

Fast Cars, Native Americans, Sailor's Yarns, and Wild Women:

My American Society

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Good afternoon! I am delighted to be here today to offer my congratulations to all of you and wish you the best for your new adventure in the United States. To prepare for your visit, MACECE has asked me to present a brief overview of American society, but since I am not adept at facts and statistics I will merely share a few stories about my own family, hoping these will serve as sufficient illustration of “American society.”

Let’s start at the beginning: The United States is a country where everyone—excepting the Native American—comes from somewhere else. Often, from somewhere very, very far away, since America is bracketed by vast oceans. Although originally the land itself was a huge, mostly uninhabited continent, its immigrants came from long-established civilizations with distinct sets of cultural habits, cuisines, languages, clothing, religions, and ways of assessing the world. In the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries they embarked mostly from England and Northern Europe to settle the narrow strip bordering the Atlantic that became the first political entity of the “original 13” colonies; but also, albeit unwillingly, they arrived in the millions as slaves from Africa forced to work the sprawling cotton and sugar plantations that were slowly expanding south and westward along the Gulf Coast; in the 19th century many came from Asia to build the great railroads that linked the now continental U.S. together, and they—not just the cowboys--helped define the culture of the Pacific West; later, they again arrived as refugees from Korea and Vietnam and are now firmly established in all the major cities; and, as we speak, immigrants continue to flood into the American South and Southwest from Latin America as illegals, *clandestins*, and to reshape the American linguistic and cultural landscape: all U.S. government publications are now printed in English—and in Spanish.

This sheer physical diversity and cultural pluralism has been America's greatest strength, fueling its national energy and zeal for innovation in business, medicine, government, law, education, religion, the arts, and in all facets of social *mores*. Since those who immigrated shared the fundamental experience of change and possessed a temperament suited to survival, they were adaptable and, like plants, either rooted into their new soil or were grafted onto the existing stock.

In my own case, both proved true. My grandmother is part Native American Indian, so my roots go very deep, and my other grandparents were descendants of northern Europeans, most of whom came to America for the classic reasons of economic opportunity or religious freedom. One ancestor started his sojourn in America as an indentured servant, a step up from slavery, a child worker on a farm in Delaware. But he grew up to marry the farmer's daughter--and to inherit the farm. He might be cited as an example of the so called "immigrant mentality"; born of the insecurity of change, many Americans are focused, competitive, driven, and while no one can be more generous in helping a neighbor, their strong individualism has bred contempt for social welfare and suspicion of authority. Certainly, some like the indentured servant had luck, yes, but many immigrants also had an eye for seizing the main chance; and, of course, they also succeeded through tough resilience and sheer hard work.

Or--through sheer audacity. My great uncle Malcolm hated school and routine work; he loved women and fast cars. In the 1920s, thanks to the newly invented automobile, he finally found his niche: driving the Philadelphia fire chief's car. He would drive so fast even the chief would tell him to slow down! My grandfather was nicknamed "Happy," and my mother always said she could never finish a meal at his table because she laughed

so hard. Grandfather, PopPop, was a sailor and, like most men of the sea, loved to spin yarns of his adventures, many of which we later found out were true. He ran away from home when he was just 15 and, lying about his age, joined the merchant marine. In the late 19th century, he apprenticed on the graceful masted “tall ships,” sailing to South America and ports in the Caribbean. He was an old salt of 25 when he met and married my part-Indian grandmother, who was only a teenager. He was a boxing champion and an expert sailor who invented a famous way of mooring ships, still practiced today, called “Melbourne Mooring.” Once, out on a cruise, he made a killing at the racetrack and sent half his winnings back to his wife who carefully invested it in the stock market; he cheerfully spent every penny of his half: Later that month, the stock market crashed and my grandmother lost everything... Although he was often asked, he never wanted to be an officer, preferring the camaraderie of his fellows; eventually, he became the highest-ranking seaman—non-officer—in the entire United States Navy. During the Second World War, he was in charge of the presidential yacht at the Washington Navy Yard, and my father vividly remembers how, as a small boy, his seaman father introduced him to “Mr. President,” FDR.

My father, on the other hand, unlike his own father and uncle Malcolm, was a serious and studious boy, so much a bookworm that PopPop once bribed him to throw a baseball through a neighbor’s window: PopPop wanted to boast of a reckless son. Times were tough in the 1930s during the Great Depression when my father was at the University of Pennsylvania, an elite private university for which his parents had sacrificed in order to send him. While he succeeded brilliantly, was even offered a full scholarship to one of the finest law schools in the country and could have become a wealthy man, he demurred:

like his father before him, my father preferred a life of adventure. Risking his future and his family's investment in his education, against slim odds, he gambled on passing the highly competitive United States Foreign Service entrance examination: the indentured servant, the half-educated fire chief's chauffeur, the runaway sailor, the Native American all participated in my father's distinguished 40-year diplomatic career.

But—what about the women? you ask, and rightly so. Until quite recently, women in America had less latitude for a life of adventure than did men. (Although this might indeed depend upon what is meant by the term “adventure.”) My mother's family were Southern, from South Carolina and Virginia, and Granny to her dying day referred to anyone from above the Mason-Dixon line as “damnyankee,” the epithet, Homer-like, carrying epic resonance. Memories of the Civil War run deep in the South, where you can still see the “Stars and Bars,” the Confederate flag, flying from local gas stations and on the license plates of pick up trucks. Granny's family were old-line Southerners who traced their name back to a signer of the Declaration of Independence, the family's women famed for their beauty, the men for their prowess on horseback—and in war. The scion of this family was Granny's cousin, the great General Douglas McArthur, who was noted as much for his tall elegance as for an autocratic manner that did not sit well with his civilian boss, President Harry Truman.

Granny was, for a girl of the 19th century, simply a scandal. There was only one word for it: wild. She liked men. One night after a ball she eloped with a young man. Her family promptly annulled the union and, to avoid more scandal, packed her off to an older sister who had married a Canadian. In Montreal, my wild grandmother finally settled down, christening her eldest daughter Virginia after her beloved home. Virginia

grew into a tall and lovely young woman who caught the eye of an American diplomat...and, voila! Here we are, my sister and I and our children, products of two distinct strands in American society, that of the Southern landowner and the self-made Northern adventurer.

My tall sister hates to leave home, but she loves to drive fast cars and can tell very funny stories; I hate to stay in one place and love the sea but find a home wherever I am, especially one here in Rabat. Through my family, I have learned that America is truly the New World, a part of the globe that belongs to us all. And, indeed, despite its periodic racial and ethnic and, now, cultural paranoia, the truth remains that the United States is a mix of all races and cultures that, at times, deliriously overlap. My son, Ibrahim, is my personal cultural hero, a Native American-Anglo-European-Arab-Egyptian-American! Last summer we spent several weeks at our beach place on an island off the North Carolina coast and my 10-year old was toasted a south Morocco, Sahara-like deep coffee. At a community barbeque, a jovial pinkly sunburned man asked, "Where are you from, son?" Puzzled, Iby looked him square in the eye: "From America."