

The Takeaway

The Meaning of 'American Values'

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By **Kristen Meinzer** : Associate Producer



American flag (jcolman/flickr)

We frequently hear the term "values" discussed as regards American politics, culture and life. But what are "American values?" Are they about family? If so, what kind of family? Are they about religion? If so, is it religion as a separate entity from the government, or religion as an ideology that informs government?

During the **week of December 13th**, we'll be delving into the values we frequently equate with being an American. We'll talk with experts and real people, both, and we'd love to hear from you as well: **What do you consider to be "American values?"**

American Values

A week-long series on uniquely American values, old and new.

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RECOMMENDED LINKS

■ **Your Take: American Values** "family" varies widely.

The topics we'll be exploring, and the experts we'll be talking with, include:

Reinvention: Toby Miller is the author of "Makeover Nation: The United States of Reinvention." He insists that the ability to remake ourselves is the value that defines Americans most. He argues, however, that while reinvention is depicted on our TV screens as more possible than ever, economically speaking, it has actually become less possible than ever before for Americans to reinvent ourselves. Nonetheless, reinvention continues to be a big part of our lives in non-economic ways.

Family: We frequently hear the terms "family values" and "American values" being used interchangeably. But what are family values? And for that matter, what do Americans consider a family? Seven years ago, Brian Powell began conducting the first nationwide survey centered on these very questions. He found that, more than anything else in their lives, Americans value their families. But how they define the term

Thriftiness and/or Conspicuous Consumption: Ben Franklin said that "A penny saved is a penny earned." But is America still defined by thrift, hard work, and cash on the barrelhead? Depending on who you ask, today's American may very well be defined more by conspicuous consumption than thriftiness. Lauren Weber, author of "In Cheap We Trust: The Story of a Misunderstood American Value" shares her insights.

Religion: Sarah Barringer Gordon is the author of "The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America." In her opinion, religion is quintessential to American life and culture. She says that America stands out in the world for its belief in God at a very high rate, its commitment to worship, its respect for plurality of religion, and its religious diversity. That being said, she insists we're not religiously adherent, but religiously vibrant. After all, where else in the world can Joseph Smith find gold tablets from God, and a science fiction writer (L. Ron Hubbard) become a great religious leader?

Home Ownership: "Go west, young man," American pioneers were once told. And why? For land ownership, of course. In light of the

housing crisis that's emotionally and economically devastated America over the past two years, though, is home and land ownership still an American value? Is it something we still feel we should aspire to? And is if so, why? Beth Kobliner, Takeaway contributor and author of "Get a Financial Life," weighs in.

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KRISTEN MEINZER, Associate Producer

Kristen Meinzer is an associate producer for The Takeaway and co-host of The Takeaway's [Movie Date podcast](#).

Comments [10]

Dorian from New York

On Reinvention: After 20 years in the workforce, as a journalist and editor, I got an MBA, and use those skills every day in a business I have created. In my graduating class were other people in their 40s, some in their 30s. I now teach MBA candidates at the same school, part of the City University of New York, all of whom are working adults. Sometimes it's career advancement, but there's often a strong element of re-invention. Given the drive and willingness to work, I believe the opportunity for reinvention exists strongly.

Dec. 10 2010 09:04 AM



P from Denver

Sports, Booze and Money!

Dec. 10 2010 08:32 AM



roblago

I can agree with elements of the last comment & which to relate this to my previous posting. Many Americans are turned off by political activism. Those that might be inclined often feel disassociated b/c the mechanism of our democracy so compromised by money. We do need better campaign finance reform and at present (& for the last 3 decades) more civil & truthful discussion from the right. One can protect themselves from lead paint, but someone should not label governments that outlaws this a nanny state. Do most Americans which to bring back lead in their paint? A person can argue the need legislate the wearing of seatbelts, but American car makers lobbied hard to avoid their inclusion in cars. Can we forgot our beloved cigarette industry and long they have worked for our benefit and in support of our freedoms. Wasn't there something written about what's wrong with Kansas. Good democratic values and freedoms are the underpinning of good personal freedoms & values we hold. Presently, there is a tug of war between the corporate personal freedoms we value & people's personal freedoms we value. They don't have to be the same & corporations usually win in the "free market". Is that what we value? Is a person's government welfare bigger in the US for corporation then for an individual person?

Dec. 09 2010 11:25 AM



Jon Leszczynski from Detroit Area

The problem with this question is that there is a big difference between what values the majority of America believes we support, and the values that America has demonstrated it supports.

Most Americans claim to support liberty but the evidence for what they actually support demonstrates far less concern.

The founders created a constitution designed to limit the powers of government and supplemented it with the bill of rights. But when you look at times when the government has trodden on those rights, few Americans are actually outraged. Most are ignorant and/or apathetic and many willfully choose to surrender their freedom in search of some supposed security.

What I see as the ideals of American Values, which are a steadfast support for freedom, individual responsibility, the virtue and compensation of hard work and taking risk have been replaced with those seeking the comfort values of a nanny state to protect them from all possible harm at a cost that I find unbearable. (Loss of the values associated with the individual being replaced with values far closer to what Karl Marx preached.)

Dec. 09 2010 10:46 AM



roblagomarsino

the basis for any claim to american uniqueness is the idea of reinventing or the chance to improve oneself. Which historically was derived in response to the Old World's societal & political calcification. However, the current crisis in American values is fundamentally about confusing the concept of personal freedom. I contend we have overly comprised our values of democratic freedoms with those values of the "free market". By democratic values I mean those values which ensure a mechanism that fairly protects our personal freedoms, such as the right to freely associate & assemble. corporate america & their right wing lackeys have campaigned successfully & marketed the equation that the value of market freedoms is the same as the value of personal freedoms. Yet they continue to undermine the mechanism that maintain an individual's democratic freedoms. the recent well know supreme court case is an example. Not only b/c of the absurdity of equating the freedom to spend with the freedom of public speech. But as an example of corporate america highjacking both the supreme court through the Republican Party, and through the media, i.e. FOX & the Washington Times. Also, the notion s/b re-inspected that a corporate person is the same as physical person. At present I suggest that corporatoion have more rights &

perhaps less responsibility. In addition, the supreme court is handing over even more.

Dec. 09 2010 10:23 AM



Kay from Milton MA

When I hear the phrase "American values" I immediately get suspicious that someone is trying to sell me something stupid. However, I do think that one value we did have and seem to have misplaced is the reliance on community. Politicians frequently use the phrase "town meeting" without ever having seen one. Once upon a time, living in small communities far from a power source, people had to rely on each other and town meetings developed as a way to manage local affairs together. Adversaries had to face each other in person (not blogs) and hammer out compromises to balance the budget, and then go on to deal with each other from day to day. This sense of communal engagement is being lost, even in places that still have real town meetings. That's an American value that we should try to recover.

Dec. 09 2010 10:13 AM



Milton from New York

When I think of American values I think of the 1973 Pink Floyd lyric...

Money, get back
I'm alright Jack
Keep your hands off of my stack

Dec. 09 2010 09:47 AM



Robert Atwood

Unfortunately, a principle element of American values today is hypocrisy. Devoted pro-life totally unconcerned about people dying from poverty or pollution; espousing freedom, but not the freedom of others to disagree; claiming freedom of religion, but only for others to believe their religion; championing allies whose needs and opinions they disregard; insisting on America's influence in the world while cutting foreign aid and diplomacy; angrily punishing illegal immigrants while turning a blind eye to the businesses that hire them if those businesses make them or their stock portfolios richer; extolling the virtues of the free market while greedily hanging on to every subsidy, tax break, loophole and non-competitive practice that benefits them. When you find any consistent American values, let me know.

Dec. 08 2010 09:07 PM



Thomas from Wallace, SC

Not that I agree with this but, American values can be summed up as:

Money, money, money, how can I make more, no matter who gets hurt, what morals have to be sacrificed, or who is enslaved or exterminated.

Dec. 08 2010 10:34 AM



Bruce P from Atlanta

As parents trying to raise two children (10 and 13 yrs old) with solid core values, we keep our values message simple but consistent. We have found in our short 13 years of parenting, that the message to our children has applied both early as well as at current ages.

- 1) Do the right thing, especially when no one else is watching.
- 2) Take responsibility for your actions.
- 3) Find ways to selflessly help others in need.
- 4) Commit to a "yes I can" attitude when facing a difficulty and/or a new challenge.
- 5) Treat yourself and others with dignity and respect.

Values come from within. We focus internally as a family for our value system.

Finally, we believe in consequences (good and bad) for taking or not taking personal responsibility.

We are learning as parents. This system has proven effective for us thus far as a family.

Dec. 08 2010 08:43 AM



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