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# The Perils of American Tribalism

## THE DISUNITING OF AMERICA Reflections on a Multicultural Society

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.  
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By Amitai Etzioni

**W**ILL THE NEXT president of the United States be sworn in on a Koran, Bible, totem pole, in Spanish, Korean and black English, by a bisexual minister—to symbolize the “multicultural” society we are urged to become? Will the world-wide ethnic upheaval—that dismembers Yugoslavia, strains the U.S.S.R., endangers Canada and many other societies—also tribalize America? Will it turn us into a bunch of hostile squabbling nationalities? This is where we are headed, if we yield further to the advocates of “multiculturalism,” argues the eminent historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in this elegantly written essay.

Schlesinger draws heavily on what is hap-

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pening in universities and public schools, especially in the field in which he is most expert, the writing of history. Here he finds, like others before him, that attempts to correct the dominance of white European material go beyond adding works about other cultures and giving credit where it is due to black, Asian and other contributions. He reports that in some courses European material is largely dismissed and denigrated, that vastly exaggerated and often outright false claims are made for black influence on the sources of Western civilization, and that history is used for therapeutic purposes, to build up racial pride, never mind the facts. (One example: the claim that the ancient Egyptians deeply influenced ancient Greek culture, and that Egyptians in turn were black.) Moreover, he finds that antagonistic courses and self-ghettoization by various groups on campuses lead to mutual hatred and paranoia. (Schlesinger cites a report that at Oberlin, for example, students segregate into Jewish, Asian, Hispanic, African, foreign, and other houses with little interaction among them.)

The main import of this timely book is that it raises the issue to the societal level. As Schlesinger sees it, the American ideal was that of a melting pot, which refused to

recognize group membership, in which immigrants sought to become Americanized as individuals. He cites findings by sociologist Richard Alba that at least in Albany, N.Y., Americans from many origins are still quickly losing their ethnic identity, even in matters of cuisine. He recognizes, being extraordinarily judicious throughout, that black Americans have had a much more difficult path to hoe than various white immigrant groups. (They, he writes, faced not snobbery but racism.) However, he strongly believes the melting-pot model is the only way to save the American society and he closes his book with the hope that it will be followed. Indeed, he warns, unless we assimilate existing groups better, we shall soon find it difficult to absorb additional immigrants.

**S**CHLESINGER is committed to the notion of a melting pot because the only alternative he sees is the Balkanization of America. A third option, which he mentions but does not explore, is the view that some social matters constitute national bonds that must embrace one and all because they provide the framework that keeps the differences among the various groups from wrecking the union. A

shared language, for instance. At the same time one may allow, even encourage, separate group identities in other areas, say, in cultural expressions such as music and dance or religious rituals. Mutual respect and tolerance among diverse groups is not inconceivable, as Switzerland suggests. Nor does Schlesinger delve into the question whether group affiliations help or hinder minorities in their quest to gain their fair share of the American pie.

Schlesinger reaches his highest eloquence when he discusses the content of the American heritage to which all should subscribe, a point with which one may agree, whether one favors the melting pot or pluralism-within-unity. He stresses that our heritage is European. Commitment to democracy, individual rights and mutual tolerance are Western ideals that are at the core of the American creed. These, he reminds us, are not readily found in other civilizations. Those who disagree cannot respond to this thesis merely by pointing to the injustices done to their group; they need to spell out their conception of what a rainbow society would look like, what place Europeans would have in it, and how they would ensure values dear to most Americans whatever their background. ■