



Crafty Bastards[®] Spotlight

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America: Imagined Community, Imagined Kinship

Executive Summary

Imagined kinship is the foundation of national community, in which society constructs a collective belief that everyone is related to one another and thus committed to one another. This construct of belief requires a strong state to establish and reaffirm national identity and belonging. Hence, the state becomes the management company for the national kinship/identity enterprise. The state's role in affirming and operating kinship-based politics tends to encourage political relationships with other nations on an imaginary kinship basis, as well.

Nowhere are the politics of imaginary kinship more pronounced than in US. American kinship terms are almost exclusively artificial, without reference to a citizen's origins, faith, folkways, or race. Thus, American kinship with all other peoples is open-ended – and this embrace supports our higher vision as the universal nation. Infinitely extensible kinship can likewise be imagined to suit any policy purpose.

Yet in practice, invented kinship acquires a political life of its own, so that the inner domestic dynamics of national kinship tend to drive most American constructions of its world relationships. Here, imagined kinship comes to drive American foreign relations for friend and foe. Imagined kinship is thus liberating in theory, while highly constraining in practice.



Key Findings

- National community in modernity is shaped by imagined kinship and the need for collective belonging and identity.
- The state is the central meditative and celebratory agent for the affirmation of national kinship, especially in war.
- This core dynamic of modern society — the process of building imagined kinship — is projected outward through that nations' relations with other societies. Domestic kinship becomes the template for foreign kinship.
- The nation most dependent on invented kinship as the basis of its politics, domestic and foreign, in modernity, is the US.
- The advantage of invented kinship is that America can theoretically pick and choose both whom it will call kin in the world and how important their kinship is to our national identity.
- The limitation of invented kinship is that America's kinship ties to other societies have a life of their own, and they strengthen and deepen over time. After two centuries, America faces a global *smörgåsbord* of kinship needs and clinging legacies.



The Nation State as Imagined Community

Imagined kinship is the foundation of national community. Imagined kinship is the cultural process that permits people in a society to collectively believe that they belong to each other — that they are part of the same kinship construct — even though they are most likely to be strangers to each other. Imagined community also makes the state the trusted manager of this process — powerfully affirming our connection and commitment to each other, for example, in war — so that the collective kinship construct is essential to the very idea of a modern nation state.

Yet this thought departs radically from the traditional idea of the state as initially developed by political theorists in early Victorian times. In the late 19th century, heading into the world wars of the early 20th century, the nation could not be conceived as anything like a cultural construct. How could such overwhelming force, completely enveloping us, be no more than our own expression of mere collective belief?

That was the time when the nation ruled. The nation state was real, a living thing, a force of nature, and we belonged to it only by continuously reaffirming our loyalty and allegiance — think the daily Pledge of Allegiance. Nation states existed as entities wholly outside of us; we petitioned to be part of them. If we were a microcosmic part of them, they nonetheless had their own, inherent consciousness. The state was the head (*capital, capitol*), and the nation was the ["body politic."](#)

Political theorists — think high priests — declared further that this entity had a will of its own as well: "*Nations have interests,*" they all intoned. Who was to question such postulation? The nation exists; *it speaks and acts*; and what it says and does — policy and strategy — is therefore all in the pure pursuit of "the national interest."

Enter Benedict Anderson. Many big wars had since chipped away at nation state authority, when he wrote in 1983, and the assertion of the nation state as an eternal entity had taken its hits. But Anderson was nonetheless just like Hans Christian Andersen's boy in [*The Emperor's New Clothes*](#), who called out a truth in plain sight that we simply, collectively, still yet refuse to see: that the nation is an *imagined community*.

In Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the idea was all in the title. Nations are no more than a collective invention, he said: a construct, an artifact; the work of humans who work, ceaselessly at their tool-making, to craft bigger things both material and ideational into comfortable places we may inhabit to find both meaning and belonging:



“It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”

Think of the nation and its state as just such an inhabitation. In its present form, it is a majestic architecture in which humanity, as so many tall towers, looks out across the larger reality it surveys, in which we all – as nations – can be together, shepherded by our tower management company, which we call the state.

Imagined Communities Rely on Imagined Kinship

But we, together, with all of the fabulous architectures of constitution and institution, with all the rules and customs and taboos, have fashioned something that is no more “real” in itself than the boundary membrane holding America’s collective belief – which is the *belief in its reality*. Together Americans have imagined, and spend the energies of our lives continuing to sustain the ongoing harvest, an ever more bountiful treasure of our shared imaging of us, from generation to generation.

Yes, such imaging is indeed real, but its reality must repose at last in ourselves, because it is sustained by our belief in each other. We are together; we belong together; because we believe that we are a brotherhood, a clan, a tribe, a family.

Human imagination is thus very big; for when we were just a gaggle of human bands in peril on the great savannahs of the Serengeti Plain, we knew each other only by our blood relation. Five millions years later we know each other when we embrace as fellow Russians or Italians or Americans. This is the meaning of the nation that Benedict Anderson uncovered for us to wonder over.

And the nation is indeed a wonder: citizens not only believe that other citizens are like brothers (ideally!), but they act in strange and amazing concert with their brothers. We saw this fraternal energy unfold in the French Revolution and the wars of Napoleon – when Frenchmen fought with frenzy never before seen in Europe for the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Tragically, we also see this fraternal energy in the fated French infantrymen in World War I, obediently serving the state as the nation bled nearly to death.

But if the nation – however amazing and wondrous – is simply a collective human artifact, then the nation state is a construct within a construct. Arguably the state is even more dependent on conscious collective loyalty than is the nation, its mother.



This judgment has been proven throughout modernity — the epoch of the nation state — as nations since 1789 have overturned state regimes and their establishments by the hundreds. Hence, it is understandable, even necessary, that the state do three existential things:

1. Associate the nation and its state as a unitary entity in which the state rules as the head (*capita*), and the nation lives only as the supporting body: a true body politic necessary to support the ruling life and thought of the head.
2. Arrange the civic — even the daily personal — life of the nation so that it is always ritually and symbolically reminded in public display that we are serving the state (that daily *Pledge of Allegiance* again!).
3. Appropriate to itself the constitutional power to claim the lives of the nation's citizens in times of crisis in which the authority to do so — whatever the political orchestration — is understood by all to rest with the state.

Anderson's template for the nation tells us — directly or indirectly — several things:

- The nation is a construct or artifact, but it is nonetheless a passionate artifact
- Imagined kinship can be as powerful — or more — than blood relations
- The state will use such imagined passion and its power to dominate society (unless reined in)

America: The Ultimate Imagined Community

The US is perhaps the ultimate imagined community: its own identity self-consciously celebrates an American kinship that depends on people who have come here from other places. But they have come here to join us: to commit themselves to the American Idea. This means that they have renounced their former belonging to another community to become Americans.

And American kinship — becoming one of us — requires a public act. This act is a civic-religious ritual in which the prospective new citizen (or original colonist) both renounce their former identity and swear to embrace the American nation through a sacred oath.

Hence the US is a fully self-conscious community in its imagination regarding the sources and authority of kinship. Here, you are my brother if you have sworn the oath; nothing else is required, and I will die for you in battle as if you were my brother.

America is one of the few imagined national communities that lays existential terms of kinship right on the table. Moreover, this is an existential postulate of national identity that is extravagantly reaffirmed in every American war movie ever made, as though each film was an integral part of the national liturgy.



Subsequently, America's relations with the world, far from being constructed according to rational actor/rational choice theories of political science – or the mystical necessities of the nation state as defined by Victorian geopolitics – are in fact driven by a desire to replicate kinship terms of relationship as they have evolved within the American polity.

Expanding America's Imagined Community Through Kinship

Anthropologists tell us that kinship is a [complex affair](#) among us humans. Imagined – or better still, invented – kinship, is yet more sublime, and its terms are undefined.

American identity as a community depends on highly explicit kinship rituals and symbols. This stands in contrast to many nations that rely on prior cultural attachment points, like language and religion, as the basis of kinship, so that the foundation for belonging historically antedates the nation, and certainly the state. Therefore, extending kinship to other societies as a central part of its world relationships can be difficult. Terms for new citizens are more constrained, too.

However, the US is free to make kinship an integral part of, and an instantiated product in, its world relationships. Moreover, the process of establishing kinship can safely be almost wholly invented in public for that purpose. The key to making other nations "related" to us requires no more than the identification of ties that can establish the kinship bond. The marshalling of celebratory public rituals and symbols will do the rest.

Hence, America is equipped with a generous palette of choices in kinship establishment. Here are five alternative paths through which the US can establish kinship relations with other societies:

1. **Kinship as fraternal vision.** Kinship here revolves around the two sacred words, "freedom" (originally, liberty) and "democracy." First invoked with the French after 1789, it led also the new republic's first kinship split, between the Jeffersonians who favored France, and the Hamiltonians who favored Britain. In the last century, others who learned to wield the fraternal vision card to build alliance-worthiness with Britain made much of its parliamentary democracy as they pushed America to take their side in the world wars, while today, Israel is constantly repeating the mantra that it remains "the Middle East's only democracy." Just last year, Ukraine tried to [leverage the civil society group Maidan](#) to the same purpose.
2. **Kinship as the tribal tie.** The blood tie has always had a powerful pull in the establishment of world kinship ties, but with this caveat: it works powerfully only for those who have the blood. This means that although, for example, the Boston Irish might desire that the US fully back the IRA, in truth, they would have to fund their own campaign. Likewise, the African-American community [lobbied hard](#) for the cause of [Ethiopians against Italian invaders in 1935](#), but to no avail in an otherwise racist electorate. In contrast, race and blood kinship has worked triumphantly in the cause of Israel, but not because of the American Jewish community alone. Rather, it was the imagined kinship felt by Christian evangelicals that turned the tide in the 1980s.



3. **Kinship as mission:** Succor the afflicted; champion the oppressed. This is the invented kinship of an American mission rooted in the divine charge of redemption. Arguably, Lincoln positioned this cause at the end of the Civil War, whereby for the first time, “the negro” became a brother through the act of redemption. This is the congregational community of the saved. This was a tradition that first took off in America during the Second Great Awakening in the 19th century, and which has since been repurposed in the pursuit of world relations. We see it at work today in our bond with the Kurds, or in the 1950s, saving a part of Korea. This invented tie served us less well in Vietnam, but was most cynically paraded in President George H. W. Bush’s attempt to cull sympathy for Kuwait in 1990 – yet such is the need to establish kinship in foreign policy.
4. **Kinship as parental responsibility.** There may be no more powerful assertion of kinship obligation than that of the parent to its child. The US has made its strongest claim to this kinship metaphor in Asia. Its first expression may have been its most unfortunate, coined by William Howard Taft while he was Governor-General of the Philippines. The parenting (paternalist) bond was nonetheless reciprocal, and did indeed tie America to the Philippines. We can see a blended kinship of the parental and the missionary in America’s relationship with China from 1900 until the fall of the Guomindang in Mainland China in 1950. Indeed, this mix dominated US relations with China until resolved in the 1970s. Kinship choices arguably foreclosed an American relationship with China for more than 20 years.
5. **Kinship as shared destiny.** Geopolitics is about verities, and foremost among them is the axiom that rising powers take on established powers and that a fight will shortly be in the works. But American notions of great power kinship offer potentially different outcomes. If Americans can see a tie that binds, then the narrative can be shaped to fit. For example, in the 1860s, the US saw in Russia a vaguely kindred spirit: both nations were enormous, rough around the edges, and destined for world greatness. Also, in tandem, our president had freed the slaves just as the czar had freed the serfs. A bit of self-serving mirror imaging, perhaps, but it served our Civil War *zeitgeist* perfectly. Going further, at the end of the Victorian era, Americans and Brits began to see strategic harmony rather than inevitable competition. Navalists like World War I-era admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan pushed the notion that the Anglo-American peoples were destined as brothers to rule the world – for democratic principles, of course. This suggests a blend of shared vision alongside shared destiny. But more recently, the US embraced a nominally communist regime, the Peoples Republic of China, as a world partner. That hope may have soured over the previous generation, yet it still lives.

Why would America wish to root its relations with other nations in imaginary constructions of kinship? First, trust makes for the strongest relationships, and what stronger trust is there than the trust possible in family? Second, the emotional bonds of kinship can create a stronger commitment by the American people to another people. Third, our commitment to another nation state is less dependent on elaborate rationalizations of national “interests” – this is perhaps why “friend” always precedes “ally” in American foreign policy rhetoric.

Not-Kin Also a Powerful Form of Kinship, but...



If imaginary kinship hinges on rituals and symbols that show all how we are connected, then not-kin is also a form of imagined kinship in that it relies on similar, but flipped, rituals and symbols that show beyond the shadow of a doubt that we are in no way related: in fact, they are alien to us, strangers, the Other.

But of course we are all human, we share [each other's DNA](#), and we all seek meaning and belonging in the same ways. Hence, not-kin is not only an imagined state, but it must be posited so strongly that it overrides any lingering awareness of our common humanity.

This deep directive in positing not-kin is especially powerful in the American Ethos.

1. **Not-kin as the *Dark Side of the Force*.** Washington laid out the not-kin law in his [farewell address](#): Monarchies are like Satan, and America is to have to truck with them. In more recent times, Bolsheviks and Nazis have represented the not-kin. Above all, not-kin here must be the polar opposite to shared vision: not-kin are thus the inveterate enemies of freedom and democracy, full stop. Yet going on 22 decades after 1796, we have become so cozy with dark princes everywhere. [Was Yoda right?](#) "If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny."
1. **Not-kin as the left behind.** Implicit, though never stated in American canon, is the counterpoint to new Americans who join us. By implication they must represent those who do not wish the fruits of our vision and way of life. They must in some measure, in their unwillingness to come to us, be rejecting the American identity. This storyline makes it easy for us to see them as not-kin. Hence the Islamists are not-kin, the czar-loving Russians are not-kin, and the obdurate Cubanos are not-kin. Here, those of them who have eagerly come to us highlight the very "otherness" of their former kin, making it that much easier for us to view those nations as collectively "against us."
2. **Not-kin as *Pied Piper People*.** On the other hand, if it suits our purpose, we may designate not-kin as people collectively drugged or hypnotized by the music of evil. Here ideology is like the Pied Piper, seducing a people without their full consent. This not-kin alternative represents a halfway house in which a people may yet be freed from their shackles when the veil is lifted. Pied Piper people are not like the left behind: they are still worthy of reclamation. They know not what they do. There is hope, and that hope is us.
3. **Not-kin as *Lord of the Flies*.** This path to not-kinship is a form of dispensation: it tells us that a people (implicitly childlike) are now beyond our help. The dispensation thus in this assignment of not-kin permits us to simply throw up our hands and do nothing. Although we will never say it, we are saying that they are beyond help. The US has and will continue to invoke this dispensation in select places in the Middle East, and did so in Afghanistan in the 1990s — and may yet again.
4. **Not-kin as the *Demiurge*.** Here is the dark mirror to kinship as shared destiny. It is a [Manichaean](#) construct, in which an opposing human reality must be completely crushed. It is what we say we will do with the Islamic State — or to al-Qa'ida and its Associated Movements. It is what we did to Germany and Japan in World War II. It is what we thought we were facing initially with the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, but then reconsidered.



The impossible problem with the Demiurge – an evil that must be destroyed, or it will destroy you – is that, put simply, it must, following declaration, actually be destroyed. Failure is unsustainable over time: it will catch up with you.

Not-kin ascription has the benefit of identifying evil and perfectly defining what we are not, while at the same time presenting that which must be destroyed. But there are two overriding drawbacks to the assignment of not-kin. First, if we cannot destroy those we have identified as not-kin, then we stand an increasing chance of being destroyed ourselves. Second, the very construction of not-kin is inflexible: [As President George W. Bush enunciated](#): “You are either with us, or with the terrorists.”

...Shutting out Not-Kin Limits Policy Options

The supreme drawback to the ascription of not-kin is that it emotionally forecloses what might be necessary re-engagement with an enemy that has either recalibrated its approach to us or has encountered changed circumstances that make our support suddenly desirable. From our strategic vantage now, it would be not impossible that the US might at some point wish to rethink its relationship with the Islamic State. Yet the entire construct of not-kin can shut down options and opportunities that may be of great national interest. We have witnessed this conundrum in the 30-year shutout of relations with the PRC.

- **Kinship is as much an invention, an artifact, as is national community.** Kinship identification and belief, tied to deep kinship emotions, are at the core of American national belonging. Kinship with other nations is simply an extension of the central civic investiture in American Life: the public affirmation of belonging to each other as Americans, whether through the sacred venues of football, or an America-affirming episode of *The Simpsons*.
- **Kinship is as important to relationships as “interest.”** From the beginning, American world relationships have put kinship ahead of pure national interest, as defined for example by so-called “realist” thinkers. Yet it might be more precise to say that interest and kinship nearly always find a way to interweave as policy – even, for example, with the Saudi state, where America wildcatters and oilmen forged [an enduring link](#) with Abdul Aziz and his Bedouin in the 1920s. When longstanding and intimate ties, if only among elites, are missing in action, foreign enterprises are at high risk of failure.
- **Kinship belief can grow or wane.** When France sent us the Statue of Liberty, and when we saved France twice in the last century, our kinship with that nation was never stronger. Yet in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, France’s abstention led to a torrent of media invective, including renaming French fries as [“freedom fries.”](#) The last time a popular fast food item was so renamed was in the wake of our declaration of war on Germany in 1917, when wieners were renamed “hot dogs,” and sauerkraut “liberty cabbage.” Indeed, kinship is a fickle state of emotional embrace.



- **Kinship ties can move across dimensions, or inhabit them all.** For example, from 1905 until 1950, Italy moved from a limited tribal tie (represented by the Knights of Columbus and Columbus Day rallies) to fraternal vision (as allies in World War I), then to the Dark Side of the Force (as Mussolini joined with Hitler after 1935), and then to become part of the American mission, as afflicted and oppressed (in the latter part of World War II), and finally again, as part of our fraternal vision, when Italy joined NATO.
- **Kinship can come to drive, or dominate, the relationship.** The tenure of belief that we are all related as Americans has such power that its emotions can be extended and enhanced over time to another nation that we call kin. Hence, the more longstanding the tie, the deeper it becomes. In this sense, imagined kinship between America and other nations can become more and more real, to the point at which it dominates all national strategy and policy considerations. In the 20th century, emotional investment shaped America's relationship to Britain and its empire. Even today we call our tie to Britain "the special relationship," and we see Australians and Canadians as blood brothers and as democracy brothers: "America has no truer friend than Great Britain." But the historical trajectory of such bonds can also dominate American strategy – to the exclusion of other "interests" – as it has most notably with Israel.

The perspective here is not mainstream; indeed, it is wholly outside the grim schools of realism and geopolitics (which delivered us the world wars). Yet a cultural vantage offers something that old-school political theory cannot, because it is hidden. The idea of imaginary kinship unlocks an elemental human dimension in the political life of the nation that has hurt for a century because we did not know. Geopolitics' Victorian romanticism and the political sciences' ruthless rational actor schools ignored the role played by "imaginary kinship" – just as they ignored identity in world politics. Now they cannot explain what is happening before our very eyes.

That foreclosure to thought was not simply an oversight, but a willful rejection of the very sources of world – but especially American – foreign policy conduct. What we must do now is open ourselves up to the defining role kinship has played by publicly exploring – and then showing – the entire world network of American "kin relations" since 1778 (when we became forever-fraternal brothers of France).

This whole historical network can be mapped. Today's graphical tools can show in clear and compelling image how imagined kinship has established America's ties to, and place in, the world. We would be a better nation for it.