

FROM THE EDITOR

Character and Criminality

By Daniel Born

In *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), Mark Twain describes an ignorant band of American tourists who stumble around Europe and the Middle East. In their search for experience, they wait to be impressed by the cultural treasures of the journey and give repeated offense to their guides. It is a memorable portrait of the American character—better, of the American yahoo. Though the book comes packed with vicious barbs, Twain manages sympathy for his fellow travelers' bad behavior, not least of all because he considers himself an unfinished primitive, desperately in need of education.

Other pundits have made their own attempts to define something called the American character. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, writing in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), would describe someone “who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced.” Crèvecoeur accurately predicted that Americans would “one day cause great changes in the world.” Alexis de Tocqueville, writing his two volume masterpiece *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), argued that what sets American society apart is a fundamental idea about equality, sharply different from Europe's obsession with class and social rank. Homegrown American Henry Adams, writing toward the end of the nineteenth century when the republic was emerging from its

agrarian identity and entering the Machine Age, would suggest that the American character is undergoing permanent transformation; in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), he describes an America in which technology alters both the spiritual and the literal landscape.

Yet it was an Englishman, D. H. Lawrence, a tubercular novelist with a penchant for scandal, who declared most succinctly what American character is about. Describing novelist James Fenimore Cooper's creation of frontier scout and woodsman Natty Bumppo, Lawrence wrote in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923): “The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.”

The initial impulse in reading that cold phrase is to dismiss it as the hyperbolic ravings of a lunatic. But the more one wrestles with Lawrence's claim, the more one feels slimed by its truth. It marks the perverse logical endpoint of one of America's most precious founding ideas: that we each be allowed to cultivate the individual voice. This in turn, paradoxically, leads to a rather narrow definition of heroic character, and one rather at home on the range despite a lack of emotional range: the loner who likes his guns and his freedom, his wide open spaces, his own personal Eden, where he can be a decider of his own. Our literature and popular culture indicate how deep these roots go. Whether Gatsby, Shane, or Mike

Hammer, these so-called individuals, upon closer inspection, generally reveal themselves as mere carbon copies of the mythological formula.

Lawrence left one prime fact off his notorious list—a fact so elemental that he didn't bother to make it explicit: the “essential” type comes bathed in testosterone. And if his screed identified the beginnings of the type in Cooper's 18th-century frontiersman, it would set the boilerplate for American heroism throughout most of the 20th century. Fifty years after Lawrence's pronouncement, Hollywood was still perfecting its parameters, in characters such as Clint Eastwood's unforgettably tough Dirty Harry and Harrison Ford's slightly more huggable scoundrel Han Solo.

The apotheosis of Lawrence's dictum came through the actor Al Pacino, whose interpretations of the gangsters Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* (1972) and Tony Montana in *Scarface* (1983) have earned him screen immortality. If Tony Montana embodies Lawrence's understanding of the American “soul,” his famous immigrant speech—spit out in crude but deeply felt monosyllables and known by heart to Pacino fans the world over—also embeds the seamiest possible interpretation of the American dream: “First you get the power. Then you get the money. Then you get the women.”

That cartoonish speech says more about our national character than we would like to admit. What I mean

by this is our national character not as we *wish* to understand it (I, too, enjoy the reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Father Knows Best*, and the Disney classics—all benign antidotes to Lawrence’s bloody claim), but as it is *perceived* in the global community of both friends and enemies.

Several matters that now cloud the face of our global character will need to be carefully addressed in the near future. The most pressing question before us is whether we indeed represent the rule of law or are busy making up new rules as we go. If our actual behavior seems more about functioning as a law unto ourselves, then we may be closer to the spirit of *Scarface* than to any kind of restraint or wisdom uttered by the Founders.

As many of us now know, the federal snooping into the lives of individual citizens—made legal through provisions of the Patriot Act, and including the monitoring of phone calls and examination of library records—has reached Orwellian proportions. If these incursions on our individual privacy and liberty trouble us, then the indefinite incarceration of “detainees” who lack the status of either prisoners of war or criminals charged with a crime should terrify us. Held without specific charges, and denied legal recourse, these individuals put to the test our basic standards of civil rights. More outrageous is the fact that according to the Military Provisions Act, signed into effect in October 2006, the president of the United States now has the power to detain any American in jail without trial, if the president so chooses. The matter of arbitrary incarceration becomes further complicated when we consider the practice of “extraordinary rendition” of prisoners to secret CIA prisons around the globe. The fact that early reports of these prisons

were vehemently denied by officials in Washington offers little in the way of reassurance.

If the spread of democracy is to be our stated purpose, then the torturing and killing of prisoners by U.S. military personnel and civilian military contractors must end: it is unacceptable on both moral grounds and pragmatic, self-interested ones. Militarily, the torture makes no sense, usually leading to fabricated or unreliable information. As some

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veteran soldiers have observed, it can only increase the danger of retaliation against U.S. military personnel. Furthermore, when U.S. officials make statements that qualify again and again how the Geneva Conventions are to be understood, the disingenuousness of American political authority and character becomes painfully clear. Our behavior in this regard makes us resemble the worst banana republics of the 1980s.

Finally, the irresponsible use of military force will require the most thoughtful of public debates. When the civilian casualties of our avowed democratizing mission—so-called “collateral damage”—are repressed or denied, the world takes note. The fact that our government does not generally allow pictures of the dead to be shown (to be sure, the mainstream media has consented to this censor-

ship), or even bother to count the number of civilian casualties, sends a chilling message about our character’s content and gives our enemies the fuel for vicious propaganda.

We American citizens are still innocents abroad, but the humor that Twain was able to summon has evaporated. Now, the truth is closer to the callous self-interest that English novelist Graham Greene brilliantly described in *The Quiet American* (1955), a story set against the backdrop of the losing French cause in Vietnam. At the heart of Greene’s story is an idealistic young man named Pyle, whose high-flown rhetoric of good intentions and the spread of democracy is merely a scrim—behind which hides an agent who blows people up for the higher good. Fowler, the shopworn journalist and narrator, bitterly observes of him and his kind: “He was determined . . . to do good, not to any individual person, but to a country, a continent, a world.” Later on Fowler identifies Pyle’s problem as one of lethal innocence: “Innocence always calls mutely for protection when we should be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it: innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm.”

We can no longer afford this kind of innocence. And if our character indeed resembles the one D. H. Lawrence laid bare nearly a century ago, then it is time to demand an accounting. I know that there are those among us who still believe our collective character is capable of moral growth, those who understand the difference between right and wrong. And if it is knowledge—not experience—that will cure us of this innocence, then I say that, however difficult it may be, we must reach for the forbidden fruit. ●