

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, has expanded on the position of *Scholars in Defense of History* with his latest book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (Knoxville, Tenn.: Whittle Direct Books, 1991). The book is reviewed by Otis L. Graham, Jr., Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

# HOW AMERICA HAS HELD TOGETHER

## A Book Review

THE DISUNITING OF AMERICA:

REFLECTIONS ON A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

It is a matter of the greatest significance that Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., at age 73 the distinguished author of thirteen books on American history, chose to write a book on contemporary threats to our national identity and cohesion. *The Disuniting of America* is a condensed, readable and arresting tour of the historical formation of the American national identity and its remarkable persistence in the face of divisive forces of regionalism, ideology, and the endless arrival of immigrants. But the point of the history is to sharpen the contrast with the present, where Schlesinger finds "a new conception" of America arising. In place of the historic conception and reality of America as a transformative society banishing old loyalties so as to forge a new commonality, "the contemporary ideal is shifting from assimilation to ethnicity, from integration to separatism." (p. 2)

Most of the book is an account of the zone of combat Schlesinger knows best: contemporary efforts to revise the teaching and writing of our national history. Both needed much revision a generation ago, he concedes. But praiseworthy efforts to open up the "dead white male" world of traditional historiography to a more pluralistic story have evolved into angry denunciations of the former core history as Eurocentric and patriarchal cultural imperialism, an illegitimate subject unless one intends to flog it. Further, the very idea of a national history is now said to be a coercive fraud, damaging the psyches of America's many non-white non-male citizens. "Multiculturalism" is the bonfire now melting school and college curricula into new forms, and Schlesinger writes of the high costs of the widespread efforts to use history to enhance the 'self-esteem' of various groups and encourage their cultural separatism. He recounts the emergence of a "peculiarly ugly mood" in the nation's academic institutions and culture, brought on by the demand for Political Correctness (PC). PC is shorthand for a form of liberal-left McCarthyism intended to intimidate those who would defend the Western tradition or question the logic or goals of those who carry "the cult of ethnicity" and/or gender resentments toward a dismantling of the very core of nationality. Schlesinger's compact book may console Soviets, Yugoslavs and Canadians with the news that their own agony of national disintegration may also

now be repeated within the nation so proud of its recent Cold and Gulf War victories.

In the end, Schlesinger is, as usual, optimistic. The balance between *unum* and *pluribus* will be restored, and around the traditional Anglo-Saxon base. The "American Creed" will prove strong enough to bind Americans together. The author, brilliant at looking back, is less-convincing when looking ahead. Consider the sources of the disuniting. Schlesinger sees them as ideas, "conceptions," and (he is less sure-footed here) social values. No doubt. The centrifugal forces now at work within the US are, in an important sense, cultural and ideological; they are ideas and values — terrain where Schlesinger is a resourceful guide with a matchless historical vision. But important sources of the disuniting are beyond his horizon, most especially immigration at indigestible rates, a problem he mentions briefly and with disrelish. To meet the new separatist impulses with only "the American Creed" is to match our nation's waning assimilationist mechanisms against growing centrifugal pressures.

*The Disuniting of America* may not fully diagnose the problem, but it is an invaluable essay on how America has held together, and how it seems now to be coming apart. If you think that an important and neglected subject, read this book.

—Otis L. Graham, Jr.