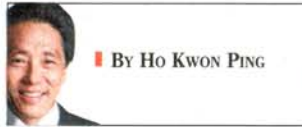


THINK-TANK

Strength in American individualism



By HO KWON PING

I'VE railed often – in these pages and elsewhere – against the corrosive impact of excessive individualism on values: the cult of the hero-chief exec, the fixation on me-first thinking, the obsession with instant gratification, qualities that have all come together to create the economic monster that is American capitalism.

A reader may thus be forgiven for thinking I must be quite anti-American. But that would be wholly incorrect. There is a trend internationally to regard America with disdain, and criticise its many failings. Although there is no doubt that America has in the last 10 years shown some tarnished spots on its slipping crown, there is no doubt in my mind that it is still a great country.

The same individualism that has led to disaster because it was pursued to excess, will also be the source of America's eventual resurgence. Resourcefulness, initiative, innovation are the other side of the coin of individualism.

I wasn't pondering such profound thoughts when my family holidayed in the United States recently. But from the ethnic jungles of San Francisco to the neon canyons of Las Vegas, I found myself recalling that phrase in the Simon and Garfunkel song from my baby-boomer youth: "I've come to look for America".

Other songs of the culture – from Woody Guthrie's This Land Is My Land to Bruce Springsteen's Born On The Fourth Of July – conjure emotions that help explain why American nationalism is among the strongest in the developed world.

In such a vast land of accumulated differences, pride in individualism – the respect Americans accord the sanctity of the individual and thus, meritocracy – binds its citizens together.

At its best, American individualism embraces the notion that every person matters. Increasingly, in American cities especially on the coasts, you will find that social categories are less important than individual histories.



People are interested in where others come from, what they have done, where they are going. Personalities – the flipside of which is the cult of the celebrity – are accorded considerably more respect than in other countries. That's probably why, though it is one of the most economically unequal societies in the world, a streak of egalitarianism pervades American culture, enabling the waiter to chat with the wealthy patron, the barman with the billionaire.

As one American said: "In this country, you can be a gardener and if you tell your friends that you want to be President of the United States, no one's gonna laugh at you. They tell you, 'Good Luck!', and clap you on the back. You can be anything you want to be."

This perhaps also partly explains a unique aspect of American service culture: it's friendliness rather than its efficiency. Naturally, the tipping culture is a major incentive in improving service attitudes, but service providers chat-chat with customers in a way unimaginable in Singapore, venturing opinions not only

on the service product, but on virtually everything else. There is a self-confidence among service providers that allows them not to feel that service is a servile job.

This individualism also translates to an endearingly naive idealism that still clings to the old frontier values of self-reliance and resourcefulness – what I call the DIY (do-it-yourself), Mr Fix-It values. Individualism means you are your own life project; you make endless improvements on your surroundings, your loved ones, yourself.

This is reflected in that uniquely American optimism – a cheery can-do attitude to solving even the most intractable personal problems. This attitude has had interesting results:

First, several times more self-help books are sold in US bookstores than anywhere else in the world. No matter what the problem is, there's always a book or motivational speaker who can help you to help yourself. And second, more items are sold in America's DIY stores than in the largest Wal-Mart.

The American values of DIY struck me when I flipped through the pages of an airline magazine. The in-flight shopping magazines of US airlines are an expedition into the minds of middle America. Magazines of other international airlines feature almost exclusively alcohol, tobacco and branded goods. American airlines' in-flight magazines are chock-a-block with the most practical offerings: devices to save time, to save effort, to make life just that much easier. I found advertisements for special ladders for dogs to climb on to their owners' beds, self-cleaning feeding troughs and an orthopaedical-ideal canine bed.

Revealingly, virtually all of the several hundred items in Sky Mall (United Airline's inflight sales almanac) were designed and manufactured by American SMEs. Here's a random sample of some of the products: The Solar-powered Mole Repeller; the Arthritis Pain Relieving Gloves; the Only Underwater Pogo Stick; the All Season Deer Repellent; the Breathe Fit Anti Snoring Aid.

Americans tend to believe solutions

can be found to any problem, so long as one tries earnestly to find or invent a solution. This led a European friend of mine to muse: "Why can't Americans just be less optimistic and more European... They're so naive!"

But such naivete is at the heart of American inventiveness. If it's broken, fix it. If it ain't broken, improve it. If there's a problem, invent a solution. Any problem, psychic to physical, can be fixed. Life is the ultimate DIY problem.

Whether it is Alexis de Tocqueville, the French observer of American democracy and culture in the 1830s, or the balladeers Simon and Garfunkel, or my own humble musings on Americana, what is common to all observers of this inspiring and infuriating nation is a sense that its greatness has not yet been exhausted, that its destiny, often heavily clouded, is still yet to be manifest.

The writer is chairman of the board of trustees of the Singapore Management University. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures from Singapore's tertiary and research institutions.