

# The Soul Of A Nation

By Larry Robinson

Moral character is determined, not so much from the values we espouse, as from the choices we make, particularly those choices we make when our values and our self-interests conflict. Most of us consider ourselves moral people; most of us think of ourselves as honest. Yet how many of us have committed an act of dishonesty because it seemed to benefit us and because we thought we could get away with it? If we are honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that such a decision diminished us.

Most of us, in fact, act morally and ethically, not because we fear that we might get caught and punished, but because we have learned that acting against our deepest values makes us less. We become greater human beings by choosing to behave in ways consistent with our principles, even though we could “get away” with something less.

Nations, too, reveal and create their moral character by their choices and their actions, particularly when they must choose between their self-interest and their most deeply held values. The history of America is the story of our ongoing struggle between these choices.

Most Americans believe in “liberty and justice for all,” we share Thomas Jefferson’s belief that we are all created equal and that we are endowed with inalienable rights, including those of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Despite these cherished values, our government’s foreign policies have, over the years, been driven more by American interests—corporate interests, to be precise. Too often, as well, these corporate interests are not the same as the interests of the average American citizen.

To be sure, there have been historical cases of American interests coinciding with American values. World War II and the subsequent Marshall Plan for rebuilding Japan and Western Europe, and establishing democracy in those countries, are examples of such a congruence.

Unfortunately, however, most policy decisions are based solely on what will benefit American businesses. Lip service is always paid to “freedom” and “democracy,” but when business interests conflict with human rights, “freedom and justice for all” take a back seat.

Witness our overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 at the behest of American and British oil companies, leading to the dictatorship of the Shah; the violent overthrow of Guatemala’s President Arbenz in 1954 to protect the interests of United Fruit; the military coup in Chile in 1973 (to benefit Anaconda Copper) which killed the democratically elected President Allende and led to a brutal dictatorship; our continued support for the military regime in Burma. When it served our strategic interests we supported Saddam Hussein, supplying him with the materials to produce chemical and biological weapons. The list goes on and on.

None of these actions have, in any way, been supportive of “American values.” Yet they have been committed in our name. Many Americans have received some short-term material

benefit, such as artificially low oil prices or inexpensive consumer goods imported from countries where dictatorships ensure manufacturers of cheap labor by brutally repressing workers' rights to organize.

But the longer-term costs have been high: the loss of higher paying manufacturing jobs on this country; greater instability throughout the world; terrorist threats and the subsequent loss of our own freedoms in the "war on terror."

The greatest cost, though, has been to the soul of America. Each time our government acts in ways contrary to our values—and they could not do it without, at least, our passive consent—we are diminished as a people. For two centuries, the world has looked to us as a beacon of hope. The following words by Emma Lazarus are inscribed on the Statue of Liberty:

### The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Now that golden door is looking increasingly tarnished and we are at risk of becoming that brazen giant. But we still have a choice. We are approaching a defining moment in American history. It appears that we are about to embark on a war of conquest against a people who have not aggressed against us. Moreover, we have threatened to unleash the world's greatest nightmare: nuclear war.

If the American people allow this to happen, we will do irreparable damage to our collective soul, to say nothing of the human suffering and environmental destruction which this war will produce. There are those cynics who speak the language of "realpolitik" who will say that we cannot afford to act on our values, that our American values are unrealistically idealistic in such a dangerous world. They would rather that we remain passive consumers of pre-digested information and ready -to-wear opinions.

In the coming days and months we will define our moral character and choose our destiny as a people. We still have it within us to become a people of greatness rather than a flock of frightened sheep trying to eat as much grass as we can before the slaughter. What is at stake is the soul of this nation.

Larry Robinson is a City Council member and former Mayor of Sebastopol, CA  
460 Eleanor Ave.  
Sebastopol, CA 95472  
[lrob@pon.net](mailto:lrob@pon.net)  
[www.larryrobinson.org](http://www.larryrobinson.org)