

Further Thoughts on *Who Are We?*

by Paul Gottfried

The printed reviews are still piling up for Samuel Huntington's newest, best-selling work that tries to define "who we are" and what distinguishes Americans from other global inhabitants. Huntington's attempt to address such issues has rendered him, despite his credentials as a liberal Democrat and a fervent Kerry-supporter, a bearer of suspect ideas. It has also made him the subject of flattering commentaries in neoconservative publications and by John O'Sullivan in the less trendy fortnightly *The American Conservative*. Apparently Huntington has tripped some live wire by uttering what look like platitudes about the American heritage of individualism, equality, and respect for law and about the connection of these values to Northern European Protestant culture. Perhaps I am missing something here but much of his book reads like a restatement of what Jewish liberal sociologist David Riesman was saying about inner-directed descendants of WASP America during the fifties and sixties. In his works *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and *Abundance for What?* (1964), Riesman, a Harvard professor and a close friend of Eric Fromm, praised the Puritan strain in the American character as a necessary source of moral strength. It makes me wonder why Huntington's salute to Protestant virtues should be thought to indicate a predilection for the far Right, as explained in the *New York Times* and in the rest of the national press.

Moreover, as Sam Francis and John Attarian remind us, those who go bonkers at Huntington's suggestion that it might be a good idea to limit immigration to those who sign on to his cultural program, conveniently overlook the evidence of leftist bias. Nowhere does Huntington challenge the managerial transformation of the U.S. into a feminist, racially egalitarian, quasi-socialist society. To the contrary, he wishes to protect this heirloom and therefore seeks to impose tighter controls over those who should be allowed into our perfected America. It is also mind-boggling that he would trace an anti-biblical, socially radicalized America to the stern Calvinists from whom

Huntington (how the mighty are fallen!) is himself descended. There is in fact no conceivable connection between what the U.S. has tumbled into and the biblical theocrats and predestinarian theologians who undertook the "errand into the wilderness" that became Protestant New England. In a book that Huntington never quotes (for good reason), *The Myth of American Individualism* (Princeton, 1994), Barry Alan Shain dwells on the corporate character of early American Protestantism that resulted in a rigorously enforced public morality. Most early Americans were Calvinists, who lived in communities that were obsessively concerned with banning vice and fighting sin. What Huntington stresses as American character, one would have to infer from Shain's heavily documented arguments, as well as from Alexis de Tocqueville's descriptions of small-town American democracy, is a straying from the older Anglo-Saxon, Germanic Protestant tradition of public virtue. This tight-lipped, morally driven Calvinism is certainly not featured in *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, which links the current political culture to a list of doubtful Protestant attributes. When Huntington talks about sectarian Protestants it is also unclear what historical phenomenon he has in mind. The Mennonites, Quakers, and Baptists were all anti-establishmentarians but were neither secularists nor individualists in any modern sense. Although Huntington makes much of a pristine Protestant tradition that nurtures the latter-day America he celebrates, what he evokes is the withering away of that tradition (or those traditions) that used to dominate our society.

What he furthermore presents as Protestant America is a reprising of the liberal culture defended in *The Clash of Civilizations*, in the article printed in *Foreign Affairs* (summer 1993) and later in his book on the same subject. For those who recall this earlier phase of Huntington's cultural investigations, his argument here was to show how the U.S. and politically similar and once allied democracies are now confronting vastly different and hostile non-Western societies. Huntington suggests that this conflict will continue for at least the

foreseeable future since the other “civilizations” with whom we are clashing cannot be easily converted to our values and institutions. Although it is questionable that all the rivals pointed to in this work constitute “civilizations,” as opposed to Muslim oil cartels or Pacific Rim economies, Huntington raised eyebrows by observing that there are irreconcilable conflicts in the world, or at least conflicts that cannot be solved by exporting American democracy. But more interestingly, he defined the “West” in a way that would have puzzled an educated man a hundred years ago. Huntington’s West is about individual autonomy, consumption, pluralism and greater and greater equality. Certainly these qualities are prized in the U.S. we inhabit today, and particularly by our national media. But to what extent can one identify the West as a “civilization” with Huntington’s preferred ideals? The answer may be to the same extent that the current American model as depicted in his newest book is a Northern European Protestant society. Both pictures of “liberal democracy” are equally attempts to extrapolate from present developments in the Western world to teach about the permanent nature of the West or of the U.S.

The point being made is that this book, like Huntington’s earlier *livre de succes*, is full of unwarranted historical and cultural generalizations. Clearly this director of an institute for strategic studies at MIT is not familiar with the expanding historiography on the changing character of American – and more generally Western – society over the last two hundred years. And his comments on American Protestantism seem to belong in a liberal Protestant sermon of forty years ago. There is no Jonathan Edwards, Stonewall Jackson or Southern Fundamentalists whom one can detect in his hymn to the American present. Any reference to sinners in the hands of an angry God has been hygienically removed. Huntington may like this updated version, but what he offers in his book has nothing to do with the Protestant Reformation or with its American distillations. That journalists have not noticed these problems tells volumes about their lack of education – or their multicultural

fixations.

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