

IDENTITY CRISIS

Who Are We?

The Challenges to America's National Identity

Samuel P. Huntington

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Reviewed by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Samuel P. Huntington's new book is really a political manifesto coupled with an attempt at historical analysis. The manifesto is unexceptionable and welcome. The analysis is tedious, wrongheaded, confused, and—so far as it is accepted seriously—damaging to the notion of national identity Professor Huntington boldly espouses.

Certainly it is encouraging to hear from a member of the Harvard faculty who is willing to state that the United States possesses a unique cultural and political identity that since 1965 has been undermined and threatened by mass immigration from countries whose own identity is not just dissimilar from the American one but positively inimical to it; that the mass migrations and pan-diasporas of the present time make the situation especially dire for the U.S., as well as for the West as a whole; and that immigration from Mexico in particular spells peril for America's future, owing to the numbers of Mexicans arriving here and the proximity of their homeland, both of which factors tend to alleviate any need they might feel to put their native past behind them, assimilate themselves to American culture, and learn English as an alternative to demanding that the United States accommodate them by becoming a bi-lingual country—a prospect Huntington views with great alarm and foreboding. All this is candid and straightforward enough—meaning that it is also sufficiently controversial to have earned the author a good deal of criticism, ranging from the expectable charges of “racism” and “nativism” from Hispanic reviewers to expressions of pained concern by fellow Ivy League academics at Professor Huntington's curious and seemingly inexplicable “wrongheadedness.”

Most offensive to these people is Huntington's postulating what he terms an "Anglo-Protestant core." A careful reading of *Who Are We?*, however, suggests that these learned scholars and savvy journalists, whether situated within the inner or outer rings of that core, have somehow grown to adulthood and professional prominence without ever having read—or anyway taken to heart—the story of the Trojan horse.

In fact, Huntington's Anglo-Protestant core would be no more than an historically incontrovertible cliché had he not proceeded to append to it a highly controvertible historical fiction he calls the "American Creed," which he claims is capable of making and holding together as one people a multiplicity of races and ethnicities—of endowing them with a national identity—*so long as they assimilate to the Anglo-Protestant core culture and subscribe to the doctrines of the Creed, itself the product of the Anglo-Protestant core as it existed in the Founders' time.* The chief elements of the core culture as Huntington understands it are the English language, Christianity, and religious belief; English concepts regarding the rule of law, the responsibility rulers bear toward their people, and individual rights; and the value of individualism, the work ethic, and the duty to attempt to achieve heaven on earth, signified by "a city on a hill" (the last three being attributable to the values of "dissenting Protestantism"). These Anglo-Protestant bequests, Huntington argues, have been profitably accepted by Americans of all races, ethnicities, and religions for three and a half centuries. It is to that acceptance that they owe their freedom, and the power, unity, and prosperity of their country; if, a half-century from now, they continue to enjoy these things, it will be because they have continued to accept them.

Professor Huntington hastens to add that he is making "an argument for the importance of Anglo-Protestant culture, not for the importance of the Anglo-Protestant people." It would be interesting to know how Huntington envisions a people separated from their culture—or rather, a culture separated from its people—as well as how he proposes to ensure the survival of a culture in the absence of the people that created it. The prejudice Muslims have against wine, bare female bodies, and the Christian religion is rather well known. Can anyone imagine a French culture worthy of the name in the custodianship of Moroccans and Algerians: without vineyards, cabernet, and brie, Follies and peepshows, Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres?

This ahistoricism, while it represents an obvious weakness in the author's thesis, is actually one of its mainstays. One ahistoricism deserves—in fact, it depends upon—another. Because, while it is obviously absurd to postulate a teetotalized France, it is not unrealistic to envisage *la France* operating under a political system different from the present one: Of course, the country has been governed by a great many of them. If, however, you can persuasively shrink the concept of culture to that of *political* culture—another completely ahistorical intellectual exercise—the speculative notion of a culture perpetuated by a people other than the one that developed it becomes somewhat more plausible. You can

get round *anything* in history, human psychology, and common sense by ideologizing it. And ideologizing American history (by wholly politicizing American culture) is precisely what Professor Huntington has done in proposing what he calls the American Creed (specifically labeled here an “ideology”) from which, he insists, the American people derive their identity—their *whole* identity, it seems! (We’ve been here before, of course, with Professors Harry Jaffa and Leo Strauss acting as guides.)

No matter that the result is of the kind that Joseph de Maistre ridiculed as “a school composition.” It is what schoolmasters and pedants do for fame and reputation, after all.

According to Huntington, the American Creed was “initially formulated by Thomas Jefferson and elaborated by many others....” He has in mind the Declaration of Independence, a highly rhetorical document having no standing in American governance or jurisprudence and written as a piece of high-flown propaganda, intended to justify the colonies’ separation from Great Britain to the opinion of mankind, and a prime example of what James Burnham called “politics as wish.” Huntington identifies as principles of the Creed liberty, equality, individualism, representative government, and private property. The Creed was developed, he explains, from the legacy of British legal and political traditions and European cultural ones. In developing a case for their withdrawal from the British Empire, the American “revolutionists” pleaded that Britain had deviated in its rulership of the colonies from English concepts of government and law. So why not the British Creed, rather than an American one? The British people, as praised by Burke, certainly enjoyed in their own right liberty, individualism, representative government, private property—and basic equality too, class system or no class system. In what way, then, other than enjoying virtually unlimited geographical territory and the opportunity to develop it, was America special?

The American Creed never was—and it is not now, except in the brainpans of a gang of wholly abstracted intellectuals. There *is* an American Myth: one that is not, however, an organic growth of the early Republic but a propagandistic creation of the increasingly ideologized nation that was formed in 1865, after the old Republic’s destruction. In the sense that America has a “creed” at all, the myth of mass-democratic, national, and finally imperial glory supplies it, while satisfying Professor Huntington’s sense of historical reality—despite his awareness that American nationalistic sentiment and a related form of patriotism came into existence *after* the War between the States. This new patriotism celebrated the New America while venerating the Old, as if it were a living, rather than a dying, tradition. It is here, really, that we see anything like a creed take form. Patriotism and the nation fused to create what Huntington calls “a national religious ritual,” which is to say a cult. In the late 1890s, the Grand Army of the Republic “was responsible for the propagation of nationalistic ritual on a mass scale,” according to one writer quoted approvingly by Samuel Huntington, who seems thoroughly to approve of this vulgar American nationalism which went on to style itself as the Savior of Democracy and, later, the Great Society.

But this proletarian nationalism did not come from the Anglo-Protestant core; it and its related phenomena were certainly not culturally specific (cf. the German, the French, and the Italian brands of nationalism). And didn't the culture of what Huntington terms the "pre-Civil War Southerners"—what became, that is, Confederate culture—belong as much to the Anglo-Protestant core as that of the North? (It played, after all, an even larger role in the founding era than New England culture did.)

Yet Samuel Huntington's confusion extends even further than this. The Anglo-Protestant core culture he identifies is naturally and essentially progressive—meaning that, judged from its original standpoint, it is regressive. Huntington does not appear to comprehend how Anglo-Protestantism has reshaped itself over the course of centuries in form and substance, under the corrosive action of external forces and the subversive workings of internal ones. The American Protestant Myth, since 1865, has destroyed the original national reality and set in its place something of its own independent creation. In result, the modern-day fetishes (especially those associated with the American Creed) Huntington celebrates in this book are the same that produced the ones he deplores (multiculturalism, deconstructionism, and globalism). Thus *Who Are We?* presents quite literally the textbook America, as taught in the public school system since the late nineteenth century. Faithfully, it substitutes mass democratic hoopla for republican theory and practice, as well as for true history. There is simply so much else to American history and the American identity (regionalism, for instance) that this erudite Harvard professor misses completely.

Nor is quoting ebulliently enthusiastic nineteenth-century visitors from Europe as useful to his purpose as he thinks, since even the best of these men often couldn't see the complexity of America in those times. What struck them, naturally enough, was what about America and Americans was *unlike* Europe and Europeans. Tocqueville and others were mightily impressed by what they took for the religiosity of nineteenth-century Americans, by contrast with their cynical European counterparts. Huntington is equally admiring. Only, Protestantism even then was destroying itself from its fissionist essence; at the start of the twenty-first century, it has long since succeeded in finishing the job. Christianity in America today is no more than a shell. Observing this shell, Samuel Huntington perceives creedal unity. Others, more pessimistic, will see only spiritual and philosophical emptiness.

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