

Why Do Americans Love the Royals? We Secretly Miss the WASPs

If the announcement of Prince Harry's and Meghan Markle's decision to "step back" from royal duties has reminded us of anything, it's that Americans are bizarrely fascinated by the British royal family. Every morning since the initial announcement, *The Washington Post* has brought yet more coverage of the royals: on [British tabloid coverage](#), on the couple's "[transition](#)," on the "[dark side of their escape](#)," on their [plans to move to Canada](#), on [how Canada will respond to their move](#), and [more on how Canadians will respond to their move](#). [Many explanations](#) are given for this American obsession: [escapism](#), a desire to witness history, [the monarchy's stability](#), participating in a real life "Truman Show."

I would offer another reason: that following the royals reflects the fact that Americans, despite their dogmas of multiculturalism and secularism, and regardless of race, ethnicity, and religion, embrace certain essential aspects of WASP culture. Thus we appreciate those things that remind us of our WASP inheritance, including the royal family. Arianne Chernock, associate professor in the history department at Boston University, [told CNN in 2018](#) that American interest in the royals "has been alive pretty much since 1776.... Pretty much as soon as we severed ties, we were back to being fascinated—captivated really—by the royal family." Americans, posits Chernock, maintain a sense of a shared path and narrative with our British cousins across the pond.

What is this WASP culture, its path and narrative? Ross Douthat in an [op-ed honoring deceased President George H.W. Bush](#) describes WASP virtues like a "spirit of *noblesse*

oblige and personal austerity and piety that went beyond the thank-you notes and boat shoes and prep school chapel going – a spirit that trained the most privileged children for service, not just success.” I would add to this a memorializing of certain middle-class traits of personal success (the “self-made man”); individualism and ambition; financial thrift; civic participation; civility; and intellectual acumen. Even if we don’t possess these traits ourselves (and Americans, sadly, increasingly do not!), a quick glance at the heroes of our TV shows and movies (e.g. Jack Ryan, Bruce Wayne, Peter Parker) suggests we think those qualities epitomize the best of what it means to be American.

Moreover, for all the attacks on former President Obama, he is, as [American academic Walter Russel Mead noted](#), “one of the neo-Waspiest men in the country.” Mead explains:

He is not a product of Kenyan villages or third world socialism. He was educated at the Hawaiian equivalent of a New England prep school, and spent his formative years in the Ivies. He has much more in common with Harvard-educated technocrats like McGeorge Bundy than with African freedom fighters and third world socialists of the 1970s.

President Obama’s vision of a strong central government leading the people along the paths of truth and righteousness has “New England” stamped all over it. Puritan Boston believed in a powerful government whose duty was to promote moral behavior and punish the immoral; by 1800 many of the Puritan descendants were turning Unitarian and modernist, but while they lost their love of Christian doctrine they never abandoned their faith in the Godly Commonwealth and the duty of the virtuous to make the rest of the world behave.

People like Obama are what Mead calls “neo-WASPs,” those whose personal family trees have no connection to Anglos or Saxons, and may not even be Protestant, but who are “steeped in and

helped carry forward a set of ideas and values that were shaped in British history and the American experience.”

This has been the experience of my own family in the United States. My father’s grandfather emigrated to America from Poland at the turn of the 20th century, and during his time in the U.S. Army during World War I, deemed it prudent to change the original spelling of his name (Czoch) to something his drill sergeant could pronounce (Chalk.) My grandfather, in turn, despite learning Polish as his first language, was eager to embrace the customs of mid-20th-century WASP America. Their house in Virginia was a model of middle-class WASP sensibilities, with portraits of Lincoln and Washington and all manner of patriotic paraphernalia. Much the same can be said for my mother’s family, almost exclusively of Irish stock who arrived in America during the Famine in the 1840s and 1850s.

As far as I know, not a single one of my ancestors was present in the United States at the time of the Revolutionary War. And my family has no evidence that our Irish-American ancestors served in the Civil War. Yet both sides of my family, Irish- and Polish-American, have embraced that history as their own. I was raised believing the keys to success were found in the WASP values of faith, individual responsibility, ambition, austerity, thrift, civic participation, and civility, as modeled by men like Washington, Lincoln, and, yes, even Robert E. Lee. My Catholic ancestors conformed to those standards and qualities, and continued to do so on the way out of generations of poverty and into family-owned businesses and military and government service.

None of this is to excuse WASP Americans for their many errors, capital among them the institution of slavery and the institutionalization of racial discrimination across both North and South. It was WASPs, while promoting middle-class sensibilities of thrift and industriousness, who exploited millions of newly arrived immigrants in American factories. It

was WASPs who populated the Ku Klux Klan not just of the 1870s anti-black South but of the 1920s anti-Catholic Midwest. It was WASPs who promoted exploitative American colonialism into Latin America and the Pacific.

My ancestors recognized that even if many WASPs looked condescendingly upon their Catholicism, their culture, and their language, WASP-dominated America offered something worth assimilating into. It's WASP culture, by the way, that's been unparalleled in its promotion of representative government, civic life, and personal socio-economic advancement. The disadvantages of certain historic aspects of WASP American culture – including anti-Catholic prejudice and anti-immigrant bullying – were far outweighed by the advantages.

I recently took a tour of Ford's Theatre. In one sense, Lincoln's assassination has practically no intersection with my family's story in America. Moreover, just about everyone mentioned during the tour – Lincoln himself, his assassin John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's guest Major Henry Rathbone, Lincoln's doctor Charles Leale – was a WASP. Yet reflecting on the Civil War, and that fateful Good Friday in 1865, I knew this was *my* history as much as any other Americans, whether they arrived on the *Mayflower*, some crowded steamship in the 1890s, or a U.S. Navy vessel fleeing South Vietnam in 1975. I've been invited to make it my own, through my public education, through exposure to American culture, and through my citizenship.

WASPs can keep their Protestantism, their ethnic and familial elitism, and, as far as I'm concerned, their affection for the British royal family. As for their many commendable values – well, I cannot imagine myself, or my family, without them.

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