

What It Means to Be an American—Two Views



ABOUT THE READING People can become American citizens in one of two ways. Any person born in the United States is automatically an American citizen. Those who come from other countries must go through a legal process to become naturalized, or “adopted,” citizens. Over the years, people have expressed different ideas about what it means to be an American. The following excerpts present views of Americans from two different centuries.



As you read note how the two men describe what it means to be a good citizen.

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

Like most American colonists, Crèvecoeur was an immigrant. He was born in France and became a citizen of New York in 1765. During the American Revolution he was caught in the conflict between patriots and loyalists. He fled to England. There he published a book of essays. The book described his adopted country. In the excerpt below, he presents his idea of what makes Americans unique.

What then is the American, this new man? . . . 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. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with

Source: From *Letters from an American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur.

VOCABULARY

Alma Mater caring mother (refers to someone or something that provides care)

incorporated included

hereafter in the future

wherein in which

allurement appeal

An American is someone who leaves behind the ideas of his old land. His new way of life makes him form new ideas.

In America, people from different countries blend together. Through their work and their children, they will change the world.

them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are **incorporated** into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will **hereafter** become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that **wherein** either he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, *self-interest*; can it want a stronger **allurement**? . . . The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence.—This is an American.

America offers people the chance to leave behind a life of poverty and lack of meaningful work. Here hard work leads to a better life.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why does Crèvecoeur think Americans should love their new country more than their old one?

2. Do you agree with the author's idea that in America people from different places are "melted into a new race"? Explain your answer.

Theodore Roosevelt

Roosevelt was president from 1901 to 1909. He was outspoken in the use of government power for the public good. When he left office he went on a long tour of Africa and Europe. The excerpt below is from a speech he made in Paris. France and the United States had similar forms of government. Roosevelt emphasized the importance of good citizens to the strength of their government.

The good citizen in a republic must first of all be able to hold his own. He is no good citizen unless he has the ability which will make him work hard and which at need will make him fight hard. The good citizen is not a good citizen unless he is an efficient citizen.

But if a man's efficiency is not guided and regulated by a moral sense, then the more efficient he is the worse he is, the more dangerous to the body politic. Courage, intellect, all the masterful qualities, serve but to make a man more evil if they are merely used for that man's own advancement, with brutal indifference to the rights of others. It speaks ill for the community if the community worships these qualities and treats their possessors as heroes regardless of whether the qualities are used rightly or wrongly. It makes no difference as to the precise way in which this **sinister** efficiency is shown. It makes no difference whether such a man's force and ability **betray** themselves in a career of money-maker or politician, soldier or **orator**, journalist or popular leader. If the man works for evil, then the more successful he is the more he should be despised and condemned by all upright and far-seeing men. To judge a man merely by success is an **abhorrent** wrong; and if the people at large habitually so judge men, if they grow to condone wickedness because the wicked man triumphs, they show their inability to understand that in the last analysis free institutions rest upon the character of citizenship, and that by such admiration of evil they prove themselves

Source: "Citizenship in a Republic," Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, France, April 23, 1910.

VOCABULARY**sinister** dangerous**betray** show**orator** public speaker**abhorrent** horrible**thereto** to them

The person who is an expert at getting things done must also have a strong sense of right and wrong. Otherwise that person is a great danger to society.

The strength of a country depends on the goodness of its citizens. Citizens must not support people who achieve success in the wrong way.

unfit for liberty. The homely virtues of the household, the ordinary workaday virtues which make the woman a good housewife and housemother, which make the man a hard worker, a good husband and father, a good soldier at need, stand at the bottom of character. But of course many other must be added **thereto** if a state is to be not only free but great. Good citizenship is not good citizenship if only exhibited in the home. There remains the duties of the individual in relation to the State, and these duties are none too easy under the conditions which exist where the effort is made to carry on the free government in a complex industrial civilization.

Good character is based on the qualities that people show in their daily lives.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why does Roosevelt place so much emphasis on acting rightly?

2. What happens if people honor those who are successful but not moral?

MAKE A COMPARISON

1. What are some qualities that both authors think good citizens should have?

2. These authors wrote at two different times. Do you think the times in which they wrote affected their ideas? Explain your answer.
