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POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Volume 119 · Number 3 · Fall 2004

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Political Science Quarterly

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Book Reviews

Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity by Samuel P. Huntington. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004. 428 pp. \$27.00.

We should have been careful what we wished for. The “we” here is all of us who criticized Samuel Huntington’s *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (1981) for conveying a misleading view of “We the people of the United States.” Following Louis Hartz, Huntington there argued for a “civic” view of American national identity as based on the “political ideas of the American Creed” (quoted on p. 46). Many called this account historically false because it neglected how massively American political identity had been defined in racial, gendered, and religious terms. Many also deemed it politically implausible because enduring communities must be bound by more than political ideas. Now Huntington joins his critics: American identity has “had several components,” not just the creed (p. 49). And necessarily so: the “deep human longing for meaningful community” must be met by a stronger “glue” than “political principles” alone (pp. 12, 339).

Huntington’s views have changed because of his fears for what he sees as the “fragile” American nation (p. 108). American national identity is eroding, he believes, because many American intellectual and corporate elites value multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism more than national unity; because more immigrants are becoming “ampersand” Americans, maintaining dual nationalities and loyalties; and because Mexican immigrants are creating bilingual, bicultural, potentially separatist regions (pp. 138, 247). He thinks a purely creedal conception of American nationality cannot withstand these “deconstructionist” forces.

Huntington wants America to survive, and he thinks the answer is renewed commitment to the “Anglo-Protestant culture” of the settlers who founded America. He now sees that culture as the “primary source” of the only “ostensibly secular” American creed (pp. xvii, 62). Huntington insists that he favors only a “cultural,” not a racial or ancestral definition of American identity (p. 31). He also disavows any “imperial impulse” that would impose “universalist” American values on the world, including religious ones. For him, American “religiosity” is the source of a distinctive American “identity and national purpose,” one that may yet save the nation (pp. 365–366).

Although Huntington is right that America was never simply a creedal nation and that purely civic nations are unsustainable, his alarm is excessive and his prescription pernicious. The United States is the richest, most powerful political community in history, and although many of its elites may favor policies Huntington dislikes, they are not about to “deconstruct” the source of their status. And most other Americans, Huntington notes, are deeply patriotic (pp. 273–276). Most non-Hispanic immigrants also continue to disperse and assimilate in ways much like in the past (pp. 194–195). Although Huntington anguishes over Mexican immigrants, he concedes that most Hispanic parents want their children to learn English “as quickly as possible” and that over 90 percent of U.S.-born people of Mexican origin speak English fluently (pp. 170, 231). The limits to their educational and economic progress that he records are not obviously due to any unwillingness to assimilate. Ongoing barriers facing all poor Americans, and especially nonwhites, may well be more of the story. In other areas, today, the dangers of overweening American nationalism appear greater than disunion.

As for Huntington’s prescription, despite his commendable disclaimers, it is politically, if not philosophically, impossible to disentangle a call for “Anglo-Protestant” values from invidious ethnic and religious senses of national identity. Those words have old, familiar meanings far more resonant than Huntington’s redefinitions, and they do not resonate first with what has been best in America.

Huntington is right that there are forces at work reshaping American nationalism in the 21st century, but they can be met more wisely. As David Hollinger, Bernard Yack, and others have argued and Huntington briefly recognizes, America, like other nations, has been defined by a “common history.” That history presents “heroes and villains, victories and defeats” (p. 339) that diverse modern Americans will and should identify differently. They should then decide democratically how best to continue their community in light of historical experiences, modern realities, and their distinct but overlapping moral traditions. A sense of American community, as based on a shared, although contested, history, and open to all who are willing to help further this common life, is far healthier than one that insists on “Anglo-Protestant” traits.

To be sure, Huntington is also correct that many now believe that some features of American national identity should be changed. But it is not clear that this rethinking is so alien to the values he prizes. After all, if the Anglo-Protestant settlers had been persuaded that existing forms of political community were too sacred to be altered, they would never have become “We the People of the United States.”

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