

SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL of AMERICA

an interview with JACOB NEEDLEMAN

"The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founding Fathers"

Several months after the fall of the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush held a press conference at which he was asked by a reporter how the immense tragedy had changed him personally. The Chief Executive hesitated briefly before answering, 'Ask my wife....I don't spend much time looking in the mirror.' In his response, our nation's leader revealed much about the contemporary American character: We are a people of action who don't spend much time reflecting on our actions, our motives, or ourselves. We simply presume that we're good folks who have everyone's best interests at heart– and then proceed to cajole, persuade & intimidate the rest of the world's people's to accept our well– intentioned actions whether they like them or not. On 9–11 our still young nation's forward momentum seemed to come to a halt. We realized things would never be the same and the time may have come to start taking stock of ourselves in a new way.

Needleman gives equal time in his book to what he calls "the crimes of America" – namely, our early legacy of slavery and the genocide of the Native American people. "To a great extent, the material success of America rests on these crimes and others like them.

When I talk to my classes about what an ideal or highly developed human being might be like, they bring up virtues like compassion, wisdom, kindness, and so on. But nobody ever mentions will; it's almost as if the word has fallen out of our vocabulary.

Who knows whether an eighteenth– century person might look at the twenty–first century as morally degraded.

Self–improvement meant "movement toward virtue." It meant developing your character by your deliberate intention, it meant developing both will and good will; it meant having the ability to see the truth, not to indulge in slander or vengeance and to care for others. being a person of authentic virtue. Self –improvement is not therapeutic, it does not mean feeling better about yourself. Understand that the self you respect is not the ego.

We are steeped in "psychic determinism"; that is the idea that our childhood traumas or our genes have essentially determined our lives. We have left out the notion of individual will; it's almost as if the word has fallen out of our vocabulary. Will is the means by which we overcome the problems that genes or life have handed us. Without it, there is no true character.

To many of the Founders, individuality meant the effort to acknowledge and obey the higher law within.

If you view happiness in terms of self realization and spiritual fulfillment, then you enable people to relate to "the Good" – his word for God, or "the highest reality."

Nations are not people; they are a lower, not higher, organism that cannot be judged the way we judge individual human beings. A nation exists primarily to protect its society. The

deepest purpose of the United States government is to provide conditions under which our society can flourish spiritually as well as 'materially.

What exactly did the Founding Fathers mean by "happiness"?

The happiness they were talking about has nothing to do with wish fulfillment or getting everything you want. Fulfillment definitely isn't happiness. The great discovery of adulthood is that getting what you want doesn't by itself make you happy. What does make you happy is to establish contact with a principle within yourself that orders your life and opens you up to loving others, and to loving something higher than yourself. So happiness is discovering truth within yourself, and then trying to live according to that truth. As a society we do need material well-being, but our ultimate purpose is the search for conscience.

No matter how beautifully conceived, no government by itself can make a country virtuous. You must also have the good will and morality of the people who serve the government and of the nation's populace. The Founders recognized the inevitable danger of what they called the "passions" lust, greed, violence, hatred – and they pitted those passions against the "interests": security, well-being, success. Interests are also desires, but they are more survival- oriented. The Founding Fathers intended for human passions to

be over- ruled by human interests. So people may be right when they say, "All America wants is to make the world safe for money." But consider the alternative- if America had been out to serve its citizens' passions rather than their interests. America's always had corrupt Congresses, and the greed and bribery that inevitably go with public office. This is nothing new. The question its not whether we re going to have corruption; the question is how much we can bear.

The Founding Fathers wanted fame; but fame back then meant being respected. by honorable people for your virtue. We can safely say that this idea of fame has been lost in our time, and that the passion for fame as simple celebrity is generally out of hand now all across our culture Even if the outer America is crass, tough, and contradictory, we can survive as long as we are somehow defending that all-important inner search.

You describe the genocide of Native Americans as "the destruction of the higher – consciousness by the lower." There are many who would say that this destruction continues

now on a worldwide basis, as America's materialistic popular culture travels the globe and sweeps away more traditional values wherever it goes.

Needleman: Yes, I think we are often a negative cultural influence. The style of modernity that we project is generally crass, materialistic and coarse. Many of the refinements that are so necessary to humanity are disappearing from other cultures– though sometimes it's because they want to be like America, not because we're imposing our culture on them.

America as merely a materialistic culture with superior physical force will not last long. The question is can we project a fundamental vision of spiritual freedom that is true to our real origins, and make this vision a possibility for the world? I believe our survival as a nation depends a great deal on this. In any case, it is in this direction that we can begin to offer recompense for the crime of genocide that's such a large part of our history. What's good about America is that it has within it the possibility of reinventing itself in this way.

You write, 'America must give back to the world the main thing it is taking from the world.' What is it that we're taking?

Needleman: A way of life that allows for the entry of higher forces into the world. Human beings are meant to do more than simply live out their physical lives on this earth. They're meant to do more, even, than be good stewards of the natural environment. Humanity is meant to be a conductor of great forces, passing from above, through humankind, and back. That's what I mean by the "American soul." Our society has a unique spiritual function that is all too often forgotten.

Are we really defending the ideal of liberty, or just our wealth and power?

Some degree of material well-being is necessary for moral and spiritual well-being. The question that's so difficult to answer is: how much material well-being do we need? If materialism becomes an addiction, leading only to more of itself, then that will obviously destroy our morality and our spirituality. But extreme poverty can do the same thing. Individuals may rise above hardship, but chronic poverty is morally destructive for a country as a whole.

It is necessary for America to become much more generous toward the poor of the world; we can afford to, after all. Even many of our enemies will allow that, as individuals, Americans are fundamentally generous and good willed. It's corporate America that projects the greedy ethos that is so often hated around the world. We need to rediscover our natural goodwill and figure out how to bring it into our relations with other peoples.

And, of course, we need to come to a better understanding of the Middle East and Islam.

The Islam of the terrorists and the fundamentalists is a relatively recent invention.

Historically, Islam contains dimensions of love and compassion that are as deep as anything found in the heart of Christianity and Judaism. The Islam portrayed in the media does not in any way reflect the essence of that great teaching. We also need to realize that Islamic civilization was a dominant world Culture for centuries, but in the modern era it has been reduced to secondary status. Its pride as a great culture has been deeply wounded, and that can be very dangerous.

America may be the only remaining superpower, but the laws of nature say that for every force there is a counterforce. Now our counter force has appeared. It may not be another nation, but something else is out there, resisting us. We need to study that resistance within ourselves. An important part of spiritual development is to understand the relationship of opposing forces. We need to develop a relatively calm and impartial appreciation of what is resisting its, and why. That would be a great step forward for our soul.