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Reflections on National Character: Is the United States Still a Superpower?

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Title: Reflections on National Character: Is the United States Still a Superpower?

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Abstract. This article comments on the construct of national character and then employs the construct to suggest that the United States (U.S.) Government and the US as a nation and nation-state may no longer warrant superpower status.

National character can be said to be a construct with a complex denotation. The denotation comprises a concatenation of psychological traits and tendencies--themselves constructs. These latter constructs are assumed by the denoter to be more common among a group of people than at least some other groups of people. A group of people is identified as a group through sharing some combination of customs, origins, history, language, and physical characteristics to a significantly greater extent than to some other group. And the concatenation of traits and tendencies must at least seem to have some sense of temporal and situational specificity and stability--even if very little temporal and situational specificity and stability and may be the stability and specificity of a national character and even if ontological validity is not explored for national character and what it may denote.

A very great problem with the national character construct is that the group of people ascribed a variant of the construct may also be identified as a group based on the same or similar traits and tendencies that constitute that construct's variant. Another problem is delineating how national characters may change with time and situation. As the temporal interval and situational consistency decrease between identifiable changes of national character, the very tenuousness of the national character construct becomes ever more difficult to differentiate from a variant of the construct. Lastly, a frequency count of social sciences studies on national character suggests a significant lack of interest among the current and last generation of researchers--perhaps suggesting that ontological validity, political correctness, and change of political contexts are contemporary impediments.

With the above as a prologue, one might then muse on whether there is a U.S. national character. Assuming there is and assuming a belief system about war is a constituent, one might well conclude that the superpower status of the US--government, nation, nation-state--is seriously threatened, if not already lost.

Events going back at least as far as this decade's aborted U.S. military and humanitarian intervention in Somalia may indicate that a war-related belief system includes elements such as wars and many other military interventions should (1) be successfully effected in very short periods of time (as defined by criteria often independent of military and political objectives); (2) not entail any or many casualties; (3) not entail any or many mistakes; (4) almost always entail predictable behaviors and consequences; and (5) almost always based on unambiguous, correct intelligence. Such a belief system would seem to impede the effective use of military assets in support of superpower political objectives.

Beyond the independent analysis of ethical, moral, and psychological components of superpower status, they can interact with the strategic and induce an implosion of status from within. (See Beit-Hallahmi, B. (1972). National character and national behavior in the Middle East conflict: The case of the "Arab personality." *International Journal of Group Tensions*, 2, 19-28; Klineberg, O. (1944). A science of

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

national character. *American Scientist*, 32, 273-285; Lester, D. (1996). Applying the concept of national character to states within a nation: An extension of Lynn's methodology. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 21, 1055-1057; Peabody, D., & Shmelyov, A.G. (1996). Psychological characteristics of Russians. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 507-512; Winthrop, H. (1966). American national character and the existentialist posture. *Journal of Existentialism*, 6, 405-419.) (Keywords: National Character, War.)