

# The New America

*A 'post-ethnic' international flophouse*

BY CARL F. HOROWITZ

Is “American” an ethnic group? On the surface, at least, the question is absurd. Unlike other nations, the accepted wisdom goes, the United States of America is a unique amalgam — a melting pot, if one will — bound by a tradition of constitutionally protected liberty. Ancestral attachments being thoroughly subordinate to our founding principles, we have enjoyed extraordinary success as a nation.

Yet on a deeper level, the question is not absurd. There are people among us — a minority, yes, but a significant one — who believe, if by their actions, that our country is post-ethnic. The proof is in the pencil. During 1980-2000, the decennial Census of Population long form included “American” as a choice for identifying national origin, a practice that the Census Bureau since has shifted to its ongoing American Community Survey. And for whatever reason, roughly 8 percent of all respondents lately have been filling in that box. This is a development of major significance, notes political scientist James S. Robbins, a senior fellow with the Washington, D.C.-based American Foreign Policy Council, in his new book, *Native Americans*. Equally to the point, he argues, it is a healthy development. For in severing as many ties as possible to the Old World, we affirm our idealism while thwarting affirmative-action bean counters. Rapid demographic change, though disruptive, can be managed as long as we convey our defining ideals to current and future generations, whether or not born here.

The author is partly right: The fading importance of ancestral heritage in this country *is* of great significance. To an extent it's both inevitable and desirable, as it is for any self-governing nation. Yet this process generates new problems as it resolves old ones. For in minimizing the importance of origins, a nation risks traveling toward a destination it will come to regret. The

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ultimate consequence of our having become an international polyglot of racial, linguistic, and religious groups who can't or won't assimilate could be the breakup of the very American polity the author would have us celebrate.

As an overview of the evolution of the American character and its place in the post-9/11 era, *Native*

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**Native Americans  
Patriotism, Exceptionalism, and the New  
American Identity**  
By James S. Robbins  
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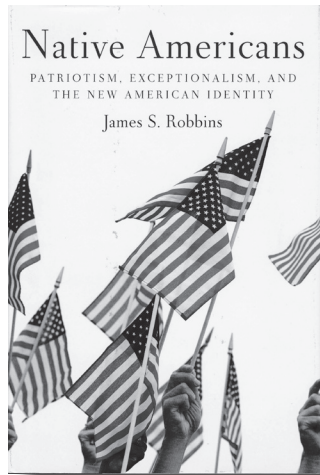


*Americans* is lucid and reasonable, at least within the ground rules of classical liberalism and its modern conservative variations. It's certainly a lot more satisfying than recent mindless authoritarian fist pumps to National Greatness such as David Gelernter's *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* and the late Tony Blankley's *American Grit: What It Will Take to Survive and Win in the 21st Century*. Yet even allowing for the omissions inherent in any book of less than 200 pages, *Native Americans* simply doesn't rise to the level of the late Samuel Huntington's 2004 book, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, published nearly a decade ago. Indeed, *Native Americans* can be seen as a polite rebuttal to Huntington.

James Robbins, by background and inclination, is a military historian. Holder of a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, he has taught at (among other places) Marine Corps University and National Defense University. He also has served in government for 10 years and is a recipient of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Meritorious Civilian Service Award. His two previous books were *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive* and *Last in Their Class: Custer, Pickett and the Goats of West Point*. All of this shows in *Native Americans*. Liberty, opportunity, and wanderlust are among our defin-

ing traits, but they depend upon military-style stoicism in order to overcome obstacles.

And from our earliest colonial days onward, argues Robbins, American history is a continuing story of overcoming obstacles. The author enlists support from John Winthrop (“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill.”), Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Frederick Jackson Turner, Ronald Reagan, plus Euro-



peans from Tocqueville to Hegel. Especially telling is a quote from Margaret Thatcher in March 1991, only months after her departure as British prime minister: “No other nation has been built upon an idea, the idea of liberty. No other nation has so successfully combined people of different races and nations within a single culture.”

All this makes for a good Fourth of July speech. Not that it’s a bad thing. All nations need to be reminded about their collective sense of purpose. But focusing on propositions and moral character alone tells only a partial story — more partial, at any rate, than the author thinks. While rightly rejecting the left’s ceaseless quest to unearth our litany of injustices in nation-building (especially with “people of color” cast as noble victims), Robbins is convinced that moral-philosophical intangibles alone can sustain us.

Unfortunately, his position is less than convincing. It is a recurring feature throughout history that a nation is born of struggle for territorial dominance by a particular ethnic and/or religious group. Once established, a nation can withstand periodic challenges to its identity, even traumatic challenges, so long as it retains its founding traits. Huntington asks in *Who Are We?*: “Would America be the America it is today if in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it had been settled not by British Protestants but by French, Spanish, or Portuguese Catholics? The answer is no. It would not be America; it would be Quebec, Mexico, or Brazil.” Robbins, contrarily, implies that America still would be America — and would remain as such regardless of demography. Values ultimately are what count.

The pitfalls of this view are most evident in Chapter Eight, “Coming to America.” Robbins declares in the first sentence: “America is a nation of immigrants.” Already we’re in trouble. This common shibboleth, as always, overlooks the fact that America, like every sovereign entity, began as a nation of *settlers*. Put another way, immigrants can’t assimilate unless they are aware

of what it is they’re supposed to assimilate into. And the settlers mainly responsible for establishing the assimilation template were the English and the Scots, in that order of importance. Yes, the Welsh, the French, the Germans, the Dutch, and others made substantial contributions, as did, more distantly, the ancient Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. But our most recognizable sources of heritage come from England and Scotland. Why be bashful about it? These two nations, despite centuries of (still unresolved) bitter mutual enmity, in their own ways bequeathed to us a system of law, a philosophy, a common language, and a general range of everyday habits. Most importantly, *they showed up* in far larger numbers than other national groups, and reproduced at high rates. This, more than anything else, made possible our national identity. Even assuming for the sake of argument that we are purely propositional, it would be impossible to deny the role of English and Scots moral philosophers and pamphleteers such as Locke, Trenchard, Gordon, Smith, Hume, Ferguson, and Witherspoon in shaping the propositions. Shouldn’t such a heritage on some level influence how we approach immigration and citizenship issues?

James Robbins apparently thinks it shouldn’t. For him, immigration, in whatever numbers and from whatever sending nations, has been a virtually unmitigated blessing. In rebuking what he calls “nativist sentiment,” he remarks: “There have always been those who wanted to keep immigrants out, to close the golden door after their ancestors were safely inside.” To his credit, he emphasizes the necessity of assimilation, including the need to be fluent in English, approvingly citing Theodore Roosevelt’s oft-quoted 1915 speech in New York before the Knights of Columbus, denouncing “hyphenated Americanism.” But what if large numbers of newcomers insist on remaining hyphenated? And what if their offspring do likewise? Robbins believes such concerns are overblown. Most newcomers, he insists, desire to assimilate. The aggressive strain of ethnic separatism among many immigrants, especially Hispanics, while troubling, is an anomaly, mainly the product of self-serving community leaders, teachers and identity politicians.

But don’t Muslims pose special problems related to assimilation and national security? Robbins is confident that they overwhelmingly desire to live the American dream. “(I)t is better to see Muslims as one of the latest groups to contribute to the melting pot, at least for those willing to assimilate.” He declares:

The United States is a country where Muslims have the freedom to worship in the manner they choose. But it is also a country where, unlike in most of their homelands, they are free to eat pork, marry a Buddhist, and ignore the call to prayer. This is the more impor-

tant freedom — the freedom to choose, the freedom that for four centuries has brought immigrants to America.

Unfortunately, this statement runs up against an observable reality: The vast majority of Muslims here are choosing *not* to exercise such freedoms. And more than a few among them have demonstrated a readiness to intimidate and even kill others, especially immediate family members, who do try to exercise them. How would Robbins deal with that? And how would he react if a growing number of “patriotic” Muslims in our military — like the now-convicted (and sentenced to death) U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, murderer of more than a dozen persons at Fort Hood, Texas — having reconnected with their religious roots, decide to exact retribution against impious fellow soldiers? Apparently, Robbins doesn’t see such cases as warranting restriction of entry. Islamic radicals, he argues, are an aberration, unrepresentative of the Muslim mainstream. But the evidence he marshals is rather thin. Robbins at one point glowingly quotes “Mohammed Mohammed,” a Jordanian-born Islamic resident of Alexandria, Louisiana and father of six: “A few years ago I tried to take my family overseas, and we had a difficult time. The customs are different. I realized, then, that I was also different...The next generation will be 100 percent American.” All this is nice. Yet one must ask: If Mohammed Mohammed is so keen on assimilation, how come his name is still “Mohammed Mohammed?”

Chapter Nine, “The Native Americans,” in a real sense, is the heart of the book. Here the author analyzes Census of Population and American Community Survey (ACS) data and reveals, with the aid of county-by-county national maps, the areas of strongest self-identification of “American” ancestry. Robbins doesn’t believe ethnicity is an especially useful marker. “An ethnic identity,” he writes, “could just be a form of personal branding — lacking strong family traditions, one may latch onto the identity from a country one has never visited and knows nothing about.” Actually, it could mean that many people here, assimilated or not, take their ancestry seriously and even attend family reunions. It also could mean that for many people, race and ethnicity are becoming irrelevant. In any event, in 1980, 5.9 percent of all respondents filling out the Census of Population long form (distributed to one in six households) wrote in “American” as their national background. This figure fell to 5.2 percent in 1990, but rose to 7.2 percent in 2000. ACS data since then have indicated responses in the 7 to 9 percent range.

By far the greatest concentrations of these “United States of Americans” are in the upland South and, secondarily, in the Ohio River Valley. These households are overwhelmingly white, and more specifically, dis-

proportionately descended from Scots, Scots-Irish and Border English Protestants arriving in the eighteenth century. Robbins notes:

Looking at the areas with high concentrations of Americans conjures various impressions: The Bible Belt. Rednecks. Flyover country. Hillbillies. NASCAR country. Walmart. Waffle House, Cracker Barrel. Country music. The area below the sweet tea line, or in the “Coke” zone. The stereotypic view would be of a white, rural, lower-middle-class (if not below), less-educated population.

The author isn’t at all being condescending here, mind you. He’s simply acknowledging a cultural reality: Lots of good old boys and gals think of themselves as Americans, first and last. Yet this raises an interesting question: Why are so many Celtic-descended Protestants reluctant to acknowledge their roots on an anonymous Census form? Are they ashamed? They shouldn’t be. Every culture has good and bad. And as the now-classic 2005 book by former Navy Secretary and Virginia Democratic Senator Jim Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*, describes, and with autobiographical passion, there is much good in that world. Perhaps these people are apathetic. Perhaps, alternately, their patriotic American populism is so ingrained that it trumps any sense of origins. Whatever the explanation, this much is certain: Something valuable will have been lost if the Scots-Irish, some 27 million strong, one day were to extinguish their collective identity, whether experienced in America or on the other side of the Atlantic.

The book concludes with a call for national renewal. By understanding Americanism as the full flowering of a noble universal code, Robbins argues, we can reinvigorate our pride, restore our flagging faith in major institutions, and become more mobilized to fight for what is right. He believes the American creed — a hybrid of economic mobility, individual rights, fair play, majority rule, localism, and religious piety — could be the creed of everyone here and in the rest of the world. But is it that simple? Even here, the creed has never enjoyed full acceptance. It certainly wasn’t enough to prevent our great national bloodletting of 1861–65, which was about far more than simply the slavery issue.

*Native Americans* has its strengths. But at its core, it is a pitch for inviting the world to come to America, as most everyone has it in them, if properly guided, to become good Americans. This assumption reigns at the highest levels of power — witness the passage this June by the Senate of highly misguided immigration amnesty/surge legislation dwarfing anything like it in the past. The last few decades, if nothing else, have rendered it suspect, if not deluded. Even a universal nation has to be particular about who it lets in. ■