

Is this the end of the American Creed?

John Roskam reviews
Who are We? The Challenges to the America's National Identity
 By Samuel P. Huntington
 (Simon & Schuster, 2005, 428 pages)

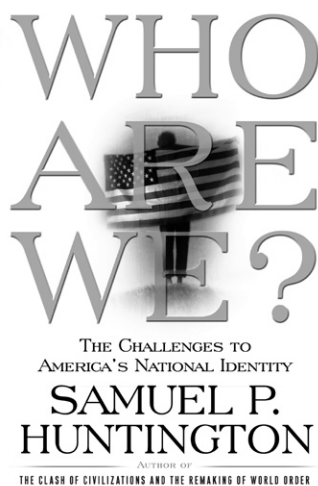
At the presidential inauguration of John Kennedy in 1961, Robert Frost recited a poem he wrote about the 'heroic deeds' of the 'glorious' founding fathers of America. In 1993, at Bill Clinton's inauguration there was also poetry. Maya Angelou recited her own poem that didn't once use the words 'America' or 'American'. Instead she listed 27 racial, religious, tribal and ethnic groups, and she spoke of the fear that her country might be 'yoked eternally to brutishness'.

According to the American political scientist Samuel Huntington, such a difference reflects something more than the contrasting approaches of Kennedy and Clinton. To Huntington, it represents what is happening not just to America, but to the idea of America.

Who are we? has three main claims. The first is that the American sense of national identity is disappearing, and is being replaced by a range of sub-national and ethnic identities. Although the events of September 11 and the threat of terrorism certainly re-ignited a national 'spirit', in the long-term, such a spirit is set to decline.

Second, he argues that American identity is the outcome of a

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unique Anglo-Protestant culture, which includes the English language, Christianity, the rule of law, human rights based around a strong concept of the individual, and a strong work ethic—such elements often being called the 'American Creed'.

And, third, according to Huntington, this Anglo-Protestant culture of America is gradually being replaced by an Hispanic culture.

Huntington catalogues the evidence for the undermining of American culture and he analyses the methods by which it has been brought about. Everything from the incidence of US flags being flown in the aftermath of 9/11 to church attendance among different ethnic groups is analysed. (It was reported that, on the day of the terrorist attacks in September 2001, Wal-Mart in the United States sold 116,000 flags, and on the following day it sold a quarter of a million flags. On September 11 a year earlier, Wal-Mart had sold 6,400 flags, and on the next day 10,000.)

The policy objective of the book is absolutely clear. He believes that 'Americans should recommit themselves to the Anglo-Protestant culture, traditions, and values ... that have

been the source of their liberty, unity, power, prosperity, and moral leadership as a force for good in the world'. Huntington himself says that he's a 'patriot' and a 'scholar', and provides us a useful way to examine his arguments.

His first and second claims are based on scholarship. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, American society was formed as the product of the particular attitudes of its settlers. The early settlers had the opportunity to establish a new political culture as they faced a future without one of the key defining characteristics of the society they left behind in Europe—class. Without a class-based hierarchy, those who arrived in the New World could focus their allegiances on the nation as a whole. Over time, this 'American Creed' came to be the allegiance of the settlers. To Huntington it is not an exaggeration to speak of 'Americanism' as an ideology, in much the same way that socialism or communism is an ideology. In the phrase of GK Chesterton, America is 'a nation with the soul of a church'. All citizens, regardless of race or background subscribed to the Creed. Unlike Europe, which in the nineteenth century had many ideologies, America had just one.

The Creed was dominant in America until the 1960s, having peaked during World War Two. It was in the 1960s that America began to be 'deconstructed' as the traditional idea of the 'melting pot' was replaced by the concept of the nation as a 'tossed salad' of different identities. The responsibility for this is placed at the feet of 'institutional elites' who Huntington lists as 'bureaucrats, judges, and educators'. 'These efforts by a nation's leaders to deconstruct the nation they governed were, quite possibly, without



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precedent in human history.' He suggests that what happened was not the product of a decision of the American people as a whole, but instead was the outcome of a deliberate strategy of those institutional elites.

He identifies various reasons for the deconstruction of the American identity. At one level, as America gained global dominance, the fear of attack that bound the country together was weakened, thus providing more opportunity for groups to pursue their own interests. There was also the influence of electoral calculations which had politicians manipulating ethnic interests to gain votes. Government officials applied the widest possible interpretation to anti-discrimination legislation to expand their own budgets and their own power. In universities and in the media, the 'cults of multiculturalism and diversity took the place of left-wing, socialist, and working-class ideologies and sympathies'.

Huntingdon's third claim, about 'Hispanic culture' and its relationship to American values, is obviously controversial. But it is here that he writes not as a scholar but as a patriot—and his arguments suffer for it.

He argues that there are profound and irreconcilable differences between the attitudes of Americans and those of Mexicans, who are those carrying the Hispanic culture into the United States. America has a Protestant culture deriving from Martin Luther, while Mexico has a Spanish-Indian 'Catholic' culture. The manifestation of this is captured in three Mexican sayings: *Ahi se va* ('Who cares? That is good

enough'); *Manana se lo tengo* ('Tomorrow it will be ready'); and *El vale madrismo* ('Nothing is really worthwhile'). By contrast, the standard America attitude is centred on a Protestant work ethic and the idea that hard work is almost an end in itself. As support for his position, Huntingdon draws on figures showing higher levels of poverty rates and an increased likelihood of school failure among the Hispanic community, compared with America as a whole.

But Huntingdon here is on much less sure a footing. In last year's *The Right Nation—Why America is Different*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge of *The Economist* convincingly drew a conclusion that is nearly the exact opposite. So, for example, Huntingdon writes that 'Mexican immigrants have had low self-employment or entrepreneurship', while in *The Right Nation* there is an extended discussion about the propensity of Latinos to be 'hard-working, God-fearing, family-oriented and upwardly-mobile', and their 'marked propensity to start their own business and buy their own homes'.

So what is the reader ultimately to make of *Who are we?* given that so

much of it relies on information from which conclusions can be drawn that clearly contradict his thesis? Aspects of his work are thought-provoking, but at times he fails to answer the key question: 'so what?' Even if America is going the way that he suggests, what are the consequences that follow? It is this that is missing from his 400-page book. The dissolution of English as a common language across the country, for example, has many effects, but remains undiscussed in the book.

Likewise the fact that the Ten Commandments can't be displayed in public buildings in America might be regrettable, but what are the consequences? Will the United States therefore be less willing to intervene militarily around the world? Will recruiting for the armed forces decline? Will the US therefore decline as an economic superpower?

As in *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntingdon displays in *Who are we?* his gift for asking important questions. His questions are easy to understand, but the answers he gives are impossible to prove right or wrong.

The extent to which such a discussion about America is relevant to the Australian situation is unclear. It certainly is the case that, just as in the United States, in Australia there are those who preach a 'cosmopolitanism' as a replacement for whatever we believe to be an Australian identity. Perhaps the key difference between America and Australia on issues of culture and identity is that in the United States it is possible to define what the 'American creed' is (even if that creed is changing). In an Australian context, before we concern ourselves with whether our 'Australian creed' is disappearing, we'd have to ask whether there is such a thing as an 'Australian creed' in the first place.

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