Who are you?
Who are we?
How do you see yourself?
How do you see Americans?
How do you see America?
How do others see you, us, this nation?

Deposited by the mothership on this minor planet of a middling star in a backwater arm of this unexceptional galaxy some sixty-six solar orbitings ago, I was charged by my immediate progenitor to observe and record the customs of its most dominant species. I am now persuaded the question most crucial to the survival of this, our species, is that posed me by a recent correspondent: "Will we ever get rid of tribal thinking?"


Yet my observations, experiences and recollections suggest no matter how narrow, parochial and limited our definition of 'tribe', the behaviors of its members toward others invariably become petty, vicious and destructively self-serving. Palestine, My Lai, Chile, Grenada; Fallujah, Nasiriya, Najaf, Abu Ghraib, it's all about putting others at risk, in jeopardy, harm's way, or worse, in service of 'self'. From the aggressive driver endangering others for his or her own convenience, to the rapacious corporation wreaking havoc with and wrecking lives, to reckless nations rolling over others to profit their own 'interests', it's always about the tribal "self" versus "them".

From time to time, pundits applaud the American spirit, what made this country 'great', what in the national attitude continues its greatness, ascendency and hegemony.

Many self-congratulatory terms have been self-applied: independent, self-reliant, self-starting, initiative-taking. Although these are facets of the general behavior, the one overriding and all-encompassing trait appears to be aggressive service of one's tribal self, an obsessive competitiveness that seeks to leave all others in the distant behind, no matter what the cost to others. In the last decade the irrelevance of collateral cost or injury, latterly even to self, has become ever more prominent.

In a 12-19 July 2004 New Yorker article, "The Price of Valor", Dan Baum describes the teaching of recruits to be remorseless killing automata, for whom 'self-defense', and 'defending the country' justifies any amount of wanton brutality, of indiscriminate slaughter. Baum explores the psychological vulnerability of soldiers exposed to such training and its
consequences, both of which the military does its best to downplay and
disregard. Our military strives to perfect its definitions of tribality:
defending the herd against perceived, proclaimed aggression, whether real,
anticipated or fantasized. Like the successful nation, the ideal soldier
is robocop on steroids, utterly indifferent to the consequences of his or
her actions for others.

Are we whom we think we are, or the sum total of how we are perceived by
all who look upon us, ourselves included?

As Robert Burns wrote in 1789:
O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see ourseuls as others see us
It wad frae monie a blunder free us ...
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us

Truly, will we ever get beyond thinking and acting tribally?

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