established in the great “course and economy of nature.” Those rights are the gift of the Creator, unalienable to us, violable by others only with His wrath. This is the ultimate source of our character.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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The Lehrman Lectures on Restoring America's
National Identity

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sical standards, this would seem to guarantee that our character cannot be so firmly shaped, our common identity so deeply seated in us, as prevailed in older times. It may therefore be that we are vulnerable to change, not only because the force and velocity of it increases, but also because there is something fundamental in us that leaves us prey to it. By one common account, America has never been so much a theme as a variety, not so much a unity as a plurality.

The Power of Change

Consider first the modern phenomenon of change. Change has been with us for a long time, but, especially lately, its power is plain. It is making the world one. We expect now to be able to telephone anyone instantly, anytime, and anywhere in the world. We no longer advertise what it costs to do this, the cost being so low as hardly to vary with the distance covered by the call. When one purchases a BlackBerry or a Treo, or when he adopts a cell service provider, he looks up in how many countries it will work. Can one get e-mail as well as talk in Thailand? In Turkey?

Our movies, a key American contribution to the arts, make as much or more money abroad than they do at home, and their plots and messages are affected increasingly by that fact. Our correspondence is now instant and impartial as to distance. I got an e-mail lately from a man in India hoping to do the transcription for Hillsdale College, which is located in rural Michigan. There is no technical or geographic reason why I should not take up the offer.

Our youngest daughter, Alice, 16, will sometimes come downstairs from doing her homework to give us a report on her cousins. She is upstairs, working away, but instant messaging—that is a gerund—at the same time. She will give the same report, in the same tone, about her school friends around the block and her cousins in England. She has been “talking” to them by the same means, both instantly. Their location is simply secondary.

People move back and forth across borders as if the borders were not there. Microsoft is now growing its research and development team in Beijing faster than in America. If a country makes a mistake

and restricts the number of smart workers who come in, it will fall behind.

College students now go abroad to study, not as I did in graduate school, and not as the elite did a century ago as a sign of aristocracy. Now they go commonly, and they go because they wish to see other cultures. This is change enough, and yet when they get abroad, they do not find other cultures. They find BlackBerrys and Treos, and the same movies that are playing at home, now opening at about the same time.

In this latest wave, it is not national identity that is being lost; it is the nation itself. In Europe, they are seeking to build what Hitler and later Stalin sought to build, but this time through elections. They are seeking to build one big state, going across the whole of Europe, with one big currency, and one big passport, and one big economy.

This suggests that the nation-state itself is expiring, its usefulness past, its future to be found in memory alone. Strobe Talbot, Deputy Secretary of State under President Clinton, wrote before he was appointed to that post:

All countries are basically social arrangements, accommodations to changing circumstances. No matter how permanent and even sacred they may seem at any one time, in fact they are all artificial and temporary.

By this reckoning, the United States of America is unique only in its stubbornness or blindness in resistance to this fact. Down on the east side of Manhattan, a whole establishment is quickening with the idea that it will inherit the sovereignty of the earth. Its Secretary General, no particular moral authority, wins cheers from people all over the world, and from elite people in this country, when he says that our making war on Saddam Hussein was illegal. Never mind that we undertook this war without hope or intention of conquest, and knowing we would gain nothing in territory or property. Never mind that the United Nations itself, and the family of its head, are complicit in schemes that supported Saddam and made them money. Institutions that transcend the state, however remote, bureaucratic, or corrupt, inspire faith among the otherwise faithless and confidence among sophisti-

cates and cynics. And the nation, even if that nation is our own, is suspected even when it triumphs over despotism and leaves freedom in its wake.

Enemies of the Nation-State

Over in Europe, where “unity” is meeting resistance, the leaders persist even against an adverse public. Their most serious argument has to do with the destruction worked by the modern nation. Unless, they contend, we rise above the nation, the future will be stalked by the terrors and consumed in the strife of the past. Amidst the debate over the European Union Constitution, German Chancellor Schroeder invited his people

to pause for a moment, perhaps even to take a few steps backwards, to view the decision we have to make today with the eyes of the older people among us, those who witnessed and suffered the ravages of the 20th century, to see it from the perspective of our fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers, who have been uppermost in our minds again during these days of remembrance, 60 years after the end of the devastation of Europe.

This is a powerful argument. One can find support for it even in one so traditional and patriotic as Winston Churchill, who saw the carnage of the world wars both from the trenches and the centers of power. He was, from an early day, as fearful of war as he was ardent when necessary in its prosecution. He traced the frightfulness of modern war partly to the growth and power of the modern nation.

Churchill was elected to Parliament in 1900 as a war hero. He had seen battle firsthand, and he exhibited bravery that inspired frequent comment. Watching a British army deploy machine guns to slaughter a Dervish army, almost without British loss, he would describe the battle not as a glorious victory, but as “unfair” and a “tragedy.” In 1901, in one of his most important early speeches, he said:

A European war cannot be anything but a cruel, heartrending struggle, which, if we are ever to enjoy the bitter fruits of victory, must demand, perhaps for several years, the whole manhood of the nation, the

entire suspension of peaceful industries, and the concentrating to one end of every vital energy in the community.

This would prove prophetic 13 years later when the Great War settled down into the trenches, and when 10,000 young men would be killed in a morning for almost no territorial gain or influence on the outcome of the war.

The cause of this change was not only, Churchill believed, the fact that technology had made killing easier. It was also the wealth that had been piled up by the modern economy, and its dispersion throughout many nations and among their populations. Also important was the birth of a kind of political organization that involved ordinary people in their millions in the government of their nations. This engaged their loyalty and their passions more completely on the side of the government than had been known before. The forming of a national character, a sameness of outlook and purpose across great masses, is the necessary condition of modern war. Churchill continued in his 1901 speech:

I will not expatiate on the horrors of war but there has been a great change which the House should not omit to notice. In former days, when wars arose from individual causes, from the policy of a Minister or the passion of a King, when they were fought by small regular armies of professional soldiers, and when their course was retarded by the difficulties of communication and supply, and often suspended by the winter season, it was possible to limit the liabilities of the combatants. But now, when mighty populations are impelled on each other, each individual severally embittered and inflamed; when the resources of science and civilization sweep away everything that might mitigate their fury, a European war can only end in the ruin of the vanquished and the scarcely less fatal commercial dislocation and exhaustion of the conquerors. Democracy is more vindictive than Cabinets. The wars of peoples will be more terrible than those of Kings.

Churchill was profoundly and earnestly a friend of free government, but he knew its dangers too.

The argument he makes here is one of the key arguments made today by the elite of Europe who argue for the European Constitution. The nation itself, the modern political community itself, is the cause of the slaughter we have wreaked upon ourselves. It is national character itself, it is the identity we form in common with one another, that makes us fight so fiercely upon such a scale.

The conclusion follows, among many today, that even if we could succeed in preserving our national character in this globalizing, changing world, we *ought not* to do so. The modern national character is itself the danger to the world. Hope lies not in its preservation but in its destruction, or anyway its transcendence.

Roots of America's National Character

There are two reasons, however, why we might not quite give up on the idea of national character, and especially of the American national character. The first has to do with the intractability of national character, with the ability of politics to influence the outlook and character of citizens. The second has to do with the peculiar source and meaning of our own.

In Europe, where the argument is most advanced that the nation-state must pass away and be replaced by some larger kind of union, there are signs that the people do not regard the matter in the same light as their leaders. The French and the Dutch have rejected the European Constitution. They cling to their citizenship, and specifically they reject certain new influences in their country that they dislike and fear.

There is a new force growing in Europe. This force is very different from the traditions of France or Denmark or Germany. It is also both opposed and immune to the multiculturalism and transnationalism that drives the contemporary establishment there.

Middle East scholar Fouad Ajami writes of the immigrants who bring this force with them to Europe:

The new lands were owed scant loyalty, if any, and political-religious radicals savored the space afforded them by Western civil society. But they resented the logic of

assimilation. They denied their sisters and daughters the right to mix with "strangers." You would have thought that the pluralism and tumult of this open European world would spawn a version of the faith to match it. But precisely the opposite happened. In bilad al kufr, the faith became sharpened for battle. We know that life in Hamburg—and the kind of Islam that Hamburg made possible—was decisive in the evolution of Mohammed Atta, who led the "death pilots" of Sept. 11.

The radicals among these immigrants look for a society that enforces the law of their religion as they understand it. In this they follow Osama bin Laden, who has called upon the United States to give up its own Constitution, which he regards as a form of sinful, man-made government. Just over a year after the September 11, 2001, attacks, he accuses us:

You are the nation who, rather than ruling by the Shariah of Allah in its Constitution and Laws, choose to invent your own laws as you will and desire. You separate religion from your policies, contradicting the pure nature which affirms Absolute Authority to the Lord and your Creator.

Notice that this claim is rather like the claim of the ancient world, but advanced in the name of universal monotheism. It is a mixture of something old and something new. Like the ancient world, it proposes the absolute authority of the law and its direct connection with the divine; but unlike the ancient world, the ruling principle is to be universal, and the ruler is to derive his authority from this universal. There can then be no check or qualification from inside the political regime upon the will of the ruler. In this sense, it is more comprehensive and more despotic than the rule of the ancient city.

Osama is not the first foreigner to demand that we abandon our Constitution. He does not make this demand in the name of his universal faith alone, but also in the name of the political regime he believes necessary to that faith. His rebellion against the modern nation is also an homage to it. He and the Taliban in Afghanistan demonstrated by their deeds what they mean when they speak of

the rule of the sharia and the peace it can bring. It is the peace of a secret police, searching in the night for people playing card games and watching movies in their homes, searching in the day for men wearing their beards the wrong length or women exposing a bit of their faces. It is the peace of the dungeon, in which people are mutilated for these evils. It is the peace of the prison state, ruled by the dictates of those who enforce the sharia. Multicultural, transnational Europe makes a very different argument than this. Its argument has not impressed, let alone refuted, the argument of Osama about the sharia.

For all the novelty of our situation today, it seems, then, not to be unique. We are presented a choice that was given us at the beginning of our nation and has been given us several times since. The choice is between abandoning what we believe and fighting for what we believe. It is the choice between government by consent and servitude.

What Makes a People

This demand by Osama that we abandon what we believe helps us to recall what that is. Nothing better helps us to count our blessings than the prospect of their loss.

There is a story about Ben Franklin, sent to London to make peace and settle all the differences between us and our Mother Country. He was eager for the task. When he arrived, he met the argument from the King's Ministers that we are the Mother Country, and you are the children, and you must do what we say. Franklin could see right away that there was going to be a war.

Franklin and his colleagues would soon give the first American response to the use of force to make us obey. We did not in the beginning answer with force, but with reason. We made an argument. We appealed to our Maker and to His "laws of nature and of nature's God." We "submitted facts to a candid world." We made an argument about the kind of thing we are, and about our duties to God and to one another. We argued that we are equal to the King (and also he to us), and he may not govern us, nor we him, without the consent of the governed.

Curiously, this argument too is grounded in the example and the dictates of the Divine. Osama bin Laden has written that "if a ruler...abandons Allah's law, it is incumbent on the subjects...to rebel." So too our fathers said that if the rights instilled in us by our Creator are offended, it is our duty to defend them. "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God" was a call to arms during the American Revolution.

If we too set out to obey God in our politics, we do not hear Him giving the same commands as Osama. Our "laws of nature and of nature's God" do not require, but rather forbid us to form our laws around compulsory service to faith, all others proscribed. They do not require, but forbid the King to prescribe the manner of our worship or to make treason and sacrilege the same offense. They do not require, but forbid control of children by officers of the state or the church rather than parents.

In fact, there is in our way of governing a general reluctance to *require*. In our society, we may do as we please within the law, and the law is meant to give us a wide berth. Observing this, Osama, and before him Hitler and many others, fail to see the strength and unity that is hidden beneath, and fostered by, this system of liberty.

George III would learn, when he lost the New World, that the Americans would fight just as bravely as his royal soldiers. The American commander, another George, would remind his troops that they were free men, and so it was beneath their dignity to run away from mere servants. And when he said this often enough, and when he personally showed them the proper comportment of a free man on a battlefield, the King's soldiers began to do the running. George Washington, who was as great of soul as any Leonides or Pericles, pronounced that he was not fit to rule his own soldiers or any man or woman without their consent. The soldiers and citizens loved him for that too. They would follow him anywhere.

The courage that George Washington exemplified in his comportment and evoked in his orders has become a legacy to the American warrior. We are a commercial people, it is true. One might think this would make us insular or self-obsessed, and in some ways it does. But in other ways, it teaches us

the importance of others, both our competitors who give us discipline and a keen edge, and our customers and suppliers, our employer and employees, with whom we develop habits of easy cooperation and fair treatment, or else we fail. That too helps to contribute to a latent fierceness of common purpose that is awesome when aroused. Churchill wrote of the American entry into the First World War:

Of all the grand miscalculations of the German high command none is more remarkable than their inability to comprehend the meaning of war with the American union. It is perhaps the crowning example of un wisdom on basing a war policy upon the weighing of material factors alone. The war effort of 120 million educated people, equipped with science...could not be measured by the number of drilled soldiers, of trained officers, of forged cannon, of ships of war that they happened to have at their disposal. It betokens ignorance of the elemental forces resident in such a community....

What, then, are these elemental forces resident in our community? We have said already that it is not family, nor place, or religion as they were understood in the classical world. It is something, in fact, without precedent in the history of the world; therefore, it is no easy thing to see or to state.

The poet-statesman who described them best was Abraham Lincoln. The nearest thing that Lincoln gave to a Fourth of July speech was given in Chicago on July 10, 1858. He raises specifically the problem that we are not the blood descendents of our fathers who built our nation, and so in the normal and natural sense, they are not our fathers. And yet they were "iron men," and we cannot but feel connected to them:

We find a race of men living in that day whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men; they fought for the principle that they were contending for; and we understood that by what they then did it has followed that the degree of prosperity which we now enjoy has

come to us. We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time, of how it was done and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves, we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit. In every way we are better men in the age and race and country in which we live, for these celebrations.

Look about you at the good things you see, Lincoln is saying. We did not build them all. We must be grateful to our fathers, and because of this, we want them to *be* our fathers. And yet they are not. Lincoln continues:

But after we have done all this we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it. We have—besides these men descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men; they are men who have come from Europe, German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian—men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us; but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence, they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"; and then they feel that that moral sentiment, taught in that day, evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration; and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving

men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

We become, says Lincoln, blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the fathers who came before us through this father of all moral principle in us. This “father” of our principles is in Lincoln decidedly a “moral” principle. The character is the place where morality is seated. This moral principle helps to shape our character.

The principle is then the first factor we can find to explain the cohesiveness of our society, despite its diversity. It suggests an explanation also for the valor of our soldiers and the fierceness of our whole society in war. It suggests a reason why we might be so marked in our propensity to produce entrepreneurs, commercial risk-takers, the equivalent of the pioneers who crossed the continent in our earlier history. It suggests why the American people are philanthropic upon a scale that exists nowhere else.

This *principle* gives us a start toward explaining the many things peculiar about Americans that cry out for an explanation.

The classical understanding suggests that the principle by itself might not be enough. However central it might be, something else would be required. However much it might suggest, or for its proper service require, peculiar features of character, it could not by itself produce them. Not the principle alone, but also institutions conforming to it, would be necessary. An idea of *constitutionalism* would be necessary. This *constitutional* feature of America to which Osama bin Laden objects is perhaps also an important part of the picture.

The term “constitution” with a small *c* means something very wide. It means to set up, establish, or place. It is connected to the Latin word from which we get the term “statue,” and the root of that word is “to stand.” The constitution of the people is the place where they stand. It is at the foundation of their being a people.

Consider the institutions that shaped character in the classical world. It is an injustice to the Spartans to associate them with the Taliban, and yet there is some distorted attempt in the Taliban to follow the Spartan example—at least in the com-

prehensiveness of the law. In Sparta, the whole society was organized to produce courage in soldiers. This was seen as the highest good, the ultimate quality or virtue. To instill it, young boys were taken from their parents at the time of their adolescence. They would then live in armed camps under conditions of extreme rigor for years. From the moment they left their homes until the moment of their retirement, decades later, they would follow the profession of arms. All the citizens were soldiers, and this was their chief occupation. Farming and commerce were carried on largely by slaves.

Back at home, the young girls were taught to grow up like their mothers: strong, athletic, and incapable of public grief or mourning for loss in war. All these features prevailed in a society where there was one religion, one set of priests, one set of rulers, one set of laws divinely inspired, in principle unalterable, in practice changing only under the most extreme pressure.

Little wonder that the Spartans were brave. Little wonder that their battle phalanx was a marvel to behold, a fearful and overwhelming sight to enemies. Little wonder that there was such a thing as a Spartan character, a thing suggested down to the current day by the adjective “Spartan.” The thing that was formed in the Spartan camps is alive in our memories today, almost three thousand years later.

We Americans do not have the common rearing of children, or the society ruled in detail by laws that extinguish the meaning of what we call private behavior. We do, however, have a constitution, and it too has certain aims regarding character. It too is a moral force, aiming to form the habits and shape the souls of those who live under it.

We like to talk about the fact that our Constitution is limited. It sets up a limited government. This surely is true. It is equally true to say that those who wrote it meant to set up a more powerful government than had existed before in this country. The previous government was, in their view, flawed precisely because it did not provide sufficient authority and means for common national action. This means necessarily that its limits are not the only excellence of the Constitu-

tion. Put the point another way: To preserve limited government, it is not enough to withhold authority. It is rather in the manner of granting authority, alongside the manner of its withholding it, that the genius is to be found.

The Father of the Constitution, James Madison, wrote most beautifully about this genius at the time of its making. In one of his writings, in *Federalist* 51, he shows that the order of nature is present in the understanding of the Constitution, just as it is in the Declaration. He writes:

But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.

Here, then, we see a precise equivalent of the mention of God (four times) in the Declaration. The Constitution invites us to look up. It is necessary itself because of our nature, because of the difference between our nature and the nature of angels. Were we angels, standing directly in the presence of God, we would not need a Constitution (even though an angel can fall). But being men, we require to be governed. Nor can we be wholly trusted inside government, any better than out.

The purpose of government is also stated in the *Federalist* by Madison, when he says that it is “our reason that must be placed in control of the government. Our passions must be controlled by it.”

This is nothing else than the classical definition of virtue. The Constitution divides powers, but not so that they may not be exercised. Remember that the Founders meant to set up a stronger government than had been in place before the Constitution. They understood that men must be governed. And so they set out to provide a government that would be sufficient to protect them against the many dangers looming, internal and external.

The purpose of the division of government was, first, to keep it from becoming oppressive of liberty and, second, to teach us, its ultimate holders, the restraint that comes from the rule of reason over passion.

The Constitution is a law made by the people, by a special process. No individual organ of the government, state or federal, has control of it. It may be changed only through an operation of government quite outside the ordinary workings of government. It is in this sense the people’s law. But it is hard to change, even by the people themselves. And so it restrains government and the people together, all in the interest of the practice of virtue. Through this practice, we learn to subordinate our wills to what is right, and ultimately to those things above that the angels see.

The Constitution sets up the politics of the country. It sets them up and according to a division of power. It means that we must work together to accomplish anything, which leads to respect for fellow citizens. It means also that it is complicated for us to work together, and because bad purposes tend to divide, the complexity of the constitutional arrangements places an obstacle against combination for bad purposes. In this way, the Constitution looks up toward the good and teaches us the restraint necessary to the rule of reason over passions.

The Constitution divides power vertically as well as horizontally. This opens the way for local things to be tended by local people. This provides a practice in self-government that has made the American people one of the most skilled in the world at the solution of common problems. This develops over time into a habit of character. It fosters as well an attitude toward government. In one of the most revealing passages in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes:

To the European, a public officer represents a superior force; to an American he represents a right. In America, then, it may be said that no one renders obedience to man, but to justice and to law. If the opinion that the citizen entertains of himself is exaggerated, it is at least salutary; he unhesitatingly confides in his own powers, which appear to him to be all-sufficient. When a private individual meditates an undertaking, however directly connected it may be with the welfare of society, he never thinks of soliciting the cooperation of the government; he publishes his plan, offers to execute it, courts the

assistance of other individuals, and struggles manfully against all obstacles. Undoubtedly he is often less successful than the state might have been in his position, but in the end the sum of these private undertakings far exceeds all that the government could have done.

The American is not a creature likely to wait for commands from above. Feeling equal, he feels also responsible, both entitled and obliged to care for himself and to contribute to the care of his neighbors. He does not regard a public official as a fearful authority, but rather as a servant. Little wonder that entrepreneurship and philanthropy are so common among us.

The Constitution sets up, therefore, a form or model for the vast array of private institutions in the country to follow. It protects contracts and private property. Indeed, one of the motives for calling the Constitutional Convention was violation of these goods by the states. The framers of the Constitution established a society in which people would be responsible for themselves economically. To this end, they would have the right to hold the goods that they produced as their own possessions. This fundamental form of self-reliance is of vast importance in the shaping of our outlook and our manners.

Guaranteeing freedom of religion, the Constitution and the principle upon which it is built both refer to the Almighty incessantly and with respect. Just as each individual is responsible for himself, his family, and his community, so he is responsible for his salvation and encouraged to be about the business of securing it. The vitality of religion in America has always been a remarkable story, and it remains so to this day. The freedom of it is essential to that story.

National Character as a Force for Good

This principle of national character or identity, and the principle and the institutions in which it is embodied, has been the most powerful force for good in the modern world. It does in certain respects stand athwart the great example of the classical world. The United States is not Rome, and still less Sparta. It is, said Winston Churchill, the greatest political force for good since Rome. This strength has become a source of resentment even

among our close friends, and yet it has never been more important to them than it is now. The modern world is the world not only of wealth, comfort, and ease, but also of terror and death. The sword that was crafted for the banishment of pain and the postponement of death is turned inevitably by some to the infliction of pain and death for despotic purposes. Before this threat, only a justice that is very strong can stand up. If the combination of terrorism and science is the chief danger of the modern world, its chief safety lies in the strength and martial vigor of the free nations. Safety can be found nowhere else.

The marvel that our national character exists at all points the way toward the source of its strength. The United States is a polity built in the name of the rights of man, as those rights are established in the great "course and economy of nature." Those rights are the gift of the Creator, unalienable to us, violable by others only with His wrath. This is the ultimate source of our character.

This character of ours has not, in the past, been vulnerable to change. In our history, we have transformed ourselves from a tiny band gathered along the coast of a hostile world until we are today the possessor of a continent and the strongest people on earth. We have cherished our freedom, and kept our character, through the Great Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and the still not finished quest for equal rights regardless of race. We have passed through the Industrial Revolution and entered the information age. We have fought and won two world wars and the Cold War, and still we are distinct. We are a mighty force and so far still restrained in our use of power both at home and abroad.

This character of ours has not, in the past, been vulnerable to immigration. Rather, it has thrived upon immigration and made immigration possible. We have from the beginning welcomed people in their numbers from every corner of the globe, and we have made them "blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the fathers" who came before them. Until the beginning of the 20th century, we did not know their names or that they were coming until they set foot on our shore.

It is true that today our immigrants come from different places than those of earlier days. It is true that those places frequently have little contact with the institutions and principles of freedom. It is true that the immigrants who come today often do not come from so far away, and so perhaps they do not break their links with their former lives as readily as did their predecessors in previous times. If these things are a danger, then we should pass immigration laws that require, as much as possible, immigrants to adopt the practices and beliefs of American constitutional liberty. Such things as speaking the language, as understanding our institutions, as readiness to work, as arrival by legal means, make a good start. The immigration laws should be liberal, and they should be enforced.

The larger danger is not in anything happening abroad. Lincoln said: "If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

It is not immigrants, then, who constitute the danger to us. Rather, the immigrants find the danger, know it or not, when they arrive here. We have long ago set about the task of transforming our limited, constitutional, and federal form of government into a centralized bureaucracy. We have done this on the same principles that are now enjoying an almost unrestrained season of power across much of Western Europe. The idea of the proposed European Constitution, the idea behind the whole super-bureaucracy of the European Union, is alive and thriving in our country, if not yet quite victorious. This idea will abolish the principle of equal rights in favor of a historical ideology under which all rights—nay, all conceptions except transition

itself—are transitory. This idea will make us deny our past until we are ignorant of it. It will make us beg and not work, await permission and not act. The civil servants will then be neither civil nor servants.

One can see in Europe today that this road leads to bankruptcy. Worse than bankruptcy, it leads to the loss of civic character, which is the bedrock of freedom. If we sacrifice our Constitution, we will be following the advice of Osama bin Laden, and we will render ourselves helpless before him. We must remember the thing that does not change. In the words of Calvin Coolidge:

If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth and their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction cannot lay claim to progress. They are reactionary.

—Larry P. Arnn is President of Hillsdale College and a member of the Board of Trustees of The Heritage Foundation. This lecture is the first in the *Lehrman Lectures on Restoring America's National Identity*, a series to consider the meaning and status of America's common national identity and to define an agenda for restoring that meaning as the central idea of America's politics and political culture.