

["America's Farbric," #2

January 13, 2008

Subject: The Uniqueness of America: Geography and Immigration]

Good morning. And welcome to our radio series "America's Fabric," which is broadcast every Sunday morning at eight o'clock to promote love of country.

Patriotism is a basic strength of every great nation. And America faces at this time in its history dangers that could destroy it if we, the people of the United States, are not actively united by love of our country.

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I'm John McElroy, your host for "America's Fabric."

Our program today is the first of two that will tell the story of America's uniqueness.

There's really only one way to describe this uniqueness, and that is by comparing our country with the three other major areas of European settlement on the continents of the Western Hemisphere after Columbus's roundtrip voyage across the Atlantic in 1492-1493 changed the world by making Europeans aware of North and South America.

Let's start with Brazil.

Brazil is as large as the United States minus Alaska and Hawaii. Its geography is dominated by the Amazon River, the largest, most awesome river in the world, which drains one-third of South America. The Amazon is so big where it empties into the sea that a person in the middle of the river cannot see either of its banks, because they disappear below the curvature of the earth!

The Portuguese called this awesome river “*o rio mar*”—which means “the river sea.” The name is appropriate, because the Amazon’s 3,900-mile length averages five miles in width and its main channel averages 150 feet in depth. The annual flood of this river-sea inundates an area the size the Mediterranean, the largest inland sea on earth.

I first saw the Amazon at Iquitos, twenty-three hundred miles from the Atlantic, and the river was still so wide and so deep at that point that ocean-going ships were able to come there.

The tropical rain-forest that covers the Amazon Basin (which is, of course, the largest on earth) is unbelievably big. In flying across it, you look down on an ocean of treetops, having only a few, widely separated, little islands of human habitation. No roads or railroads are visible from the windows of your commercial airliner. Only rivers and trees, hour after hour. Green trees and brown rivers for hour after hour.

This incredibly immense and inhospitable rain-forest and the Amazon’s uncontrollable annual flooding, plus the precipitous uplands crowding close to the Brazilian coast south of the Amazon Basin, have confined most of the Brazil’s population to towns and cities on or near the Atlantic. To this day, there is no city in Brazil as large and as far from the sea as Atlanta, Georgia.

Let us turn now to Canada, to get a quick sense of how its geography differs from that of our country.

Just as most of present-day Brazil—now completing the fifth century since its settlement by Europeans—is still covered by a tropical wilderness, so too is most of Canada still covered, 400 years after its first European settlement, by arctic and sub-arctic wilderness. Before the end of the last Ice Age, 11,000 years ago, all of Canada lay under

a thick cap of ice; and the innumerable lakes, bogs, rivers, ponds, and streams left by the melting of that ice cap are today frozen solid more months of the year than they are free of ice.

Which is why Canada's population is concentrated within one hundred to two hundred miles of its southern border: mostly near the eastern Great lakes and the Saint Lawrence, whose valley was the initial place of European settlement in Canada. It is also why the Canadian population is only one-ninth the size of the U. S. population, even though Canada is bigger than the United States.

Now let's consider Spanish America, the largest area of European settlement in the Western Hemisphere.

In the final decade of the fifteenth century, Spain established the first permanent European settlements in the Western Hemisphere on the islands of the Caribbean, the first lands discovered by Columbus in what was, indeed, for Europeans in the 1490s a "New World." Three decades later, employing those Caribbean islands as bases, Spanish settlement spread to the mainland of North America, with the conquest of the Mexican and Mayan civilizations and in the following decade, to South America, with the conquest of the Chibcha civilization and the Inca empire. By the end of the 1500s, before there were any permanent European settlements in America or Canada, Spain had built over fifty new cities to serve as administrative centers throughout what was to become known in the English-speaking world as "Spanish America."

High mountains are the main topographical feature of Spanish America, which encompasses sixteen Spanish-speaking nations. These north-south mountains are some 9,000 miles in length and are nearly continuous, with only a break of a few hundred miles

in Central America. They include in South America the 5,000 miles of the Andean cordillera, which is the world's longest chain of high mountains and, with seventeen peaks over 22,000 feet, also the highest mountains after the Himalayas.

Only in this part of the New World did Europeans find advanced civilizations with large cities of cut stone, irrigation projects that carried water hundreds of miles, thousands of miles of paved roads and suspension bridges with spans of up to five hundred feet, elaborate governments, including royalty and noblemen who lived in sumptuous palaces, and large amounts of gold and silver—to mention only some of the wonders Europeans encountered in Spanish America. In these parts of the Americas, the tradition of civilization was already twenty centuries old at the time Europeans arrived.

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The typography of the United States of America was altogether different from the typographies of Brazil, Canada, and Spanish America.

America was, to be sure, a wilderness like Brazil and Canada at the time of its European settlement, but a temperate, inviting wilderness rather than a forbiddingly tropical or arctic place.

An eleven-hundred-mile-long coastal plain, extending inland from fifty to a hundred miles—and more in its southern reaches—greeted the first Europeans. In the middle of this immense coastal plain was a 200-mile-long tidal bay (the Chesapeake) and this bay, plus the plain's numerous rivers, some of which, like the Connecticut, the Hudson, the Delaware, the Susquehanna, and the Potomac were quite sizeable, provided ready means of transportation inland. This long, thickly forested, inviting coastal plain, with its superb natural resources, was the cradle of the American nation.

Beyond the comparatively low mountains defining the Atlantic Coastal Plain's western edge lay an expanse of forests, plains, and grasslands that beggared the imagination. At the northern end of these Great Plains were five freshwater lakes, comprising the greatest body of freshwater on the planet. And, in the last third of the continent before the Pacific Ocean, beyond this fabulous, open country with its network of huge rivers, lay mountain ranges whose highest peaks were not too much more than half the height of the Andean peaks, intermontane basins, and California's hugely fertile central valley. In the waters off both coasts and the five freshwater seas called the Great Lakes were rich fisheries. Everywhere there was timber, building stone, and exploitable mineral wealth—and good farmland, lots of it.

Nowhere else on the two American continents was there a continental expanse like this, with this sort of climate and accessibility, and this amount of arable land—as much cultivatable land as all of Spanish America, Canada, and Brazil.

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The population America acquired was also unique. Whereas European immigration to French Canada, Brazil, and Spanish America in the 1500s and 1600s reproduced the structure of Europe's hierarchical, feudal societies, no titled, hereditary lords migrated to the wilderness on the Atlantic Coastal Plain to live off the labor of subjugated peoples. But on the Atlantic Coastal Plain of North America, a rapidly growing society of free workers soon developed. Some eighty-five percent of this society benefited from their own labor.

Again, to appreciate this unique aspect of America's history, it is necessary to make comparisons.

Each of the four large continental areas of the Western Hemisphere—Spanish America, Brazil, Canada, and the United States—acquired a new population after Columbus’s world-changing voyage. But only the United States received a population of self-selecting immigrants.

What is meant by self-selecting immigrants?

Self-selecting immigrants are individuals *who are not compelled to meet a set of standards*. Freedom from governmental restrictions distinguishes the self-selected immigrant.

Of the principal European powers—Spain, Portugal, France, and England—that colonized the Western Hemisphere in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only England permitted self-selecting immigration.

To take up residence in one of the thirteen colonies established by England in North America, an oath of allegiance was the only demand made of immigrants who were not already subjects of the English crown. Regardless of their country, anyone willing to swear allegiance to the English monarchy could take up residence in these colonies.

Nor did the English crown impose any religious test on would-be immigrants.

The kings of England adopted this immigration policy not because they were less interested in imperial profit than the kings of France, Portugal, and Spain, but because they wanted to build up in their American possessions, as soon as possible, as large a population of European workers as they could get, in order to transform the temperate wilderness of the Atlantic Coastal Plain into valuable farmland and to constitute a new market for English merchants. Where the workers came from in Europe, or what their

church membership might be, were unimportant considerations to the English crown, as long as they were willing to acknowledge the authority of the English crown and obey English laws.

Thus, England's thirteen American colonies came to have a population characterized by a unique diversity of European nationalities and Christian denominations.

A description of this population in 1782 noted that Americans were [quote] "a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen.... Here[,] individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world." [end of quotation]

Thomas Paine succinctly summarized the diversity of America's colonial population in his essay "Common Sense," the year before America declared its independence, in this matter-of-fact statement [quote]: "Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America."

The policy of self-selecting immigration was an enormous success in generating the kind of rapidly growing European population the English kings wanted in their thirteen colonies in North America. But it proved to be a disastrous imperial blunder. For it led, in a comparatively short time, to a non-English sense of national identity among the self-selected immigrants and their American-born descendants and a precocious desire for independence.

It is worth noting in this respect that the United States was not just the first of Europe's colonies in the New World to become independent. More significantly,

America became independent a great deal sooner in its history than any other part of the New World did in theirs. It took America only a century and three-quarters to achieve independent. Brazil and the sixteen countries of Spanish America remained dependencies of Europe for three centuries; and Canada, which was settled by Europeans in the same decade as the United States, did not become fully sovereign until 1982.

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The immigration policies of all of the imperial powers of Europe were based on their particular needs to turn an imperial profit, just as England's was.

The Spanish monarchs restricted European immigration to Spanish subjects who practiced the state religion of Spain: Roman Catholicism. The Aztec and Inca empires that Spain had dominated already had dense populations of tens of millions of civilized Indians, who were accustomed to paying taxes and serving their native lords. The populous civilizations of Mexico and Guatemala, which became the viceroyalty of New Spain, and the populous Inca empire and the Chibcha civilization in what is now Colombia, which became the viceroyalty of Peru, lacked only a new class of rulers. The Spanish crown needed Spanish noblemen, professional soldiers, loyal administrators, and Catholic churchmen to constitute a new governing class to replace the priests, lords, and professional soldiers of the Inca and Aztec empires. And of course this new ruling class would require Spanish tradesmen and artisans to satisfy their customary tastes.

Therefore the Spanish monarchs established in 1503 in the port-city of Seville, in southern Spain, a powerful bureaucracy called the *Casa de Contratacion* to control trade with Spain's new territories in the Western Hemisphere and to make certain that the only Europeans who went to live in these viceroyalties were Spaniards of documented, pure

Spanish ancestry and documented Roman Catholic faith (“*gente de sangre pura y catolicos viejos*”). This bureau of Spain’s imperial government continued to serve those functions without interruption for the next three centuries.

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France likewise rigorously screened immigrants to its colony of “New France,” as the French called Canada, and enforcing conformity to one nationality and one religion, namely French Roman Catholics. Moreover the number of immigrants was strictly regulated. Though France had the largest population by far of any of the imperial powers that established colonies in the New World, it needed to keep as much of its manpower as possible at home to fight its wars in Europe. Hence, only enough Frenchmen to garrison the great fortress at Quebec, trade with the Indians, and raise sufficient food to supply the colony’s wants were allowed to emigrate to Canada.

Besides, exploiting the fish and furs that were the main sources of wealth of this colony required no large, year-round European population. Indian trappers harvested the furs and brought them by canoe to Montreal for shipment to Europe, and fishing boats from France came every year to the Grand Banks off eastern Canada to harvest the seemingly inexhaustible stocks of cod to be found on that teeming fishing ground.

After a century and a half of applying this kind of immigrant screening, the French, Roman Catholic population of Canada numbered less than 70,000. At the same time, England’s colonies, after a century and a half of self-selecting immigration, had a rapidly increasing population of close to one million European-descended inhabitants.

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The kingdom of Portugal, whose population was the smallest of the four major imperial powers that colonized the New World, could not spare many citizens to populate its colony of Brazil. But its need for laborers to convert the Brazilian wilderness into profitable agricultural property was as pressing as England's need for workers to transform the North American wilderness. Portugal solved its problem, not as England did, by encouraging self-selecting European immigration, but by a wholesale importation of slaves from West Africa, where it had long conducted a thriving slave trade.

Slaves of African descent remained the basis of Brazil's economy for 290 years under Portuguese rule and for another sixty-six after Brazil gained its independence. During most of those three and a half centuries, slaves made up roughly eighty-five percent of the population of Brazil.

As was typical everywhere in the post-1492 Americas, except for the English-speaking colonies of North America, the only European immigrants allowed into Brazil were citizens of the colonizing country who worshipped in that country's established state church, although Portugal was never as severe as France or Spain in its screening of immigrants by nationality and religion.

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Thus, during the first two centuries of European immigration to the New World, basically different societies came into being.

In Spanish America, many millions of civilized, conquered Indians lived as they had under their native lords, before the Spanish conquered their civilizations: that is to say, in the condition of peons serving an elite ruling class from one European nationality practicing one Christian faith.

In Portuguese Brazil, the same situation pertained: a large mass of subjugated laborers of non-European descent ruled by a relatively small class from one nation of Europe who practiced but one Christian religion.

In France's colony of Canada, a small population of French Catholics made commercial and, occasionally, military use of the North American Indian tribes living in their vicinity.

Only in one part of the New World was there a large, growing population of free, self-determining workers who directly benefited from their own labor.

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This is your host for "America's Fabric," John McElroy, saying thanks for listening. And remember: we need your help to stay on the air. Please send your tax-deductible check to: "America's Fabric," Post Office Box seventeen three fifty-six, Tucson, Arizona, 85731, and receive a bumper sticker reading: "GRATEFUL to be an AMERICAN."

The program for "America's Fabric" next Sunday tells the story of how the beliefs of the self-selecting immigrants became the basis of our nation's unique character.

Until then, stay proud—and grateful—to be an American, and remember: America is the land of the free because it is the home of the brave.