

Understanding American Culture Worksheet

1. Insert the following words in the blanks of the article titled "Teaching American Values at Home and Abroad":

black slavery	American Dream	capitalism	Declaration of Independence	hard work
democracy	Revolutionary War	melting pot	tolerant	immigrants
civil rights	competition	equality	entrepreneur	U.S. Civil War

2. Answer the following questions:

a) What is the American Dream?

b) What is the American "melting pot"?

c) How is individualism reinforced by industrial capitalism?

d) The author says that:

"The values of individualism and democracy are shared more fully among its citizens than any other country in history."

Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

3. Which of America's values do you admire the most? Which ones do you think do not represent what America looks like today?

TEACHING AMERICAN VALUES AT HOME AND ABROAD

(abridged)

By Susan Armitage

(In the following article the author has posed a variety of topics and explored their use as elements of provocation to engage students from very different perspectives. The issues as cast are not intended as definitive examinations of historical interpretation.)

America's fundamental political values were first and most famously expressed at a moment of profound change: the beginning of the _____ against Britain in 1776. That revolution was justified to the world by America's most famous document, the _____ which contains words that many Americans know by heart:

5 *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

10 This set of vague but powerful values is basic to American national identity. The very existence of such a specific ideology makes America distinctive among nations, most of whom have developed their sense of nationhood more out of a shared cultural history than out of a set of abstract political principles.

How, you may ask, has it really worked in practice? How have Americans measured up to their expressed creed during the two centuries since the Declaration of Independence?

15 Let us take the most fundamental value first -- **liberty, or freedom**. We know that the signers of the Declaration of Independence did not take the phrase "all men are created equal" literally, because they continued to allow _____.

20 Slavery began in America in the early 17th century, when the first captives were shipped from Africa. It remained legal in 15 states in the American South until the end of the _____ in 1865. After the Civil War, 4 million black people, former slaves, were free, but they were not equal. Most remained in the American South, in a system that kept them segregated from society until after World War II. In the 20th century, many black people migrated to northern cities, but the majority of the black population still lived in the South.

25 Beginning in the 1950s, black people rose up peacefully in nonviolent resistance to demand their _____. It was a great moment in American history, a confirmation of American values, for black people based their protest on the fact that they were denied their basic American right to equality, and most white Americans agreed with them. Nevertheless, the civil rights movement still continues, for although great changes in race relations have occurred in America since the 1960s, much remains to be done.

30 Another key American value is **individualism** and its political expression, _____. Americans think of themselves first as individuals and only second as members of groups such as ethnic group, social class, local community or family. This extreme emphasis on individualism reflects the importance of individual rights summarized in the words of the nation's founders. It was also reinforced by the concurrent development of industrial _____, with its opportunities for individual success and wealth. As it developed in
35 the United States, industrial capitalism replaced a family-based system of production, encouraged mobility away from one's own original community, and demonstrated that the single (almost always male) wage-earner could prosper through _____ rather than from the patronage or influence of someone else. Closely tied to individualism, then, is a strong belief in _____ and in the free enterprise system. You get ahead by
40 competing with others rather than cooperating with them. The best economy, most Americans believe, is the free enterprise economy, in which companies and individuals compete freely with each other without government interference. Never mind for now that the American

45 economy does not really work that way. Many people believe that it does, and that "interference," especially from the government, is wrong. Thus "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" become defined as one's own self-interest, rather than wider social goals or even the goals or needs of one's own family. The belief that one has control over one's own life is a major value. One of the most admired figures in American life today is the _____, the man who works for himself. Especially admired is the successful entrepreneur, who is always believed to be, in a telling phrase, a self-made man.

50 If competition is so valued, what happens to the idea of _____? Americans believe not in absolute equality but in equality of opportunity: Everyone should have an equal chance to succeed. If they do, it will be because of their own hard work, because the system itself is fair. Conversely, those who do poorly in life have only themselves to blame. The oft-called " _____ " tells us that if we work hard, we will get ahead. Immigrants, today as in
55 the past, are some of the strongest believers in the American Dream.

America has always been, and continues to be, a nation of _____. The process by which an immigrant becomes an American is starkly simple. Immigrants in time give up their native language, their ethnic customs (except, perhaps, for food), and, in the second or third
60 generation, often marry someone of another ethnic group. This is the famed American " _____ " by which all distinctive ethnicities are dissolved and a composite emerges. Why have immigrants been willing to undergo this challenging experience? Because, for some, the fable about America as the place where the streets were paved with gold was more or less true. There was much more economic opportunity in America than in the home
65 country. Yet sometimes there is a price paid for economic success: some loss of family, group and ethnic history, which can lead to a sense of rootlessness. Still, immigration is a major shaper of American life. When you consider not only immigration but the high rates of internal migration, you come quickly to understand that starting over is the most common American experience. Americans are optimistic, hopeful people who welcome change because they believe that it is controllable and will lead to improvement in their economic position.

70 While many immigrants feel pressure to change, immigration, and relatively unrestricted opportunity, have made many Americans more _____ of difference and diversity. Americans come from different origins, and this has contributed to tolerance. Open space, open economy and rapid growth have meant an ability to absorb new populations; this also helps to produce tolerance. The tolerance has limits, which are both racial and behavioral, but
75 compared to many other nations, we are still more open, less discriminatory.

Our differences have also shaped our politics. Because we do not share a common cultural past, we have agreed as a nation to be future-oriented, to look forward rather than backward. This has worked well when Americans believed they had a clear future, such as settling the continent in the 19th century or taking a major role in world leadership in the 20th century. It works less well when the future is unclear, as it is at the moment.
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Nevertheless, today most Americans believe that the spectacular success of their large, rich and diverse country has been the result of the American values of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The values of individualism and democracy are shared more fully among its citizens than any other country in history. Most Americans are proud of our country's history as they understand it, of its values and of the way it has used its power to support those goals in the world. They view the current spread of American music, fashions and television throughout the world as confirmation that what is often called the American way of life is suitable for everyone, everywhere.
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