

It was just two years ago in July of 1989 that a committee studying school curriculum in New York State came up with its recommendations for altering the program of studies in the state's schools. This report has fostered intense reconsideration of the wave of "political correctness" that has blossomed on the country's campuses. Michael Novak, author of The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics, finds a condemnation of pluralism in this repudiation of America's European roots. Philosopher, journalist, and former US ambassador, Mr. Novak directs social and political studies at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. This column is reprinted by permission of Forbes magazine, July 9, 1990. © Forbes Inc., 1990.

A CALL FOR DISUNITY

By Michael Novak

A generation ago, social scientists were predicting the disappearance of ethnicity, as freeways and television and plastic produced a homogenized culture that might one day be designated (from discovered ruins) as "Early Period Holiday Inn." Little did they anticipate the furies that would be unleashed in Azerbaijan and other Soviet republics as the century neared its end; the bitter hatreds of Northern Ireland and Lebanon; the separatist itch of Quebec. Or the growing intensity of ethnic conflict in New York City and other hot spots in the US.

Against that trend, in 1972 I published *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, predicting that the 1970s would mark the emergence of the "ethnics" in American life. Several other scholars writing at the time made the same point. And, indeed, many politicians with a strong ethnic identity did emerge from obscurity: Cuomo, Mikulski, Celeste, DeConcini, Deukmejian, Rostenkowski. These were the children of the immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and by extension all the others who did not quite feel included in the high culture of New England's Brahmins.

"Until recently the US had a unique method for bringing together diverse peoples — who elsewhere, under different systems, were often murdering one another."

In those days, we made a distinction between "the new ethnicity" and the old. In the old days, people living in ethnic enclaves had hardly known any other peoples, except as strangers and rivals. Many soldiers first met the "others" in their platoons in World War II. This was the old ethnicity.

In the new ethnicity, by contrast, nurtured chiefly in the inner suburbs, people now lived next to, and went to school with, "the others," had forgotten their parents' mother tongue, and yet were children of a

distinctive tradition with identifiable political habits.

This rediscovery also gripped that first generation of blacks after *Brown v. Board of Education*, led brilliantly by Martin Luther King, Jr. Alex Haley's famous book *Roots*—and the television miniseries—struck a powerful chord in all Americans, not only blacks.

Until recently the US had a unique method for bringing together diverse people—who elsewhere, under different systems, were often murdering one another. Our system taught them to live as good neighbors, gradually to respect one another, and to take pride in civic cooperation. This system was a model emulated around the world. Until recently.

Suddenly, ethnicity has turned virulent. Last July [1989] the New York State Commissioner of Education issued a report calling "European culture and its derivatives" oppressive. The report debunked "the European-American monocultural perspective." In short, it suggested that the American way of pluralism was a bad thing and that the "American idea" was a fraud.

It is quite legitimate to demand, as does this New York report, appreciation for "the history, achievements, aspirations and concerns of people of all cultures." But it is far too much to demand an "equal" focus on all cultures. For not all cultures on this earth have produced institutions and ideas such as those that animated the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. Compared with Eastern Europe or sub-Saharan Africa or Red China, God *did* bless America.

Not in Africa nor in Asia nor in Latin America nor in large stretches of northeastern Europe can one find the cultural roots that lie behind the US Constitution, or the habits and institutions that give the Constitution its daily relevance and force. That Constitution is no parchment barrier, quite particular experiences lie behind it. This history must be learned afresh by every generation. Truths "self-evident" to the framers were intended to become valid for all, whatever their land of origin.

The primary task of education should be to keep

alive the particular ideas and institutions that inspired the design of this new American system. This system was without model or precedent on the face of the earth when it began and remains today a beacon for much of the world.

Forget those "European-American" ideas that suffuse the US Constitution, and this nation will swiftly descend into the racial and ethnic strife recurrent elsewhere on this planet. Thus, those rumblings of last July from New York on the Commissioner of Education's office portend ethnic splintering and institutional disarray. What this can lead to is painfully evident in the picketing outside the shops of Korean merchants in New York City by certain extremists, and in many other ill omens.

What Americans pledge allegiance to on July 4 is not a piece of geography or a royal history or a language or a folk, but a form of governance, "the Republic." Take away the Republic and the deal is off. Take away those self-evident truths on which it rests, and the Republic falls. Some forms of "pluralism" and "diversity" destroy.

* * * *