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Multiculturalism v. Melting Pot

A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.

--Melting-Pot, 1908, by Israel Zangwill, playwright

It has been referred to as one of the more remarkable presidential speeches of modern times. Even political foes of President George W. Bush praised the focus and the clarity of the message he presented to a joint session of Congress on September 20th. Calling for a global war against international terrorism, the president said, “*This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.*”

Speaking directly to Muslims, President Bush said of Islam, “Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah.” But, while the president’s acknowledgment of *Allah* may have played well in Cairo and Istanbul, Muslims are not going to fall on their swords in the name of progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.

The term *progress*, for instance, holds little meaning for people in the Middle East other than oil sheiks, where for generations, little has changed. And, much of what is regarded as progress in the West, is usually seen by Islamic fundamentalists as decadence. Especially scorned by Muslims, was the progress called for by former President Clinton in the arena of international human rights. Remembered are the American delegations to UN conferences championing abortion rights, women’s rights, and legitimizing prostitution.

Terms like tolerance and freedom, are anathema to Islamic rulers as well, whether radical Shiites or the more moderate Sunnis. During the 1991 Gulf War, American expeditionary forces experienced first-hand, Islam’s zero-tolerance policy for even the most incidental public expressions of Christianity such as wearing a cross or carrying a Bible.

And, *pluralism*, as democratic as it sounds, is probably an equal opportunity angst in both the East and the West. Webster says pluralism is “The existence within a nation or society of groups distinctive in ethnic origin, cultural patterns, religion, or the like. . . a policy of favoring the preservation of such groups within a given nation or society...”

Years ago, philosopher Horace Kallen, a “Jewish-American,” favored a policy of preserving distinctive groups in America. He scoffed at the popular notion that America was a great crucible for the nations. In 1915, he wrote an essay entitled “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot,” in which he argued that unlike freely chosen affiliations, the ethnic bond was both involuntary and immutable. Kallen insisted that while men may change their politics, and their religions, they cannot change their grandfathers.

Kallen saw the nation not as one people, but rather a federation or democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily through common institutions. He later called his

concept, “cultural pluralism.” He had no answer, however, when asked how ethnic separatism could be encouraged without weakening the original ideal of a single and united society. Critics warned that cultural pluralism would result in the Balkanization of America.

A missionary friend appointed to the war ravaged region formerly known as Yugoslavia, knows something of Balkanization. It is his observation that people of eastern Europe have a diminished national identity because of their emphasis on ethnicity. Blood feuds and generations of seeking revenge for past injustices, cause this people to look back and live in the past. Though long-standing ethnic rivalries may sometimes simmer, they are never assuaged. Americans, on the other hand, have been known as a forward looking people, optimistic about the future - expecting to make things better for their children and grandchildren.

In his book, The Disuniting of America, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. says, “At the beginning, America was seen as a severing of roots, a liberation from the stifling past, an entry into a new life, an interweaving of separate ethnic strands into a new national design.” He says the unstated national motto was “Never look back.” John Quincy Adams bluntly said, “They must cast off the European skin, never to resume it. They must look forward to their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors. . . .”

Schlesinger notes that George Washington had similar advise for immigrants. Washington said, “The bosom of America is open. . . to the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.” But, he warned, immigrants who nestled as groups in the national bosom, might retain the “Language, habits and principles (good or bad) which they bring with them.” Therefore, he urged them to settle as individuals, prepared for “intermixture with our people.” Then they would be “assimilated to our customs, measures and laws: in a word, soon become one people.”

British historian, James Bryce, author of The American Commonwealth (1888), marveled at what he experienced during his long stay in America. He wrote that he was struck by “the amazing solvent power which American institutions, habits, and ideas exercise upon newcomers of all races. . . quickly dissolving and assimilating the foreign bodies that are poured into her mass.”

On June 8, 1630, Governor John Winthrop, a Puritan preacher, drew up a document he called *A Model of Christian Charity*. It went a step further than the Mayflower Compact of the Pilgrims, by stating how and why a body politic gathered under God and governed by mutual consent would work. Winthrop urged:

We must hold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make one another's condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in this work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. . . For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill.

“And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one”
--John 17:22

Rick Forcier

Executive Director