The problem of race in the United States could be regarded as context-specific. No other society with a previous experience of Negro slavery has had to deal with quite the same legacy. To understand the racial issue in USA, there is first the need to set it in its proper context. Since the issue, over time, has developed not only material but also philosophical dimensions, it needs to be placed against the background of American society and its value system of almost 400 years. In America, identity has been a site for performance perhaps more than in any other "modern" culture. The identity of Americans has been a strong inspiration for whatever course of action they, whether black or white, have decided upon on a number of issues. Perhaps, the race problem could be counted amongst those which have felt the impact of this force the most. Many factors that make the cause of racial equality a difficult one are part of the American historical tradition and closely tied to the idea of "Americanism" or American identity. Modifying them is bound to be a difficult proposition since it would raise fears of an unravelling of America through an unravelling of Americanism. Thus a brief discussion of American identity furnishes a relevant starting point for this background.

It should be clarified at the outset that defining the national characteristics of a people is always a daunting task, especially when they belong to a highly pluralistic society, with large segments drawn from widely divergent ethnic,
geographical and cultural backgrounds. It takes a long time for such a society to develop into a composite social unit, and longer still to evolve an identity that will fit the entire social aggregate. While the process of historical and social evolution plays a major role in the process, it is also shaped, to a considerable extent, by the leaders and visionaries of that nation, particularly while it is still in the making. This complex route followed by the national identity to reach a stable state, if such a state can ever be achieved, makes its decipherment at a given point of time that much more difficult. There is a grave danger of overlooking the obvious or subtle distinctions and stratifications, which exist in all societies in some form or the other. The danger exists in case of the United States too. However, the task in this case is made slightly more approachable as the Americans from the very beginning have been conscious of their being in a special position in the world. As Henry Steele Commager, one of the distinguished historians, has written in The American Mind:

A people so aware that they were making history were conscious of their duty to record it.... A people whose institutions were continually under scrutiny were zealous to explain and defend them.... A people made up of such conglomerate elements and with so little racial or religious or even geographical unity were at pains to emphasize their common historical experience and validate their historical unity.¹

As a result many of them from the colonial times itself put down their thoughts, experiences and dreams for their

contemporaries and posterity alike. These form an important source for studying the American people at first hand. As the above quotation mentions, both the people and their institutions in America found themselves under constant scrutiny from outsiders. Quite a large number of such observers, counting amongst themselves such illustrious names as Alexis de Tocqueville, Thomas Paine, Lord James Bryce and Gunnar Myrdal, have left behind valuable works commenting on the place and its people. These are equally valuable for the insights that they provide to students on the subject.

Another major development, which aids the study of American national character, is the evolution of the scientific approach to history at roughly the same time as the evolution of the United States into a country and a people. This approach compared to the purely narrative approach followed earlier, laid far greater emphasis upon the safekeeping and study of original documents pertaining to the study of historical subjects. Consequently, American scholars have helped to unearth a great storehouse of primary data and to study and maintain it as a valuable testimony of their country’s history. This is not to say that defining American character therefore becomes an easy task. The problems of interpretation and bias continue to befuddle the student but certain leads are available which are not based merely upon hearsay or isolated and infrequent personal impressions.

As the blacks have been resident in the United States almost as long as “whites”, they share with the latter a

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surprising likeness of values. Yet, a number of these values have taken life from victimization and denigration of blacks historically. As such, they are liable to generate acute emotional and communal conflicts because to hold them is, often, to denigrate blacks and to give them up is to step into a value-vacuum.

THE BACKGROUND

Christopher Columbus discovered the route to America at a time (1492) when Europe was undergoing momentous changes. A web of economic, political and intellectual factors was causing a drastic remodelling of European society and its worldview. Amongst economic factors were growth in population and consequent expansion of the economy, and the emergence of capitalism aided by such new tools as money economy, contract system, commercial partnerships and banking facilities. Politically, circumstances were snatching authority away from the feudal barons and princes and vesting them in the central office of the king. Development of printing technology, exploration of new sea routes, and improvements in weapon technologies were some of the other variables that aided this trend.

Intellectually, the elite in towns were immersed in the Renaissance movement which opened a whole new window to the ancient European civilizations of Greece and Rome. The classicist and humanist scholars, who were at the forefront of the Renaissance, slowly but surely, built up a consensus

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3 Jennifer Hoshchild, Facing Up To the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation (Princeton, 1995), ch. 1.
4 Carlton J. H. Hayes, Modern Europe (New Delhi, 1956), ch. 3.
extolling the pagan virtues and the democratic political institutions of the Greeks and the republicanism and rule of law practiced by Rome.

Slightly later came the Reformation which, in time, became the instrument for undermining the unity bestowed by the Church upon Christendom. The upshot of this state of flux was "...a compelling new vision of man: man here and now, on his own, endowed by his creator with the power to make his own destiny".6

It was against this background of an emergent "age of modern science, modern capitalism, and the modern nation state" 7 that the emigration of colonists to America began to take place in earnest and the aims and expectations of the colonists were influenced by it. The expanding population and the growing economy at first had the effect of reinforcing the already privileged position of the better-off sections of European society. The Europe of sixteenth century grappled painfully with the paradox of multiplying dissenting groups at a time of increasing religious intolerance.

Further, the spread of doctrines holding man responsible for his destiny encouraged people to venture out of their erstwhile narrow confines of family and community to seek their

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5 ibid.
7 ibid., p. 38.
8 ibid., p. 39.
fortunes farther afield. New religious sects, like the Puritans, no longer condemned the pursuit of wealth provided it was honestly come by. Others, like the Quakers, set themselves the goal of taking Christ's teachings to heathens for the salvation of their souls. Combined with the imperialist impulse which had followed at the heels of geographical explorations since the fourteenth century, this missionary zeal was to become an important engine for the spread of European values to other continents in the next three centuries, including America. Due to various historical reasons England took the lead in planting its colonies on the Atlantic seacoast which would later become the nucleus of the United States of America. The settlers, however, no matter which country in Europe had sent them forth to the New World, carried the impress of this restless age to their new homes.

LAND, COHESION AND THE PRINCIPLE OF WHITENESS

Another factor common to American experience of almost all the settlers, till the beginning of the twentieth century, was closely tied with the abundance of land to the West of the original English colonies. In fact, until the border was officially closed in 1893, westward expansion and related developments attracted the nation's attention to an extent not comparable with any other national issue, except slavery. Religion and

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9 Perry Miller, the historian *par excellence* of the Puritan settlers of New England testifies to this: "Even when the clergy most vehemently arraigned the economic expansion of the colonies as the occasion of the people's depravity, they could not call it the cause, for financial success was given by God. Affluence was the reward of New England's virtue." See, Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1939), p. 474.

10 Catton and Catton, n.6.
desire for material benefits were the two primary motives that had initially propelled the newcomers to the American shores. Once there, land and territorial expansion added their influence to these motives in shaping American identity and values. The African Americans had not shared in the worldview of white settlers when they were "brought" to America. Placed in a subordinate position and unfamiliar with the language and philosophy of Europe, they must have received rather than contributed to the evolving culture. The blend of these factors at the dawn of the twentieth century was responsible for some markedly peculiar features of the American context with which the African Americans were called upon to deal.

The settling of English American colonies, in the last decade of the sixteenth century, was promoted in general by men of means. The bulk of the colonists, however, were a heterogeneous lot. They left their European homelands for an

[12] An interesting example of the kinds of people whom the promoters hoped to attract to the colonies is furnished by the following excerpt from a document prepared by the Carolina proprietors in 1666 to invite more settlers:

Is there therefore any younger Brother who is born of Gentile blood, and whose Spirit is elevated above the common sort, and yet the hard usage of our Country hath not allowed suitable fortune....If any Maid or single Woman have a desire to go over, they will think themselves in the Golden Age, when Men paid a Dowry (p. 30).

Even as late as 1732, when the last of the English colonies, Georgia, was being settled, the trustees themselves gave this account of the kind of people sent over to populate the land:
uncertain future in America "tempted sometimes by science, sometimes by faith, sometimes by dreams". They included artisans and journeymen, husbandmen and preachers, younger sons of aristocratic families and mercenaries, poor and the persecuted, all in search of liberty and opportunity, greater in extent than what was available in Europe. To a large number both these facilities were represented by land. Till 1893, the westward expansion of "America" was responsible for the unusual situation where an abundance of land faced shortage of manpower. As a result, the ordinary settlers attempted successfully, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the then-novel task of forcing the more powerful and monied

...it was thought necessary for the trustees to send over such poor people and foreign Protestants as were willing to live in Georgia, not only to cultivate the lands, but at the same time to strengthen his majesty's colonies. For which purpose they considered each inhabitant both as a planter and a soldier... (pp. 32-33).

See, "South Carolina" (pp. 30-31), and "Georgia" (pp. 31-35) for the two quotes respectively, in Ina Woestemeyer Van Noppen, ed., The South: A Documentary History (New York, 1968).

14 The charter for the settlement of Virginia was granted in 1606 to two--the London and the Plymouth--companies. Its inhabitants came motivated primarily by the desire for land rather than any overriding religious dogma. The London company, the prime mover, had managed to publicise well the vast tracts of land available for settlement. However, within twenty years, the publicity material found a new magnate: the lure of building a new society, of starting afresh, of the opportunity of building from scratch. In its way, this was as much of a mission as the Puritan settlement of New England had been. But this was a personal rather than a community mission and it blended in the forming American reality a strand of strong individualism.
The most famous theory regarding the role of abundant land in shaping the American society was put forward by Frederick Jackson Turner. Despite later criticisms, Turner's theory remains a valuable resource for studying this factor. In a paper titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", presented in 1893, Turner claimed that "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." In this essay, as well as in a number of succeeding works, he distinguished a number of characteristics which one could attribute to the influence of a frontier which could constantly move westward to make more land available to the Americans. The most important of these influences he recognized as a strong leaning for democracy. Turner found that the availability of land produced an aversion to controls and bred in the frontiersmen and women a fierce individualism. "The tendency is anti-social", he wrote. Thus no one was willing to abide totally by the laws made in accordance with someone else's ideas of right and wrong. If there was a chance of being forced to do so then the people merely moved on. Authorities,

15 The sponsors of the colonies had intended, in most cases, to transplant and recreate the social and feudal conditions of England in America. To this end they had invested money and effort in their ventures. The indentured labourers, recruited mostly from indigent masses, had been a kind of investment. But the labour grew in importance manifold once it reached America. See, ibid. for a detailed analysis.

therefore, learned to respect the will of their constituents.\textsuperscript{17} However, he cautioned that this democracy which was born of frontier individualism was also responsible for "laxity in regard to governmental affairs". This laxity was the genesis of corruption in government which was such a marked feature of late nineteenth century American politics--the time when Turner was writing. He felt that lack of respect for administrative experience and education, coupled with too strong an emphasis on individual interests to the extent of selfishness, had led the government in this direction to the detriment of governance as such.\textsuperscript{18} Amongst other American characteristics born out of the frontier experience, Turner counted "lax business honor", "wild-cat banking",

\begin{quote}
[T]hat coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom...\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

which would be softened over time but not quite eliminated.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} ibid., p. 30.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid., p. 32.
\textsuperscript{19} ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{20} The Turnerian thesis began to attract ever greater criticism by the 1930s. Historians decried his reliance on a single factor to explain American development. As Charles A. Beard had noted during Turner's lifetime itself, the frontier thesis failed to take into account factors like industrialization, class struggle and other complexities of modern social organization. Later still, others found fault with his inexact definitions, loose terminology and unsupported generalizations. Specific aspects of the theory like the promotion of democracy, nationalism and individualism through the influence of
The historians, Oscar and Lilian Handlin, have corroborated Turner's findings to a large extent through more modern and widespread research at the end of the twentieth century. They also assert, like Turner, that the vast spaces available in America combined with "[T]he presence of rootless people..." to produce a profound impact upon the development of the colonies as well as the colonists. They served to ingrain in the latter some of the characteristics which ultimately distinguished them from their European antecedents. These characteristics they delineate as "aversion to restraint", "to be wary, to take nothing for granted, to depend on themselves", "a desire for fair dealing [...], a wish for credit in heaven for bringing the true faith to the heathen", and a tendency for the frontier were also contended. However, as Ray Allen Billington has pointed out, in his "Foreword" to the volume, Turner himself was aware of many of these factors but his aim was not to present American culture in its totality but only to "call attention to a molding force that earlier historians had failed to emphasize". However, the more modern and thorough historical research of Oscar and Lilian Handlin has also led them to confirm many traits of American character pointed out by Turner and trace them to the influence of land-in-plenty. That many of Turner's conclusions regarding the traits created by the frontier have stood the test of more rigorous scholarship is also supported by a survey of recent works on the subject carried out by Daniel P. Barr. His findings are reported in his article "An Overview of Recent Scholarship Pertaining to Colonial Backcountry", Early America Review, Fall 1998, Internet edition @ adex3.flycast.com. Summarizing the work of many notable scholars, Barr notes that the impact of frontier life "manifests itself in many of the characteristics historically attributed to the influence of the frontier, including widespread violence, individualism and political and class conflict with the East". The rough hardihood, violence, courage, individualism and resistance to authority of frontiersmen can also be gleaned from the account of three frontier battles, between the Tories and frontiersmen during the Revolution, as reported in James Pierce, "Frontier Battles of the Revolution", Early America Review, Winter 1999, Internet edition @ adex3.flycast.com. The frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner,
"attending more to present profit than to safety and seeking only to please their humors and fancies".\(^{21}\)

These developments presented a very real danger of the development of chaotic, isolated and warring settlements which would have inhibited economic opportunities.\(^{22}\). However, one therefore, with all its shortcomings, still remains valuable for studying American people and personality.

\(^{21}\) ibid., pp. 23-32.

\(^{22}\) The aversion to restraint expressed itself in various forms. Amongst the most frequent and important of these was embracing the wilderness to place oneself out of the reach of instituted authority. This authority could have been communal, ecclesiastical or imperial. The wilderness of the new continent had at first frightened the settlers. However, once they became familiar with its dangers and advantages, they used it to challenge authority they did not like. Law, therefore, began to lose some of the glory attached to it in Europe where it was supposed to have been given by the divinely ordained monarch. As Lord Acton pithily noted in nineteenth century: "No awe surrounds institutions of which all the colonists have seen the beginning, and which many helped to make" (Quoted in Christopher Clausen, "Lord Acton and the Lost Cause", *The American Scholar* [Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin], p. 52). There was no superstition or force of tradition attached to the laws and institutions of the New World and so they remained open to scrutiny and challenges from men who were shaping them to suit their survival. In America, through slow and almost imperceptible degrees, law came to be recognized and treated as the handiwork of man--to be obeyed or defied as such.

The separation of government from divine authority was the beginning of a process leading eventually to the institution of a democratic liberal government in the eighteenth century. But, meanwhile, not only theocratic innovators like the Puritans, but even the Virginia colonists, acting merely to transplant English practices in America, felt the pull of the wilderness. Even in that colony of subjects, ideologically loyal to the English way of life in toto, including religion and politics, law could be subordinated to the will or the conscience of the individual. If an authority tried to impose a law upon the subjects, they simply moved beyond the settlement to found another. Once the colonists learned, through their contact with nature and the Indians, to survive by using the natural resources, they could no longer be counted upon to huddle together out of the fear of the unknown. The royal governments in Europe and their representatives in America found it necessary to temper the laws to suit the new conditions. Till such time as a new government acceptable to a majority of the people could persuade them to respect
principle which offset the danger of dissolution and promoted cohesion was "whiteness".  

As the historian, Winthrop Jordan has suggested, the majority of Americans of the time, descended from the English, identified the colour white with virtue. Further, the Founding Fathers had opted for the system of a republic at the time of independence from Britain (1776) precisely because prevailing Classicism of the times accepted it as the system most likely to promote the growth of virtue in a polity. This factor was of special importance in America because the American sense of self was closely tied to the idea of America as an example of righteous living. Perhaps to distinguish it from contemporary its laws, this state of affairs could be a source of lawlessness and a form of individualism leading to anarchy. The following excerpt from a contemporary account of the settling of the Albemarle in Virginia underscores this point: "But as it was so distant from the seat of Virginian government, the inhabitants yielded little obedience to its power, and had lived for some time without any perceivable rule." (p. 29). George Chalmers, Political Annals of the Province of Carolina, excerpted in B. R. Caroll, ed., Historical Collections of South Carolina (New York, 1836), vol. II, pp. 283-84. Reproduced in Van Noppenn, n.12, p. 29. Also see, Oscar and Lilian Handlin, n. 13, p. 45.

23 In an oft-quoted passage, Crevecoeur defined an American in strictly white terms:

What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European or the descendent of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country....He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds (Crevoceur, Letters from an American Farmer, as quoted in Philip Gleason, "American Identity and Americanization", in Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups (Cambridge, MA, 1980), p. 33.


25 The roots of a sense of American uniqueness may be traced back to the time of early settlements. John Winthrop, the leader of the Puritan migration of 1630, explicitly defined their aim as:
European civilization, considered decadent, there was a tremendous emphasis in America upon idealism and virtue. To the common man this preoccupation with virtue could easily translate into a preoccupation with “whiteness”. Moreover, at a time of ideational buoyancy like the end eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when western “white” culture was triumphantly marching through the world to new discoveries,

...there is now sett before vs life, and good, deathe and euille in that wee are Commanded this day to loue the Lord our God, and to loue one another to walke in his ways and to keepe his Commandements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may lye and be multiplyed, and that the Lord our God may blesse vs in the land whether wee goe to possesse it....

The Puritans were conscious of being a special people, chosen of the Lord. In this capacity they felt it incumbent upon themselves to act as a model to other people in the world. John Winthrop, in the sermon quoted above, reminded the journymen “...for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty vpon a Hill, the cies of all people are vppon vs”.

This sense of being an exceptional civilization was not confined to the Puritans alone. The impact of the European Enlightenment of late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries carried it to other population groups too though in a secular form. The American Declaration of Independence was the first attempt to create a modern “Enlightened” republic in history. The acceptance and spread of Enlightenment throughout the world, as a result of colonialism, from eighteenth century onwards, presented the United States as the model for the rest of the world and buttressed the sense of American exceptionalism in moral terms. The metaphor of America being a city upon the hill, used by John Winthrop in seventeenth century, was repeated by President John F. Kennedy in twentieth century. Evidently, the sense of being a chosen people with the eyes of the world upon them has persisted as an element of American self-image. For the two quotes from John Winthrop, see, John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity”, as reproduced in William Raymond Smith, The Rhetoric of American Politics: A Study of Documents (Westport, 1969), p.71; for the quote from John F. Kennedy, see the author’s commentary on John Winthrop’s sermon in the same work, p. 74.
prosperity and adventure, the identification of white with virtue could have been easily reinforced.

The African Americans became the great exception. This exception was to the advantage of both white labour and white proprietors. For the latter, it was a means of preventing a possible alliance of labourers of both races through common interests and securing at least a group of labour to be placed at their mercy. For the white labourers, the “white” alliance procured better work conditions, greater consideration from the better-off sections in governance of the settlements, wider equality of opportunity, assured social status above a particular group of people and freedom from the worst and most tedious tasks, like plantation labour. The process of accepting white immigrants thronging to labour on vast American lands and later in American industries from white but culturally different North, South and East of Europe till well into the present century continued the relevance of this factor of whiteness. As late as early twentieth century, the country faced the task of homogenizing new whites and imbuing them with a sense of the uniqueness of American ideals and values. The task was successfully achieved by various means all of which stressed their “whiteness” against the “blackness” of African Americans. Instead of genetic stock, birth, wealth or class, it was the colour of one’s skin that “promoted” a person to respectability and equality under the American system. Thus, till the mid-twentieth century the image of “Americanism” as a unique virtue, and virtue as “whiteness”, persisted and maintained a privileged position for whites. The obverse side of such a

26 Hayes, n. 4.
preoccupation was the identification of black with vice or evil. The colour black represented the strongest notion of the Other to Americans. Ascribing a low status to the blacks was a natural outcome of these intellectual moorings.

By nineteenth century, it was commonplace for pro-slavery sections to ascribe the slave status of blacks to their natural inferiority and not the other way around. The result was that by the time the Civil War ended the economic interest in racism, the ideological position on it had taken on a life of its own and the greatest challenge before the freed African Americans in twentieth century was to combat this philosophical nexus between whiteness and virtue. The strength of this intellectual tradition can be gauged from the fact that almost 50 years after the end of the Civil War, the motion picture, The Birth of a Nation, could arouse immense enthusiasm despite the portrayal of blacks in near-bestial terms. The most castigating verdict of white society against the colour black, in the form of the one-drop rule, remains in place even at the end of twentieth century. According to this rule, a person with even a drop of African blood in her/his veins is designated as black. The rule does not apply to any other population group. A drop of Chinese blood does not transform a white person into a Chinese legally. But the obsession with racial purity is strikingly defined against intermingling of white and black racial categories. In a famous case, Susie Guillory Phipps of Louisiana, who had lived as a white all her life, discovered incidentally in 1977 that she had been designated as “colored” on her birth certificate by a midwife who knew that that her great-great-great-grandmother had been a.

slave. Though famous, this is by no means an isolated example. What is of main significance is the agitation felt by Phipps when she discovered being described as "colored". Also, people of partial African ancestry did regularly pass themselves off as "whites", if possible till the present century. Franz Fanon, the African American writer and activist, testifies to the attraction of white colour for blacks. The use of invectives, deriding the colour black, is a regular feature amongst African Americans of certain sections. The encapsulation of an American identity in terms of "whiteness", and its acceptance by large numbers of blacks, has been responsible for constant efforts in the current century to trace white "virtuosity" to "Black" sources as in the Afrocentric approach to academics, or an angry rejection of all that perceived to be white, including their nationality by Black Muslims, or to redefine Americanism in terms inclusive of blacks as in multiculturalism. In each case, the American context has forced a preoccupation with colour which has informed African American self-image and identity.

DEMOCRACY

Whiteness as a cohesive force in America was reinforced by democracy. The tendency towards democracy in the colonies was explicitly consecrated as an American value and

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29 To the evolving conditions in America Enlightenment provided an organizing principle of government in the form of a modern theory of democracy that was formally instituted in the constitution of the independent American republic. But the tendency towards that had been manifest for long.
institution at the time of independence from Britain. Abundance of land, shortage of labour and the ensuing decline of absolute authority of institutions of government had created conditions conducive for modifications in governing practices and institutions that promoted democracy and popular participation.

At the heart of the developing democratic communities were households of independent farmers. Till nineteenth century, the practice of acquiring land simply by working it constituted more or less general practice and created a large body of liberty-loving householders wary of their liberty and equality equally.\(^\text{30}\) It was this idea of equality of individuals which was at the heart of Jeffersonian doctrine of democracy in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The doctrine attracted devoted followers by advocating vast powers to the local governments where a large number of affected individuals could have a say in any decision. The popularity of the notion was testified to by an almost mythical reverence accorded to it till at least mid-nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville, the astute observer of American democracy in the 1830s, also commented

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By 1624, when Virginia became a crown colony, after several years of trial-and-errors, the settlers had gained a say in its governance through an elected representative assembly. The powers of the assembly were closely hedged in by those of the governor and his council, but its very existence was a pointer to the future. New England, at the other end of the colonial settlements, was acquiring nascent democratic moorings at the same time due to other reasons. Thus, at both ends of the British American settlements the settlers soon acquired a right to have a voice in the government. For the powers of the governor in Virginia, see, "Ordinance for Virginia" in Commager, n. 11,p. 13. For the conditions that tended to democracy, see, Handlin and Handlin, n. 13, and Turner, n. 16.

on the strength of local government and voluntary associations in America which really gave a popular character to the government.\textsuperscript{31}

The chaotic conditions before independence and the dynamic of democracy at work after it had a logic and impact of their own. As Professor Charles Taylor has rightly pointed out, the notion of popular sovereignty, of a "people" in government over themselves, demands a strong cohesive force if the polity is to be stable. The corollary to this state of affairs is:

...democracies are in a standing dilemma. They need strong cohesion around a political identity, and precisely this provides a strong temptation to exclude those who can't or won't fit easily into the identity which the majority feels comfortable with, or believes can alone hold them together. And yet exclusion...goes against the legitimacy idea of popular sovereignty, which is to realize the government of all the people.\textsuperscript{32}

Both these processes have been at work in the United States throughout till twentieth century. Being a "nation of immigrants", the land has attracted settlers from different parts of the world at different periods of its history. Till the 1830s, there was a degree of cohesion granted not only by "racial" bonds amongst whites but also by a cultural identity since most of the settlers could trace their origins back to England. The African Americans could fit into neither of these two moulds of racial or cultural similarity.


\textsuperscript{32} Charles Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion (And Its Remedies?)", in Bhargva, Rajeev et al., eds, \textit{Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy} (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 138-65; quote on p. 155.
Along with women and religious groups like Jews, their exclusion was the prerequisite of a strong political and communal identity for the rest.

From 1840s onwards, forces for the exclusion of African Americans were strengthened since cultural unity was under assault from the imperatives of having to accommodate the Irish first and then the culturally different population groups from the East and South of Europe in the early decades of the present century. By 1930s, the diverse origins of migrants could only be overridden by an identity formed around white skin colour. "Cultural" part of the early American identity, therefore, was negotiated and broadened by this time to root itself in a "European" cultural soil rather than an English one. This served to strengthen the remaining earlier strand of "whiteness", discussed next, since many of the new immigrants sought to downplay their cultural heterogeneity by affirming their whiteness. Providentially timed to coincide with the challenge to racial exclusion in the form of the Civil War, affirmations of "whiteness" choked the hesitant idea of racial equality. 33

33 Jon Gjerde and David Roediger make clear essentially the same process operated in the North even though slaves had been largely emancipated there in the three decades following independence. They demonstrate that for many "white" immigrants of lower status, anti-black racism was the easiest route to assimilation and finding acceptance as "white", respectable Americans. As Gjerde puts it, "By becoming white, they were able to etch out a niche amid the uncertainties of the early national era. In a effort to make certain that the larger society differentiated them from the non-white, the unfree, the disempowered, these immigrants became among the most vociferous advocates of a herrenvolk republic." See, David R. Roediger, "The Pursuit of Whiteness: Property, Terror, and Expansion, 1790-1860", pp. 579-600; and Jon Gjerde, "Here in America There is Neither King nor Tyrant: European Encounters with Race, 'Freedom', and Their European Pasts", pp. 673-90 in Journal of the Early
Even in the first three decades of the twentieth century, when an “Americanization” movement arose, first, to encourage European immigrants to learn English and participate in American public life and, later, to coerce them into doing so, Blacks remained out of the purview of the discussions. Not only those who advocated “assimilation” of “races”, a term then used to define even Europeans from different parts of Europe, but also the liberals who decried the element of force in the movement remained either unaware and unconscious or unmindful of the fact that blacks were not allowed to participate in the political life in the South and social life in the North. As Ralph Ellison summed it up in the title of his famous novel, despite standing out in the white American crowd, the Negro was the Invisible Man in America.

The above-discussed reaction of immigrants, competition with black as industrial labour, and the fear of intermarriage with the emancipated blacks had the further effect of hardening erstwhile class lines into race- or colour-lines. The Negro, despite exceptions like Paul Cuffe, became the first American to be denied the mobility across class lines which was a distinguishing characteristic of American civilization marking it out from the European one. And with the mobility, the Negroes seem to have lost their visibility too. The whole tumult of Civil War and the Reconstruction seemed strangely ineffective in making Blacks visible to the nation as such. It was not till after WWII that the presence of blacks in America began to be


See, Nathan Glazer, We Are All Multiculturalists Now (Cambridge, MA, 1997), pp. 96-110.
acknowledged by groups other than the white supremacists and blacks themselves. This dependence on the Negro Other to define whiteness was also fraught with serious consequences since it fixed the Negro in a position of inferiority, of an alienated Outsider status from which it would be nearly impossible to escape.

The process of assimilating cultural difference did, on the other hand, chart new routes that could later be travelled to pitch for racial equality. Cultural associations, political pressure groups, pooling together of votes into vote banks, lobbying political authority for favourable treatment were some of the tools worked out at this time. Democracy in America meant that so long as “whiteness” could be counted upon to cobble together coherence amongst a majority, it would remain immune to ideological challengers. It also meant that the democratic political process could be influenced only through influencing at least an articulate segment of the majority. Last, it required the conversion of scattered, rural populace of African Americans, without the vote in effect, into a self-conscious pressure group, capable of affecting election outcome, if negotiations for a favourable redefinition of Americanism were to be effected.

But immigration as a factor in post-World War II period began to turn in favour of blacks by attracting non-white immigrants into the country. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had begun to attract Asian immigrant labour too, primarily from China and Japan. From the beginning of the twentieth century labourers from Indian subcontinent began to arrive on the West Coast too. The result was an outpouring of racial antipathy against yellow and brown skin colours. Everywhere the labourers found mob hostility and mob
action against even the resident alien status granted to them by law. The derision earlier shown to European immigrants was several degrees lower than the fate of coloured immigrants. Again to return to de Tocqueville, one can see the astute insight displayed by him when he remarked that there was less intellectual freedom in United States than in Europe and the pressure to conform was tremendous. In matters where conformity was not possible, as in the matter of skin colour, prejudices ran deep and strong and near-permanent. It was only in the 1940s that the law granted restricted quotas to immigrants from various Asian countries. Till then only whites from Europe could become naturalized citizens (apart from Africans!). With further liberalization of immigration laws in the 1960s, immigrants of colour began to populate United States at an astounding pace and their growing presence under the unofficial leadership of African Americans began to challenge the racial assumptions of the country from 1980s. Ironically, though the African Americans and the Asian- and Hispanic Americans drew strength from each other's presence, they often try to prove their Americanism by joining in the racial crusade against the other. The pressure to conform, obviously, still draws direction and content from white Americans.

At the philosophical level, the American context drew heavily upon the values of European Enlightenment which the African Americans needed to explore and often challenge in the twentieth century.

ENLIGHTENMENT

The United States was the first polity to base itself explicitly upon “modern” foundations propounded most
succinctly by the European Enlightenment. In attacking the superstitions and other-worldly stress of medieval Europe, the thinkers in this era unleashed certain principles with far-reaching consequences for African American community.

Prior to mid-twentieth century, Enlightenment, generally a liberating force for the common people, ironically influenced race relations in the opposite direction. As a movement, Enlightenment can be said to have had three main strands of thought coiled into it. These were an emphasis upon the discovery of natural laws through objective studies rather than religion; faith in the idea of a benign balance between freedom and order in human society; and privileging of individual social and economic agency above that of the state or the community. Together these values constituted a universal scale to measure the "progress" of individuals and cultures.

The contempt towards the black man in America was aided by the Enlightenment's idea of "progress". This progress, in effect, came to be measured in terms of scientific and technological achievements in case of civilizations and cultures and of the supremacy of rationalism above emotions in case of individuals. As Joyce Appleby and others point out: "From the eighteenth century onward, Westerners would also judge other cultures by their science and technology. By the 1740s, European travelers concluded that the absence of western techniques and mechanical thinking signaled cultural inferiority."35

The kingdoms and tribes of West Africa, supplying most of the slaves to United States, seemed to fail against these

35 Joyce Appleby and others, n. 2, p. 25.
standards and were, consequently, graded low in the hierarchy of human races. Thomas Jefferson spoke for a large number of Americans when he described the Negroes as ruled by emotions. The universalism of Enlightenment made little room for difference of needs, desires and circumstances in judging the development of a particular culture. Nor did received values make room for the conditions of slavery, which could have prompted a show of emotionalism as Stanely Elkins argues, or proven examples of black rationality.

Historically, the strand most relevant to the condition of African Americans became the one which extolled human rationalism, objectivity or intelligence to unprecedented levels. The tremendous stress on rationalism and the prestige enjoyed by science in America, specially since nineteenth century, created a formidable barrier to racial equality. The access which whites enjoyed to the academic domain meant that they could, sometimes unwittingly, press science into serving the cause of white supremacy. It was widely believed, till the closing years of twentieth century that scientists and scientific studies were free from environmental and contextual influences. It helped to impart an aura of truth and objectivity even to pseudo-scientific "findings" regarding race. Only in the last two decades or so this position has been challenged and the impact of cultural assumptions, family values and social context has come to be recognized as a potent factor which often affects scientists' attitudes and the results of their enquiries. But in the

36 "Thomas Jefferson on Slavery", Afro-American Almanac @ cgil.bellacoola.com

preceding 150 years or so genetics, anthropology, and biology amongst others as the emergent scientific disciplines had created a veritable fortress around the idea of the inherent superiority of whites over blacks.38 The scientists went to great lengths to test the validity of their hypotheses regarding the racial characteristics. There were studies to measure almost every conceivable comparable facet of the two communities’ respective personalities. They measured the size of heads, the quality and kinds of teeth, response time, intelligence and a variety of other factors. But what they were blind to were their own biased assumptions. To take just one example, earlier tests returned a quicker response time for blacks than for whites and the scientists declared it to be proof of the primitive, animal-like physical characteristics of blacks. After some time the response time returned by whites superseded that of blacks and was promptly declared to be proof of the greater development of whites as a race.39

Such biases notwithstanding, by the twentieth century, the idea of biological determinism of merit had taken firm root in American society due to the supposed “scientific” backing to the notion. As early as mid-nineteenth century, when the Abolitionist response to slavery was at its height, faith in immutable racial characteristics meant that the opposition on religious grounds was directed mainly against the perceived cruelty that slavery involved towards fellow humans. It did not, in most cases, go to the extent of advocating racial equality—not

38 Ashley Montagu, Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race (Walnut Creek, 1998), chs. 1-3.
39 See, Payne, n. 28, p. 47.
even equality of opportunity. 40 The implicit assumption of the racial superiority of whites operated within religious denominations too. As a result, the condition of the African Americans declined sharply in the postbellum period, just prior to the opening of the twentieth century, because many of the Abolitionists were content with achieving freedom for slaves and opposed racial equality. In a society based on meritocracy, instead of ascription, this factor was of great significance in justifying ascription for a particular group. The strength of this tradition was on display even at the end of twentieth century when, in the *Bell Curve*, respected political scientist Charles Murray and psychologist, Richard Herrenstein, re-erected the idea of natural inequality. Though the book aroused fierce opposition from certain knowledgeable academics, it was by no means condemned by all.

The most damaging impact of "modern science" upon racial questions was being entrenched at the end of last century in the form of Social Darwinism. Applying contested Darwinian principles from biology to social systems, Social Darwinism envisaged constant competition amongst human beings for the resources of the world in which only the fittest survived and the rest perished. The important factor in this movement was the use of "fittest" and "best" interchangeably. Even theologians were not free from its influence. Thus competition was, in fact, bolstered above cooperation and victims of circumstances, like the slaves, were considered fit only for their station in life. If Darwinianism was the law of nature, and applied in the realm of human relations too, then persons or groups acquired their

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places in society because they deserved them. It was easy to argue from here that slaves were slaves precisely because they deserved to be slaves and nothing better. In the contentious times of the latter half of the century this philosophy was a disturbing intellectual weapon in the hands of white supremacists and played a role in the return of the racial caste system to the South after the Civil War.

At the end of the twentieth century, the idea of "natural" and "inherent" inequality is in partial retreat due to constant assaults from natural and social sciences. However, the idea of America as a meritocracy, where individuals largely get the fate they deserve, continues. It is the cornerstone of the idea of American Exceptionalism which proclaims merit, justice and equality of opportunity as the paths to prosperity and the American Dream. Specially, since legal discrimination against people of colour was removed in the 1960s, at the end of the century claims of racial discrimination were often considered excuses for personal failure and undue assault upon a fundamental American virtue.41

MATERIALISM

Another way in which abundant land impacted upon the formation of American character, and thence the construction of a racial ideology, was by promoting materialism. The earliest settlers had come to the land searching for freedom from want. If the territory available to them had been limited, perhaps a cooperative use of resources would have been forced by the circumstances. As events developed, however, the territory of

41 See, Payne, n.28, p. 2.
the United States kept expanding till 1893 and the impulse towards materialism was spurred on, through constant satisfaction and growing opportunities, till it became a fundamental part of American worldview. The “desire for present profits”, mentioned by Oscar and Lilian Handlin as an American characteristic, added one more powerful motive for a conscious and elaborate construction of whiteness as Americanism and virtue. Once the Virginians discovered that the path to prosperity lay through tobacco cultivation, it began to spread at a quick speed. The Europeans were at one with the Indians in following slash-and-burn methods of agriculture. However, they were different in that they did not undertake cultivation for the sake of survival alone. Their agricultural enterprise was inspired by the desire for profits. Hence, greater the area cultivated, greater would be the profits.42

The interest in slavery shaped the notional juxtaposition of white and black into the ideology of racism. This ideology justified the rule of white masters over black slaves as the rule of virtue over vice and so could be presented as the epitome of the American mission of creating a virtuous polity. Plantation crops, employing the labour of slaves, were destructive of the soil's fertility and might have caused the end of slavery much earlier by exhausting a small stretch of land if no more land

42 Materialism, however, was not limited to the South. Even in Puritan New England voices were raised in alarmed dismay at the growing influence of materialism by the second half of the seventeenth century itself. The colonists in Massachusetts realized the changes and “gave full recognition to the growing absorption of the saints in business and commerce: 'In Wares, Merchandize and Trading, a gaining what they can possibly, as if Justice had set them no bounds, but to gain what they can is their professed justice; and their gain is their godliness'”. The New Englanders were important
was available. But even till mid-nineteenth century if plantation agriculture exhausted a particular part of land, the planters could just move to another so slavery continued to be relevant and freedom for blacks was postponed. Even the pervasive influence of religion was not able to check the growth of materialism as a fundamental trait of Americans though a number of the early colonists were influenced in other matters by the preachers amongst them. The English American colonies had not attracted many people of status, wealth or influence. The difficult conditions of survival had ensured that only the hardiest of people used to tough, back-breaking labour, a flexible temperament or an overweening zeal alone managed to survive in the new land. These were generally not the members of the wealthy class. As a result, the only measure of man in the colonies was material success. Whether it was in agriculture or trade most of those at the top had had to rise to their eminence by hard work. In the absence of aristocracy and other social hierarchies wealth alone marked out a man as being more worthy than his neighbours. In such circumstances, participants in the slave trade. For the quote, see, Miller, n. 9, p. 473.

43 The prominence of preachers and of the importance of Christianity is to be seen in a good number of documents of the early colonial period. They generally profess the furtherance of Christianity as their aim in America. The Articles of The New England Confederation in 1643 are an example: "...we all came into these parts of America with one and the same end and aim, namely, to advance the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and to enjoy the liberties of the Gospel in purity and peace...". “The New England Confederation, May 19, 1643” in Commager, n. 11, pp. 26-28. Similar examples can be found in the documents titled “The Mayflower Compact, November 11, 1620” (pp. 15-16); “The Cambridge Agreement, August 26, 1629” (p. 18); “Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, January 13, 1629” (pp. 22-24); “Massachusetts School Law of 1647” (p. 29); “The Cambridge Platform, 1648” (pp. 29-31); “Maryland Toleration Act, April 21, 1649” (pp. 31-32) in the same publication.
slaves without rights to the fruit of their labour till 1865 were being left far behind in the race not only for wealth but also for the sense of worth. Jennifer Hoshchild shows that affluence is recognized as a virtue not only by whites but also by blacks in this century. The negative effects of black poverty upon their self-image and image in the larger society can be a problem stemming from this aspect of historical development.

There has been a consensus on a capitalist economic system as the only appropriate one for the material advance of a modern republic. Although there were vigorous disagreements about the nature and direction that capitalism should be allowed to follow, there was no serious consideration of any alternative. Jefferson advocated an economy sustained by small, mainly agrarian, producers while Hamilton envisaged widespread industrial development as the foundation for a stable republic. Both, however, were agreed that economic activity should revolve around competition so that market forces could make for economic prosperity. Pursuit of self-interest, therefore, was written into the constitution as a definite characteristic of the new republic. The only caveat was that it should not violate the norms of public good. But "public good" or "civic virtue" have defied any permanent definition. Till the 1960s, injustice to blacks was not accepted as against public good and so defied concerted efforts at improvement. Capitalism was acceptable not only because it was the emerging creed of the times, or that it was well-suited to American situation but also because the thinkers were in agreement that

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45 Young, n.31.
"Christian moral principles required a system of private property in which to flourish". With this the two dominant intellectual forces in America--Enlightenment and religion--stood reconciled. As a result, to use Richard Hofstadter's terms, beneath all the conflicts in America, there is an underlying consensus on an "ideology of self-help, free enterprise, competition, and beneficent cupidity".

Self-help philosophy became particularly entrenched at the opening of twentieth century. It is best symbolized by the works of Horatio Alger, also made a huge impact upon American culture at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. It held the individual responsible for her/his rise in the world and prescribed industry and frugality as the two ways to that end. The striking element of this kind of literature was its almost total identification of success with material success. The element of "beneficent cupidity" was overwhelming. The wide success enjoyed by Alger testified to the strength and popularity of his ideas. Throughout twentieth century, as Roger A. Fortin has deftly shown, this emphasis has remained the same. The two movements together were responsible for strengthening the elements of competition and individual responsibility in American society. It meant that even with the debunking of biological determinism, the individual continued to be held responsible for her/his success or failure regardless of circumstances. Till this situation was modified in the second half of the century, the implications of this view for

46 Genovese, n. 44, p. 69.
the economic and emotional states of blacks were catastrophic. There was no real help from society or government, since they were expected to be self-reliant, and their historical poverty was further perpetuated.

IDEALISM: THE MITIGATING TRADITION

Though the English Americans colonies had not attracted many wealthy settlers they held a special allure for visionaries. The great effect of these migrants, in relatively large numbers from all over Europe, was to carry on a constant debate on the goals and ends of life and Christianity. Both by example and their precepts, the reformers presented to their fellow settlers the ideal of self-restraint, self-improvement, and service to others—in whatever way they interpreted it.

Till the end of eighteenth century the interpretation was generally in religious terms. Religion must be looked upon as a major element undergirding the nascent American settlements. Though one would be wary of generalizing too much, however, the ferment of the Reformation bequeathed a recognizable legacy to this far off continent. Amongst the first two areas to be settled initially—New England in the North and Virginia farther South—the former was avowedly an experiment in righteous living by Puritans. However, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. finds that

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48 Though a minority in Britain, the Puritans became a majority in New England and largely influenced the structure of its government and community. Their religious zeal, Protestant doctrine, and the need to survive in a climate of religious intolerance in Europe had made the community a well-ordered and disciplined one. The migrants to America were further united by the hardships of the voyage across. Once in America, they engaged in building their city upon a hill with a tremendous sense of mission. The purpose of the Puritan community was to “improue [their] liues to doe more servie to the Lord the comforte and encrease of the body of christe whereof
there are two sides to this Puritan legacy: a negative and a positive one. The negative has caused the Americans to be filled with a self-righteous zeal to save the world from whatever they consider the evil of the moment to be regardless of the feelings of others. But on the positive side, it has made Americans conscious of a sense of responsibility, of the limits of human action and endeavour and imparts to their character a valuable realism. 49

Amongst the other religious groups to have left a discernible influence upon American character and identity [they were] members...". [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr, The Cycles of American History [Boston, 1968], pp. 12-14).

While the Puritans upheld honest pursuit of material wealth, as mentioned above, they set other goals for themselves in the New World too. One such goal was to keep alive the Puritan reverence for education. As early as 1642, Massachusetts put into effect a school law. Concerned at the "neglect of many parents and masters in training up their children in learning & labor", the law empowered the elected administrators of each town to secure the education of all children. In 1647, it established the first system of public education in the American colonies ("Massachusetts School Law of 1642, April 14, 1642" [p. 28] and "Massachusetts School Law of 1647" [p. 29] in Commager, n. 11). For long, Massachusetts contained a disproportionate number of graduates in the colony due to this high regard for education. The most important contribution of Puritans to the American heritage, writes Dr. Daniel Boorstin, was to develop

...a practical common-law orthodoxy. Their heavy reliance on the Bible, and their preoccupation with platforms, programs of action, and schemes of confederation--rather than with religious dogma--fixed the temper of their society, and foreshadowed American political life for centuries to come (Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience [New York, 1958], p. 25).

were the Quakers.\textsuperscript{50} Not only in their criticism of slavery, but in their whole outlook they bequeathed to the blooming American identity what Professor Boorstein has described as their "Inward plantation".\textsuperscript{51} This inward turning of the Quakers was embodied in a quest for perfectionism.

They were among the most prominent opponents of slavery. The first recorded protest against slavery was a resolution of the Mennonites of Germantown dated 1688.\textsuperscript{52} The Mennonite resolution protested the injustice of "separating wives from their husbands, and giving them to others: and some sell children of these poor creatures to other men".

Though secularism found favour in independent America, the tradition of religion as popular check upon the elite continued. It was of great significance for African Americans after Emancipation since the Church was the strongest institution of the community. It could thus provide leadership to the community at vital times by stepping into this old

\textsuperscript{50} They took the Protestant revolt in matters of religion to its logical conclusion by removing even the scriptures from standing between man and God. In more secular matters, too, the Quaker preoccupation in life was with the forming and perfecting of human character to bring it in light with divine designs. Moreover, they were confirmed missionaries in that they concerned themselves not only with their own salvation but also with that of others. In attacking Negro slavery as a practice opposed to the natural equality of all men, the Quaker reformers injected in American thought an element of universalism while at the same time pointing out its most virulent violation in their society. Though rarely acknowledged, the Quakers were as great believers in human industry and wealth-creation as the Puritans. The only difference was their strict disapprobation against, what they considered ostentation. Despite being wealthy a Quaker was enjoined to live a life of frugal simplicity. The advice given by Benjamin Franklin quoted earlier seems more in the Quaker tradition than anything else.


\textsuperscript{52} "The Earliest Protest Against Slavery" (p. 37), in Commager, n. 11.
American tradition and be accepted as a valid leader by the community at large. For example, in the challenge posed by the minister Jesse Jackson to the established politicians in 1984, religion clearly appealed to the American mind as a purifier of the corruption in political practices. The Abolitionist movement against slavery and Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.'s struggle for racial equality, to name only a few, have been movements that benefitted from this tradition to successfully help the black community. Religion in America remains separate from the state but in a Puritan way shares actively in its concern. It is not the religion of the ascetic or the monk but of the reformer, the improver of everyday life.

When America took the lead in the creation of a modern republic founded to promote the emerging philosophy of liberalism (though the name is a later development) it did so on the basis of allegiance to ideals above biological ties. From the very beginning, this provided the African Americans with a rationale to fight racial injustice. Though the whites subverted the principle through many means, they could not defy the principle openly without rejecting the foundation of American uniqueness and world moral leadership. The blacks have had to battle each subversion as it arose, like biological determinism, but they were fortified by American morality on their side.53

53 It needs to be clarified at the outset that there was rarely any homogenous view of the changes needed to be implemented in the institutional set up. The ratification of the Constitution was a long-drawn and cantankerous process because of this. The fact that Madison and Hamilton who had collaborated to to write the body of material later called the Federalist Papers, and generally treated as the best expression of the intent of the founders, later fell out over the interpretation of the constitutional text. The text, therefore, is open to various meanings and a consensus view deals only with the most general of foundations. However, for the purposes of elucidating the
The first declaration of theirs, The Declaration of Independence, articulated the doctrine of natural rights of man. It claimed equality of all men by virtue only of their being men. This declaration, coupled with the lack of any explicitly ethnic appeal to nationalism in the constitution, were truly revolutionary steps. For the first time citizenship to a nation or state was defined in terms of adherence to a set of ideals rather than to common origins or racial stock. It meant that anyone, regardless of origin or ethnicity, could become an American citizen simply by declaring allegiance to these principles. Though Negro slavery existed at the time and was enough to remind the founders of the shortcomings of such a basis for citizenship but they perhaps hoped that time would bring reality closer to principles.

American republicanism has been closely identified with the happiness of all individuals. In the famous and oft-quoted passage Jefferson wrote, and the others endorsed, man's inherent right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The indebtedness of this idea to the foremost philosopher of the time, John Locke, has often been pointed out. However, what is equally important is the American strain visible in the Enlightenment ideals blown over from Europe. The original Lockean trinity of rights read: life, liberty and "estate" or property as the basic rights of all individuals. In substituting "pursuit of happiness", the signatories to the Declaration made such a fundamental change that they cannot be supposed to elements of Americanism, it is these shared values and interpretations which are of utmost importance.

have been ignorant of its importance. In spite of the emerging liberal consensus on the virtues of capitalism, the declaration shied from granting property the status of a natural right. In light of later claims made in favour of the rights of property owners, as for example by anti-progressive forces in twentieth century, over the needs of popular happiness, this factor is of tremendous significance. Thus competition was accepted as the basic principle of both economic and political institutions.55

55 The prominence of civic virtue to limit the possible evil effects of capitalism have been ascribed to the republican doctrine then in favour. It looked to ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. In the English American colonies of late eighteenth century, there was a utopian mood full of righteous exuberance that also affected the writing of the Declaration [See, Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution [Cambridge, 1967] and Gordon Wood, The Creation of the American Republic [Chapel Hill, 1969]]. The leading men of the colonies, and particularly those who signed the Declaration, and later the constitution, had been avid readers of Greek and Latin classics [Editor's “Introduction” to Saul K. Padover, ed., The World of the Founding Fathers [New York, 1960]]. Inspired by the neoclassicism of the day they found much to admire in the early republics of Greece and Rome. However, they were troubled by the corruption that led to instability and decline of the ancient polities. More damaging was the realization that the contemporary American society seemed an uncomfortably close likeness of the decadent periods of the old republics.

The Great Awakening had been a popular revolt against growing materialism and hedonism in the colonies. Writing in 1776, John Adams showed himself aware of greed and materialism pervading the society. In his words:

But there is so much rascality, so much venality and corruption, so much avarice and ambition, such a rage for profit and commerce among all ranks and degrees of men even in America, that I sometimes doubt there is public virtue enough to support a republic (Letter from John Adam to Mercy Warren, Braintree, 8 January 1776, as reproduced in ibid., p. 79).

Alexander Hamilton confessed in 1783: “I have an indifferent opinion of the honesty of this country...”[Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, 25 March 1783], as reproduced in ibid., p. 197], and George Washington felt as late as 1786: “Notwithstanding the boasted virtue of America we are very little if anything behind them.
This competition was envisaged on an individual basis since ethnic groupings find no mention in the documents. However, Federalist 10 and 51 make clear that there was a general recognition of the phenomenon of "faction" or interest groups as we would call them today. Though factions were regarded as detrimental to the exercise of civic virtue, competition amongst them was considered a useful tool to check their damaging power. There was also a clear realization that factions were probably needed to make democracy work. As Eugene D. Genovese notes, till the time of the Civil War, the conservatives in both North and South tended to interpret individual liberty as belonging to the head of the household while liberals were beginning to interpret it in terms of atomic individuals. For both, however, competition on the basis of "individualism" was the only way to select the best, whether it was goods, ideas, or persons. This was a lead for the African Americans to transform their traditional racial category into a "faction" and compete for their rights.

Once the Civil War successfully set aside spurious scientific doubts about the humanity of blacks, they began slowly to grapple with the peculiar context of Americanism – fighting its prejudice against "Black" and asserting its idealism in their favour. They were aided by the fact that the twentieth
century has seen the greatest battles over fundamental changes in traditional liberalism. Progressivism in the first two decades of the century, New Deal policies in 1930s and 1940s and the policy changes necessitated by the Civil Rights movement have all essentially accepted that the ideology of personal responsibility has been stretched to the breaking point. These movements have been a recognition of the fact that circumstances play an important part in deciding the fate of an individual even in American society.

They highlighted that the African Americans have been the great and glaring exception in American practice of liberalism. Also, albeit to a lesser extent, in the histories of Asian and Hispanic peoples, is written the violation of the liberal code in America. Americanism therefore has faced its most serious and threatening crisis in the form of racial rather than class conflicts. The Civil War, the Reconstruction, the Civil Rights movement, and the extremes of the present-day multiculturalism have all to do with race problems. Race, in twentieth century, remained the single most potent flaw in the American ideological consensus, and struggles over it seemed at times capable of wrecking it.