A nation apart

Also in this section

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All banner quotations are taken from Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" (1835 and 1840)

Sources A list of sources can be found online
Economist.com/surveys

The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 have not only widened the differences between America and the rest of the world, but have also deepened divisions within the country itself, says John Parker

AT NINE o'clock on the morning of September 11th 2001, President George Bush sat in an elementary school in Sarasota, Florida, listening to seven-year-olds read stories about goats. "Night fell on a different world," he said of that day. And on a different America.

At first, America and the world seemed to change together. "We are all New Yorkers now," ran an e-mail from Berlin that day, mirroring John F. Kennedy's declaration 40 years earlier, "Ich bin ein Berliner", and predicting *Le Monde*'s headline the next day, "Nous sommes tous Américains". And America, for its part, seemed to become more like other countries. Al-Qaeda's strikes, the first on the country's mainland by a foreign enemy, stripped away something unique: its aura of invulnerability, its sense of itself as a place apart, "the city on a hill".

Two days after the event, President George Bush senior predicted that, like Pearl Harbour, "so, too, should this most recent surprise attack erase the concept in some quarters that America can somehow go it alone." Francis Fukuyama, a professor at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University, suggested that "America may become a more ordinary country in the sense of having concrete interests and real vulnerabilities, rather than thinking itself unilaterally able to define the nature of the world it lives in."

Both men were thinking about foreign policy. But global terrorism changed America at home as well. Because it made national security more important, it enhanced the role of the president and the federal government. Twice as many Americans as in the 1990s now say that they are paying a lot of attention to national affairs, where they used to care more about business and local stories. Some observers noted "a return to seriousness"—and indeed frivolities do not dominate television news as they used to.

But America has not become "a more ordinary country", either in foreign policy or in the domestic arena. Instead, this survey will argue that the attacks of 2001 have increased "American exceptionalism"—a phrase coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in the mid-19th century to describe America's profound differences from other nations. The features that the attacks brought to the surface were already there, but the Bush administration has amplified them. As a result, in the past two years the differences between America and other countries have become more pronounced.

Yet because America is not a homoge- ▸▸

"For 50 years, it has been constantly repeated to the inhabitants of the United States that they form the only religious, enlightened, and free people. They see that up to now, democratic institutions have prospered among them; they therefore have an immense opinion of themselves, and they are not far from believing that they form a species apart in the human race"

▸ neous country—indeed, its heterogeneity is one of its most striking features—many of its people feel uneasy about manifestations of exceptionalism. Hence, as this survey will also argue, the revival and expansion of American exceptionalism will prove divisive at home. This division will define domestic politics for years to come.

Not all New Yorkers any more

From the outside, the best indication of American exceptionalism is military power. America spends more on defence than the next dozen countries combined. In the nearest approach to an explicit endorsement of exceptionalism in the public domain, the National Security Strategy of 2002 says America must ensure that its current military dominance—often described as the greatest since Rome's—is not even challenged, let alone surpassed.

In fact, military might is only a symptom of what makes America itself unusual. The country is exceptional in more profound ways. It is more strongly individualistic than Europe, more patriotic, more religious and culturally more conservative (see chart 1). Al-Qaeda's assaults stimulated two of these deeper characteristics. In the wake of the attacks, expressions of both love of country and love of God spiked. This did not necessarily mean Americans suddenly became more patriotic or religious. Rather, the spike was a reminder of what is important to them. It was like a bolt of lightning, briefly illuminating the landscape but not changing it.

The president seized on these manifestations of the American spirit. The day after he had defined America's enemies in his "axis of evil" speech, in January 2002, Mr Bush told an audience in Daytona Beach, Florida, about his country's "mission" in the world. "We're fighting for freedom, and civilisation and universal values." That is one strand of American exceptionalism. America is the purest example of a nation founded upon universal values, such as democracy and human rights. It is a standard-bearer, an exemplar.

But the president went further, seeking to change America's culture and values in ways that would make the country still more distinctive. "We've got a great opportunity," he said at Daytona. "As a result of evil, there's some amazing things that are taking place in America. People have begun to challenge the culture of the past that said, 'If it feels good, do it'. This great nation has a chance to help change the culture." He was appealing to old-fashioned virtues of personal responsibility, self-reliance and restraint, qualities associated with a strand of exceptionalism that says American values and institutions are different and America is exceptional in its essence, not just because it is a standard-bearer.

On this view, America is not exceptional because it is powerful; America is powerful because it is exceptional. And because what makes America different also keeps it rich and powerful, an administration that encourages American wealth and power will tend to encourage intrinsic exceptionalism. Walter Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations dubs this impulse "American revivalism". It is not an explicit ideology but a pattern of beliefs, attitudes and instincts.

The Bush administration displays "exceptionalist" characteristics to an unusual extent. It is more openly religious than any of its predecessors. Mr Bush has called Jesus his favourite philosopher. White House staff members arrange Bible study classes. The president's re-election team courts evangelical Protestant voters. The administration wants religious institutions to play a bigger role in social policy.

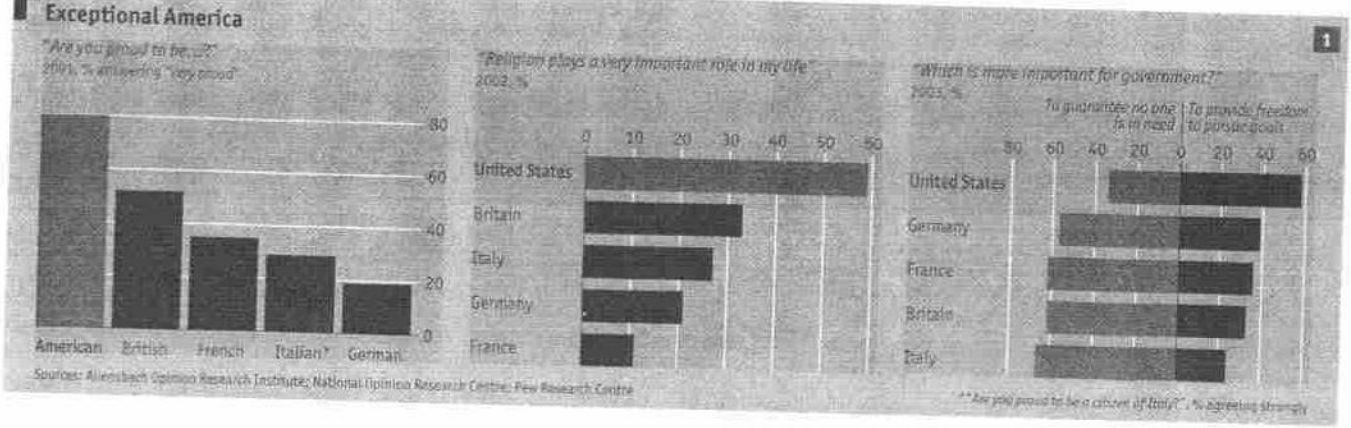
It also wears patriotism on its sleeve. That is not to say it is more patriotic than previous governments, but it flaunts this quality more openly, using images of the flag on every occasion and relishing America's military might to an unusual extent. More than any administration since Ronald Reagan's, this one is focused narrowly on America's national interest.

Related to this is a certain disdain for "old Europe" which goes beyond frustrations over policy. By education and background, this is an administration less influenced than usual by those bastions of transatlanticism, Ivy League universities. One-third of President Bush senior's first cabinet secretaries, and half of President Clinton's, had Ivy League degrees. But in the current cabinet the share is down to a quarter. For most members of this administration, who are mainly from the heartland and the American west (Texas especially), Europe seems far away. They have not studied there. They do not follow German novels or French films. Indeed, for many of them, Europe is in some ways unserious. Its armies are a joke. Its people work short hours. They wear sandals and make chocolate. Europe does not capture their imagination in the way that China, the Middle East and America itself do.

Mr Bush's own family embodies the shift away from Euro-centrism. His grandfather was a senator from Connecticut, an internationalist and a scion of Brown Brothers Harriman, bluest of blue-blooded Wall Street investment banks. His father epitomised the transatlantic generation. Despite his Yale education, he himself is most at home on his Texas ranch.

Looked at this way, the Bush administration's policies are not only responses to specific problems, or to demands made by interest groups. They reflect a certain way of looking at America and the world. They embody American exceptionalism. ■

Exceptional America 1



Sources: Allensbach Opinion Research Institute; National Opinion Research Center; Pew Research Centre

*"Are you proud to be a citizen of Italy?", % agreeing strongly

From sea to shining sea

American exceptionalism is nothing new. But it is getting sharper

"EVERYTHING about the Americans," said Alexis de Tocqueville, "is extraordinary, but what is more extraordinary still is the soil that supports them." America has natural harbours on two great oceans, access to one of the world's richest fishing areas, an abundance of every possible raw material and a huge range of farmed crops, from cold-weather to tropical. Not only is it the fourth-largest country in the world, but two-thirds of it is habitable, unlike Russia or Canada. Any country occupying America's space on the map would be likely to be unusual. But as de Tocqueville also said, "Physical causes contribute less [to America's distinctiveness] than laws and mores."

In his 1995 book "American Exceptionalism," Seymour Martin Lipset enumerates some of these laws and social features. In terms of income per head, America is the wealthiest large industrial country. It is also the only western democracy to have practised slavery in the industrial era. It has the highest crime rate and highest rate of imprisonment (though crime, at least, is falling towards European levels). Its society is among the most religious in the world. Perhaps less obviously, Americans are more likely than almost anyone else to join voluntary associations.

America has a highly decentralised political system, with federal, state and local governments all collecting their own taxes, writing their own laws and administering their own affairs. Its federal government spends a relatively low share of national income. The country has more elective offices than any other, including, in some states, those of judges, which means that in each four-year cycle America holds about 1m elections. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it also has one of the lowest voter turn-outs, making it at once the most and the least democratic democracy.

It has no large socialist party, and never has had. Nor has it ever had a significant fascist movement. Unlike conservative parties in Europe, its home-grown version has no aristocratic roots. America has one of the lowest tax rates among rich countries, the least generous public services, the highest military spending, the most lawyers per head, the highest proportion of young people at universities and the most persistent work ethic.

But the term "exceptionalism" is more than a description of how America differs from the rest of the world. It also encompasses the significance of those differences and the policies based upon them. People have been searching for some wider meaning to the place since its earliest days. In 1630, the year the Massachusetts Bay Company was founded, John Winthrop, the colony's governor, described his new land as "a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

And as they have looked, people have found two quite different reasons for thinking that America is special. One is that it is uniquely founded on principles to which any country can aspire. In 1787, Alexander Hamilton wrote in the first Federalist Paper that "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."

Prescient de Tocqueville

That is America-as-model. George Bush has embraced the idea. Commemorating the first anniversary of the attacks of September 11th 2001, he said that "the ideal of America is the hope of all mankind." He was echoing Lincoln, who called America "the last, best hope of earth".

But exceptionalism has another meaning: that America is intrinsically different from other countries in its values and institutions, and is therefore not necessarily a model. Thomas Jefferson said that "Every species of government has its specific principles. Ours are perhaps more peculiar than those of any other in the universe."

In 1929, Jay Lovestone, the head of the American communist party, was summoned to Moscow. Stalin demanded to know why the worldwide communist revolution had advanced not one step in the largest capitalist country. Lovestone replied that America lacked the preconditions for communism, such as feudalism and aristocracy. No less an authority than Friedrich Engels had said the same thing, talking of "the special American conditions...which make bourgeois conditions look like a *beau idéal* to them." So had an Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, and a British socialist, H.G. Wells, who had both argued that America's unique origins had produced a distinctive value system and unusual politics.

Lovestone was purged, but his argument still has force: America is exceptional partly because it is peculiar. As usual, de Tocqueville had thought about both meanings of exceptionalism before anyone else. In his book "Democracy in America", he described not only what is particular to democracy, especially the way in which it changes how people think and act (what he calls "the quiet action of society upon itself"). He also described what was, and is, particular to America: its size, the institutions it had inherited from England, its decentralised administration.

These two versions of American excep- ▸▸

All the causes tending to the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States can be reduced to three: the particular and accidental situation in which Providence has placed the Americans; the laws; habits and mores

tionalism have more in common than might appear at first sight. Both suggest that the experience of America is open to others. The idea of America-as-model implies that other countries can come to be more like America, though American differences may still persist over time. The idea that America is intrinsically different is also consistent with the notion that outsiders can become American, but they must go there to do it and become citizens—hence America's extraordinary capacity to assimilate immigrants.

There are three points to grasp from this gallop through the history of American exceptionalism. First, it is, as Mr Lipset put it, a double-edged sword. It helps explain the best and the worst about the country: its business innovation and its economic inequality; its populist democracy and its low voter turn-out; its high spending on education and its deplorable rates of infant mortality and teenage pregnancy. Exceptionalism is often used either as a boast or as a condemnation—though in reality it is neither.

Second, the two strands help explain why exceptionalism is divisive within America itself. Most Americans are doubtless proud of the "exemplary" qualities of their country. But the non-exemplary, more peculiar features do not always command universal approval.

Third, there should be nothing surprising, or necessarily disturbing, in a revival of exceptionalism. America has almost always been seen as different. The question is: has anything changed recently?

Unparallel tracks

It is always risky to proclaim a break in a trend. Yet evidence is growing that, over the past decade or so, America has been changing in ways that do make it more different from its allies in Europe, and September 11th has increased this divergence.

Most of the previous half-century was a period of convergence. Between 1945 and about 1990, America and Europe seemed to be growing more like one another in almost every way that matters. Economically, Europe began the post-war period in ruins. According to Angus Maddison, an economic historian, in 1950 average incomes in western Europe were 54% of American ones. By the early 1990s, the ratio had passed 80%. Richer EU countries now boast a standard of living comparable to America's. Until the mid-1980s, America and Europe also both had stable populations, declining fertility rates and growing numbers of old people.

In the 1960s, America moved closer towards European levels of government spending through the Great Society programmes. This was the start of Medicaid for the poor and, later, increased regulation of industry through bodies like the Environmental Protection Agency.

With Watergate and the Vietnam war, America started to approach European levels of cynicism about government and military intervention abroad. In 1976, a sociologist, Daniel Bell, wrote a book whose title encapsulated the conventional wisdom of the time: "The End of American Exceptionalism". Later changes seemed to prove him right. In the 1980s, European countries started to organise their economies on more American lines. Governments privatised and deregulated. Companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange, set up NASDAQ clones and started using share prices to measure a company's or manager's performance.

In politics, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were both engaged in similar projects to shrink the size of the state. Bill Clinton (who was wildly popular in Europe) proclaimed himself a paid-up member of the largely European "third way".

When communism collapsed, Mr Fukuyama hailed "The End of History". Countries, he argued, would henceforth tend to become more alike, more democratic, more liberal, more globalised. There would be less exceptionalism, of the American or any other kind.

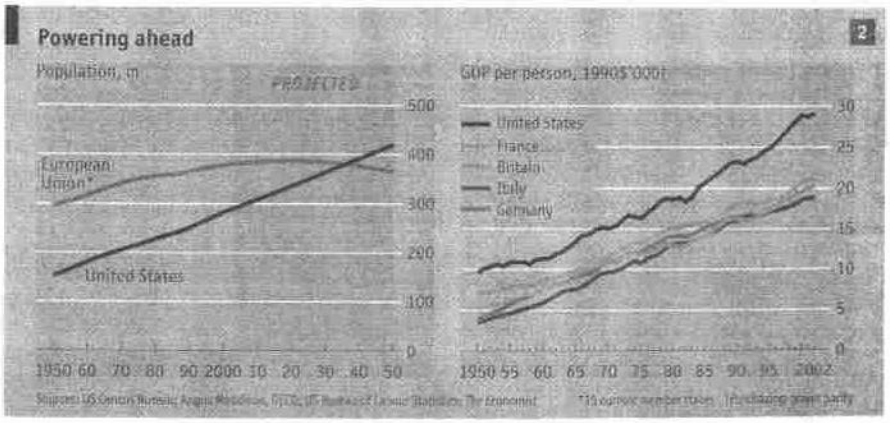
But things did not work out that way in foreign affairs, and other sorts of convergence may be coming to an end, too. The demographic differences are now startling. Around 1985, America's fertility rate bottomed out and began to rise again. It is now at almost two children per woman, just below the replacement level of 2.1, and looks set to rise further. Europe's fertility rate is below 1.4 and falling. Even China's is 1.8, and its birth rate is dropping fast.

At the moment, the EU's population is considerably larger than America's—380m against 280m—and will grow further with enlargement next year. China's is nearly four times as large as America's. But on current trends, by the middle of this century America's population could be 440m-550m, larger than the EU's even after enlargement, and nearly half China's, rather than a quarter.

America will also be noticeably younger then and ethnically more varied. At the moment, its median age is roughly the same as Europe's (36 against 38). By 2050, according to Bill Frey of the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, America's median age will still be around 36, but Europe's will have risen to 53 (and China's will be 44). In the 1990s, America took in the largest number of immigrants it had ever seen in one decade: 33m people now living in the country were born outside it, and Latinos have become the largest ethnic group. "America," says Hania Zlotnik of the United Nations Population Division, "is the world's great demographic outlier."

Then there is the technology gap. Each year, more patents are applied for in America than in the European Union. America has almost three times as many Nobel prize-winners than the next country (Britain), and spends more on research and development than any other country. On one measure of academic performance, over 90 of the world's top 100 universities are in America.

Europe and America have also been diverging economically, though one should be cautious about that. In the seven years from 1995 to 2001, real GDP rose by 3.3% a year in America but by only 2.5% a year in the European Union. The bursting



f the stockmarket bubble and the subseuent recession reversed this pattern—in 001, GDP growth was higher in Europe han America—but the gap opened up gain as the economies recovered. On curent estimates and forecasts, growth in merica in the three years to 2004 will avrage 1.3 percentage points a year more han in the 12-country euro area. Some 0% of the world's economic growth since 995 has come from America.

These relative economic gains may be eversed. It is hard to see how the country an sustain both its huge trade and budget leficits. On the other hand, its growth in he 1990s reflected a big improvement in roductivity, which rose by over 2% a year n the 1990s. The number of hours worked lso rose. In 1982, Europeans and Americans put in roughly the same number of hours each year. Now, Americans work a daunting 300 hours a year more.

These divergences began at different times and for different reasons. The demographic gap began to open up as long ago as the mid-1980s. Economies started to diverge in the mid-1990s. Even in the area most relevant to the terrorist attacks—foreign policy—the roots of transatlantic differences arguably go back to the fall of communism in 1989-91. September 11th did not create these tensions, but it dramatised some of them. The attacks took place at a time when America was governed by an administration already less engaged in Europe than any in recent history, and when almost all the other measures were, for the first time in 50 years, pointing in the same direction—away from Europe, as well as from much of the rest of the world.

If this pattern continues, America may be entering a period of even greater dominance in world affairs. That alone makes American exceptionalism of more than domestic importance. American power will be divisive abroad—but it will also bring conflict at home, because a significant portion of Americans does not believe that the era of convergence is over. When Howard Dean, a Democratic presidential candidate, said that "We won't always have the strongest military," he was slapped down by his own party as well as by Republicans. But he touched a nerve. The next section will explain how exceptionalism divides America as well as defining it. ■

Us versus us

American values divide as well as define the country

THE new National Constitution Centre in Philadelphia stands three blocks from where the Declaration of Independence and the American constitution were adopted. Post-it notes are dotted around the museum for visitors to reply to questions such as "What does it mean to be an American?" "It means I have a responsibility and obligation to protect my freedom and that of my children," runs one typical reply. Or: "It means to say when I disagree." Or: "Sometimes it means unbridled capitalism."

To a second question, "Should the ten commandments be displayed in public buildings?" the replies range from, "They are the foundational laws for the constitution" to, "We have the right to freedom *from* religion." And to a third, "What makes you feel free?", they include: "Our military forces willing to give their lives for mine"; "Not to have to think about it"; or simply, "USA rocks!"

American values are distinctive, but not uniformly so. Patriotism and religious faith are unusually strong. Americans stress personal responsibility rather than collective goals. Many are fairly conservative in their social opinions and are somewhat more likely than Europeans to disapprove of divorce, abortion and homosexuality. Yet people on both sides of the Atlantic find international terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction equally worrying. And Americans are in some ways more open than Europeans—or were, until the terrorist attacks of 2001 made them less welcoming—in their greater approval of immigration and the value of "other cultures". It is this particular combination of values, as much as strong patriotism or religiosity, that really makes America stand out.

Begin with an area of clear difference: attitudes to the role of government in a free market. People in almost every country surveyed by the Pew Research Centre in 2003 say they are better off in a free-market economy. But asked which is more important—that the government should guarantee no one is in need, or that it should not constrain the pursuit of personal goals—Europeans in both east and west come down roughly two-thirds/one-third in favour of a safety net, whereas Americans split two-thirds/one-third the other way.

However, when asked, "Does the government control too much of your daily life? Is it usually inefficient and wasteful?", two-thirds of respondents on both sides of the Atlantic say yes. So the differences seem to have less to do with the way that governments are viewed, and more to do with Americans' belief in the importance of individual effort. Pew's pollsters sought to measure this belief by asking people in 44 countries, "Do you agree or disagree that success is determined by forces outside your control?" In most countries, fewer than half thought that success was within their control. In only two did more than 60% consider success a matter of individual effort: Canada and, by the widest margin, the United States.

Bigger is usually better

In other areas, American exceptionalism is less clear-cut. For example, nine out of ten Americans say they are very patriotic, according to Pew. But Indians, Nigerians and Turks are equally patriotic. Among wealthy nations, Americans are also the ▸▸

It is not that men in democracies are naturally very convinced of the certainty of their opinions and very firm in their beliefs; they often have doubts that no one can resolve, but since nothing either pushes it powerfully or directs it, it oscillates within itself and does not move

most likely to go to church and to say God is very important in their lives, but again Indians, Nigerians and Turks are more religious than Americans.

Lots of Americans like to buy products that shout, "I'm large. I'm loud. I'm ready for anything," such as army assault vehicles lightly disguised as cars, or outdoor grills the size of small kitchens, or Arnold Schwarzenegger. David Brooks, a *New York Times* columnist, calls this "getting in touch with your inner longshoreman". Yet at the same time Americans seem to be developing a more restrained side. They are just as likely as Europeans to say that people with AIDS should not be discriminated against. Support for the idea that "women should return to traditional roles in society" has fallen from just under a third in the late 1980s to about a fifth now, roughly the same as in Europe. Both Americans and Europeans overwhelmingly disagree that when jobs are scarce men should be given priority.

Americans are slightly less likely than Europeans to find homosexuality socially acceptable, and less likely to support gay marriage, but tolerance of gays is on the increase (see chart 3). Americans also tend to be fairly positive about the contribution of immigrants to society, whereas in most of the rest of the industrial world more than half the population thinks immigrants are bad for their countries.

These differences and similarities are best understood as values arranged along two spectrums of opinion. One spectrum, says the World Values Survey of the University of Michigan (which invented the idea), measures "traditional values". The most important of these is patriotism; others concern religion and traditional family ties. Americans tend to be traditionalists. A remarkable 80% say they hold "old-fashioned values" about family and marriage. At the other end of this spectrum are "secular-rational" values, for whose adherents religion is a personal, optional matter, patriotism is not a big concern and children have their own lives to lead. Europeans tend to be secular-rationalists. On this spectrum, America is indeed exceptional.

The other spectrum measures "quality of life" attitudes. At one end of it are the values and opinions people hold when economic and physical insecurity dominates their lives, as often happens in poor countries. This makes them suspicious of outsiders, cautious about changing patterns of work and reluctant to engage in political activity. At the other end are values of self-expression involving the acceptance of a wide range of behaviour. On this score, Americans and Europeans are similar, because neither group is engaged in a struggle for survival any more.

But the two spectrums together suggest that there is a "values gap" within America itself too. In Europe, countries have become both more secular and more "self-expressive" as they have got richer. In America, this did not happen. That has profound implications.

E pluribus duo

In 1999, Gertrude Himmelfarb, a social historian, argued that America is becoming "One Nation, Two Cultures". One is religious, puritanical, family-centred and somewhat conformist. The other is tolerant, hedonistic, secular, predominantly single and celebrates multiculturalism. These value judgments are the best predictor of political affiliation, far better than wealth or income.

In the 2000 election, 63% of those who went to church more than once a week voted for George Bush; 61% of those who never went voted for Al Gore. About 70% of those who said abortion should always be available voted for Mr Gore; 74% of those who said it should always be illegal voted for Mr Bush. As Pete du Pont, a former governor of Delaware, pointed out, a map showing the sales and rentals of porn movies bore an eerie resemblance to the map of the 2000 election results.

America, it is said, can live together because Americans live apart. The two cultures occupy different worlds. Traditionalists are concentrated in a great L-shape on the map, the spine of the Rockies forming its vertical arm, its horizontal one cutting a swathe through the South. With a couple of exceptions, all these "red states" voted for Mr Bush in 2000.

The rest of the country is more secular. This includes the Pacific coast and the square outlined by the big L, consisting of the north-eastern and upper mid-western states. With a few exceptions, these "blue states" voted for Mr Gore in 2000.

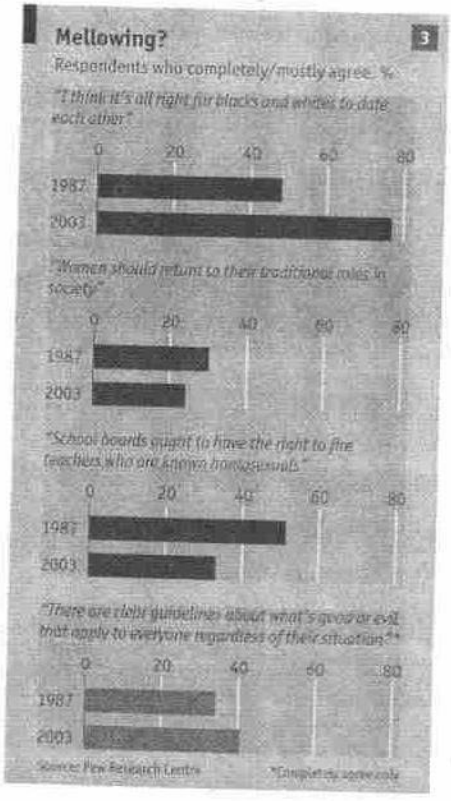
Their differences are deeply entrenched. Traditionalists are heavily concentrated in smaller towns and rural areas. Secularists dominate big cities. Southerners tend to be a bit more religious, a bit more socially conservative and more supportive of a strong military stance than the rest of the country. Intriguingly, black southerners are more conservative than blacks elsewhere, though less conservative than their white neighbours.

The political effect of these differences is increasing. For historical reasons (Republicans having been the anti-slavery party in the civil war), white southerners were part of the Democratic coalition, circumscribing for many years the political impact of southern conservatism. Now, as the region becomes more Republican, that conservatism is getting noisier.

In contrast, multiculturalism is deeply entrenched in blue states. The states with the highest levels of immigration of Latinos and Asians include New York, New Jersey, New Mexico and California—what Mr Frey calls America's new melting-pots. Mr Gore won all of them, except Texas and Florida. These were special cases: both had governors called Bush; both had seen the largest inflow from other parts of America of white immigrants, who tend to be more conservative.

The differences between the two Americas seem to be getting sharper. A new survey of American values by Pew finds greater social and sexual tolerance, yet also more strictness on matters of personal morality. The number of people saying they completely agree that there are clear and universal guidelines about good and evil has risen from one-third to two-fifths in the space of 15 years.

One of America's characteristic fea-



tures is its sunny optimism, the sense that anything is possible. Yet there is an 18-point gap between the number of Democrats and Republicans who agree with the statement "I don't believe there are any real limits to growth in this country today." Democrats are usually keener than Republicans to urge the administration to pay attention to domestic issues. This gap has widened from three points in 1997 to 16 points now. On America's role in the world, the importance of military strength and patriotism itself, the gap between the parties has never been wider.

So if there is a revival of exceptionalism—in the sense both of greater divergence from other countries, and of policies based on it—it will be controversial. Red states are likely to welcome it. Blue states probably will not.

But there are complicating factors. The red-blue split implies that two tribes are forming, with people within each of them thinking more or less alike. In reality, things are rarely that clear-cut. In his book "A California State of Mind", published in 2002, Mark Baldassare of the Public Policy Institute in San Francisco showed that voters in that state do not fit the bifurcated pattern of the 2000 election. California is one of the most solidly Democratic (blue) states. Most voters call themselves socially liberal and environmentally friendly, which seem like "European" attributes. Yet in other ways California is as unEuropean as you can get, a place of swirling ethnicities that looks towards Latin America and Asia.

Californians wanted the large tax revenues the state had generated during the boom years of the 1990s to be spent on social programmes, rather than handed back in tax cuts—again, a European impulse. Yet, in flat contradiction, they did not want their state government to grow because they did not trust politicians to spend the money wisely—an exceptionalist, American characteristic.

Part of this muddle is doubtless specific to California. Yet there are mixed views and big contrasts between opinion and behaviour in many other places too. For example, Americans in heartland states express traditional views about family and personal morality especially strongly, yet the incidence of divorce, teenage pregnancy, births out of wedlock and murder is slightly higher there than elsewhere.

Land of the soccer moms

Among all the ways America is unusual, one of the least noticed but most important is that more than half the population lives in suburbs. In this, it is unique in the world: in most European countries, for example, over two-thirds of the population is classified as urban. American suburbia has changed radically in the past 20 years. It is no longer a homogeneous world of nuclear families, dormitory towns and middle-class whites. Now there are ethnic suburbs (most immigrants go straight there); office parks (90% of office space built in the 1990s was suburban); poor suburbs near towns; and rich ones on the outskirts. Some suburbs even try to recreate European towns: an intriguing counter-example to the general pattern of divergence.

Yet compared with the sharp differences between cities and rural areas, suburbs still show a residual similarity of values. Those that matter most are family achievement and moderation. This is the land of soccer moms, SUVs, meticulously kept subdivisions, oboe practice for kids and school runs.

Such people make up a hefty share of the roughly 40% of Americans who describe themselves as politically moderate. They explain the softening of some of the sharp edges of American exceptionalism, such as declining support for the death penalty since the mid-1990s and greater acceptance of gays and inter-racial dating. Suburban moderation cuts across the bright line between red and blue states.

On this reading, the distribution of American opinion forms a bell shape. The traditionalists and the secularists are the two tails, which are getting fatter and more vocal. In the middle is a bulge of moderate opinion, indifferent to, or even repelled by, this contest. It is up to politicians to decide whether to appeal to the extremes or to the centre. But before delving into politics, stop to look at the most important of the "exceptional" qualities: religion and patriotism. ■

Therapy of the masses

Americans are becoming more religious, but not necessarily more censorious

SADDLEBACK church could exist only in America. On any Sunday, over 3,000 people from the suburbs of southern Los Angeles flock to the main Worship Centre, which looks less like a cathedral than an airport terminal. If you want to experience the rock bands, theatrical shows and powerpoint sermons in a traditional church, you can: they are piped into one by video link. Or you can watch the service on huge video screens while sipping a cappuccino in an outdoor café.

But in case you think this is religion lite, Rick Warren, the pastor, will quickly encourage you to join one of the thousands of smaller groups that are the real life of the church. Saddleback members will help you find a school, a friend, a job or God. There is a "Geeks for God" club of Cisco employees, and a mountain-bike club where they pray and pedal.

To Europeans, religion is the strangest and most disturbing feature of American exceptionalism. They worry that fundamentalists are hijacking the country. They find it extraordinary that three times as many Americans believe in the virgin birth as in evolution. They fear that America will go on a "crusade" (a term briefly used by Mr Bush himself) in the Muslim world or cut aid to poor countries lest it be used for birth control. The persistence of religion as a public force is all the more puzzling because it seems to run counter to historical trends. Like the philosophers of the Enlightenment, many Europeans argue that modernisation is the enemy of religion. As countries get richer, organised religion will decline. Secular Europe seems to fit that pattern. America does not.

In fact, points out Peter Berger, head of the Institute on Religion and World Affairs at Boston University, few developing countries have shown signs of religious decline as their standards of living have risen. It may be Europe that is the exception here, not America. There is no doubt, though, that America is the most religious rich country. Over 80% of Americans say they believe in God, and 39% describe themselves as born-again Christians. Fur- ▸▸

On my arrival in the United States, it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck my eye. As I prolonged my stay, I perceived the great political consequences that flowed from these new facts

thermore, 58% of Americans think that unless you believe in God, you cannot be a moral person.

There is also some evidence that private belief is becoming more intense. The Pew Research Centre reported that the number of those who "agree strongly" with three articles of faith (belief in God, in judgment day and in the importance of prayer in daily life) rose by seven to ten points in 1965-2003. In the late 1980s, two-fifths of Protestants described themselves as "born again"; now the figure is over half.

The importance of religion in America goes well beyond personal belief. Back in the 1960s, Gallup polls found that 53% of Americans thought churches should not be involved in politics, and 22% thought members of the clergy should not even mention candidates for public office from the pulpit. By 1996, these numbers had reversed: 54% thought it was fine for churches to talk about political and social issues, and 20% thought even stump speeches were permissible in church.

These shifts in opinion have given a boost to one particular group of churches: evangelical Protestants. They embrace a variety of denominations, including Baptist, Confessional and Pentecostal churches, all of which stress individual salvation and the word of the Bible rather than sacraments or established doctrine. In 1987, they were the third-largest religious group in America, with a membership of 24% of the adult population; now they are the largest, with 30%. The percentage of Catholics has stayed stable, largely thanks to Latino immigrants, but established Protestant churches, such as Presbyterians, have declined sharply.

For God and Republicanism

A marriage of church and politics

Evangelical Protestants bear out the European view that religion in America is politically active, socially conservative and overwhelmingly Republican. Almost two-thirds of committed evangelicals—the ones who attend church most frequently and say they hold strictly to the Bible—describe themselves as conservative, by far the largest proportion of any religious group. They are also more likely than other churchgoers to rate social and cultural issues as important, somewhat more likely to say homosexuality should be discouraged, and most likely to want to rein in the scope of government.

Over time, evangelicals have become more willing to engage in politics, too. White evangelical Protestants represent almost a third of registered voters now, up from slightly below a quarter in 1987. Their leaders have tried to unite the various evangelical churches as a political force, establishing the Moral Majority in 1979 and the Christian Coalition in 1989. Their comments speak for themselves. Franklin Graham (Billy's son) called Islam "a wicked religion". The former president of the Southern Baptist Convention called the Prophet Muhammad "a demon-possessed pedophile".

Such political activism, the growth of new churches and the increased intensity of belief has led some to argue that America may be in the early stages of a fourth Great Awakening, a period of religious fervour when the variety, vigour, size and public involvement of religious groups suddenly increases. Earlier awakenings occurred in the late colonial period, the 1820s and the late 19th century. Might the same thing be happening again?

The evidence seems to be against it. Church attendance has not been increasing, as a new awakening would suggest. The Gallup organisation found that it fell slowly in the 1960s and 1970s, stabilised in 1980 and has remained level since then, with about two-thirds of the population claiming membership of a church.

These findings are based on how often people say they go to church, something they tend to exaggerate. But a collection of records from the churches themselves, summarised by Harvard University's Robert Putnam, shows the same pattern (see chart 4). So do figures from the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, which show that in 2000 some 141m Americans—or half the population—were members of a church. That is a lot, but it falls well short of the four-fifths who believe in God as a private matter. And it is active churchgoing that makes the difference between private belief and public consequences.

Even among fundamentalist Protestants, public influence is patchy. There was, for example, no huge turn-out of conservative Christians in the 1998 mid-term elections, even though the Lewinsky scandal infuriated religious voters. After President Bill Clinton's impeachment and acquittal, Paul Weyrich, a leader of the Moral Majority, wrote to the *Washington Post* to say that conservative Christians had "lost the culture wars"—hardly evidence of growing influence.

It is not even clear how important religion is in determining the political and social views of evangelical Protestants. The largest concentration of these churches is in the South, among whites. But white southerners held conservative views on homosexuality, government, defence and so on long before the Moral Majority was invented. It is just as likely that social conservatism has encouraged evangelical churches as the other way around.

The Pew study tried to disentangle the role of religion in determining churchgoers' views from other factors, and found that only in social and cultural attitudes (on matters like abortion and homosex- ▸▸

Do not lead an American to speak of Europe; he will ordinarily show great presumption and a rather silly pride. But ask him about his country and you will see the cloud that envelops him suddenly dissipate

Home of the brave

American patriotism is different from the European variety

HERMANIO BERMANIS holds up his right hand to take the oath of American citizenship. Half a million do the same every year, but this ceremony is unusual. It is being held in the Walter Reed military hospital, in the presence of two cabinet members, because Army Specialist Bermanis, who was born in Micronesia, had both legs and his left arm blown off on active service in Iraq. His right hand is all he has to hold up.

The ceremony gave expression to a powerful sentiment: American patriotism. As de Tocqueville noted long ago, "The inhabitants of the United States speak much of their love for their native country." Seymour Martin Lipset begins his book on American exceptionalism with a remark unusual for an academic: "I write as a proud American." In a new survey of American values by the Pew Research Centre, fully 91% of Americans say they are very patriotic.

Europeans have long been bothered by this feature of American life. De Tocqueville again: "There is nothing more annoying...than this irritable patriotism of the Americans." But since September 11th the Europeans have become even more disturbed. They associate patriotism with militarism, intolerance and ethnic strife. No wonder they consider it an alarming quality in the world's most powerful country.

Yet European and American patriotism are different. Patriotic Europeans take pride in a nation, a tract of land or a language they are born into. You cannot become un-French. In contrast, patriotic Americans have a dual loyalty: both to their country and to the ideas it embodies. "He loved his country," said Lincoln of Henry Clay, "partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country." As the English writer G.K. Chesterton said in 1922, America is the only country based on a creed, enshrined in its constitution and declaration of independence. People become American by adopting the creed, regardless of their own place of birth, parentage or language. And you can become un-American—by rejecting the creed.

This dual character softens American patriotism. "My country, right or wrong" may be an American phrase (it comes from a toast by Stephen Decatur, an American naval hero), but only one American in two agrees with it, according to the Pew survey. Only two years after September 11th, fewer than half the respondents supported the statement that "We should try to get even with any country that tries to take advantage of the United States."

However, there is one trend in American opinion that should give pause for thought. Republicans have long been slightly more likely than Democrats to say they are intensely patriotic, but the gap has widened dramatically, and is now by far the largest on record. In 2003, 71% of Republicans said they were intensely patriotic, compared with only 48% of Democrats. An even larger gap has opened up in responses to the proposition that "The best way to ensure peace is through military strength." The number of Democrats who agreed with that sentiment slumped from 55% in 2002 to 44% this year.

The intensity gap may well reflect differing attitudes to the war in Iraq, the domestic effects of which will presumably fade with time. But the gap may also be an early indication of a more lasting split: over the passion of loyalty, and what counts as "real" patriotism. ■

uality) was religion alone a powerful factor. Even there, broader demographic factors were more important.

Don't believe a word of it

Lastly, although the number and membership of charismatic churches has certainly grown, there has been an offsetting increase in those who describe themselves as of no religion at all. Since 1960, the number of self-described secularists (atheists, agnostics and those not affiliated to any organised religion) has roughly doubled. According to a survey by the City University of New York (CUNY), 14% of Americans between 18 and 34 describe themselves as "secular" and a further 9% as "somewhat secular".

Secularists are more likely to live on the Pacific coast or in the north-east, in a city, have a college degree, be male, single, and either lean towards the Democrats or be politically independent. Committed evangelicals are more likely to live in the south, vote Republican, lack a college degree, live in towns or rural areas, and be female and married. In other words, America looks like two tribes, one religious and one secular.

But the really distinctive feature of American religion is the area in the middle. Most Americans do not become members of a church to sign up for a crusade or to sit in judgment on miserable sinners. For them, churchgoing is a matter of personal belief, not conservative activism. Their religion is mild.

In 1965, according to Gallup, half of respondents said the most important purpose of their church was to teach people to live better lives. Since then, the share has grown to almost three-quarters. This is the biggest change in America's religious life in the past 40 years.

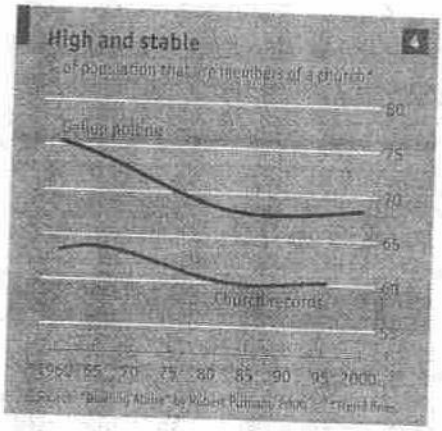
Alan Wolfe, of the Boisi Institute for the Study of Religion at Boston College, points out that American religion is exceptional in two senses: not only are Americans more religious than Europeans, but they have no national church. Thanks to the separation of church and state, the country has nothing comparable to, say, the Catholic churches of Italy and Spain, or the Church of England. Americans are members of sects.

The two kinds of religious exceptionalism are connected. Rather as in the economic sphere competing private companies tend to produce wealth and activity, whereas monopoly firms have the opposite effect, so in the religious sphere competing sects generate a ferment of activity and increased levels of belief, whereas state churches produce indifference.

This has implications for the quality of American belief. Churches come and go with astonishing speed. The statisticians of American religious bodies tracked 187 denominations (and there were many ▸▸

more) between 1990 and 2000; in that time 37 disappeared and 54 new ones appeared on the scene. Adherents and pastors, too, are constantly on the move. One study found that half the pastors of so-called "mega-churches" (suburban ones like Saddleback, with Sunday congregations of 2,000 or more) have moved from another denomination. According to the CUNY study, 16% of American adults—33m people—say they have switched denominations. For some churches the share of new adherents was startlingly high. In 2001, 30% of Pentecostalists had joined from another church and 19% had left; among Presbyterians, 24% came in and 25% went out.

Such churning limits doctrinal purism, which might otherwise be expected in a new church. Instead, churches try to attract floating believers—what Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist, calls "a generation of seekers". According to Mr Wolfe, American churches are therapeutic, not judgmental. They stress "soft" qualities such as guidance and mutual help, not "hard" ones like sin and damnation.



This means that the charismatic and evangelical churches are not typical of the whole of religious life in America. If the pattern of public opinion in general is bell-shaped, that of religious belief has the profile of a Volkswagen Beetle: a bump of evangelical Protestants at the front, a bigger bulge of uncensorious congregations in the middle and a stubby secular tail. That must temper the notion that religion is running amok in America, or that it is causing America to run amok in the world.

At Saddleback church, Rick Warren preaches that abortion is wrong. On a recent Sunday, anti-abortion groups lobbied for their cause as parishioners left church. Mr Warren told them not to return. He agreed with their views, but members of his church, and newcomers, might not. He did not want abortion to get between members and the more important matter of their relationship with God. ■

Politics as warfare

American politics has become more partisan, and nastier

THE 2000 election was the third dead-heat in a row. In votes for the House of Representatives, the widest margin of victory between 1996 and 2000 was a mere 1.3 percentage points. Essentially, every presidential and House election came out at a dead heat, 49:49.

The 2002 mid-term elections brought a change. In House races, Republicans won 51% of the popular vote, Democrats 46%. As Michael Barone, a political journalist, points out, statistically this margin was not significant, but politically it had a big impact. Republicans captured the Senate, the first time the president's party had ever won the upper chamber at this point in the electoral cycle. They gained 141 seats in statehouses, giving Republicans a majority of state legislators for the first time since 1952. The party kept its majority among state governors. In Washington, it controlled both houses of Congress and the presidency. The victory was highly unusual: most mid-term elections punish the incumbent party, especially at times of economic weakness. But does it presage a bigger electoral breakthrough, the beginning of the end of the 50-50 nation?

It might. Ever since the New Deal, there have been more registered Democrats than Republicans. In the four years before September 11th, according to the Pew Research Centre, Democrats held a small advantage in party identification (34% of registered voters described themselves as Democrats, 28% as Republicans). But immediately after the terrorist attacks Democratic affiliation dropped sharply, and in the past two years the parties have been roughly balanced. There was a further rise in Republican identification after the Iraq war earlier this year, so at the moment Republicans have an advantage in party identification for only the second time in 75 years (see chart 5). September 11th seems to have been a turning point.

But long-term trends were helping Republicans anyway. The defection of the South—America's most populous region—broke up the old Democratic coalition. In 2002, Republicans won the South by an even larger margin than in their landslide victory of 1994. The rise of an investor class (half of Americans own shares) benefits the party, because middle-class shareholders tend to back Republican causes such as privatising Social Security, the federal pensions system.

These long-term trends are reinforced by significant temporary gains. The campaign-finance reform of 2002 shifted the balance of advantage towards the party that raises more cash from individuals, which currently means the Republicans. Sophisticated computer software has turned redistricting—the ability of the dominant party in state assemblies to gerrymander district boundaries—from an art into a science. In 2002, Republicans controlled the legislatures of three big states—Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. By amazing coincidence, in Gore-majority districts where Republicans drew new boundaries, their party won 11 more seats than in 2000.

Breaking the deadlock

So it is not hard to see why Republican strategists think their party may be on the verge of breaking the 50-50 deadlock. Yet, on balance, the evidence is still against the idea that there has been a fundamental shift in electoral politics. The 2002 elections did not break the mould. For incumbents to gain as much as Republicans did last year is unusual but not unprecedented. Democrats also won against the odds in 1998. And as Gary Jacobson of the University of California at San Diego points out, the Republicans' success in 2002 can be largely explained by special factors.

At that point, Mr Bush's personal rat- ▸▸

17

> Democratic governments can become violent and even cruel at certain moments of great excitement and peril; but these crises will be rare and transient

▸ ings—the highest of any president—ran well ahead of his ratings on the economy. Usually the two do not differ much. That implies that but for the war on terrorism, which buoyed up his overall popularity, Mr Bush would not have been able to shield Republican candidates from economic discontent. This is unlikely to apply in 2004. Mr Bush's popularity also scared off the Democrats, who fielded a particularly feeble bunch of challengers. They have a few more creditable ones now.

Usually, incumbent parties lose seats in mid-term elections because congressmen squeak into marginal seats on the coat-tails of a successful president. But Mr Bush had no coat-tails in 2000, so in 2002 Republicans had fewer vulnerable seats to lose. Add in the special impact of redistricting, and most of the Republican success in 2002 can be explained by the party's skills in squeezing the most out of a largely balanced electorate rather than by a fundamental shift in its favour. There was little evidence that voters were less polarised in 2002 than they had been in 1996-2000.

Opposites repel

In one sense, that does not matter. If Mr Bush hopes a permanent majority is within his grasp, he may well dash ahead with an ambitious agenda. But he may also do that if he fears the partisan divide is too deep to be overcome. If so, his party's current political dominance would be just a window of opportunity, and he should take advantage of it before it closes.

But the persistence of a deep electoral division effects how his policies—or any president's policies—are received and carried out. It tempts Mr Bush (or any Republican) to push for more extreme policies, and any Democrat to push for the opposite extreme. The divide also encourages partisan behaviour among voters. This increasing polarisation could turn out to be the most important trend in American politics today.

George Wallace, a former governor of Alabama, used to say there wasn't a dime's worth of difference between the parties. But polarisation is growing in Congress. Republicans are now twice as likely to toe the party line in the House and Senate as they were in 1975. Democrats are about one-and a half times as likely. Ad hoc "coalitions of the willing" have become much rarer in domestic politics.

Partisanship is rife in congressional committees. Heads of committees used at least to pay lip service to the minority party when proposing legislation, but since Newt Gingrich's takeover in 1994, partisan control has by and large been the rule. Committee chairmen now routinely squelch attempts by Democrats to influence legislation, leading to petty squabbling and ill temper.

Partisanship is also evident in redistricting, which has increased the number of safe seats towards North Korean levels. In 2004, only 30-40 congressional seats are likely to be truly competitive—a quarter of the number in the 1990s. Since 1964, the share of House incumbents re-elected with over 60% of the vote has risen from 58% to 77%. This makes congressmen's politics more extreme.

If your district is rock-solid, you have little reason to fear that voters will kick you out for moving too far from their opinions. The main threat comes from party activists, who tend to be more extreme in their views and can propose a challenger in primary elections. So the dangers of drifting too far to the middle outweigh those of drifting too far to the extremes. Partisan redistricting marginalises centrist voters, aligns the views of candidates more closely with extremists on each side and radicalises politics.

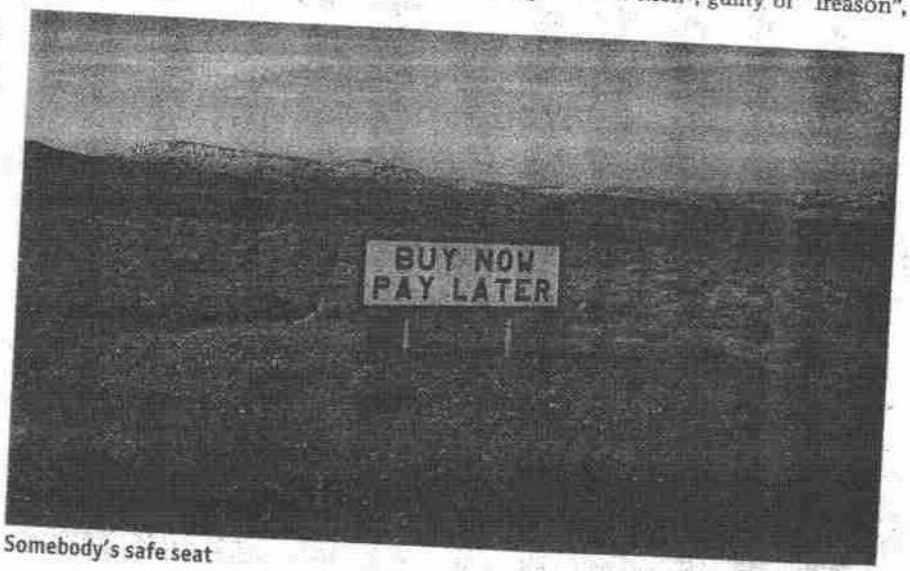
Away from Capitol Hill, partisanship has also grown in lobbying. Both parties have tried to control lobbyists, the fourth branch of American government, but Republicans have got better at it than Democrats. Every Tuesday, lobbyists troop to the office of Rick Santorum, the leader of the Senate Republican conference, to talk about hiring Republicans—an ex-chief of staff here, a pollster there. Republicans place their protégés in lobbying firms. The firms raise money for Republican candidates and help get them elected. Legislators then place their protégés in the firms. And so it goes on.

Above all, polarisation has grown in the electorate, evidenced by a sharp decline in split-ticket voting (choosing a president from one party and a congressional representative from another). In 1972, 44% of congressmen and women represented a different party from the one whose presidential candidate carried their district. In 2000, the share was under 20%.

The truly independent voter seems to be disappearing. That may seem curious, because those who call themselves independents easily outnumber self-identified Democrats or Republicans. Yet most so-called independents vote consistently one way or the other. The White House reckons that less than one-third of independent voters actually switched parties in the past three elections.

With the decline of swing voters, there seems less and less point in running presidential campaigns to appeal to the slim middle. Instead, elections have become contests to mobilise core supporters. The 2000 and 2002 elections were both turnout races.

The upshot is that politics has become warfare. What matters most is the size and bloodthirstiness of your troops, not winning over neutrals. Politicians take the first opportunity to reach for weapons of mass destruction, such as Bill Clinton's impeachment or the recall of Governor Gray Davis in California. It is no longer possible to agree to disagree. Your enemies must be "Stupid White Men", guilty of "Treason", ▸▸



Somebody's safe seat

who live in a world of "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them" (to quote the titles of three of this year's political bestsellers).

Increased partisanship has implications for the nature of America's public debate, the country's decentralised political tradition and Mr Bush himself. Politics as warfare is rooted in debates about fundamental issues. Over the past few years, the Republicans have become the "exceptionalist" party by celebrating America's traditional values and stressing qualities that make the country intrinsically different. Call that conservative exceptionalism.

In contrast, Democrats are divided. Mainstream Democrats, including members of the Clinton administration, go for the other type of exceptionalism, the city-on-a-hill variety—though Mr Bush claims to espouse that, too. Others—notably Howard Dean and the left—seem to regard exceptionalism of any kind as a bad thing. Still others embrace what might be called liberal exceptionalism, celebrating America's egalitarian, anti-aristocratic heritage. In different ways, all these distinctions are based on values or principles.

Steamrollering the enemy

In contrast, winning at all costs is not, or not necessarily. Take the 2002 Senate election in Georgia, one of the nastiest campaigns of recent memory. The Democrat, Max Cleland, who had lost three limbs in Vietnam, was demonised as soft on Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. The culture of victory may supersede arguments about values and substance because conquest becomes imperative.

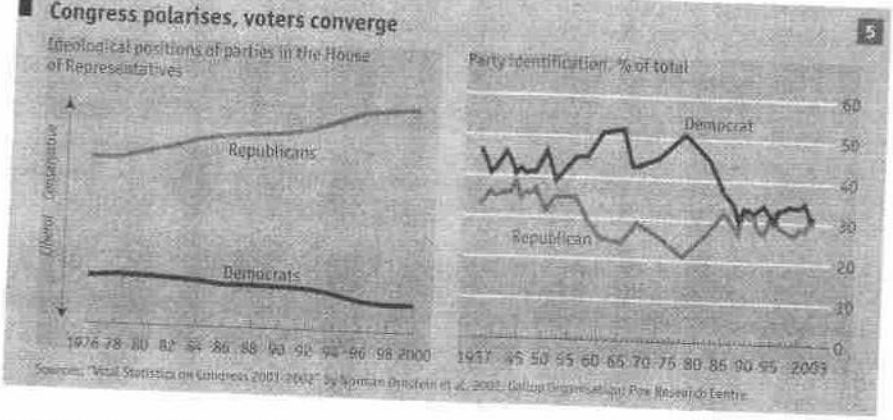
America's political system is decentralised, with proud, distinctive traditions at state level, and national parties that used to be loose coalitions of diverse groups which banded together to win power. Partisanship, on the other hand, is a centralising force that encourages uniformity. America's distinctive political traditions have been tested before, and survived. In the early part of the 20th century, a time of just as much partisanship in voting and in politicians' behaviour, America did not move towards the party-dominated political systems familiar in Europe. But there was less ideological coherence then, and no television or national media groups to reinforce a consistent message.

Now localism is weaker. And, at least on the Republican side, it faces a national organisation more disciplined, more firmly under the control of the White House, more fiercely loyal to the president—and more prepared to throw its weight around. In the 2002 elections, the White House intervened to persuade local parties in Minnesota, South Dakota and Georgia to change their senatorial candidate. The White House's choice won in two of the three states against the odds.

This does not mean that party structures themselves have strengthened. In fact, in terms of raising money they are weaker than they have been throughout most of American history. But the parties are ideologically more distinct. And within the parties, politicians are more partisan and less diverse in their backgrounds.

As for Mr Bush himself, he has proved a polarising president, better at solidifying the Republican base than at extending it. Two years after September 2001, his own party's approval of him stood at over 80%, but Democratic approval had fallen below 20%. This stunning gap marks Mr Bush as even more divisive than Bill Clinton, who suffered just as much from Republicans' hostility as Mr Bush does from Democrats'. But whereas Mr Clinton's policies were more popular than he was, with Mr Bush it is the other way around. His ratings on the economy and tax cuts are lower than his overall approval levels. The next section explains why. ■

Congress polarises, voters converge 5



Sources: "Vital Statistics on Congress 2001-2002" by Norman Ornstein et al. 2002; Gallup Organisation; Pew Research Centre

Doctor Jekyll and Mr Bush

How "exceptional" is George Bush?

FOR a moment, it seemed that the attacks of September 11th 2001 had created a new opportunity for political leadership. The mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, transformed himself overnight from an effective, if cantankerous, administrator into a symbol of the resilient city. Mr Bush might have emulated him. Americans rallied round the president after the terrorist attacks. His speeches at the time expressed the mood of national determination. His stature as commander-in-chief grew. Yet Mr Bush made no real attempt to unify the nation behind a domestic cause. He made no call for sacrifice, as Franklin Roosevelt had done after Pearl Harbour. Asked what people could do for the nation at a time of crisis, Mr Bush replied: Go back to normal. Go shopping.

This could perhaps be regarded as a failure of the president's imagination. But there is another reason. President Bush says he wants to promote America's universal values. In that sense, he is a city-on-the-hill exceptionalist. He also claimed during the 2000 election campaign that he would be "a uniter, not a divider". But his political personality is too complicated for either claim to be wholly convincing.

There are two George Bushes. One is ideological, divisive, willing to tear up the rule book and push strongly conservative ▸▸

> One opinion wanted to restrict popular power, the other to extend it indefinitely

policies. This is the Bush loved by Republicans, loathed by Democrats (see chart 6). The other is more incremental and sometimes more bipartisan. Yet even this Bush, who might appeal to the middle, is also surprisingly audacious. His audacity causes wariness among voters who are not strongly inclined for or against him.

Big-government conservatism

Foreign policy shows Mr Bush in rule-book-destroying mode. He has rejected the cornerstone of cold-war diplomacy, the doctrine of containment, and is unwilling to treat states as legitimate merely because they are internationally recognised or stable. This puts him at odds not only with European, but with cold-war traditions of American diplomacy.

In some areas of domestic policy, Mr Bush has been almost as far-reaching. The best example is tax. As Bill Galston of the University of Maryland puts it, "Ronald Reagan thought government was the problem. George Bush thinks tax is the problem." Mr Bush is in fact more radical, or more determined, than his Republican predecessor. Mr Reagan cut taxes in his first year but increased them later in the face of widening budget deficits. Mr Bush cut them in each of his first three years, despite the prospect, by the third year, of deficits as far as the eye can see.

This year, total federal revenues stood at 17% of GDP, the lowest level since 1959, which was long before Medicare, Medicaid, federal education programmes and today's defence build-up. Mr Bush's tax policy is consistent with the "exceptionalist" view that, in a twist on Thomas Jefferson's words, "the government that governs best, taxes least." It has heightened differences in the tax burden between the two sides of the Atlantic.

What about the other George Bush? This is the one who created the biggest new bureaucracy since Harry Truman: the Department of Homeland Security. This is the Bush who has pushed the powers of the federal government into education, hitherto a state preserve, by requiring annual testing of students and raising federal spending to supervise those tests. It is the one who has allowed the Justice Department to detain suspected terrorists for longer periods and with less judicial review.

This is the Bush who is trying to set up a national energy policy to reduce dependence on foreign oil; who slapped protectionist barriers on steel; who signed a farm bill costing $180 billion over ten years; who set up a White House office to promote marriage (surely the last thing a conservative government should be poking its nose into). And this is the one urging Congress to expand state health care for the elderly to cover some of the costs of prescription drugs—an action President Clinton's Medicare adviser says would be "the biggest expansion of government health benefits since the Great Society."

In all, the Bush administration in its first three years increased government spending by 21%. It will rise even higher if the president wins a second term and fulfils his promise to reform Social Security, because of the huge transition costs. In contrast, during the Clinton administration government spending fell as a share of GDP. "Appalling," says Ed Crane, the head of the libertarian Cato Institute which campaigns for small government.

This rise in the scope and cost of government seems to contradict the idea that American exceptionalism is increasing on Mr Bush's watch. Clearly, he is not an exceptionalist in the small-government, Reagan mould. He does not believe government is part of the problem. This qualifies, but does not rebut, the notion that exceptionalism is growing. Still less does it mean Mr Bush is making America's government more "European".

The combination of large tax cuts and increased spending has turned a budget surplus of 2.4% of GDP in 2000 into a 3.5% deficit in 2003—one of the fastest fiscal deteriorations in history. With more spending pressure, the proposed expansion of Medicare and the desire to make "temporary" tax cuts permanent, the deficit is likely to rise yet further, to around 5% of GDP by 2004-05, near the record post-war deficit set in 1983. This would almost certainly be unsustainable, so Mr Bush's economic policy must be counted a work in progress at best, a shambles at worst.

And even though Mr Bush is no sm government exceptionalist, he is no E pean-style welfare statist either. As Jo than Rauch has argued in *National Jour* a magazine for Washington insiders, thread running through his non-defe government expansion is increased cho rather than increased government. Hig spending on school tests enables pare to assess the quality of schools and cho between them. Health-care reform as o inally proposed is supposed to let priv health providers compete with Medica Social Security reform, if it happe would allow people to save for their o retirement through individual accou that would compete with the existing p as-you-go system.

These two Bushes coexist uneasily. N ther is likely to dominate the other, cause of the way the president runs his ministration. Mr Bush has an MBA, an shows. He sets overall goals but lets lieutenants work out how to meet th and goes with the policy that best plea him. Different policies, therefore, refl different strands of Republicanism. Sor times neo-conservatives have the pr dent's ear; sometimes traditional real do. Sometimes corporate barons seem permost; at other times, supply-sid This fluidity makes for a dizzy, sometir invigorating, often incoherent mixture.

Summing up

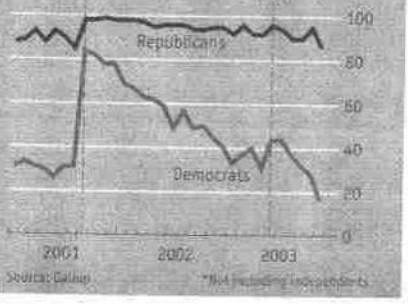
The conclusion must be that Mr Bu policies are somewhat exceptionalist, creasing his appeal to the red states anc ducing it in blue ones. At the same ti the combination of radical ambition uncertain outcomes leaves voters in middle nervously suspending judgme

The president's radical policies and growth of partisanship have increased importance of extreme opinion and n ginalised the centre. After September 1 Mr Bush appealed strongly to traditic American patriotism. His tax policies pealed to small-government conse tism. Both implicitly encouraged ex tionalism. All this lessened the modera influence of the middle.

Exceptionalism and partisanship r force one another. Exceptionalism e anyway; partisanship increases its im tance. Partisan politics is growing anyv exceptionalism gives it character spirit. By exaggerating existing divisi Mr Bush seems to have hardened his c try's battle lines. And they seem to h hardened him. ■

Polarised 6

George Bush's job-approval rating by party identification, %*



Source: Gallup *Not including Independents

The Economist November 6th 2004

"America... seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe"

The last, best hope of earth?

American exceptionalism is a fact and a fate. It does not have to be a problem

IS AMERICAN exceptionalism something to worry about? Many people will say yes. Their concerns are understandable but overblown.

An increased sense of national distinctiveness in any big power must worry the small fry who live in its shadow. America's alliance with Europe kept millions of people free and wealthy during the cold war. To the extent that American assertiveness threatens that alliance, it also hurts something that has done immense good.

But the world has lived with American differences for two centuries. The suspicions surrounding their current revival are due in part to foreigners' shock at the end of the somewhat artificial closeness engendered by the cold war, and in part to the war in Iraq. As other countries begin to adjust to changes in America, and as profound disagreement over Iraq fades into milder wrangling about the occupation, alliances will be rebuilt. That is already beginning to happen.

Some of the features that make America different cause problems within the country because they are divisive. True, qualities such as Americans' optimism and their stress on individual responsibility encourage unity. But other features are more partisan, including religiosity, small-government conservatism and perhaps intense patriotism. America is already deeply divided between traditional and secular cultures. The increase of partisanship, the culture of political victory at all costs, Mr Bush's own policies and his enormous appeal to traditional America all risk making matters worse.

Yet the contest of values is a source of strength as well as weakness for America. New opinions are always bubbling up; elite views are always being tested. This is messy but not acquiescent. De Tocqueville argued that the most insidious threat to any democracy was apathy, which conducts people "by a longer, more secret, but surer path towards servitude." America's culture wars help to bar that secret path.

And for everyone other than Americans themselves, the country's divisions should be less worrying. Doctrines of American exceptionalism tend to be self-regulating. Mr Bush stresses them and meets opposition from the left; a President Howard Dean would no doubt downplay them and meet opposition from the right.

In addition, there are two external constraints upon American exceptionalism. One is the sheer difficulty of engagement abroad. As problems pile up in Iraq, people at home will become ever less likely to support the idea that America has a unique mission in the world.

The other constraint is economic. At the moment, the world economy depends too heavily on American growth, and America depends too much on borrowing abroad. At some point, global economic imbalances will be corrected and, if things go well, growth in the rest of the world will begin to catch up with America's, making its economic performance less divergent from its partners'. Meanwhile, America's budget problems will constrain President Bush. In 2000, surpluses enabled him to make expansive, nation-changing promises. As the red ink flows, he is likely to be forced into small-scale, incremental promises for his second term.

In the end, though, American exceptionalism worries outsiders because it seems both to represent and encourage a more dangerous world. Doctrines of exceptionalism seem to fit with the notion that the post-cold-war world is a battleground of warring cultures and hostile ideologies, the "clash of civilisations". In such a world, the anti-exceptionalist tenets of the European Union—that countries should play down their differences—seem to offer a safe haven. Exceptionalists reply that the world's conflicts are there for all to see, and that American power is likely to promote not chaos, but safety.

Patriots of the future

No one knows which of these ideas will be more influential in the world in future: America's top-dog exceptionalism or the EU's basket of squealing puppies. But for America itself, the choice has already been made. America is a nation apart in both senses: different from others, and divided within itself. ■