Strength in American individualism

I’ve railed often—indeed, the obsession with instant gratification, that has all become together to shape the economic monster that is American capitalism.

A nation must be quite anti-American, with its many failings. The disaster it was pursued to extricate this from its own culture, enabling the waiter to chat the DIY (do-it-yourself), fix-it, turn: it’s friendliness rather than its self-love, the most intractable personal problems. This attitude has had intractable 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 check-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’ bed, self-cleaning feeding troughs and an orthopaedically ideal canine bed.

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

Americans tend to believe solutions can be found to any problem, so long as one tries sufficiently 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 naivety 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 or 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 bulldozers Simon and Garfunkel, or my own humble musings on Americans, what is common to all observers of this inspiring and insatiable nation is a sense that its greatness has not yet been exhausted, that its destiny, often heavily clouded, is still yet to be manifest.

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