Which American Way?

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The Hudson Institute's Christopher DeMuth in an ***interview*** *with Lénárd Sándor of the Institute for American Studies at Hungary's National University of Public Service, appearing in* Mandiner *magazine, Oct. 7:*

The American way of life has changed in many ways over our long history, as Americans have become more numerous, diverse, prosperous, urban, and mobile. Three characteristics that have endured from the founding are a live-and-let-live attitude, a belief in opportunity and initiative, and a strong sense of patriotism. The first two embody our ideals of liberty and equality; the third is the spirit that holds everything together.

First, most of us are attached to ways of living that are characteristic of our localities, ethnic heritages, family traditions, religions, vocations, and so on—but recognize, and appreciate, that many of our countrymen are attached to other distinctive, worthy ways and traditions. Live-and-let-live has fortified rather than divided our nation. We have been, for example, a notably religious people without tearing ourselves apart over matters of doctrine and revelation—and religious movements have made many illustrious contributions to our national development.

Second, we are united by an ethic of equal opportunity for all. This is not an abstract creed but rather a set of living practices. It depends on robust private initiative and public commitments—to the rule of law, limited government, and wide freedoms of inquiry, belief, and speech and of association and industry.

Third, our patriotism is strong because it is based on gratitude—for our stupendous natural resources and geography, for our long-lived Constitution and political system that have gotten us through many hard challenges, for the deeds of our ancestors, for the living practices of liberty and equality. This American patriotism is not aggressive and does not have a chip on its shoulder; it is attached to our national inheritance rather than to the state; it is unifying rather than dividing.

Today's woke progressives believe that these features of the American way are lies and illusions—to be "woke" means to have woken up to the realities concealed by happy talk about liberty, equality, and opportunity. Progressives want to replace live-and-let-live with an identity politics of grievance and resentment among racial, sexual, and other groups and of envy of "the rich." They would replace equal opportunity with preferences and penalties for officially identified groups, and individual initiative with government provision for even routine incidents of life. In the service of these goals, they would restrict each of the freedoms I have itemized. Finally, by opening our borders, and by recasting our history as a story of unmitigated evil, progressives would depose American nationhood; they favor the sovereignty of the unmoored, unconstrained self.

A great many Americans remain attached to our traditional ideals and ways of life and are aghast at the strange ideologies sweeping their institutions, from Wall Street to local schools. But progressivism has become a powerful force. It draws upon the decline of family, religion, and locality and on the tribalism of social media and the internet. It has the advantages of passionate conviction, elite validation, and bureaucratic entrenchment. Which American way will eventually prevail is an open question.