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Culture Clash? Contesting Notions of American Identity and the Effects of Latin American Immigration

Luis R. Fraga and Gary M. Segura

The publication of Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* provides an opportunity to consider several distinct underlying assumptions about American national identity, and to evaluate the claim that this identity is threatened by growth among native-born and immigrant populations of Latin American origin, particularly—but not exclusively—Mexicans.

It is certainly the case that Latin American migrants and their descendants make up a large and growing share of the nation's population, and that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are the overwhelming majority of this group. The timeliness of Huntington's work is apparent when one considers that the 2002 *Current Population Survey*

conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that Latinos¹ surpassed African Americans as the nation's largest identifiable ethnic/racial group² comprising 13.5 percent of the national population. This growth is fueled by both higher fertility rates and continued immigration. And while others would debate this (see Alba in this symposium), we are inclined to accept Huntington's characterization of this migrant flow as unlikely to stop or even slow anytime in the immediate future. As a result, population projections of the Census Bureau estimate that Latinos may comprise as much as 25 percent of the national population in 2050, when people of primarily European ancestry are estimated to comprise only 52 percent.³

In this essay, we use Huntington as a jumping off point. We first examine the question of immigration and threats to national identity within the history of American political development. We consider what current and potential challenges the United States faces as it accommodates population shifts and prepares for a future where Caucasians are a far smaller proportion of the national population than may ever have been the case in our history. Further, we compare the relative abilities of Anglos and Latinos to shape that future, and whether and how those power inequalities inform competing claims regarding resistance to assimilation, cultural segregation, and national disunity. Finally, we offer some thoughts on how America might cope with its demographic evolution without resorting to xenophobia, isolationism, or cultural nationalism.

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How New Are the Current Threats to American National Identity?

Concerns regarding the threat posed by newer immigrants to the Anglocentric nature of the United States are not new. In fact, they predate the Declaration of Independence. Among the earliest recorded expressions of such concern was contained in a commentary written by Benjamin Franklin in 1751.⁴ Although the central focus of the essay was the nature of economic growth in the colonies, with a special emphasis on rates of population

increase, at the end of the essay Franklin interestingly spends a considerable amount of space describing the threat posed by German and other immigration to the British character of Pennsylvania. Franklin wrote:

And since Detachments of English from Britain sent to America, will have their Places at Home so soon supply'd and increase so largely here; why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of *Aliens*, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.⁵

In this quote, Franklin has reaffirmed the English nature of his society, denounced immigration and ethno-linguistic enclaves, expressed the classic fear of demographic change, and even attempted, with his reference to “complexion” to conceptualize these “swarm[ing]” and “herding” Germans as, what today we would term, a “racialized other.” To us, these words sound eerily familiar to language used in much of the contemporary argument.

Franklin’s view is distinct to that of French writer Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (pseudonym J. Hector St. John) whose view is more often referenced than Franklin’s to characterize the foundations of American national identity. In his *Letters from an American Farmer* first published in 1782 he wrote:

What, then, is the American, this new man? He is either an European or the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.⁶

To Crèvecoeur, the most important element of American identity was its capacity to be built through the successful synthesis of people with nationally diverse origins into a new American identity. There is no sense of threat posed by immigrants, *provided* they leave old customs and beliefs behind and embrace a “new” American identity.

A more recent characterization of the ways in which American national identity can be threatened by the desires of subgroups of its population to maintain identities different from its Anglocentric origins is provided by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. In his *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, he writes that American national identity is under threat from those who would place sub-national racial and ethnic group identity before,

and especially in opposition to, a more unifying understanding of national identity. He states,

A cult of ethnicity has arisen both among non-Anglo whites and among nonwhite minorities to denounce the idea of a melting pot, to challenge the concept of ‘one people,’ and to protect, promote, and perpetuate separate ethnic and racial communities.⁷

Although Schlesinger’s primary concern is with the promotion of Afro-centric and other racial-ethnic specific histories in secondary school curricula at the expense of more traditional versions of American history, his concerns, like Huntington’s, lie in the threat this can pose to American society and its sense of nationhood. He continues,

the cult of ethnicity has reversed the movement of American history, producing a nation of minorities—or at least of minority spokesmen—less interested in joining with the majority in common endeavor than in declaring their alienation from an oppressive, white, patriarchal, racist, sexist, classist society.⁸

How, then, are we to understand the roles of ethnic diversity and the pressure for assimilation in their effects on national identity? It is Rogers M. Smith who, in his analysis of the evolution of American citizenship laws, provides one of the most insightful frameworks to best understand how the evolution of national identity in American political development has often depended on both exclusion and inclusion, that is, identifying a group for exclusion from the rights and privileges of full citizenship because of its perceived threat to national interests while, at the same time, calls are made for the inclusion of other groups to be added to the aggregation of interests that comprise the national interest. According to Smith, it is useful to characterize “American civic identity” as being comprised of three coexistent civic ideologies or myths of civic identity: 1) individual liberalism that acknowledges individual rights and limited government; 2) democratic republicanism that gives importance to collective fate; and 3) ascriptive inegalitarianism that uses law to define who is included in the body politic, and by necessity, who is excluded. These three traditions compete with one another in the extent to which they drive which groups and interests,⁹ often times including immigrant groups, are included as legitimate parts of the American nation. The need for elected leaders to receive support from majorities of the electorate, he argues, gives political leaders opportunities to manipulate whose interests are—and, by extension, are not—legitimate in the body politic. It is this constant tension between the need to include and the simultaneous benefits of exclusion, that has directly contributed to the evolution of American national identity. Smith states:

First, aspirants to power require a population to lead that imagines itself to be a ‘people’; and, second, they need a people that imagines itself in ways that make leadership by those aspirants appropriate. The needs drive political leaders to offer civic ideologies, or myths of civic identity, that foster the requisite sense of peoplehood, and to support citizenship laws that express those

ideologies symbolically while legally incorporating and empowering the leaders' likely constituents.¹⁰

A focus on protecting individual rights, defining who is part of the national collective people, and, most importantly, defining who is *not* part of the American polity have always competed with one another to define central elements of American political discourse. According to Smith, the most successful politicians who have affected the evolution of American national identity have been those who have effectively combined elements of the three civic myths. Most importantly, he notes that it is the ascriptive civic ideology that has been the most critical at building a sense of peoplehood in the U.S.¹¹

What Smith's work allows us to appreciate is that the question of national identity, and especially threats to national identity posed by immigrants and immigrant-derived racial and ethnic groups, has been part of American discourse since before there even was a formally structured American polity. Moreover, contestation over who was *in* the American polity as a citizen with full rights and responsibilities has defined important elements of that national identity throughout American history. For some segments of the population, such as African Americans, women, and Native Americans, there is a very long tradition of being defined outside of the national body politic. Immigrant groups have, more often than not, initially been defined as separate from and a threat to American identity. However, there is much variation in the path of inclusion to be part of the American nation; many European-derived immigrant groups attained inclusionary status much sooner, for example, than many immigrants from Asia and Latin America.¹²

What an historical perspective can, perhaps, help us understand is that what may appear to be a severe threat to national identity at a specific historical moment need not prove itself to be so over the course of time. Those who would claim the presence of a crisis of—or at least severe threat to—American national identity must be very careful to outline not only changes in American national culture, but also exactly how these changes directly threaten important dimensions of America's sense of peoplehood. They must distinguish change from threat, threat from crisis, and crisis from historical inevitability. Without such analytical precision, history teaches us that much harm can result from nationalistic vitriol, such as through the systematic exclusion of full rights to citizenship, that in the long term may threaten expansions in the inclusiveness of American national identity more than any group distinct in language, religion, culture, or values ever has.

What Is the American Creed?

It is hard to dispute that Anglo-Protestant culture has played a central role in the development of American national identity. However, this claim subsumes several

smaller contentions that are actually more controversial—that a national culture in the ethno-linguistic and religious sense is necessary for the formation of a successful democratic polity, that the Anglo-Protestant culture is uniquely normatively good, that the religious portion of that identity is a generally positive force in American national life, and that this culture has been historically characterized by remarkable stability, varying only modestly from its beginnings.

How important is a single national culture for the preservation of democratic institutions? Perhaps more importantly, which are the specific components of that “culture” that provide the binding ties of nationhood, ethno-religious and linguistic traditions, or the more complex civic culture understood by Smith, Schlesinger, and others? Proponents of the primacy of Anglo-Protestant culture appear to argue that the most critical ties are ethno-linguistic and religious. Further, they also argue for the unique contribution of Anglo-Protestantism—the foundation for arguments of Anglo-American exceptionalism—and suggest that the erosion in the dominance of Anglo-Protestant culture is inherently destabilizing to contemporary American society.

We question the accuracy of each of these arguments. The relative success of multi-cultural states whose populations are sufficiently committed to specific constitutional principles is frequently brushed aside or entirely overlooked. This raises at least the possibility that civic attachments can—under some circumstances at any rate—transcend ethno-cultural and linguistic differences. Huntington, for example, holds out the Canadian and Belgian examples as instructive (in the negative) without acknowledging that both of those societies have more than held together but actually prospered, and have engaged in struggles over national identity entirely through democratic processes.¹³ No mention is made of numerous other consolidated democracies with substantial ethno-linguistic diversity including Spain, France, Finland, Switzerland, and India, to name a few.¹⁴

Moreover, there is significant discussion of this issue in the theoretical literature that raises serious questions about the twin claims that a national ethno-linguistic culture is a *sine qua non* of stable and successful democracy,¹⁵ and that American national success was the product of its remarkable cultural unity.¹⁶ Morone, for example, contends that the claims made by Huntington in an earlier work, Greenstone, and others should be considered in light of counter-claims that American cultural unity was, in fact, cultural hegemony, where the voices of the powerful suppressed other views.¹⁷ For Morone, American political culture “is a perpetual work in progress. Americans are fighting over it now. They have fought over it since the first Puritan stepped ashore.”¹⁸

Likewise, flattering portraits of the Anglo-Protestant value set might benefit from a bit more skepticism.¹⁹ It is frequently individualism, a work ethic, belief in “English”

legal traditions, religious commitment, and the English language that are identified as central components of this “culture,” all while a number of other well documented aspects of American national character are left unmentioned. For example, Puritanism, xenophobia, moralistic intolerance, traditionalism, and authoritarianism have often played destructive roles in our history and have been identified as widespread, at least within particular regions or social classes and potentially endemic to the American character.²⁰ The results almost always include important political and social implications—ominous implications—for individuals from socially subordinate groups.²¹ Often, these views or less-than-noble aspects of American identity are closely intertwined with some of the other elements generally seen as good, for example the embracing of slavery by the Southern Baptist Convention, a view not officially repudiated by America’s largest Protestant denomination until 1995. Indeed, Huntington himself highlights some less than flattering practices and events in U.S. history—particularly with respect to how some of these character flaws might have been visited upon immigrants, non-Protestants, and non-Anglo-Saxons—but without any apparent willingness to evaluate what these events might mean in terms of the innate goodness or attractiveness of the national character as he has imagined it.

With respect to religion, Huntington repeatedly asserts the Christian nature of American society and dismisses any concern that such an identity might be problematic for non-Christians. Referencing court cases regarding the Pledge of Allegiance or the display of Christian symbols to the exclusion of others on public land, he basically suggests that the plaintiffs’ perceptions of exclusion or alienation are correct, but not in any way problematic. Rather, this is viewed with some approval. “America is a predominantly Christian nation with a secular government. Non-Christians may legitimately see themselves as strangers because they or their ancestors moved to this ‘strange land’ founded and peopled by Christians.”²²

To claim as unproblematic a description of the United States as a “Christian nation” with a secular government is surely to invite the institution of the former and the abolition of the latter. Phenomena such as tax-funded religious institutions (under the name of “faith-based initiatives”), school vouchers for parochial schools, or the political power and agenda of evangelical Christians give testimony to our unease. While there is certainly wide disagreement over the degree to which each threatens to undermine the secular nature of civil authority in the United States, surely the issue deserves *some* consideration, if the secular nature of government authority, and the avoidance of “capture” by any particular religion or church, is of importance to American democracy.

All of which is to say that a fairer and more nuanced reading of American history and contemporary circumstances would substantially undermine claims that

American democracy owes its existence to the relative homogeneity of its ethno-linguistic and religious traditions and the primacy of Anglo-Protestantism in shaping them.

Change and the American Creed

Huntington’s understanding of the origins and dimensions of American national identity and the American Creed has one glaring omission. Several historians and scholars of American political development place the capacity for change and especially the centrality of self-critique as fundamental to the uniqueness of the American Creed. In fact, it may be that both self-critique and the capacity for change have been more fundamental to the longevity of the American republic than has the maintenance of Anglo-Protestant cultural domination.

Though we take issue with many facets of his argument, we return to Schlesinger for a succinct and insightful characterization of this aspect of the American Creed, minimized by Huntington. In writing his critique of multiculturalists and multiculturalism, Schlesinger notes that a distinction of much Western thought is that it produced the ideas that challenged its own practices and American society has been better for those challenges. He states that

the crimes of the West have produced their own antidotes. They have provoked great movements to end slavery, to raise the status of women, to abolish torture, to combat racism, to defend freedom of inquiry and expression, to advance personal liberty and human rights.

Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source—the *unique* source—of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom that constitute our most precious legacy and to which most of the world today aspires.²³

Schlesinger’s characterization of this aspect of the American Creed, and especially the capacity of its precepts and related practices to accommodate change, is in direct contradiction to a characterization of the Creed as unchanging, that is, surprisingly static and permanently rooted in only one set of cultural traditions. Even before his arguments in this most recent book, Huntington has long seen the path of American political development as rooted in its first principles, that is, fixed at its core with only incremental changes brought to the periphery. Morone characterizes Huntington’s view as follows: “American political history reads like the inexorable (although bumpy) march of liberal democracy.”²⁴

As we have noted, major changes have occurred as to who was included as full and participating citizens in American society. Changes such as the elimination of the property requirement to vote, the abolition of slavery, the passage of the constitutional amendment allowing women to vote, the extension of civil rights (as uneven as that extension has been and continues to be) to African Americans and others, and the historical decline of anti-Semitism and

anti-Catholicism, clearly demonstrate, we think, the capacity for American society to change within the American Creed. It seems both unnecessarily nostalgic and inaccurate to insist that all changes, no matter how sweeping, were both modest in their overall effect and rooted in the first principles, as they are imagined.

Moreover, the glacial pace at which these and other changes occurred can even be interpreted as among the primary factors allowing change to occur at all. That is, gradual change, inconsistent change, change that moves only with important subsets of public opinion, is change nonetheless. This different reading of American history removes the hyper-urgency of contemporary demographic shifts that characterize anti-immigration alarms. It may be, in fact, that there is little urgency at all.

Multiculturalism, immigration, and internationalism have always been part of American society. Their capacity to present new challenges to past practices deriving from the American Creed, including cultural practices in Huntington's sense, may be more transforming than threatening. If one looks to history as a guide, such challenges have *never* led to the downfall of the republic. It may even have strengthened the society.

In summary, arguments about the immutability of core American identity, the necessity and unerringly positive contribution of Anglo-Protestant culture to American national life and success, and the omission of any discussion of the capacity of the American Creed to accommodate major change, all represent a very limited reading of American history. A reading that acknowledges the detrimental effects of cultural hegemony, and one that considers the historical tradition of a capacity to accommodate change, provides a more comprehensive foundation upon which to consider contemporary challenges to American national identity.

Whither Anglo-Protestant Agency?

Whether or not immigration changes the nature and identity of a people is the product of the collective decisions of two sets of actors—both the immigrants and those in the receiving society. In this instance, determining whether the outcome is assimilation or societal fracturing depends both on whether the Latino migrants are willing to adapt themselves to their new surroundings, *and* whether Anglo-Protestant society stands ready to accept them. Curiously, however, when reflecting on the alleged dangers to national identity posed by immigrants, there is a peculiar tendency by writers in this line of thought to minimize, or even entirely overlook, the role Anglo-Protestant leaders and citizens have played in the creation of distinct identities, cultural practices, and segregated communities among subsets of the population, the very circumstances Huntington suggests will adversely impact American national identity and adherence to the American Creed.

An example will be useful. In discussing the components of our national identity, Huntington identifies Indians and Puerto Ricans as emblematic of peoples absorbed into the political boundaries of the U.S. without being absorbed into the national identity. He describes them as being “*in* but not fully *of* the American republic,”²⁵ a status he suggests that “is reflected in the arrangements *negotiated* with them for reservations and tribal government, on the one hand, and commonwealth status, on the other.”²⁶

To which *negotiations* is Huntington referring? Setting aside the tragic history of the treatment of the indigenous population at the hands of the Anglo-Protestants, Puerto Rico's status under American sovereignty but external to its society is one that was imposed on it through conquest, in the Spanish-American War, and acts of Congress, particularly the Jones Act of March 1917.²⁷ Puerto Ricans, themselves, had little say in these “negotiations.” So to the extent that Puerto Rico represents a sub-national community not fully incorporated into national life, one has to examine the choices of the Anglo-Protestants to understand the historical causes.

This is just one example of a larger pattern, that is, the frequent portrayal of Anglo-Protestants as merely witnesses to—or at worst, facilitators of—the unraveling of our national identity. In another, Huntington discusses, at length and with some admiration, the Americanization campaigns of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁸ Moreover, he holds out the negative example of Germany and its Turkish immigrant community, where the receiving nation acts to continue the formal exclusion of its new residents, even generations after the date of first migration. But the apparent lessons to be drawn from these examples do not appear to apply, in Huntington's thinking, to contemporary circumstances. These Americanization campaigns may, or may not, have had the desired effect at the time. But if we are going to wax nostalgic for them, as Huntington appears to do, then we should at least inquire into the reasons for their absence today.

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the phenomena of English-only initiatives, often offered as evidence that the broader American public is resisting pressure to dilute the national identity. None of these pieces of legislation or citizen initiatives have ever included efforts to teach immigrants English. They include no money for English language instruction, no opening of public schools for nighttime courses in English and American civics, indeed none of the efforts reminiscent of the Americanization campaigns in the earlier era. Though some might wish to blame the multiculturalists for the “disuniting” of this society, no such argument can be made here, as the origins and provisions of English-only legislation are firmly located on the right of the American political spectrum. Absent any meaningful effort to create opportunities for acculturation and language acquisition, it is difficult to

view these measures as anything but symbolic, anti-immigrant temper tantrums rather than serious reaffirmations of American cultural identity.

Likewise, the origin of the public school system in the U.S. was related to a conscious attempt at “Americanizing” immigrant children. Huntington and others point to the high concentrations of Hispanic children in the nation’s largest school systems and the high drop-out rates. Nowhere in this line of criticism, however, is there a serious consideration of the state of public schools in the United States today and how they might affect immigrant incorporation—particularly the impact of chronic under-funding, the ideological motives behind school choice and voucher programs, or the impact of white flight on these schools. Each, we suggest, has served to undermine the schools’ historic role in acculturation and immigrant incorporation. So while the importance of public schools in the nineteenth century as an agent for assimilation is celebrated by those sounding the anti-immigrant alarm, their characteristics today are usually unexamined.

If Mexican immigration is to be feared for both its volume and its ongoing nature, which allegedly presents a challenge to national identity, it is urgent then that we pay due attention to its causes, which are well understood. The contemporary political science and economics literatures speak of the forces of “push and pull.”²⁹ Opponents of immigration focus on the former to the complete neglect of the latter, discussing the poor performance of the Mexican economy and the inherent limitations it imposes on economic opportunity for Mexico’s citizens, but nothing of the long-standing economic forces and choices of employers in the U.S. that attract immigrant labor.

The pro-immigration political forces in this country historically were the owners of capital interested in reducing labor costs. The vast majority of immigrants today, legal and illegal, work for non-immigrant employers. There are countless economic beneficiaries of immigrant labor today, including white homeowners who employ domestic and landscaping help, farmers utilizing migrant farm labor, small business owners, construction contractors, and large industrial conglomerates. The legal and regulatory environment actually serves as an incentive for employers to hire illegals. Undocumented laborers are denied even the most basic forms of workplace protection and are beyond the reach of guarantees facilitating organized labor, thanks to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Hoffman Plastics v. NLRB*,³⁰ making them a particularly attractive category of employee. In short, immigration is attractive to the potential migrant in large measure because of plentiful jobs and a preference for immigrant—and even undocumented—labor among some employers.

Finally, it is hypocrisy to bemoan the persistence of ethnic neighborhoods and residential segregation without acknowledging that such segregation is only possible in

association with the companion phenomenon of “white flight.” In the end, we cannot dispute that large-scale immigration has, in fact, raised a variety of important issues including language acquisition, undocumented migration, segregation, public education, assimilation, or many other challenges. We suggest, however, that we are remiss if we fail to assess honestly the role played by the dominant (read “Anglo-Protestant”) forces in American society who wield tremendous power in shaping these and other outcomes.

Are Latinos Doing It Wrong?

With Anglos curiously missing from the story of how current circumstances came to pass, we are left then with only Latinos and their behavior at issue in these arguments. We are told that Latinos are not assimilating. Rather, the story goes, Mexican and other Latinos immigrants are naturalizing at extremely low rates, these immigrants and native-born Latinos, especially Mexican Americans, maintain their mother tongue even for generations, concentrate in particular regions and neighborhoods, and perhaps are even strategizing to take over sections of the U.S. by building upon historical claims to the Southwest. As a consequence of these bad choices and the resulting failure to take substantial advantage of the opportunities provided by American society, Latinos, and especially Mexican Americans, experience economic deprivation, educational under-achievement, and persisting social isolation.

Economic and social outcomes of marginalized groups are not useful indicators of the group’s adherence to values and norms. Such a claim assumes that the groups possess an unexpected amount of power to negotiate their place within contemporary American society, an assumption at odds with the prevailing research and common understanding. Unlike some previous research that characterized Mexicans and Mexican Americans as largely subservient and fatalistic, this argument perceives Latinos as having an overwhelming sense of agency. That is, they are largely assumed to be in control of their destiny in the U.S.

Such an understanding completely discounts the many barriers Latinos have historically faced in attaining upward mobility in the U.S. There is the history of statutory discrimination against people of Mexican origin in Texas and California, the many ways in which Mexicans and Mexican Americans have always been part of an exploited class of laborers in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and today’s service industries, and the complex way that immigration and racialization have always reinforced one another to deny opportunities to Mexicans and Mexican Americans in sections of the Southwest.³¹

This is not to say that Latinos have not attempted to control their destiny. Some Mexican American organizations, since at least 1929 and the founding of LULAC,³² have advocated the path of full integration into American

society on its own terms, including learning English, becoming participating American citizens, and in this way proving one's worthiness to be respected and treated equally in American society.³³ Choices and opportunities available to Latinos, however, have been constrained by decisions of the powerful, public and private, who have chosen to exclude, rather than include, Latinos and their interests as an integral part of American society, as they have envisioned it.

The traditional practices of disenfranchisement and vote dilution have always limited the capacity of many Latinos to become fully integrated within American political institutions.³⁴ This did not begin to change substantially until 1975 and the extension of the Voting Rights Act.³⁵ According to the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), in 2002 there were 4,464 Latinos serving in elective office. Of these 36 percent held office at the school board level and another 34 percent served at the municipal level. One can certainly see this as a sign of the further "Hispanization" of American society. It is not difficult to see it *also* as a sign of ultimate, and growing political integration, i.e., the acceptance of the responsibilities of public policy-making in the most mainstream of institutions. One need not look too far to find compelling evidence of Latinos choosing to become full participants in American society.

How Should America Respond to These Challenges to Its American Identity?

It seems odd that the only prescription provided by Huntington as to how Americans should respond to his described challenges to American national identity is to look to our past and somehow reify our country's culture as English-speaking, Anglo, and Protestant. This is a clearly nationalist, in Huntington's terms, response. And, we think, the one his analysis pushes us to make. It seems, however, that this response is fundamentally disempowering to all Americans. It requires little creativity; we simply look to the past to know who we are. It requires no intellectual or personal growth, although it may require a recommitment to a renewed sense of Protestantism. Huntington is very clear in saying that a response that is largely based on a reflection of the principles of the American Creed including "liberty, equality, democracy, civil rights, nondiscrimination, [and the] rule of law" is insufficient.³⁶ It seems that cultural homogeneity, of the Anglo Protestant kind, is the only way to begin to forge an appropriate response to these current challenges

Again, Schlesinger is instructive for an alternative view. Building on the thought of Croly (1909), he argues that

the American democratic faith . . . is an ever-evolving philosophy, fulfilling its ideals through debate, self-criticism, protest, disrespect, and irreverence; a tradition in which all have rights of

heterodoxy and opportunities for self-assertion. The Creed has been the means by which Americans have haltingly but persistently narrowed the gap between performance and principle. It is what all Americans should learn, because it is what binds all Americans together.³⁷

Unlike Huntington, Schlesinger looks to find solutions in political competition and compromise, and not so much on an imagined past. It may be that Huntington is simply pushing us to this point of national discourse as well. He does say that "the choices Americans make will shape their future as a nation and the future of the world".³⁸ His analysis, however, suggests that the range of choices must, of necessity, begin with a reification of and recommitment to our nation's Anglo-Protestant cultural origins.

Smith provides an insightful discussion of the challenges to current thinking about the relationship between national identity and political development that is also grounded in political competition and compromise, and especially the choices made by political leaders and voters.³⁹ However, he goes beyond Schlesinger in arguing that commitment to civic ideals is unlikely to be sufficient to hold the nation together during times of perceived challenges to traditional understandings of its civic identity. His interpretation of the way these limits are apparent in the writings of scholars promoting democratic cultural pluralism, liberal pluralism, and multicultural liberal citizenship lies in the way they do not address the need of all nations to have a strong, consensus-driven commitment to a "shared [national] civic identity and purposes"⁴⁰. What is significant in Smith's discussion of how this identity and purposes can be attained is that they are rooted in continuous contestation, especially when that contestation is driven by what he terms "rational or reflective liberty".⁴¹

We agree with Smith, in part with Schlesinger, and with others that a more informed starting point for developing a strategy for how America should deal with perceived challenges to its traditional American identity is an honest read of American history. Such a reading would acknowledge that America's undoubted Anglo-Protestant origins were the source of the promise of American democracy for some, but its active denial to other substantial segments of the American population, throughout much of our national development. However, it would also recognize that out of political necessity, a desire to maintain social control, or a genuine commitment to make more inclusive that promise of American democracy, those same leaders and institutions have at times, however grudgingly, expanded the number of immigrant-derived and native-born ethnic-racial groups included as contributing members of American society, thus forging changes in both American national identity and the American creed.

What this honest reading also tells us is that expansions in liberty and opportunity in the United States for groups with histories of statutory exclusion have rarely come during times of nationalistic reifications of our

nation's Anglo-Protestant origins. It would be unfortunate if Huntington's recent work were to serve to further marginalize segments of America's current population, especially more recent immigrants, who are among the most vulnerable in our society. Questions of nationhood and national identity are of their nature complex, value-laden, and contested. It is important, nonetheless, that they be raised in national discourse. It is perhaps even more important that scholars avail themselves of a full range of historical and contemporary evidence before reaching conclusions of threat, potential threat, and crisis in national identity. Fully informed discourse is, we think, more likely to help the nation meet the challenges of complexity, values, and contestation that considerations of national identity demand. It is much more likely to help the nation meet the challenges of demographic change in an increasingly interdependent world than are calls for a nation to return to a more simple, and more imagined, past.

Notes

- 1 "Latino" here is a category of self-identification for persons living in the United States who are descended from, or themselves are, migrants from any of the Spanish-speaking nations of the Americas.
- 2 It is worth noting that the Census Bureau separates the concept of race from the question of whether the resident identifies as Hispanic or Latino. As a consequence, self-identified Latinos can be of any race, according to the census. African Americans were estimated at 12.7 percent of the national population in 2002.
- 3 We well recognize that such projections are based on assumptions of continuing immigration rates, birth rates, and death rates. We make no claim about the precise social or political relevance of ethnic identity in the future.
- 4 Franklin 1961, 225–234.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 234, italics original.
- 6 St. John de Crèvecoeur 1981, 69–70, italics original.
- 7 Schlesinger 1991, 15.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 9 Smith 1997, 4–7. In addition to immigrant groups, Smith's analysis focuses on white males, white women, African Americans, and native peoples.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 See Smith 1997 for the most comprehensive discussion of the variation in these patterns of inclusion and exclusion for the colonial period through 1920. See Stephen Steinberg (1981) for a linkage to these varying patterns that relates national receptivity to groups based upon their conditions of initial incorporation to the U.S.
- 13 Huntington 2004, 159.
- 14 We well acknowledge that the specific origins and political development in each of these countries varies. We are suggesting, however, that the experiences of these countries shows that there is no inherent contradiction between ethno-cultural and linguistic diversity and viable national government.
- 15 Abizadeh 2002.
- 16 Morone 1996.
- 17 Huntington 1981, Greenstone 1986, Thelen and Hoxie 1994.
- 18 Morone 1996, 429
- 19 Morone 1996; Smith 1997.
- 20 Elazar 1966, 1984, 1994; Grabb 1979; Janowitz and Marvick 1953; Lipset 1959.
- 21 Hero and Tolbert 1996; Hero 1998.
- 22 Huntington 2004, 83.
- 23 Schlesinger 1991 127.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 426.
- 25 Huntington 2004, 45, emphasis original.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 45–46, emphasis added.
- 27 The Jones Act established Puerto Rico as a territory of the U.S., granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, and provided for the establishment of local government on a U.S. model. Puerto Rican independence, unlike Cuban and, eventually, Filipino independence, was never seriously considered, despite the existence of independence movements in Puerto Rico, under Spanish rule, since the 1870s.
- 28 Huntington 2004, 131–135.
- 29 E.g., Andreas 1998, Avery 1998; Borjas 1994; DeSipio and de la Garza 1998; Greenwood and McDowell 1991; Money 1997; and Pachon and DeSipio 1994, among countless others.
- 30 *Hoffman Plastic Compounds, Inc. v. National Labor Relations Board* 2002.
- 31 Montejano 1987; Camarillo 1979; Barrera 1979; Gutiérrez 1995.
- 32 League of United Latin American Citizens.
- 33 Márquez 1993.
- 34 Fraga et al. 1986; 1988.
- 35 Fraga et al. 1992.
- 36 Huntington 2004, 338.
- 37 Croly 1909; Schlesinger 1991, 136.
- 38 Huntington 2004, 366.
- 39 Smith 1997, 470–506.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 1997, 496.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 502.

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