**Pursuing happiness**

One of the most striking things about the document that Americans celebrate with such gusto on July 4 is that so much of it is dull – hardly worthy of the tons of fireworks and barbecue that are sacrificed in its honour. There are lists of complaints about the administration of the courts and the quartering of British troops. There is an angry passage about King George’s habit of summoning legislators ‘at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records’. But all this is more than made up for by a single sentence – the one about ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (The Economist, Pursuing Happiness, June 29, 2006).

The sentence was remarkable at the time – a perfect summary, in a few pithy words, of exactly what was new about the new republic. Previous countries had been based on common traditions and a collective identity. Previous statesmen had been exercised by things like the common good and public virtue (which usually meant making sure that people played their allotted roles in the divinely established order). The Founding Fathers were the first politicians to produce the explosive combination of individual rights and the pursuit of happiness. It remains equally remarkable today, still the best statement, 230 years after it was written, of what makes America American. The Book of Job gives warning that ‘man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward’. Americans, for all their overt religiosity, have dedicated their civilization to proving Job wrong. Everywhere you look in contemporary America, you see a people engaged in that pursuit.

You can see it in work habits. Americans not only work harder than most Europeans (they work an average of 1731 hours a year compared with an average of 1440 for Germans).They also endure lengthy commutes (who cares about a couple of hours a day in a car when you have a McMansion to come home to?). You can see it in geographical mobility. About 40 million of them move house every year. They are remarkably willing to travel huge distances in pursuit of everything from bowling conventions to factory outlets. You can see it in religion: Americans relentlessly shop around for the church that most suits their spiritual needs. And you can see it in the country’s general hopefulness: two-thirds of Americans are optimistic about the future.

Since Americans are energetic even in deconstructing their own founding principles, there is no shortage of people who have taken exception to the happiness pursuit. They range from conservatives such as Robert Bork, who think the phrase encapsulates the ‘emptiness at the heart of American ideology’, to liberals who think that it is a justifi cation for an acquisitive society.

One criticism is that the pursuit is self-defeating. The more you pursue the illusion of happiness the more you sacrifice the real thing. The flip side of relentless mobility is turmoil and angst, broken marriages and unhappy children. Americans have less job security than ever before. They even report having fewer close friends than a couple of decades ago. And international studies of happiness suggest that people in certain poor countries, for instance Nigeria and Mexico, are apparently happier than people in the US.

Another criticism is that Americans have confused happiness with material possessions (it is notable that Thomas Jefferson’s call echoes Adam Smith’s phrase about ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of property’). Do all those pairs of Manolo Blahnik shoes really make you happy? Or are they just a compensation for empty lives in the City? If opinion polls on such matters mean anything – and that is dubious – they suggest that both these criticisms are flawed. A 2006 Pew Research Centre study, ‘Are we happy (50%). The Harris Poll’s 2004 ‘feel good index’ found that 95% are pleased with their homes and 91% are pleased with their social lives. The Pew polls show that money does indeed go some way towards buying happiness: nearly half (49%) of Americans with annual incomes of more than $100,000 say they are very happy compared with just 24% of people with incomes of $30,000 or less. They also suggest that Americans’

religiosity makes them happier still: 43% of Americans who attend religious services once a week or more report being very happy compared with 31% who attend once a month or less and 26% of people who attend seldom or never.

**Weep, and you weep alone**

The pursuit of happiness explains all sorts of peculiarities of American life: from the $700m that is spent on self-help books every year to the irritating dinner guests who will not stop looking at their BlackBerries. It also holds a clue to understanding American politics. Perhaps the biggest reason why the Republicans have proved so successful in recent years is that they have established a huge ‘happiness gap’. Some 45% of Republicans report being ‘very happy’ compared with just 30% of Democrats. The Democrats may be right to give warning of global warming and other disasters. But are they right to give the impression that they relish all the misery? The people’s party will never regain its momentum unless it learns to relate to the guy on the super-sized patio, happily grilling his hamburgers and displaying his American flag. The pursuit of happiness may even help to explain the surge of anti-Americanism.

Many people dislike the US because of its failure to live up to its stated ideals. But others dislike it precisely because it is doing exactly what Jefferson intended. For some Europeans, the pursuit of happiness in the form of monster cars and mansions is objectionable on every possible ground, from aesthetic to ecological. You cannot pursue happiness with such conspicuous enthusiasm without making quite a lot of people around the world rather unhappy.

**Questions**

1 Discuss the proposition that the pursuit of happiness is self-defeating, commenting on relevant empirical evidence.

2 ‘For some Europeans, the pursuit of happiness in the form of monster cars and mansions is objectionable on every possible ground.’ Explain this statement, commenting on differences between the American and European viewpoints.

3 ‘Religiosity appears to make people happier; therefore I should become religious.’Discuss.