GUNNAR MYRDAL

Selection from An American Dilemma
(1944)

One of the twentieth century’s most forthright and influential formulations of traditional American ideals was written by an “outsider,” the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal (1898–1987). The occasion was the publication in 1944 of a 1,483-page analysis of the place of black people in the United States, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy. Myrdal’s work was part of a six-year effort by a team of researchers assembled by Myrdal in response to a commission from a private foundation, the Carnegie Corporation. Although the bulk of this study consisted of social scientific data and analysis, Myrdal framed the work in terms of a gap between American ideals and the reality of how black people lived in the United States. Hence his articulation of “the American Creed” in the opening pages served to cast into bold relief the facts that were to follow: The prejudicial treatment of Negroes was an anomaly, a striking case in which Americans had failed to live up to their ideals. The attempt to reinforce what he took to be the American moral conscience in specific relation to “the Negro Problem,” Myrdal exaggerated the extent to which the “Creed” had been accepted, and had been acted upon in other areas of American life. But his formulation of American democratic ideology resonated well beyond the specific policy dilemmas that inspired it. It appeared while the United States was engaged in a war against powers who offered not even lip service to the ideology Myrdal attributed to Americans, and was widely read during the subsequent Cold War era when Americans were preoccupied with distinguishing themselves ideologically from the Soviet Union.


It is commonplace to point out the heterogeneity of the American nation and the swift succession of all sorts of changes in all its component parts and, as it often seems, in every conceivable direction. America is truly a shock to the stranger. The bewildering impression it gives of dissimilarity throughout and of chaotic unrest is indicated by the fact that few outside observers—and, indeed, few native Americans—have been able to avoid the intellectual escape of speaking about America as “paradoxical.”

Still there is evidently a strong unity in this nation and a basic homogeneity and stability in its valuations. Americans of all national origins, classes, regions, creeds, and colors, have something in common: a social ethos, a political creed. It is difficult to avoid the judgment that this “American Creed” is the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation.

When the American Creed is once detected, the cacophony becomes a melody. The further observation then becomes apparent: that America, compared to every other country in Western civilization, large or small, has the most explicitly expressed system of general ideals in reference to human interactions. This body of ideals is more widely understood and appreciated than similar ideals are anywhere else. The American Creed is not merely—as in some other countries—the implicit background of the nation’s political and judicial order as it functions. To be sure, the political creed of America is not very satisfactorily effectuated in actual social life. But as principles which ought to rule, the Creed has been made conscious to everyone in American society.

Sometimes one even gets the impression that there is a relation between the intense apprehension of high and uncompromising ideals and the sporty reality. One feels that it is, perhaps, the difficulty of giving reality to the ethos in this young end still somewhat unorganized nation—that it is the prevalence of “wrongs” in America, “wrongs” judged by the high standards of the national Creed—which helps make the ideals stand out so clearly. America is continuously struggling for its soul. These principles of social ethics have been hammered into easily remembered formulas. All means of intellectual communication are utilized to stamp them into everybody’s mind. The schools teach them, the churches preach them. The courts pronounce their judicial decisions in their terms. They permeate editorials with a pattern of idealism so ingrained that the writers could scarcely free themselves from it even if they tried. They have fixed a custom of indulging in high-sounding generalities in all written or spoken addresses to the American public, otherwise so splendidly gifted for the matter-of-fact approach to things and problems. Even the stranger, when he has to appear before an American audience, feels this, if he is sensitive at all, and finds himself espousing the national Creed, as this is the only means by which a speaker can obtain human response from the people to whom he talks.

The Negro people in America are no exception to the national pattern. “It was a revelation to me to hear Negroes sometimes indulge in a glorification of American democracy in the same uncritical way as unsophisticated whites often do,” relates the Dutch observer, Bertram Schröle. A Negro political scientist, Ralph Bunche, observes:

Every man in the street, white, black, red or yellow, knows that this is “the land of the free,” the “land of opportunity,” the “cradle of liberty,” the “home of democracy,” that the American flag symbolizes the “equality of all men” and

guarantees to us all "the protection of life, liberty and property," freedom of speech, freedom of religion and racial tolerance.

The present writer has made the same observation. The American Negroes know that they are a subordinated group experiencing, more than anybody else in the nation, the consequences of the fact that the Creed is not lived up to in America. Yet their faith in the Creed is not simply a means of pleading their unsatisfied rights. They, like the whites, are under the spell of the great national suggestion. With one part of themselves they actually believe, as do the whites, that the Creed is ruling America.

These ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity represent to the American people the essential meaning of the nation's early struggle for independence. In the clarity and intellectual boldness of the Enlightenment period these tenets were written into the Declaration of Independence, the preamble of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and into the constitutions of the several states. The ideals of the American Creed have thus become the highest law of the land. The Supreme Court pays its reverence to these general principles when it declares what is constitutional and what is not. They have been elaborated upon by all national leaders, thinkers and statesmen. America has had, throughout its history, a continuous discussion of the principles and implications of democracy, a discussion which, in every epoch, measured by any standard, remained high, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. The flow of learned treatises and popular tracts on the subject has not ebbed, nor is it likely to do so.

In all wars, including the present one, the American Creed has been the ideological foundation of national morale.

The American Creed is identified with America's peculiar brand of nationalism, and it gives the common American his feeling of the historic mission of America in the world—a fact which just now becomes of global importance but which is also of highest significance for the particular problem studied in this book. The great national historian of the middle nineteenth century, George Bancroft, expressed this national feeling of pride and responsibility:

"In the fulness of time a republic rose in the wilderness of America. Thousands of years had passed away before this child of the ages could be born. From whatever there was of good in the systems of the former centuries she drew her nourishment; the wrecks of the past were her hopes ... The fame of this only daughter of freedom went not into all the lands of the earth; from her the human race drew hope.

And Frederick J. Turner, who injected the naturalistic explanation into history that American democracy was a native-born product of the Western frontier, early in this century wrote in a similar vein:

"Other nations have been rich and prosperous and powerful. But the United States has believed that it had an original contribution to make to the history of society by the production of a self-determining, self-restrained, intelligent democracy.

Wilson's fourteen points and Roosevelt's Four Freedoms have more recently expressed to the world the boundless idealistic aspirations of this American Creed. For a century and a half before the present epoch, when the oceans gave reality to the Monroe Doctrine,

America at last applauded heartily every uprising of the people in any corner of the world. This was a tradition from America's own Revolution. The political revolutionaries of foreign countries were approved even by the conservatives in America. And America wanted generously to share its precious ideals and its happiness in enjoying a society ruled by its own people with all who would come here. James Truslow Adams tells us:

The American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhindered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, suppressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves.

This is what the Western frontier country could say to the "East." And even the skeptic cannot help feeling that, perhaps, this youthful exuberant America has the destiny to do for the whole Old World what the frontier did to the old colonies. American nationalism is permitted by the American Creed, and therefore becomes international in its essence.

It is remarkable that a vast democracy with so many cultural disparities has been able to reach this unanimity of ideals and to elevate them supremely over the threshold of popular perception. Totalitarian fascism and nationalism have not in their own countries—at least not in the short range of their present rule—succeeded in accomplishing a similar result, in spite of the fact that these governments, after having subdued the principal precepts most akin to the American Creed, have attempted to coerce the minds of their people by means of a centrally controlled, ruthless, and scientifically contrived apparatus of propaganda and violence.

There are more things to be wondered about. The disparity of national origin, language, religion, and culture, during the long era of mass immigration into the United States, has been closely correlated with income differences and social class distinctions.

Successive vintages of "Old Americans" have owned the country and held the dominant political power; they have often despised and exploited "the foreigners." To this extent conditions in America must be said to have been particularly favorable to the stratification of a rigid class society.

But it has not come to be. On the question of why the trend took the other course, the historians, from Turner on, point to the free land and the boundless resources. The persistent drive from the Western frontier—now and then swelling into great tides as in the Jeffersonian movement around 1800, the Jacksonian movement a generation later, and the successive third-party movements and breaks in the traditional parties—could, however, reach its historical potency only because of the fact that America, from the Revolution onward, had an equalitarian creed as a going national ethos. The economic determinants and the force of the ideals can be shown to be interrelated. But the latter should not be relegated to merely a dependent variable. Vernon L. Parrington, the great historian of the development of the American mind, writes thus:

The humanitarian idealism of the Declaration [of Independence] has always echoed as a battle-cry in the hearts of those who dream of an America dedicated to democratic ends. It cannot be long ignored or repudiated, for sooner or later
it returns to plague the council of practical politics. It is constantly breaking out in fresh revolt... Without its refreshing influence our political history would have been much more sordid and materialistic.

Indeed, the new republic began its career with a reaction. Charles Beard, in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, and a group of modern historians, threw aside the much cherished national mythology which had blunted the difference in spirit between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and shown that the latter was conceived in considerable suspicion against democracy and fear of "the people." It was dominated by property consciousness and designed as a defense against the democratic spirit let loose during the Revolution.

But, admitting all this, the Constitution which actually emerged out of the compromises in the drafting convention provided for the most democratic state structure in existence anywhere in the world at that time. And many of the safeguards so skillfully thought out by the conservatives to protect "the rich, the wellborn, and the capable" against majority rule melted when the new order began to function. Other conservative safeguards have fastened themselves into the political pattern. And "in the ceaseless conflict between the man and the dollar, between democracy and property"—again to quote Parington—property has for long periods triumphed and blocked the will of the people. And there are today large geographical regions and fields of human life which, particularly when measured by the high goals of the American Creed, are conspicuously lagging. But taking the broad historical view, the American Creed has triumphed. It has given the main direction to change in this country. America has had gifted conservative statesmen and national leaders, and they have often determined the course of public affairs. But with few exceptions, only the liberals have gone down in history as national heroes. America is, as we shall point out, conservative in fundamental principles, and in much more than that, though hopefully experimentalistic in regard to much of the practical arrangements in society. But the principles preserved are liberal and some, indeed, are radical.

America got this dynamic Creed much as a political convenience and a device of strategy during the long struggle with the English Crown, the London Parliament and the various British powerholders in the colonies. It served as the rallying center for the growing national unity that was needed. Later it was a necessary device for building up a national morale in order to enlist and sustain the people in the Revolutionary War. In this spirit the famous declarations were resolved, the glorious speeches made, the inciting pamphlets written and spread. "The appeal to arms would seem to have been brought about by a minority of the American people, directed by a small group of skillful leaders, who, like Indian scouts, covered their tracks so cleverly, that only the keenest travelers can now follow their course and understand their strategy."

But the Creed, once set forth and disseminated among the American people, became so strongly entrenched in their hearts, and the circumstances have since then been so relatively favorable, that it has succeeded in keeping itself very much alive for more than a century and a half.

The American Creed is a humanistic liberalism developing out of the epoch of Enlightenment when America received its national consciousness and its political structure. The Revolution did not stop short of anything less than the heroic desire for the "emancipation of human nature." The enticing flavor of the eighteenth century, so dear to every intellectual and rationalist, has not been lost on the long journey up to the present time. Let us quote a contemporary essayist:

Democracy is a form of political association in which the general control and direction of the commonwealth is habitually determined by the bulk of the community in accordance with understandings and procedures providing for popular participation and consent. Its postulates are:

1. The essential dignity of man, the importance of protecting and cultivating his personality and the personality within the frame-work of the common good in a formula of liberty, justice, welfare.

2. The perfectibility of man, confidence in the possibilities of the human personality, as over against the doctrines of caste, class, and slavery.

3. That the gains of commonwealths are essentially mass gains rather than the efforts of the few and should be diffused as promptly as possible throughout the community without too great delay or too wide a spread in differentials.

4. Confidence in the value of the consent of the governed expressed in institutions, understandings and practices so as a basis of order, liberty, justice.

5. The value of decisions arrived at by common counsel rather than by violence and brutality.

These postulates rest upon (1) reason in regard to the essential nature of the political man, upon (2) observation, experience and inference, and (3) the fulfillment of the democratic ideal is strengthened by a faith in the final triumph of ideals of human behavior in general and of political behavior in particular.

For practical purposes the main norms of the American Creed as usually pronounced are centered in the belief in equality and in the rights to liberty. In the Declaration of Independence—as in the earlier Virginia Bill of Rights—equality was given the supreme rank and the rights to liberty were placed as derived from equality. This logic was even more clearly expressed in Jefferson's original formulation of the first of the "self-evident truths": "All men are created equal and from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and unalienable, among which are the preservation of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Liberty, in a sense, was easiest to reach. It is a vague ideal: everything turns around whose liberty is preserved, to what extent and in what direction. In society liberty for one may mean the suppression of liberty for others. The result of competition will be determined by who got a head start and who is handicapped. In America as everywhere else—and sometimes, perhaps, on the average, a little more ruthlessly—liberty often provided an opportunity for the stronger to rob the weaker. Against this, the equalitarianism in the Creed has been persistently revolting. The struggle is far from ended. The reason why American liberty was not more dangerous to equality was, of course, the open frontier and the free land. When opportunity became bounded in the last generation, the inherent conflict between equality and liberty flared up. Equality is slowly winning. The New Deal during the thirties was a landrace.

If the European philosophy of Enlightenment was one of the ideological roots of the American Creed, another equally important one was Christianity, particularly as it took the form in the colonies of various lower class Protestant sects, split off from the Anglican Church. "Democracy was envisaged in religious terms long before it assumed a political terminology."
Religion is still a potent force in American life. "They are a religious people," observed Lord Bryce about Americans a half century ago, with great understanding for the importance of this fact for their national ideology. American scientific observers are likely to get their attention fixed upon the process of progressive secularization to the extent that they do not see this main fact, that America probably is still the most religious country in the Western world. Political leaders are continuously deducing the American Creed out of the Bible. Vice-President Henry Wallace, in his historic speech of May 8, 1942, to the Free World Association, where he declared the present war to be "a fight between a slave world and a free world" and declared himself for "a people's peace" to inaugurate "the century of the common man," spoke thus:

The idea of freedom—the freedom that we in the United States know and love so well—is derived from the Bible with its extraordinary emphasis on the dignity of the individual. Democracy is the only true political expression of Christianity.

The prophets of the Old Testament were the first to preach social justice. But that which was sensed by the prophets many centuries before Christ was not given complete and powerful political expression until our Nation was formed as a Federal Union a century and a half ago.

Ministers have often been reactionaries in America. They have often tried to stifle free speech; they have organized persecution of unpopular dissenters and have even, in some regions, been active as the organizers of the Ku Klux Klan and similar "un-American" (in the terms of the American Creed) movements. But, on the whole, church and religion in America are a force strengthening the American Creed. The fundamental tenets of Christianity press for expression even in the most bigoted setting. And, again on the whole, American religion is not particularly bigoted, but on the contrary, rather open-minded. The mere fact that there are many denominations, and that there is competition between them, frees American churches to a greater tolerance and ecumenical understanding and to a greater humanitarian and interest in social problems than the people in the churches would otherwise call for.

I also believe that American churches and their teachings have contributed something essential to the emotional temper of the Creed and, indeed, of the American people. Competent and sympathetic foreign observers have always noted the generosity and helpfulness of Americans. This and the equally conspicuous formal democracy in human contacts have undoubtedly had much to do with the predominantly lower class origin of the American people, and even more perhaps, with the mobility and the opportunities—what de Tocqueville called the "equality of condition"—in the nation when it was in its formative stage. But I cannot help feeling that the Christian neighborliness of the common American reflects, also, an influence from the churches. Apart from its origin, this temper of the Americans is part and parcel of the American Creed. It shows up in the American readiness to make financial sacrifices for charitable purposes. No country has so many cheerful givers as America. It was not only "ragged individualism," nor a relatively continuous prosperity, that made it possible for America to get along without a publicly organized welfare policy almost up to the Great Depression in the 'thirties but it was also the world's most generous private charity.

The third main ideological influence behind the American Creed is English law. The independence of American civilization to the culture of the mother country is nowhere else as great as in respect to the democratic concept of law and order, which it inherited...
almost without noticing it. It is the glory of England that, after many generations of hard struggle, it established the principles of justice, equity, and equality before the law even in an age when the rest of Europe (except for the cultural islands of Switzerland, Iceland, and Scandinavia) based personal security on the arbitrary police and on lettres de cachet.

This concept of a government "of laws and not of men" contained certain fundamentals of both equality and liberty. It will be a part of our task to study how these elemental demands are not nearly realized even in present-day America. But in the American Creed they have never been questioned. And it is no exaggeration to state that the philosophical ideas of human equality and the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property, hasty sowed on American ground in a period of revolution when they were opportune—even allowing ever so much credit to the influences from the free life on the Western frontier—would not have struck root as they did if the soil had not already been cultivated by English law.

From the point of view of the American Creed the status accorded the Negro in America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century-long negation of public morals. In principle the Negro problem was settled long ago; in practice the solution is not effectuated. The Negro in America has not yet been given the elemental civil and political rights of formal democracy, including a fair opportunity to earn his living, upon which a general accord was already won when the American Creed was first taking form. And this anachronism constitutes the contemporary "problem" both to Negroes and to whites.

If these rights were respected, many other pressing social problems would, of course, still remain. Many Negroes would, together with many whites, belong to groups which would invoke the old ideals of equality and liberty in demanding more effective protection for their social and economic opportunities. But there would no longer be a Negro problem. This does not mean that the Negro problem is an easy problem to solve. It is a tremendous task for theoretical research to find out why the Negro's status is what it is. In its unsolved form it further interpenetrates with all other social problems. It is simple only in the technical sense that in America the value premises—if they are conceived to be the ideals of the American Creed—are extraordinarily specific and definite.

Finally, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings, it should be explained that we have called this Creed "American" in the sense that it is adhered to by the Americans. This is the only matter which interests us in this book, which is focused upon the Negro problem as part of American life and American politics. But this Creed is, of course, no American monopoly. With minor variations, some of which, however, are not without importance, the American Creed is the common democratic creed. "American ideals" are just humane ideals as they have matured in our common Western civilization upon the foundation of Christianity and pre-Christian liberalism and under the influence of the economic, scientific, and political development over a number of centuries. The American Creed is older and wider than America itself.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Selection from The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness
(1944)

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was for several decades the nation's most quoted and respected critic of modern thought's drift away from explicitly Christian foundations. Niebuhr owed much of his influence to the skill with which he—a Protestant preacher and seminary professor—brought the perspectives of liberal theology to bear on the political, social, and cultural issues of the middle third of the twentieth century. An effective polemist against pacifism, communism, and other utopian projects under attack in the 1940s and 1950s, Niebuhr won a large following among secular intellectuals ("atheists for Niebuhr"); such men and women were sometimes called. Although Niebuhr was sometimes associated in the public mind with the neoorthodox movement led by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, his most vital engagements were decidedly more worldly and contemporary than Barth's. This was especially true of Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), which first made Niebuhr famous. This work of political criticism supported collective action by workers against their capitalist oppressors, and it included a critique of Christian pacifism so vehement as to lead some of Niebuhr's ministerial colleagues to accuse him of abandoning the ethics of Jesus for the "nought-minded" views of Pontius Pilate. Niebuhr pulled back from this extremity in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York, 1938), but the affairs of civil society always remained at the center of his gaze, and he continued to project a "nought-than-nought" persona. In The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York, 1944), a selection from which follows, Niebuhr criticized the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment for what he insisted was its prevailing optimism regarding human character. Niebuhr's most theologically ambitious work was The Nature and Destiny of Man, 3 vols. (New York, 1943). The most important book of his later career was an interpretation of the history of the United States in world-historical perspective, The Irony of American History (1952). During the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Niebuhr exercised great influence through his contributions to magazines, especially Christianity and Crisis.