



Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity (Paperback)

by [Samuel P. Huntington](#)

Editorial Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

In his seminal *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington anticipated the United States' battle with militant Islam. Here he turns his laser on America-or, rather, America as he thinks it ought to be. Despite its clinical tone, this book is an aggressive polemic whose central argument-that America, at heart, has been and in many ways should remain a Christian, Anglocentric country-wouldn't be out of place on many a conservative radio station. The author seeks at length to prove that the American Creed, which he defines

as a Protestant-influenced ideology modeled on the British system, was the founders' original intent and remains America's best course. He then turns to many of the usual subjects-the imperiled primacy of English, the dangers of immigration and multiculturalism-to make his case. He argues that a growing divide between the patriotic working class and "denationalized elites" will lead to internal fissures. Where those findings can lead is another question. For instance, he predicts a movement of white nativism. This movement while not "advocating white racist supremacy" would still believe that the "mixing of races and hence culture is the road to national degeneration." The book is also marred by a number of self-contradictions; for example, Huntington draws heavily on the founders to make a nationalist case even as he acknowledges that notions of Americanism (as opposed to allegiances to individual states) became popular only after the Civil War. Exhaustively researched and occasionally inspired, this polemic remains more often filled with colorless and ineffectual writing that will provide evidence for the converted but do little to persuade the doubters.

Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --*This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.*

From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com

As at so many other critical junctures in recent history -- during the Vietnam War, at the height of the soul-searching that followed, as the Cold War drew to a close -- Samuel P. Huntington has written a book that poses some of the most critical questions facing our nation. The epochal change before us now is globalization, and Huntington is as penetrating as ever in his assessment of the challenges it creates -- challenges, he shrewdly sees, that go far beyond the economic. What distinguishes America, or any nation for that matter, in a shrinking world where international frontiers mean less and less? How can a people already preoccupied with ethnic identity absorb and acculturate the millions of immigrants being driven to our shores by global economics? And how in the long run will America cohere if everyone feels they belong to a minority?

Who Are We? tackles these questions with passionate intensity. As Huntington argues, nations "come and go," and a strong sense of "national consciousness" is surely critical to America's success or failure. It's all the more disappointing, then, that *Who Are We?* slips far too often into paranoid threat-mongering instead of honestly weighing the quandaries of the newly globalizing American nation. And its proposed solution for the United States -- an insular, "Anglo-Protestant" cultural fortress -- seems a

poor road map indeed for navigating the new world ahead.

The strongest part of the book is its premise: that nationality matters -- and that, despite the universalism central to our values, America is different from other countries. In Huntington's view, this distinctiveness is based in "culture," by which he means neither Walt Whitman nor MTV, but rather a shared sense of community and common mores, including the premium we put on individualism, the work ethic, the gospel of success and an often crusading moralism. One can quarrel with some of the elements he thinks are central -- most important, a single, shared religion -- but plainly Huntington is on to something. Hard as it may be for us to define what it means to be American, people the world over know it when they see it, and we lose touch with it at our peril.

Where Huntington goes wrong, first of all, is in diagnosing the threats to this culture. Concerned that many Americans do not grasp the urgency of the issue, he piles on chapter after anxious chapter documenting potential dangers. Some of his points are well taken, though familiar enough: alarums about affirmative action, bilingual education, dual citizenship and the like. The problem even here, where he is on most solid ground, is that Huntington can't seem to see anything but bad news -- can't grasp, for example, how multiculturalism has ebbed since Sept. 11, or the way some apparently disturbing trends like dual citizenship are more symbolic than real and paradoxically can boost national cohesion, in this case by easing the way for many immigrants to become American citizens. Worse still, in other instances, convinced by his own conjecture that a trend could pose a threat, Huntington badly distorts the evidence or masks it with overheated speculation.

The most misleading chapters are those that deal with Hispanic immigrants. In Huntington's nightmare vision, we are headed for a "bilingual, bicultural society," where Latinos take over some states, Anglos retreat to others, most of our big cities look like the barrios of Los Angeles and U.S. foreign policy is dictated in Mexico City. Huntington is not wrong that today's Latino influx differs in many ways from previous immigrant waves: the sheer number coming from a single non-English speaking region, for example, and the way modern communications make it easier to maintain ties to the Old Country. But existing evidence about Hispanic assimilation simply does not support his apocalyptic fears -- as he himself often lets on in the fine print under an inflammatory topic sentence. Newly arrived Latinos are among the most patriotic Americans -- enlisting, for instance, in record numbers and now dying bravely in Iraq. For all the fulminations of a few angry activists, there is no evidence that the majority harbor irredentist designs on the Southwest or do not want their children to become full Americans. Study after study shows that virtually everyone in the second generation grows up proficient in English, and by the third generation, two-thirds speak only English.

But arguably even more wrong-headed is the prescriptive half of the book: a long, fervent historically based case that America is inherently an Anglo-Protestant nation and that we cannot hope to flourish unless we embrace that definition. Huntington argues convincingly -- and who can doubt? -- that the soil in which America's distinctive culture first took root was both English and dissenting. The earliest settlers' values still do much to color ours, and the "American Creed" that unites us politically -- our belief in freedom, tolerance, equal opportunity, the rule of law and the like -- is plainly a product of the British Enlightenment. But to say that our national character is Anglo-Protestant is to mistake origins for essence.

Huntington's selective history leaves out the critical ways in which early Americans revised and repudiated their Anglo inheritance -- most fundamentally with the separation of church and state and their rejection of the class-based hierarchies that bind British society. The result was a radically new nation based on a universalist conception of man and open to anyone -- including, over time, tens of millions of non-Anglo immigrants. Despite persistent fears much like those Huntington voices today,

these newcomers and their children invariably became Americans. The very act of living in a free, democratic society ensures this outcome by rewarding the habits of the heart -- the quick pursuit of opportunity, self-sufficiency, the work ethic and the like -- that Huntington identifies as American culture. True, each successive wave added a distinctive flavor to the mix: new food, new music, new ways of approaching family, fun and even politics. But the newcomers made little dent in the essential core of what it means to be American: Their sectarian, communal identities have always given way to tolerant individualism, for example, and even those from the most authoritarian societies have eventually embraced our egalitarianism. Still, to claim that this core remains Anglo-Protestant only distorts its distinctiveness. It is also to exaggerate the challenges that immigration and ethnicity pose.

In the end, what's most disturbing about *Who Are We?* is its lack of confidence in the power of American identity. It's as if Huntington can't believe that our tolerant, universalist spirit could possibly stand up to an old-fashioned, ethnic nationalism of the kind that, say, today's Mexican immigrants arrive with. And, as a result, he needs to define our diffuse, big-tent essence down to the narrow orthodoxies of a more easily grasped culture, like Anglo-Protestantism. Of course, he's entitled to his fears and his pessimism, but it's a sorry approach for a self-styled "patriot" proposing to chart America's way into the global future.

Reviewed by Tamar Jacoby