The Crisis of National Identity

Samuel P. Huntington

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Salience: Are the Flags Still There?

Charles Street, the principal thoroughfare on Boston's Beacon Hill, is a comfortable street bordered by four-story brick buildings with apartments above antique stores and other shops on the ground level. At one time on one block American flags regularly hung over the entrances to the United States Post Office and the liquor store. Then the Post Office stopped displaying the flag, and on September 11, 2001, the liquor store flag flew alone. Two weeks later seventeen flags flew on this block, in addition to a huge Stars and Stripes suspended across the street a short distance away. With their country under attack, Charles Street denizens rediscovered their nation and identified themselves with it.

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In their surge of patriotism, Charles Streeters were at one with people throughout America. Since the Civil War, Americans have been a flag-oriented people. The Stars and Stripes has the status of a religious icon and is a more central symbol of national identity for Americans than their flags are for peoples of other nations. Probably never in the past, however, was the flag as omnipresent as it was after September 11. It was everywhere: homes, businesses, automobiles, clothes, furniture, windows, storefronts, lampposts, telephone poles. In early October, 80 percent of Americans said they were displaying the flag, 63 percent at home, 29 percent on clothes, 28 percent on cars.[1] Wal-Mart reportedly sold 116,000 flags on September 11 and 250,000 the next day, "compared with 6,400 and 10,000 on the same days a year earlier." The demand for flags was ten times what it had been during the Gulf War; flag manufacturers went overtime and doubled, tripled, or quintupled production.[2]

The flags were physical evidence of the sudden and dramatic rise in the salience of national identity for Americans compared to their other identities, a transformation exemplified by the comment on October 1 of one young woman:

> When I was 19, I moved to New York City. . . . If you asked me to describe myself then, I would have told you I was a musician, a poet, an artist and, on a somewhat political level, a woman, a lesbian and a Jew. Being an American wouldn't have made my list.
>
> [In my college class Gender and Economics my] girlfriend and I were so frustrated by inequality in America that we discussed moving to another country. On Sept. 11, all that changed. I realized that I had been taking the freedoms I have here for granted. Now I have an American flag on my backpack, I cheer at the fighter jets as they pass overhead and I am calling myself a patriot.[3]

Rachel Newman's words reflect the low salience of national identity for some Americans before September 11. Among some educated and elite Americans, national identity seemed at times to have

May Day demonstrators seek amnesty and other rights for immigrants 1 May 2006 in downtown Los Angeles, California. May Day—the International Workers Day observed in Asia, most of Europe, and Mexico, but not officially recognized in the United States due to its communist associations—coincided with The Great American Boycott, a one-day boycott of U.S. schools and businesses by immigrants in the United States, conducted mainly by people of Latin American origin. (Photo courtesy of Jonathan McIntosh)

faded from sight. Globalization, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, immigration, subnationalism, and anti-nationalism had battered American consciousness. Ethnic, racial, and gender identities came to the fore. In contrast to their predecessors, many immigrants were ampersands, maintaining dual loyalties and dual citizenships. A massive Hispanic influx raised questions concerning America's linguistic and cultural unity. Corporate executives, professionals, and Information Age technocrats espoused cosmopolitan over national identities. The teaching of national history gave way to the teaching of ethnic and racial histories. The celebration of diversity replaced emphasis on what Americans had in common. The national unity and sense of national identity created by work and war in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and consolidated in the world wars of the twentieth century seemed to be eroding. By 2000, America was, in many respects, less a nation than it had been for a century. The Stars and Stripes were at half-mast and other flags flew higher on the flagpole of American identities.

The challenges to the salience of American national identity from other-national, subnational, and transnational identities were epitomized in several events of the 1990s.

Other-National Identities. At a Gold Cup soccer game between Mexico and the United States in February 1998, the 91,255 fans were immersed in a "sea of red, white, and green flags"; they booed when "The Star-Spangled Banner" was played; they "pelted" the U.S. players "with debris and cups of what might have been water, beer or worse"; and they attacked with "fruit and cups of beer" a few fans who tried to raise an American flag. This game took place not in Mexico City but in Los Angeles. "Something's wrong when I can't even raise an American flag in my own country," a U.S. fan commented, as he ducked a lemon going by his head. "Playing in

Los Angeles is not a home game for the United States," a *Los Angeles Times* reporter agreed.[4]

Past immigrants wept with joy when, after overcoming hardship and risk, they saw the Statue of Liberty; enthusiastically identified themselves with their new country that offered them liberty, work, and hope; and often became the most intensely patriotic of citizens. In 2000 the proportion of foreign-born was somewhat less than in 1910, but the proportion of people in America who were also loyal to and identified with other countries was quite possibly higher than at any time since the American Revolution.

Subnational Identities. In his book *Race Pride and the American Identity*, Joseph Rhea quotes the poetry

Cpl. Balreet Kaur and Spc. Jasleen Kaur, Indian-born sisters, compare common courtesies of the United States and India with an Indian soldier 31 October 2010 before the opening ceremony for the combined training exercise Yudh Abhyas 2010 on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. The sisters are California National Guardsmen assigned to the 79th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. Both are medics and were cultural liaisons for the fourteen-day exercise. (Photo by Spc. Ashley M. Armstrong, U.S. Army)

recited at two presidential inaugurations. At President John F. Kennedy's in 1961, Robert Frost hailed the "heroic deeds" of America's founding that with God's "approval" ushered in "a new order of the ages":

Our venture in revolution and outlawry
Has justified itself in freedom's story
Right down to now in glory upon glory.

America, he said, was entering a new "golden age of poetry and power."

Thirty-two years later, Maya Angelou recited a poem at President Bill Clinton's inauguration that conveyed a different image of America. Without ever mentioning the words "America" or "American," she identified twenty-seven racial, religious, tribal, and ethnic groups—Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Pawnee, Hispanic, Eskimo, Arab, Ashanti, among others—and denounced the immoral repression they suffered, as a result of America's "armed struggles for profit" and its "bloody sear" of "cynicism." America, she said, may be "wedded forever to fear, yoked eternally to brutishness."[5] Frost saw America's history and identity as glories to be celebrated and perpetuated. Angelou saw the manifestations of American identity as evil threats to the well-being and real identities of people with their subnational groups.

A similar contrast in attitudes occurred in a 1997 telephone interview by a *New York Times* reporter with Ward Connerly, then the leading proponent of an initiative measure in California prohibiting affirmative action by the state government. The following exchange occurred:

REPORTER: "What are you?"
CONNERLY: "I am an American."
REPORTER: "No, no, no! What *are* you?"
CONNERLY: "Yes, yes, yes! I am an American."
REPORTER: "That is not what I mean. I was told that you are African American. Are you ashamed to be African American?"
CONNERLY: "No, I am just proud to be an American."

Connerly then explained that his ancestry included Africans, French, Irish, and American Indians, and the dialogue concluded:

REPORTER: "What does that make you?"
CONNERLY: "That makes me all-American!"[6]

In the 1990s, however, Americans like Rachel Newman did not respond to the question "What are

you?" with Ward Connerly's passionate affirmation of his national identity. They instead articulated subnational racial, ethnic, or gender identities, as the *Times* reporter clearly expected.

Transnational Identities. In 1996 Ralph Nader wrote to the chief executive officers of one hundred of the largest American corporations pointing to the substantial tax benefits and other subsidies (estimated at $65 billion a year by the Cato Institute) they received from the federal government and urging them to show their support for "the country that bred them, built them, subsidized them, and defended them" by having their directors open their annual stockholders meeting by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag and the republic for which it stands. One corporation (Federated Department Stores) responded favorably; half of the corporations never responded; others rejected it brusquely. The respondent for Ford explicitly claimed transnational identity: "As a multinational . . . Ford in its largest sense is an Australian country [company] in Australia, a British company in the United Kingdom, a German company in Germany." Aetna's CEO called Nader's idea "contrary to the principles on which our democracy was founded." Motorola's respondent condemned its "political and nationalistic overtones." Price Costco's CEO asked, "What do you propose next—personal loyalty oaths?" And Kimberly-Clark's executive asserted that it was "a grim reminder of the loyalty oaths of the 1950s."[7]

Undoubtedly the vociferous reaction of American corporate leaders was in part because Nader had been hounding them for years and they could not resist the opportunity to castigate him as a latter-day Joe McCarthy. Yet they were not alone among American elites in downgrading or disavowing identification with their country. Prominent intellectuals and scholars attacked nationalism, warned of the dangers of inculcating national pride and commitment to America in students, and argued that a national identity was undesirable. Statements like these reflected the extent to which some people in American elite groups, business, financial, intellectual, professional, and even governmental, were becoming denationalized and developing transnational and cosmopolitan identities superseding their national ones. This was not true of the American public, and a gap consequently emerged between the primacy of national identity for most Americans and the growth of transnational identities among the controllers of power, wealth, and knowledge in American society.

September 11 drastically reduced the salience of these other identities and sent Old Glory back to the top of the national flag pole. Will it stay there? The seventeen flags on Charles Street declined to twelve in November, nine in December, seven in January, and five in March, and were down to four by the first anniversary of the attacks, four times the number pre-September 11 but also one-fourth of those displayed immediately afterward. As an index of the salience of national identity, did this represent a modified post-September 11 normalcy, a slightly revised pre-September 11 normalcy, or a new, post-post-September 11 normalcy? Does it take an Osama bin laden, as it did for Rachel Newman, to make us realize that we are Americans? If we do not experience recurring destructive attacks, will we return to the fragmentation and eroded Americanism before September 11? Or will we find a revitalized national identity that is not dependent on calamitous threats from abroad and that provides the unity lacking in the last decades of the twentieth century?

Substance: Who Are We?

The post-September 11 flags symbolized America, but they did not convey any meaning of America. Some national flags, such as the tricolor, the Union Jack, or Pakistan's green flag with its star and crescent, say something significant about the identity of the country they represent. The explicit visual message of the Stars and Strips is simply that America is a country that originally had thirteen and currently has fifty states. Beyond that, Americans, and others, can read into the flag any meaning they want. The post-September 11 proliferation of flags may well evidence not only the intensified salience of national identity to Americans but also their uncertainty as to the substance of that identity. While the salience of national identity may vary sharply with the intensity of external threats, the substance of national identity is shaped slowly and more fundamentally by a wide variety of long-term, often conflicting social, economic, and political trends. The crucial issues concerning the substance of American identity on September 10 did not disappear the following day.

"We Americans" face a substantive problem of national identity epitomized by the subject of this sentence. Are we a "we," one people or several? If we are a "we,"

what distinguishes us from the "thems" who are not us? Race, religion, ethnicity, values, culture, wealth, politics, or what? Is the United States, as some have argued, a "universal nation," based on values common to all humanity and in principle embracing all peoples? Or are we a Western nation with our identity defined by our European heritage and institutions? Or are we unique with a distinctive civilization of our own, as the proponents of "American exceptionalism" have argued throughout our history? Are we basically a political community whose identity exists only in a social contract embodied in the Declaration of Independence and other founding documents? Are we multicultural, bicultural, or unicultural, a mosaic or a melting pot? Do we have any meaningful identity as a nation that transcends our subnational ethnic, religious, racial identities? These questions remain for Americans in their post-September 11 era. They are in part rhetorical questions, but they are also questions that have profound implications for American society and American policy at home and abroad. In the 1990s Americans engaged in intense debates over immigration and assimilation, multiculturalism and diversity, race relations and affirmative action, religion in the public sphere, bilingual education, school and college curricula, school prayer and abortion, the meaning of citizenship and nationality, foreign involvement in American elections, the extraterritorial application of American law, and the increasing political role of diasporas here and abroad. Underlying all these issues is the question of national identity. Virtually any position on any one of these issues implies certain assumptions about that identity.

National interests derive from national identity. We have to know who we are before we can know what our interests are.

So also with foreign policy. The 1990s saw intense, wide-ranging, and rather confused debates over American national interests after the Cold War. Much of this confusion stemmed from the complexity and novelty of that world. Yet that was not the only source of uncertainty about America's role. National interests derive from national identity. We have to know who we are before we can know what our interests are.

If American identity is defined by a set of universal principles of liberty and democracy, then presumably the promotion of those principles in other countries should be the primary goal of American foreign policy. If, however, the United States is "exceptional," the rationale for promoting human rights and democracy elsewhere disappears. If the United States is primarily a collection of cultural and ethnic entities, its national interest is in the promotion of the goals of those entities and we should have a "multicultural foreign policy." If the United States is primarily defined by its European cultural heritage as a Western country, then it should direct its attention to strengthening its ties with Western Europe. If immigration is making the United States a more Hispanic nation, we should orient ourselves primarily toward Latin America. If neither European nor Hispanic culture is central to American identity, then presumably America should pursue a foreign policy divorced from cultural ties to other countries. Other definitions of national identity generate different national interests and policy priorities. Conflicts over what we should do abroad are rooted in conflicts over who we are at home.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was created in 1707, the United States of America in 1776, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1918. As their names indicate, they were all unions "of" entities brought together through processes of federation and conquest. In the early 1980s, all three seemed like reasonably cohesive and successful societies, whose governments were relatively effective and in varying degrees accepted as legitimate, and whose peoples had strong senses of their British, American, and Soviet identities. By the early 1990s the Soviet Union was no more. By the late 1990s, the United Kingdom was becoming less united, with a new regime struggling to be born in Northern Ireland, devolution well under way in Scotland and Wales, many Scots looking forward to eventual independence, and the English increasingly defining themselves as English rather than British. The Union Jack was being disassembled into its separate crosses, and it seemed possible that sometime in the first part of the twenty-first century the United Kingdom could follow the Soviet Union into history.

Few people anticipated the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the movement toward possible

decomposition of the United Kingdom a decade before they got under way. Few Americans now anticipate the dissolution of or even fundamental changes in the United States. Yet the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990s East Asian economic crisis, and September 11 remind us that history is replete with surprises. The greatest surprise might be if the United States in 2025 were still much the same country it was in 2000 rather than a very different country (or countries) with very different conceptions of itself and its identity than it had a quarter century earlier.

The American people who achieved independence in the late eighteenth century were few and homogeneous: overwhelmingly white (thanks to the exclusion of blacks and Indians from citizenship), British, and Protestant, broadly sharing a common culture, and overwhelmingly committed to the political principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and other founding documents. By the end of the twentieth century, the number of Americans had multiplied almost one hundred times. America had become multiracial (roughly 69 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, 12 percent black, 4 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 3 percent other), multiethnic (with no majority ethnic group), and 63 percent Protestant, 23 percent Catholic, 8 percent other religions, and 6 percent no religion. America's common culture and principles of equality and individualism central to the American Creed were under attack by many individuals and groups in American society. The end of the Cold War deprived America of the evil empire against which it could define itself. We Americans were not what we were, and uncertain who we were becoming.

No society is immortal. As Rousseau said, "If Sparta and Rome perished, what state can hope to endure forever?" Even the most successful societies are at some point threatened by internal disintegration and decay and by more vigorous and ruthless external "barbarian" forces. In the end, the United States of America will suffer the fate of Sparta, Rome, and other human communities. Historically the substance of American identity has involved four key components: race, ethnicity, culture (most notably language and religion), and ideology. The racial and ethnic Americas are no more. Cultural America is under siege. And as the Soviet experience illustrates, ideology is a weak glue to hold together people otherwise lacking racial, ethnic, and cultural sources of community. Reasons could exist, as Robert Kaplan observed, why "America, more than any other nation, may have been born to die,"[8] Yet some societies, confronted with serious challenges to their existence, are also able to postpone their demise and halt disintegration, by renewing their sense of national identity, their national purpose, and the cultural values they have in common. Americans did this after September 11. The challenge they face in the first years of the third millennium is whether they can continue to do this if they are not under attack.

The Global Identity Crisis

America's identity problem is unique, but America is not unique in having an identity problem. Debates over national identity are a pervasive characteristic of our time. Almost everywhere people have questioned, reconsidered, and redefined what they have in common and what distinguishes them from other people: Who are we? Where do we belong? The Japanese agonize over whether their location, history, and culture make them Asian or whether their wealth, democracy, and modernity make them Western. Iran has been described as a "nation in search of an identity," South Africa as engaged in "the search for identity" and China in a "quest for national identity," while Taiwan was involved in the "dissolution and reconstruction of national identity." Syria and Brazil are each said to face an "identity crisis," Canada "a continuing identity crisis," Denmark an "acute identity crisis," Algeria a "destructive identity crisis," Turkey a "unique identity crisis" leading to heated "debate on national identity," and Russia "a profound identity crisis" reopening the classic nineteenth-century debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers as to whether Russia is a "normal" European country or a distinctly different Eurasian one. In Mexico questions are coming to the fore "about Mexico's identity." The people who had identified with different Germanies, democratic and Western European vs. communist and Eastern European, struggle to recreate a common German identity. The inhabitants of the British Isles have become less sure of their British identity and uncertain as to whether they were primarily a European or a North Atlantic people.[9] Crises of national identity have become a global phenomenon.

The identity crises of these and other countries vary in form, substance, and intensity. Undoubtedly each crisis in large part has unique causes. Yet their

During part of a day-long celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty's dedication, two babies sleep while holding American flags at a naturalization ceremony 28 October 2011 for 125 new citizens on Liberty Island, New York. (Photo by Sgt. Randall. A. Clinton, U.S. Marine Corps)

simultaneous appearance in the United States and so many other countries suggests that common factors are also likely to be at work. The more general causes of these quests and questionings include the emergence of a global economy, tremendous improvements in communications and transportation, rising levels of migration, the global expansion of democracy, and the end both of the Cold War and of Soviet communism as a viable economic and political system.

Modernization, economic development, urbanization, and globalization have led people to rethink their identities and to redefine them in narrower, more intimate, communal terms. Subnational cultural and regional identities are taking precedence over broader national identities. People identify with those who are most like themselves and with whom they share a perceived common ethnicity, religion, traditions, and myth of common descent and common history. In the United States this fragmentation of identity manifested itself in the rise of multiculturalism and racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness. In other countries it takes the more extreme form of communal movements demanding political recognition, autonomy, or independence. These have included movements on behalf of Quebecois, Scots, Flemings, Catalonians, Basques, Lombards, Corsicans, Kurds, Kosovars, Berbers, Chiapans, Chechens, Palestinians, Tibetans, Muslim Mindanaoans, Christian Sudanese, Abkhazians, Tamils, Acehans, East Timorese, and others.

This narrowing of identities, however, has been paralleled by a broadening of identity as people increasingly interact with other people of very different cultures and civilizations and at the same time are able through modern means of communication to identify with people geographically distant but with similar language, religion, or culture. The emergence of a broader supranational identity has been most obvious in Europe, and its emergence there reinforces the simultaneous narrowing of identities. Scots increasingly think of themselves as Scottish rather than British because they can also think of themselves as European. Their Scottish identity is rooted in their European identity. This is equally true for Lombards, Catalonians, and others.

A related dialectic has been occurring between mixing and huddling, the interaction and separation, of communal groups. Massive migrations, both temporary and permanent, have increasingly intermingled peoples of various races and cultures: Asians and Latin Americans

coming to the United States, Arabs, Turks, Yugoslavs, Albanians entering Western Europe. As a result of modern communications and transportation, these migrants have been able to remain part of their original culture and community. Their identity is thus less that of migrants than of diasporans, that is, members of a transnational, trans-state cultural community. They both mix with other peoples and huddle with their own. For the United States, these developments mean the high levels of immigration from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America could have quite different consequences for assimilation than previous waves of immigration.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalism was intensely promoted by intellectual, political, and, on occasion, economic elites. These elites developed sophisticated and emotionally charged appeals to generate among those whom they saw as their compatriots a sense of national identity and to rally them for nationalist causes. The last decades of the twentieth century, on the other hand, witnessed a growing denationalization of elites in many countries, as well as the United States. The emergence of a global economy and global corporations plus the ability to form transnational coalitions to promote reforms on a global basis (women's rights, the environment, land mines, human rights, small arms) led many elites to develop supranational identities and to downgrade their national identities. Previously, mobile individuals pursued their careers and fortunes within a country by moving from farms to cities and from one city to another. Now they increasingly move from one country to another, and just as intracountry mobility decreased their identity with any particular locale within that country, so their intercountry mobility decreases their identity with any particular country. They become binational, multinational, or cosmopolitan.

In the early stage of European nationalism, national identity was often defined primarily in religious terms. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalist ideologies became largely secular. Germans, British, French, and others defined themselves increasingly in terms of ancestry, language, or culture, rather than religion, which often would have divided their societies. In the twentieth century, people in Western countries (with the notable exception of the United States) generally became secularized, and churches and religion played decreasing roles in public, social, and private life.

The twenty-first century, however, is dawning as a century of religion. Virtually everywhere, apart from Western Europe, people are turning to religion for comfort, guidance, solace, and identity. "La revanche

de Dieu," as Gilles Kepel termed it, is in full swing.[10] Violence between religious groups is proliferating around the world. People are increasingly concerned with the fate of geographically remote co-religionists. In many countries powerful movements have appeared attempting to redefine the identity of their country in religious terms. In a very different way, movements in the United States are recalling America's religious origins and the extraordinary commitment to religion of the American people. Evangelical Christianity has become an important force, and Americans generally may be returning to the self-image prevalent for three centuries that they are a Christian people.

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes in more than fifty countries scattered throughout the world. It also witnessed efforts to broaden and deepen democracy in the United States and other developed countries. Individual authoritarian governments may rule and often have ruled over people of diverse nationalities and cultures. Democracy, on the other hand, means that at a minimum people choose their rulers and that more broadly they participate in government in other ways. The question of identity thus becomes central: Who are the people? As Ivor Jennings observed, "the people cannot decide until someone decides who are the people."[11] The decision as to who are the people may be the result of long-standing tradition, war and conquest, plebiscite or referendum, constitutional provision, or other causes, but it cannot be avoided. Debates over how to define that identity, who is a citizen and who is not, come to the fore when autocracies democratize and when democracies confront many new claimants on citizenship.

Historically, the emergence of nation-states in Europe was the result of several centuries of recurring wars. "War made the state, and the state made war," as Charles Tilly said.[12] These wars also made it possible and necessary for states to generate national consciousness among their peoples. The primary function of the state was to create and defend the nation, and the need to perform that function justified the expansion of state authority and the establishment of military forces, bureaucracies, and effective tax systems. Two world wars and a cold war reinforced these trends in the twentieth century. By the end of that century, however, the Cold War was over, and interstate wars had become rare; in one estimate only seven of one hundred and ten wars between 1989 and

Muslims socialize after Eid al-Adha prayers 21 October 2013 at Valley Stream Park, Long Island, New York. (Time-lapse photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

1999 were not civil wars.[13] War is now more often the breaker of states than the maker of states. More generally, the erosion of the national security function reduced the authority of states and the reason for people to identify with their state, and instead promoted identification with subnational and transnational groups.

The relative significance of national identity has varied among cultures. In the Muslim world, the distribution of identities has tended to be U-shaped: the strongest identities and commitments have been to family, clan, and tribe, at one extreme, and to Islam and the *ummah* or Islamic community, at the other. With a few exceptions, loyalties to nations and nation-states have been weak. In the Western world for over two centuries, in contrast, the identity curve has been more an upside-down U, with the nation at the apex commanding deeper loyalty and commitment than narrower or broader sources of identity. Now, however, that may be changing, with transnational and subnational identities gaining salience and the European and American patterns flattening and coming more to resemble the Muslim one. The notions of nation, national identity, and national interest may be losing relevance and usefulness. If this is the case, the question becomes: What, if anything, will replace them and what does that mean for the United States? If this is not the case and national identity is still relevant, the question then becomes: What are the implications for America of changes in the content of its national identity?

Prospects for American Identity

The relative importance of the components of national identity and the salience of national identity compared to the other identities have varied over the years. In the last half of the eighteenth century the peoples of the colonies and states developed a common American identity that coexisted with other, primarily state and local, identities. The struggles first with Britain, then France, and then again Britain strengthened this sense of Americans as a single people. After 1815 the threats to the nation's security disappeared, and the salience of national identity declined. Sectional and economic identities emerged and increasingly divided the country, leading to the Civil War. That war solidified America as a nation by the end of the nineteenth century. American nationalism became preeminent as the United States emerged on the world scene and in the following century fought two world wars and a cold war.

The ethnic component of American identity gradually weakened as a result of the assimilation of the Irish and Germans who came in the mid-nineteenth century and the southern and eastern Europeans who came between 1880 and 1914. The racial component was first marginally weakened by the outcome of the Civil War and then drastically eroded by the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. In the following decades, America's core Anglo-Protestant culture and its political Creed of liberty and democracy faced four challenges.

First, the dissolution of the Soviet Union eliminated one major and obvious threat to American security and hence reduced the salience of national identity compared to subnational, transnational, binational, and other-national identities. Historical experience and sociological analysis show that the absence of an external "other" is likely to undermine unity and breed divisions within a society. It is problematic whether intermittent terrorist attacks and conflicts with Iraq or other "rogue states" will generate the national coherence that twentieth-century wars did.

Second, the ideologies of multiculturalism and diversity eroded the legitimacy of the remaining central elements of American identity, the cultural core and the American Creed. President Clinton explicitly set forth this challenge when he said that America needed a third "great revolution" (in addition to *the* American Revolution and the civil rights revolution) to "prove that we literally can live without having a dominant European culture."[14] Attacks on that culture undermined the Creed that it produced, and were reflected in the various movements promoting group rights against individual rights.

Third, America's third major wave of immigration that began in the 1960s brought to America people primarily from Latin America and Asia rather than Europe as the previous waves did. The culture and values of their countries of origin often differ substantially from those prevalent in America. It is much easier for these immigrants to retain contact with and to remain culturally part of their country of origin. Earlier waves of immigrants were subjected to intense programs of Americanization to assimilate them into American society. Nothing comparable occurred after 1965. In the past, assimilation was greatly facilitated because both waves substantially tapered off due to the Civil War, World War I, and laws limiting immigration. The current wave continues unabated. The erosion of other national loyalties and the assimilation of recent

immigrants could be much slower and more problematic than assimilation has been in the past.

Fourth, never before in American history has close to a majority of immigrants spoken a single non-English language. The impact of the predominance of Spanish-speaking immigrants is reinforced by many other factors: the proximity of their countries of origin; their absolute numbers; the improbability of this flow ending or being significantly reduced; their geographical concentration; their home government policies promoting their migration and influence in American society and politics; the support of many elite Americans for multiculturalism, diversity, bilingual education, and affirmative action; the economic incentives for American businesses to cater to Hispanic tastes, use Spanish in their business and advertising, and hire Spanish-speaking employees; the pressures to use Spanish as well as English in government signs, forms, reports, and offices.

The elimination of the racial and ethnic components of national identity and the challenges to its cultural and creedal components raise questions concerning the prospects for American identity. At least four possible future identities exist: ideological, bifurcated, exclusivist, and cultural. The America of the future is in reality likely to be a mixture of these and other possible identities.

First, America could lose its core culture, as President Clinton anticipated, and become multicultural. Yet Americans could also retain their commitment to the principles of the Creed, which would provide an ideological or political base for national unity and identity. Many people, particularly liberals, favor this alternative. It assumes, however, that a nation can be based on only a political contract among individuals lacking any other commonality. This is the classic Enlightenment-based, civic concept of a nation. History and psychology, however, suggest that it is unlikely to be enough to sustain a nation for long. America with only the Creed as a basis for unity could soon evolve into a loose confederation of ethnic, racial, cultural, and political groups, with little or nothing in common apart from their location in the territory of what had been the United States of America. This could resemble the collections of diverse groups that once constituted the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. These conglomerations were held together by the emperor and his bureaucracy. What central institutions, however, would hold together a loose American assemblage of groups? As the experiences of America in the 1780s and Germany in the 1860s suggest, past confederations normally have not lasted long.

Second, the massive Hispanic immigration after 1965 could make America increasingly bifurcated in terms of language (English and Spanish) and culture (Anglo and Hispanic), which could supplement or supplant the black-white racial bifurcation as the most important division in American society. Substantial parts of America, primarily in southern Florida and the Southwest, would be primarily Hispanic in culture and language, while

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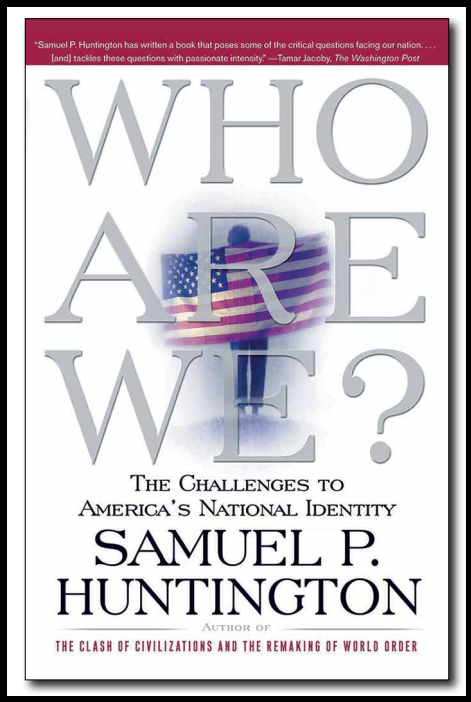
WE RECOMMEND



Now deceased Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington discusses social and political influences trending in a direction that could lead to the weakening and eventual dissolution of the United States. He poses the example of the Soviet Union as a case study demonstrating the weakness of mere idealogy (communism) employed in an effort to unify different cultures and nationalities—an approach that eventually failed. To mitigate and reverse such trends in the United States, he proposes solutions to restore and stimulate American cohesion and national identity.

both cultures and languages would coexist in the rest of America. America, in short, would lose its cultural and linguistic unity and become a bilingual, bicultural society like Canada, Switzerland, or Belgium.

Third, the various forces challenging the core American culture and Creed could generate a move by native white Americans to revive the discarded and discredited racial and ethnic concepts of American identity and to create an America that would exclude, expel, or suppress people of other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Historical and contemporary experience suggest that this is a highly probable reaction from a once dominant ethnic-racial group that feels threatened by the rise of other groups. It could produce a racially intolerant country with high levels of intergroup conflict.

Fourth, Americans of all races and ethnicities could attempt to reinvigorate their core culture. This would mean a recommitment to America as a deeply religious and primarily Christian country, encompassing several religious minorities, adhering to Anglo-Protestant values, speaking English, maintaining its European cultural heritage, and committed to the principles of the Creed. Religion has been and still is a central, perhaps the central, element of American identity. America was founded in large part for religious reasons, and religious movements have shaped its evolution for almost four centuries. By every indicator, Americans are far more religious than the people of other industrialized countries. Overwhelming majorities of white Americans, of black Americans, and of Hispanic Americans are Christian. In a world in which culture and particularly religion shape the allegiances, the alliances, and the antagonisms of people on every continent, Americans could again find their national identity and their national purposes in their culture and religion. ■

Notes

1. Luntz Research Co. survey of 1,000 adults, 3 October 2001, reported in *USA Today*, 19–21 October 2001, p. 1.

2. *New York Times*, 23 September 2001, p. B6.

3. Rachel Newman, "The Day the World Changed, I Did Too," *Newsweek*, 1 October 2001, p. 9.

4. *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 1998, pp. B1, C1; John J. Miller, "Becoming an American," *New York Times*, 26 May 1998. p. A27.

5. Joseph Tilden Rhea, *Race Pride and the American Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2, 8–9; Robert Frost, *Selected Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), pp. 297–301, 422; Maya Angelou, "On the Pulse of Morning," *New York Times*, 21 January 1993, p. A14.

6. Ward Connerly, "Back to Equality, *Imprimis*, 27 (February 1998), p. 3.

7. Correspondence supplied by Ralph Nader; Jeff Jacoby, "Patriotism and the CEOs" *Boston Globe*, 30 July 1998, p. A15.

8. Robert D. Kaplan, "Fort Leavenworth and the Eclipse of Nationhood," *Atlantic Monthly*, 278 (September 1996), p. 81; Bruce D. Porter, "Can American Democracy Survive?" *Commentary*, 96 (November 1993), p. 37.

9. Mehran Kamrava, *The Political History of Modern Iran: From Tribalism to Theocracy* (London: Praeger, 1992), p. 1; James Barber, "South Africa: The Search for Identity," *International Affairs*, 70 (January 1994); Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, *China's Quest for National Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Timothy Ka-Ying Wong and Milan Tung-Wen Sun, "Dissolution and Reconstruction of National Identity: The Experience of Subjectivity in Taiwan," *Nations and Nationalism*, 4 (April 1998); Gilbert Rozman, "A Regional Approach to Northeast Asia," *Orbis*, 39 (Winter 1995); Robert D. Kaplan, "Syria: Identity Crisis," *Atlantic Monthly*, 271 (February 1993); *New York Times*, 10 September 2000, p. 2, 25 April 2000, p. A3; Conrad Black, "Canada's Continuing Identity Crisis," *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (March/April 1995), pp. 95–115; "Algeria's Destructive Identity Crisis," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 31 January–6 February 1994, p. 19; *Boston Globe*, 10 April 1991, p. 9; Anthony DePalma, "Reform in Mexico: Now You See It," *New York Times*, 12 September 1993, p. 4E; Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (New York: Schocken, 1998).

10. Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). See also Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999); David Westerlund, ed., *Questioning the Secular State: The Worldwide Resurgence of Religion in Politics* (London: Hurst, 1996).

11. Ivor Jennings, *The Approach to Self-Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 56, quoted in Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics*, 2 (April 1970), p. 351.

12. Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 42.

13. Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, "Armed Conflict, 1989–99," *Journal of Peace Research*, 39 (September 2000), p. 638.

14. Bill Clinton, quoted in *The Tennessean*, 15 June 1997, p. 10.