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What is an American?: A primer

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This essay was written just after 9-11 by an associate law professor at Virginia's George Mason University.

You probably missed it in the rush of news last week, but there was actually a report that someone in Pakistan had published in a newspaper there an offer of a reward to anyone who killed an American, any American.

So I just thought I would write to let them know what an American is, so they would know when they found one.

An American is English...or French, or Italian, Irish, German, Spanish, Polish, Russian or Greek. An American may also be African, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Australian, Iranian, Asian, or Arab, or Pakistani, or Afghan.

An American is Christian, or he could be Jewish, or Buddhist, or Muslim. In fact, there are more Muslims in America than in Afghanistan. The only difference is that in America they are free to worship as each of them choose.

An American is also free to believe in no religion. For that he will answer only to God, not to the government, or to armed thugs claiming to speak for the government and for God.

An American is from the most prosperous land in the history of the world. The root of that prosperity can be found in the Declaration of Independence, which recognizes the God-given right of each man and woman to the pursuit of happiness.

An American is generous. Americans have helped out just about every other nation in the world in their time of need. When Afghanistan was overrun by the Soviet army 20 years ago, Americans came with arms and supplies to enable the people to win back their country. As of the morning of September 11, Americans had given more than any other nation to the poor in Afghanistan.

An American does not have to obey the mad ravings of ignorant, ungodly cruel, old men. American men will not be fooled into giving up their lives to kill innocent people, so that these foolish old men may hold on to power. American women are free to show their beautiful faces to the world, as each of them choose.

An American is free to criticize his government's officials when they are wrong, in his or her own opinion. Then he is free to replace them, by majority vote.

Americans welcome people from all lands, all cultures, all religions, because they are not afraid. They are not afraid that their history, their religion, their beliefs, will be overrun, or forgotten. That is because they know they are free to hold to their religion, their beliefs, their history, as each of them choose.

And just as Americans welcome all, they enjoy the best that everyone has to bring, from all over the world. The best science, the best technology, the best products, the best books, the best music, the best food, the best athletes.

Americans welcome the best, but they also welcome the least. The nation symbol of America welcomes your tired and your poor, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores, the homeless, tempest tossed.

These in fact are the people who built America. Many of them were working in the twin towers on the morning of September 11, earning a better life for their families.

So you can try to kill an American if you must. Hitler did. So did General Tojo and Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung, and every bloodthirsty tyrant in the history of the world.

But in doing so you would just be killing yourself. Because Americans are not a particular people from a particular place. They are the embodiment of the human spirit of freedom. Everyone who holds to that spirit, everywhere, is an American.

So look around you. You may find more Americans in your land than you thought were there.

By Peter Ferrara, Associate Professor of Law, George Mason University School of Law, in National Review, September 25, 2001.

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