

Elitism for Everybody

While not everyone is great, everyone can be.

This may be my most American idea.

As Gordon Wood argues in *American Characters*, we live in a populist country founded by elitists: a strange twist in history that has given to a mass population personal role models who had extraordinary (if flawed) personal character.

We're taught from an early age that we should look up to and imitate founders like George Washington – a landed aristocrat – and Thomas Jefferson – who was reading Latin and Greek classics in his teens. There's an idea in most of our educational systems that we can be like these men.

That's a pretty crazy idea. It's a pretty wonderful one, because it's true (we can exceed those men). And it breaks categories.

It's not a pure egalitarian idea. Egalitarianism is a leveling force. This idea calls us to go higher, and to be as good or better than men who were superior to their cultures.

But it's also a revolutionary idea. In calling everyone to become elite, this American idea redefines aristocracy. It offers admission to anyone – if they're good enough, that is.

It's a hard belief to maintain, but I want to believe and try to act in a way that assumes that everyone can (in some way) become great and virtuous. It may be the idea that makes America special. It's the idea that makes it possible for me to work hard to make the world better. I want to believe that there is some profound and great potential in every person.

As far as I know, that idea hasn't been disproven. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, the idea of "egalitarian elitism" may not have been tried and found wanting, but found difficult and left mostly untried.

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