

Chris Carbin: American identity is so fundamentally abstract that defining it can only come about after settling on a distinct and specific lens with which to do our perceiving. If we zoom out too far, we quickly lose track of any qualitative or quantitative aspects by which to conceptualize our American-ness. The current population of the United States of America clocks in around 328,200,000 people. If we, for the sake of argument, count “individual liberty” among our commonly held values, then it is entirely impossible to accurately consider the 328 million forms that the aforementioned individual liberty might take. Try as we might to empathize with each and every person who crosses our paths, extending that empathy to hundreds of millions is a commendable thought experiment, but a pretty useless tool for quantifying a common identity. The idea that those 328 million souls are working in tandem towards the lofty goals of our founding fathers is, in a word, ridiculous.

We encounter an equal and opposite problem if we zoom in too close. Any individual can decide upon a set of values by which to live their lives, but assigning those values to others gets sticky fast. Let’s consider the universal human right to the pursuit of happiness in a vacuum. Even this tiny tidbit from the Declaration of Independence introduces an ENORMOUS philosophical question: what is happiness? How might its forms differ from person to person? Is there a version of happiness that is loose enough for everyone to participate in, but also puritanical enough that it doesn’t create too much friction with the typically conservative American perspective on sex, love, war, capitalism, etc? When we zoom in too close, we find ourselves immediately mired in the minutiae of describing abstract concepts in concrete form. It can make for wonderful conversation, but again, does little to address the question at hand.

How then should we commonly identify? Our common struggles? Our common triumphs? Simply existing at a given longitude and latitude within a series of imaginary borders created to more simply organize land stolen from indigenous peoples does not an identity make - or, if it does, not a particularly flattering one. For a start, we must look to the communities within which our voices can be heard with some semblance of immediacy and efficacy, and identify the structures upon which we can have a tangible influence. When we better understand the reach of our influence as individuals, and the extension of that reach by means of existing as a member of a group of individuals with a common goal, it becomes apparent very quickly how little national identity has anything at all to do with how most of us make decisions from day-to-day.

An American with a predisposition to purchase American-made goods is no different from a German with a predisposition to purchase German-made goods. Do you feel pride in or gratitude towards the U.S. Military? Whether your answer is yes or no is actually irrelevant, because that exact emotional reaction toward a given institution can absolutely be mirrored by countless citizens of countless countries across the globe. Are you glad to participate in a democracy, where your individual vote can have far-reaching consequences, for better or for worse? Again, the answer here is irrelevant. None of these are uniquely American experiences. I believe there is only one common American experience, and that is to be legally recognized as an American citizen. Does that devalue the principles, ideals, values, and humanity of an undocumented immigrant on U.S. soil? Of course it does not, and in that is revealed the absurdity of national identity.

What it is to be an American, then, rests wholly upon the individual to determine. National identity is capable of existing as a tool of division as well as a tool of inclusion, but it doesn't actually mean anything until that meaning is designated by the beholder of that identity. In a world of 328 million beholders, finding a common identity makes a lot less sense than inventing that identity for yourself.