

The mind of Uncle Sam
by Lloyd Robertson

Canada is now an American state.

We joined the Organization of American States back in the 1980s but we were American before that. It is not just because our country is on an American continent. After all, Cuba was kicked out of the O.A.S. after "Uncle Sam" decided it's government was, well, "Un- American".

Uncle Sam is a skinny fellow with a long white beard and top hat of red, white and blue. Cartoonists have sometimes drawn him with a club marching into other American countries encouraging them to accept the American way. Uncle Sam had over 80 such military interventions in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In her new book, "The Meme Machine", psychologist Dr. Sue Blackmore says that the concept of self is a collection of thousands of self- reinforcing memes called a "memplex". The mind is a collection memplexes of which the "self" is but one. Given that a meme is the smallest unit of culture that is self-replicating we can use the model to understand the mind of Uncle Sam.

He had a bloody birth. France was his midwife and his first memes were anti-British. This may be why we call the deep fried slices of potato, invented in England, "French fries".

He said that every citizen has the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". At the time these rights applied to just white, male landowners; however, eventually these memes evolved to include almost every American.

Uncle Sam had a fairly simple world view. New York, Georgia and Pennsylvania were all American. Canada, Mexico and Brazil were all European. Eventually all would become American and some even suggested that their capital city would be Washington. This "manifest destiny" became the "Monroe Doctrine" of the 1830s which held that any European activity anywhere on the American continents was aggression against the United States of America. I guess the rest of us were the "Not Yet United States of America".

Under this world view aboriginal people were neither European nor American. Uncle Sam was more than a little racist. When the Cherokees decided to assimilate into U.S. American culture they learned English, took up cotton farming, published a newspaper and some of them even became slave owners. Their reward was a forced march to Oklahoma during which up to 80% died on what became known as "the trail of tears".

The gun totin' cowboy became a powerful part of Uncle Sam's self image. Fast on the draw, Uncle Sam fought cattle rustlers, Indians and even crooked judges. When the World Court found the U.S. guilty of war crimes in Nicaragua during the 1980s Uncle Sam treated the court as tho it was one such judge. Uncle Sam's style is to call down the bad guys and, if that doesn't work, organize a posse to have an old fashioned "shoot-out". This is what is happening in Yugoslavia now. A neutral observer may have trouble, at times, deciding who the bad guys are but Uncle Sam has no such doubts.

This gunslinger self-image has consequences at home. A few years ago a Japanese tourist, lost, rang a doorbell in a southern U.S. city. He was shot and killed by the home owner. The owner got off. It was an "honest mistake". In the United States, apparently, a person who thinks his home is being invaded can "shoot first and ask questions later".

You have 10 to 12 times the chance of being murdered in U.S. as compared to Canada and we have the second highest homicide rate of all the industrialized nations. Yet the gun is sacred in U.S.America where even gun registration is thought of as "Un- American".

It is possible to make predictions using meme theory. The United States is spiralling toward a culture of increasing violence. U.S.Americans will increasingly turn to religious explanations for this cycle. The traditional separation between church and state will be dissolved. Social spending, already the lowest of any industrialized state, will be reduced further. With missionary zeal U.S.Americans will continue to vigorously export their brand of American culture. They will continue to see themselves as the only "true" Americans and any country that attempts to limit this "cultural imperialism" either by restricting the sale of U.S. movies and magazines or by subsidizing local home grown alternatives will be punished.

Amway will continue to be sold in Canada.