

# ***E PLURIBUS UNUM STILL: THE UNITING OF AMERICA***

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As a nation built not on a common ancestry, but rather on the uniting of people from diverse ethnic, language, and cultural backgrounds, the US has often seen itself uncomfortably vulnerable to centrifugal pressures. Is our cohesiveness, we have wondered periodically, being eroded by too much immigration from different traditions? Is national unity threatened by assertions of particularistic ethnic and language claims? Is what the English philosopher and writer, G. K. Chesterton, once called "the great American experiment...of a democracy of diverse races" somehow being put in jeopardy?

Such doubts are again front and center. The "two nations—black and white" argument seems to many reinforced by the Rodney King verdict, and by the rioting which followed. And concerns about national unity are broader than this. For example, in a recent book, the distinguished historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., examines critically a series of movements and efforts which would, he believes, reverse our historic progression from *pluribus* to *unum*. Schlesinger writes that, in recent years, "ethnic ideologues" have opposed "the old American ideal of assimilation," called on the country "to think in terms not of individual but of group identity," and "done their best to turn a college generation against Europe and the Western tradition."<sup>1</sup>

However, even as he eloquently exposes the deficiencies of movements such as those on behalf of bilingualism and "multiculturalism," Schlesinger stresses the enormous strength and staying power of America as a nation made one by a widely shared commitment to a set of social and political ideals. He concludes that "the campaign against the idea of common ideals and a single society will fail. Gunnar Myrdal was surely right: for all the damage it has done, the upsurge of ethnicity is a superficial enthusiasm stirred by romantic ideologues and unscrupulous

hucksters....A historian's guess is that the resources of the [American] Creed have not been exhausted."<sup>2</sup>

## **The First Ideological Nation**

What Schlesinger calls "the resources of the Creed" are the powerful attraction American ideals and promise have had historically for millions who have migrated here, and the subsequent creation of a strong sense of nationhood among these peoples through shared ideological adherence. This whole matter of the US as a country with a philosophic rather than ethnic foundation has shaped the country's development in many ways. In particular, we lean much more heavily on an ideology than most nations do. The continued existence of the French nation, for example, hardly depends on the ascendancy of any particular body of social and political ideas—and indeed there has been a France through many ideological regimes. But the only America the world has known is one defined by one body of ideas. Should those somehow cease to command broad allegiance, the territory of the US would still be as it now is, and life would go on. But the resulting entity in such a change is unimaginable; the very thought of it is profoundly unsettling, even frightening, I think, to many Americans.

James Bryce begins his monumental study of American life by observing that throughout his travels across the country he, like other European visitors before him, was constantly greeted by the query, "What do you think of our institutions?" "Why was it so prevalent?", he wondered. "In England one does not inquire from foreigners, not even from Americans, their views of the English laws and government; nor does the Englishman on the Continent find Frenchmen or Germans or Italians anxious to have his judgments on their politics."<sup>3</sup> Only in America, Bryce argues, was the foreign visitor so interrogated.

His answer to why this question came up so often in the US was that American political ideas and institutions were something "invented" rather than "grown." They represent an elaborate, highly self-conscious experiment—one whose ultimate conclusion seemed to have importance beyond America's shores.

They form, or are supposed to form, a symmetrical whole, capable of being studied and judged altogether more profitably than the less perfectly harmonized institutions of older countries. They represent an experiment in the rule of the multitude, tried on a scale unprecedentedly vast, and the results of which everyone is concerned to watch. And yet they are something more than an experiment, for they are believed to disclose and display the type of institutions toward which, as by a law of fate, the rest of civilized mankind are forced to move, some with swifter, others with slower, but all with unrelenting feet.<sup>4</sup>

Bryce was surely right, so far as he went, but probably something else was also at work. Americans worried and wondered about their basic ideas and institutions in Bryce's day, and do so today in a somewhat different but nonetheless intense fashion, because the American nation has no substantial existence apart from these ideas and institutions. The US isn't, as most countries are, based on a particular ethnicity: rather it is one erected upon and around a political philosophy. The Germans, the English, the Japanese, all have had debates aplenty about what political values and programs their nations should pursue; but no one has thought that the existence of Germany, England, or Japan was predicated upon the validity of any one set of values. But America's national existence was, and to a considerable extent still is.

John Adams, who was the dominant figure in Philadelphia in 1776, and then the country's second president, late in life explored the nature of American origins in various exchanges with friends and acquaintances. In one of them, a letter to Hezekiah Niles in 1818, Adams wrote that a new American nation had emerged long before the war with England. It sprang from a revolution, he argued, "in the minds and hearts of the people," one which involved a sweeping ideological transformation—of "the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections" of the inhabitants of the thirteen colonies. A new American nation, rejecting aristocratic institutions and values, and replacing them with an egalitarian and individualistic order, had emerged bit by bit over the century and a half following the first settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia. The Declaration of 1776 proclaimed the formal independence of a new nationality which had already been established philosophically.

Like his fellow countryman Lord Bryce, G. K. Chesterton grasped the importance of American values to American nationality itself. Following a visit to the US in 1921, he compared the American system to the Spanish Inquisition. At first glance, that was a dubious compliment—but Chesterton in fact intended it as a compliment. "The American Constitution," he wrote, "does resemble the Spanish Inquisition in this:

That it is founded on a creed. America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature. It enunciates that all men are equal in their claim to justice, that governments exist to give them that justice, and that their authority is for that reason just. It certainly does condemn anarchism, and it does also by inference condemn atheism, since it clearly names the Cre-

ator as the ultimate authority from whom these equal rights are derived. Nobody expects a modern political system to proceed logically in the application of such dogmas....The point is that there is a creed, if not about divine, at least about human things."<sup>5</sup>

Chesterton went on to note the enormous demands this "nation on an ideology" foundation places on the integrating capacities of the ideology. The "great American experiment...of a democracy of diverse races," he noted, "has been compared to a melting pot. But even that metaphor implies that *the pot itself is of a certain shape and a certain substance; a pretty solid substance. The melting pot must not melt.*"<sup>6</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Fortwo centuries, we know, the melting pot hasn't melted. But how is it holding today?

### The View From Survey Research

The Roper Center archive contains many hundreds of surveys that help us better understand the current status of the American ideology. To what extent do citizens at large adhere to their country's historic social and political ideals? Is there evidence as to whether that attachment is eroding? Of particular importance to my focus here, how do various social groups in our population compare in their support for the central values of the national ideology and its symbols?

Historically there has been considerable debate about whether America's social and political ideals, or values, are in fact virtues. But there has been striking agreement among analysts—including the parade of distinguished foreign visitors—as to what these values are. The core of the American ideology has been seen as uniquely insistent and far-reaching individualism—a view of the individual person which gives unprecedented weight to his or her choices, interests, and claims. Private property in the economic sphere; democracy and freedom from government control in the polity; advancement

on one's merits, the absence of rank, and moral equality in the larger society: These have been seen as the essential, distinguishing American values. All reflect the pervasive underlying individualism.<sup>7</sup>

As I have shown elsewhere, available survey data indicate that Americans today adhere to a set of social and political values which corresponds closely to that portrayed by the historic literature on the shape and distinctiveness of the national ideology. In particular, the data show individualism to be more intense, pervasive, and uncontradicted here than in other industrial democracies. Support for a private-property-based economy remains strong. Americans declare themselves prepared to countenance very substantial economic inequalities, while insisting on the importance of the ideal of equal opportunity. Government has grown enormously over the past 60 years as the public has turned to it for guarantees and services, but support for limits on government are still stronger in the US than in most other industrial democracies. American policy on social welfare reflects national insistence on a large measure of individual, rather than governmental, responsibility. Americans place high value on individual effort and achievement.<sup>8</sup>

### Strong Adherence Across Group Lines

The data I have assembled here carry us one step further. Not only is the populace at large distinguished by strong attachments to liberal individualism, but these attachments are remarkably uniform across social group lines. Even more important, the groups which might be thought most likely to dissent because they have been least well served by the American experience, in fact differ little in their attachment to the creed from those who have tasted most abundantly of what Herbert Croly called "the promise of American life."<sup>9</sup> Thus, blacks, and people of the lowest income strata, show high adherence. In addition, there is little indication of any generational erosion: The youngest strata remain strongly supportive of the creed.

Consider, for example, the responses to the question shown on p. 7, which asks whether “people get ahead by their own hard work,” or whether “lucky breaks or help from other people are more important.” It poses two related matters central to the American ideology: First, does the US offer to the many real opportunity for advancement? Is hard work in fact broadly rewarded? Second, do Americans accept the normative claim that they should rely heavily on their own efforts?

Two-thirds of the US public say it’s one’s own effort which determines success or failure. That’s an impressive affirmation of individualism. What’s even more impressive, 60% of black Americans accept the standard. In the combined National Opinion Research Center surveys of 1985 and 1987-91, 69% of Hispanic Americans agreed.<sup>10</sup> So did 63% of those earning less than \$12,500 a year.

It’s not that people everywhere naturally respond in this way. In 1990 and 1991, the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press surveyed political attitudes and social values in the US and across Europe. One question posed of respondents was whether they agreed or disagreed that “hard work offers little guarantee of success.” Sixty-four percent of Americans rejected this proposition. While only 46% of the British and the French, and 38% of Germans did so, 55% of black Americans said no to the idea that one’s effort has little bearing on one’s success.

In a survey taken in April of this year, ABC News asked respondents whether current failings in US government and politics suggested that the system itself was flawed and needed major change, or rather if the system was good and it was just malperformance by current leadership that was at issue (see p. 8). Most said the system itself was sound—a conclusion which sharply limits the reach of the protest. Americans aren’t calling for revolutionary change—just better performance. And, again, groups all across the spectrum agree, in strikingly uniform proportions. Thus 64% of the grade school educated and 67% of college grads, 68%

of whites, 70% of blacks, and 67% of Hispanics said the governmental system itself isn’t in need of major change.

### **Patriotism Still in Style**

Today we hear much about Americans being “alienated” from politics. I think that misses the point of the public’s call, which is for better performance. In any case, if many people think we can expect more from our leadership, and probably from ourselves, in meeting the nation’s problems, the public is surely as deeply attached to the country as ever. Overwhelming majorities of every social group describe themselves as very proud to be Americans and as patriotic; 94% say they would rather live in the US than anywhere else—including 92% of Hispanics, 93% of those with less than a high school education, and 90% of persons under 30 years of age (p. 9).

### **Conservative about the Symbols**

When the US Supreme Court ruled in *Texas v. Johnson* (1989) that burning the US flag was constitutionally protected expression, there was a howl of protest across the country, and politicians fell over one another trying to get to the head of the line in attesting to their devotion to the flag and their determination to protect it.

Reactions like this have remained a source of puzzlement and amusement, even consternation, for foreign observers. They find the emotional force that surrounds the various symbols of nation in the United States to be jarring. How can it be, they ask, that the highpoint in the most important speech given by the man who is now president, at the Republican Convention in 1988, was his recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance? But political symbols take on great emotional weight in a “creedal nation,” for they represent the ties which bind together an ethnically diverse people.

Surveys show that the various social groups making up the populace differ little in their attachment to the nation’s principal symbols—like the Flag, the

Pledge of Allegiance, and the National Anthem. Thus they say by overwhelming majorities that children should be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in all US schools, and that it’s unpatriotic to refuse to stand when the Star Spangled Banner is being played. There are some small differences—the college educated are a bit more likely than those with high school educations, for example, to think certain overt expressions of patriotism are “uncool”—but the symbols of our nationhood are warmly espoused by all groups.

A number of recent studies have faulted the US school system for failing to impart much historical knowledge to today’s students.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, I think much of that criticism is warranted. It’s striking, then, and evidence of the extent of our attachment to the key symbols and experiences of our nationhood, that 67% of Americans know there are 13 stripes in the Flag, and 54% that they represent the original states; that 55% know (more precisely, answered correctly in a poll) that the first ten amendments to the Constitution are referred to as the Bill of Rights; that 75% state correctly that the Fourth of July commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence, 69% know it was signed in 1776, and 66% that the signing came in Philadelphia. The young hold their own on all of these matters.

### **"Two Nations" Revisited**

The US faces enormous tensions and problems in race relations. It has, of course, been beset by ethnic and other social group tensions throughout its history. The potential for conflict will always be enormous in a country as diverse as ours. The key questions before us here are whether the nation’s historic philosophic commitments remain an integrating resource that helps mitigate the conflict; and whether the integrating capacities of shared values are sufficient to stop conflict from intensifying.

The data suggest strongly that the answer to both these questions is yes. On the broad principles on which the US was built as a nation, in fundamental attachment to the country, and in respect for its

symbols as expressions of national oneness, the story told by survey explorations is one of overwhelming consensus across group lines. Centrifugal pressures are surely present, but if they are gaining strength, the available data emphatically do not show it. Instead, they indicate that the "resources of the Creed" are as much evident in drawing an otherwise diverse populace—despite great strains—from *pluribus* to *unum* as ever before in US history.

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), p. 130.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- <sup>3</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), volume 1, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (NY: Da Capo Press, 1968; first published 1922), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> I have explored this at length elsewhere. See "The American Ideology: An Exploration of the Origins, Meaning, and Role of American Values." A preliminary version was presented to a conference "The New Global Popular Culture," sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC, March 10, 1992. See, too, "American Values in Comparative Perspective," *The Public Perspective*, November/December 1991, pp. 5-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-46.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (Boston: Northeastern University Press edition, 1989; first published in 1909).

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that this NORC finding that Americans of Hispanic background (rep-

resentatives of the largest contemporary stream of immigration) are highly supportive of one key element in the country's individualistic ideology, is consistent with the much broader findings of the first comprehensive survey of this population. The Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) interviewed samples of 1,546 Mexican, 589 Puerto Rican, and 682 Cuban ancestry persons in the US in 1989 and 1990. Project directors are Rodolfo O. de la Garza, a political scientist at the University of Texas, Austin, and Angelo Falcon, president of the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy. In a summary of the study's findings presented at the University of Connecticut on April 8, 1992, de la Garza stressed his study's findings of strong inclinations across the diverse Hispanic communities to integrate into the US mainstream.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, Jr., *What Do Our Seventeen Year Olds Know?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

## Historically, Income Limits Have Been Rejected By All Social Strata in the US

**Question :** Do you think there should be a law limiting the amount of money any individual is allowed to earn in a year?

	No	Yes
Everyone	74%	26%
<b>By Economic Status*</b>		
Rich	89	10
Upper Middle	81	19
Lower Middle	76	25
Poor	65	35

**Source :** Survey by the Roper Organization, December 1939.

\* Interviewer coded from observation of housing, etc.

**Question :** Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?...There should be a top limit on incomes so that no one can earn more than \$100,000 a year.

	Disagree	Agree
Everyone	75%	20%
<b>By Age</b>		
18-29	78	18
30-44	81	16
45-59	76	19
60+	65	27
<b>By Education</b>		
<H.S.	59	35
H.S. Grad	73	21
Some College	85	13
College Grad	87	12
<b>By Race</b>		
White	76	19
Black	70	23

**Source :** Survey by Civic Services, March 1981.