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Purity is Danger: An Argument for Divisible Identities

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This article explores two very different, yet related, sets of reasons to help explain the absence of widespread identity-based communal violence in the United States. First, Americans can afford to treat identity situationally, and only recently have they begun to bump up against the outer limits of who it can be agreed the state should protect. Secondly, the government has proved increasingly vigilant in its response to separatist groups that pledge their primary allegiance to themselves rather than to the state, and who by doing so invite the use of force.

One of democracy's great strengths has to be its wide appeal to people of all backgrounds. Yet background can also subvert democracy within states and lead to violence under certain sets of conditions. For instance, in many of the places where democratization has been pushed, but extended families and other communal solidarities persist, there has been extensive bloodshed: in Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Bosnia – the list is long, while the rationale for how ethnic fissures can lead to ethnic violence seems clear.

Put most simply, people want to be represented by individuals who they know will look out for their interests, over whom they have some sort of leverage, and with whom they feel solidarity. Where such ties also carry moral weight – as they do among members of extended families, clans, tribes and churches, for instance – communal trust is already implied. In fact, it may be *immoral* to vote for anyone outside of the community so long as someone from within the community is running for office. This means that there may be far less choice for people in many societies about who and why they vote than we presume. Choicelessness, in certain instances, may even be said to *define* societies within states, so much so that sub-national groups then

win individuals' allegiance, loyalty and compliance away from the state.

A variety of conditions will produce choicelessness.[1] Either the state cannot be trusted to meet citizens' basic needs, or there has never been enough wealth to go around. Regardless, when citizens are haunted by a future they consider to be uncertain and insecure, they invariably fall back on institutions and individuals they know they can trust. In solvent states, government-sponsored social welfare safety nets tend to be wide, deep and inclusive enough to offer sufficient assistance. By contrast, where chronic insecurity emanates *from* the state, people have nowhere else to turn *but* to members of their family, clan, tribe or church. Meanwhile, the more people rely on others easily identifiable as kin (or kindred), the more definition, visibility and substance this lends groups and the more group membership appears to matter. The slide is short and slippery between group identities mattering and members of 'other' groups not mattering at all. Actually, neglecting non-members may represent a best-case scenario. Far worse is when people consider those outside their group to be competitors and rivals. Then, their very existence demands removal.

In 1991–92, members of powerful Somali clan-families neglected drought-stricken members of other clan-families. In 1994 Hutus related to Rwandan President Habyarimana's wife's family incited tens of thousands of other Hutus to pre-emptively murder Tutsi 'power-seekers' in a gambit to retain power themselves. Between 1992 and 1995, Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims committed atrocities in an effort to establish (or re-establish) strongholds where they would prevail socially, economically and politically. And these are but three recent cases of large-scale ethnic conflict. In each case dissolution has followed hard on the heels of government promises to be more inclusive.[2] Elsewhere, in places as far removed as the Congo, India and Indonesia[3] elections have also triggered communal violence.

So far, the United States has escaped this brand of deadly identity politics. How? And why does democracy work so effectively here, but cause so much strife elsewhere?

In this article I suggest two very different, yet related, sets of reasons to help explain the absence of widespread identity-based communal violence in the United States. First, Americans can afford to treat identity situationally, and only recently have they begun to bump up against the outer limits of who it can be agreed the state *should* protect.

Secondly, the government has proved increasingly vigilant in its response to separatist groups that pledge their primary allegiance to themselves rather than to the state, and by doing so invite the use of force.

A confluence of conditions

In the final years of the previous century, American democracy was said to be on trial,[4] full of discontent,[5] and in need of reinvention,[6] vigorous leadership[7] and even a new enemy.[8] The tone was clear: democracy is hurting. But is this democracy's fault? And what is American democracy anyway: a social system that creates people as Americans, or their creation subject to incremental but (in the end) substantive change?

More than 200 years after the establishment of the state, it may no longer be possible to say whether democracy emerges from or grants Americans the freedoms they consider Creedal. As Samuel Huntington notes, if Americans do not worship they at least privilege liberty, equality, constitutionalism, liberalism, limited government and private enterprise. And this, more than anything else, distinguishes them.

> In some societies, some people subscribe to many of these ideas and in other societies many people subscribe to some of these ideas. In no other society, however, are all of these ideas so widely adhered to by so many people as they are in the United States.[9]

However, there is more to American exceptionalism than her political ideas and institutions.[10] As Bellah makes clear, her civil religion is critical to national solidarity.[11] But not even this would be possible without her resource base, and the freedoms that come with room in which to manoeuvre and escape.[12] America could never have seemed such a promising 'promised land' without bounty and (apparent) emptiness. It certainly would not have attracted the numbers of indentured servants and impoverished early immigrants as it did. And likewise, it would not have supported them earning their way as eventual equals under the law. As Jack Greene describes the Thirteen Colonies, they were rankless, not classless: 'all free people occupied the same social status in respect to the law and enjoyed an equality of opportunity to strive for and earn respect'.[13]

Although national myths suggest that US independence was a direct result of the struggle for equality, fairer representation and more

republican (and local) governance, one cannot ignore the extent to which environmental givens also favoured liberty and certain 'rights'. In fact, some of the constitution's most basic guarantees may well amount to little more than ethnographic truths. For example, Americans already bore arms and assembled to protect and govern themselves long before the revolution. Other freedoms were likewise entrenched, with far too many religious sects and presses for a weak central government to be able to control. Or, to turn this around, there may have been no way for any eighteenth century government to rein back these liberties, as ingrained as they already were. Just spatially, the Thirteen Colonies were far too inchoate. But also, one generally finds that people will strive to remain independent yet equal according to their own laws wherever they are able to disperse, live off the land and escape one another's surveillance.

Significantly, up through (arguably) the 1930s individuals, families and even entire communities could find large stretches of unmonitored space into which to disappear. Attendant gaps in communications and transportation systems would have helped people remain socially and even economically disengaged. Citizens who chose to could not only subsist comfortably without government assistance, but they could likewise avoid government interference – a luxury which may be in the throes of finally vanishing.

Individuals and factions

In one sense, individuals continue to remain highly divisible. Throughout American history, rights have been fought for on the basis of our inalienable status as separable people, not *peoples*. Traditionally, whenever the Supreme Court (or a constitutional amendment) has reversed customary discrimination of a category of people (e.g. Blacks, women) the point has been to break individuals out of denigrated groups in order to reintegrate them into a broadened society.[14]

Thanks, too, to the intense fusion of democracy with capitalism, Americans have come to compete with one another in virtually all spheres: for jobs, for labour, for votes, for representation. Essentially, individuals serve as *the* political and economic unit of account. However, democratic and capitalist principles do not always mesh in practice.

While Americans may be enjoined legally not to discriminate against others for being members of this or that group, rampant economic competition ensures that judgements about who to hire, fire,

befriend, support and associate with are made constantly. The easiest way to make such choices is to pre-judge others based on (1) personal past experiences, and/or (2) the experiences of trusted friends, family members, mentors and others.

There may be no way around it: people constantly compare and categorize; nor does it seem difficult to map people's comfort zones. For everyone, there are people who they are (reflexively) alike, and there are people who they are not like, while clearly the more circumscribed their experiences, the closer-to-home are their choices about who to throw in with. Meanwhile, too, because the United States is a democracy, people *have* to group. Otherwise, their voices are drowned out as soon as those with whom they are in disagreement (or competition) begin to cluster. Thus, it is not just that there is a human penchant to categorize others; there is a political responsibility to group.

This, in turn, means that certain latent tensions persist and are likely always to be present. The challenge comes in preventing these from leading to permanent and/or divisive group-based fissures. One solution is never to allow groups themselves to become permanent. And notably, the founders designed a system which would ensure that this would not have to happen.

Realizing the extent to which voters would align themselves according to self-interest rather than disinterest, the founding fathers devised a system full of cross-cutting checks and balances. To address the issue of factions they built enough flexibility, redundancy, overlap and competition not only into government, but into its interstices, that new interest groups could always be accommodated, and individuals would always be tempted to join new groups. As Madison argues in *The Federalist Paper* #10, the more expansive the system, the more long-lived the union would likely be.[15] The more factions, too, the less likely it would be that any one interest could capture and hold government hostage, as occurred among the ancient Greeks.

Essentially, too, by placing no limits on *who* the Constitution and Bill of Rights applied to, the founding fathers left open a whole series of social frontiers. Given systems of governance and market relations designed to accommodate growth, along with bountiful conditions in this 'new' promised land, government could well afford to be increasingly expansive. Even neater, the faster the country expanded – demographically as well as spatially – the less likely it became that any one faction could ever lock in everyone else.

The proof of the founders' genius endures. Who, at the end of the eighteenth century, could have forseen the shape of states, parties, movements, labour unions or special interests yet to come? Even the multicultural identity politics that alarm so many Americans today should reassure them of the founders' foresight.

Identity politics

Consequently, too, identity politics in the US differ from identity politics abroad. In the US there are no official subnational identities. Although there is a plethora of possible affiliations from which to choose, none carries an official imprimatur: none is a trump. In fact, not only is there tremendous choice in how identities can be fashioned, but identities can be changed much as if they were fashions. Consider some of our most public figures. Michael Jackson, Dennis Rodman, Madonna, Prince, even Bob Dylan, routinely transform themselves. These entertainers have switched colour, sexual orientation, religion – precisely those things which many might say are bred into us – and yet none can be said to have suffered as a result.

Significantly, there is no single factor that the US government or even a majority of Americans uses to categorize all other members of the population. At different times and in different regions, religion, place of birth, class and race may have seemed all-important. But none has been paramount across the country over time. This is in sharp contrast to identity elsewhere, where people carry national identity cards which list their ethnicity (as in Rwanda) or, at a more local level, are acutely aware of one another's heritage.

For many Americans heritage is a hobby and a curiosity. Some do pay keen attention to their past(s), but because the United States is a country founded by waves of different immigrants there is no single, let alone common, past everyone can plug into. Likewise, there is no divisive issue around which Americans can all take sides in a fight. For example, most Bosnians agree on what divides them: differences grounded in locally shared history and mutual slights and depradations. Ditto Rwandans, Sri Lankans and residents of Northern Ireland. By contrast, what are the faultlines that Americans could *all* agree on?

The only civil war fought in the US cannot easily be refought. Even now, historians can hardly agree on whether its causes were economic, political or moral. Resuscitating slavery is on no one's agenda. Not only have grievances shifted radically, so have populations.

The availability of government assistance in the United States also puts the lie to the need for subnational regroupment. No matter where Americans move to or with whom they choose to align themselves, government is generally just a disaster away. This is not the case in many other places where, when catastrophe strikes, central authority fails to protect people, and offers nothing in the way of individual social welfare. Then citizens find themselves turning to the same networks and institutions their parents and grandparents would have trusted: family, church, anything which promises (and has proven) long-lasting, overarching security.[16]

In contrast (and at least so far), conditions in the US offer too many counter-incentives to large-scale, multi-generational, subnational groupings persisting or claiming the exclusive allegiance of members.[17] Or, to come at this from a slightly different angle, few American ethnic interest groups have much moral cohesiveness. Identity politics, in this sense, have broad but shallow roots.

Individuals who self-identify as Blacks, Chicanos, gays or Americans with disabilities, for example, may well feel affinity for others who seem tied to them by virtue of a shared colour, language or stigma. Socially such markers might seem as though they link such individuals together from birth. But morally they do not. It takes more than a shared mode of production, a set of traits or lifestyle to bind people morally. Either webs of mutual obligation are thick, involuntary and inescapable, or members unquestioningly support one another because they believe themselves impelled to by some higher authority. Far too much mobility (and affluence) has precluded the former from developing or persisting in the United States. But the latter?

The issue of allegiance

On the one hand, incorporating all citizens into the state can be viewed as a triumph of social equity. On the other, it can reflect an unhealthy, overly controlling interest. Who reads the situation and how is likely to be morally contingent, while the catch for any central government is to impel (not compel) all citizens to accede to *it* as the overarching moral authority. In a democracy, nothing is more important.

To attain this, government essentially makes citizens a deal. A citizen can be gay and American, or white, gay and American, or straight, black and American; he or she can choose to whom he or she

belongs. No one else is supposed to pick individuals' labels for them. The ethos of the United States promises this pluralism, and more: provided Americans grant the state their primary allegiance, the state will protect them no matter what their affinities may be.

Of course, there are two potential hitches to this contract. First, not all Americans believe everyone is equal or that all individuals, given their affinities, are worth protecting. Secondly, problems arise if the government cannot live up to its promise, oversteps its bounds, or is thought to be captured by one particular interest or group.

Failures on all these counts have led to dissolution elsewhere. For instance, once the Somali government could no longer perform even its most basic function –protecting citizens' safety – the 31-year-old Somali state formally fell apart.[18] Most Somalis never regarded the central government as a source of moral authority. Therefore, government actions easily inspired opposition, which triggered fighting and fed further insecurity. Similar patterns can be traced in, for example, Afghanistan, Sudan, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland.

In the Somali case, as in so many others, government inequity and the presence of separable societies turn out to have been glaringly concomitant. Not only did Somali clans predate the establishment of 'Somalia the state', but the national government proved unwilling or unable to break individuals out of their kinship groups. Subnationally, Somalis openly conducted business and categorized one another according to long-lived genealogical affiliations, and thus the only thing that wound up effectively linking all Somalis was the understanding that clans were where individuals' primary loyalty lay (including, most blatantly, members of government).

Clearly, other countries which have recently dissolved – Afghanistan, Liberia, the former Yugoslavia – do not share Somalia's precise clan structure. However, there do seem to be commonalities. Hindsight suggests that in each of these places the state proved incapable of encouraging and supporting the proliferation of cross-cutting ties which could have kept individuals separable and their affiliations mixed. The morality promised by a civil religion did not sufficiently override or dissolve pre-existing attachments. People instead were able (or were forced) to fall back on, and reinvigorate, networks which obligated them to treat people who did not belong to their particular 'us' as members of alien 'thems'. This, in turn, facilitated ethnic targeting. Without the intercession of credible central

authority, members of some groups could all too easily cleanse others simply for belonging to groups they had a moral, often historic, and invariably economic, imperative to dislike.

Still, insecurity and group fears cannot be the sole explanation for how and why ethnic or group violence topples states. There has to be something more – or less. The fact that the government (and not just the faction controlling government) also becomes a target suggests that capturing the state has value, precisely the thing the founding fathers were so keen to prevent any one group from being able to realize.

In virtually all countries, the government controls resources worth having, and/or there is little of worth that those who seize the levers of government cannot (and will not) control. Therefore, we should expect a scramble, though this in and of itself cannot explain why competition has to lead to conflict, or why disaffected, disenfranchised and disgruntled individuals do not simply withdraw, escape and set themselves up elsewhere, as so many immigrants did in coming *to* the US or, once in the US, as others did by moving west.

Separable societies

The short rejoinder to the exit option is that it is decreasingly an option: often there is nowhere else for people to go. The longer answer depends on local conditions.

Again Somalia, as exemplar of a fractured state, may be instructive. Two subclans continue to inhabit and fight over control of the former national capital, Mogadishu. One clan has erected its own government in the former British Somaliland, and considers the region independent (though the international community still does not). In north-eastern Somalia, meanwhile (where members of a third clan predominate), there seems to be peace and a second self-declared state (Puntland). Finally, there is everyone else, scattered throughout the countryside, resident in refugee camps, chased from place to place, with no space to call their own, no one to guarantee them safety and no way to start over. Many of these dispossessed people were nomads to begin with. Yet even they have a bleak future, at least in part because they are too hemmed in by what others have carved up and control.

Somalia, to be sure, is somewhat unusual. Few countries today support nomads at all, let alone the percentage of the population (60 per cent) nomads were said to comprise prior to Somalia's formal collapse.

But if it is impossible for groups of former nomads to move around in Somalia, imagine countries with settled populations, where land has long been a commodity to control. Or, consider the United States.

Historically, there have been communities which have succeeded in separating themselves from broader American society or, having been chased out of one region, have been able to establish themselves elsewhere. Certainly, numerous religious sects have successfully removed themselves. So have communes. Nor can we ignore the hollows and pockets full of people who simply allowed (or could not help) being passed by because there was nothing worth developing where they lived. Most often, though, people in places like Appalachia already owned their land – or no one did.

Significantly, in few (if any) of these cases did residents deny, let alone contest, the central authority of the US government. Individuals may have actively avoided the long arm of the law, but they did not take up weapons *en masse* to protect their separateness; they did not engage in separatist confrontation – with one notable exception.

American Indian tribes are the one set of separable societies the US government *has* officially recognized. Yet the entire relationship between the federal government and American Indians has been (and continues to be) fraught, largely because the US government has always been ambivalent about what Indians are.[9] Are they Americans first, in which case individuals should be pried out of tribes, something the government has, at times, worked hard to do? Or, are Indians members of sovereign nations, in which case the tribe (and community), not the federal government, is the only authority to whom individual Indians owe any allegiance?

The 1973 seige at Wounded Knee, vicious battles over fishing rights and the ongoing tussle to control gaming all indicate just how difficult it has been for the federal government to countenance societies that the law insists must be treated as separate but equal to itself. There are several bitter realities which serve to buttress Indian tribal rights. For one, Indians have already been beaten; they are under control. Secondly, their numbers cannot suddenly swell (since membership depends on blood). Also, these societies make no claim to self-sufficiency; instead, the government is heavily involved and invested.

In other words, and legally speaking, tribes may present certain challenges to federal authority. But Indians cannot pose a threat to democracy *as* Indians, since tribes (and Indians) have been treated as

something separate and apart since the founding of the United States. This is not a privilege that marks off any category of individuals. Blacks, women, Chinese and Japanese, for instance, may have been singled out for differential treatment in the past, but only Indians have been awarded supra-constitutional rights granting them *group* sovereignty.

The issue of authority and the association/dissociation challenge

This is noteworthy because the government projects (and may well have to project) a very different attitude toward self-segregating, *non*-Indian societies. While increasingly many are labelled 'anti-government' (and then lumped together), not all are separatist in the same ways.[20] Some, for example, have simply been millenarian and seek neither a confrontation with nor the overthrow of government. They are not particularly antagonistic toward authority; members simply want to be able to answer to a higher authority of their own choosing, on their own terms. Or at least this is one way to interpret the activities of groups such as the Heaven's Gate 'cult', which (apparently) went unmonitored, even by the government.[21]

Problems inevitably arise, though, when the ever-expanding range of choices some Americans make rub up against what other Americans refuse to countenance. As Lindholm and Hall put it, 'civility in society ... depends upon a particular social agreement to live together with difference'.[22] But, again, nothing in society guarantees that all individuals will assent to this. This means that when people treat identity as though it *is* a value, and grant it moral weight, they can (and likely will) use identity to cleave those they regard as morally inferior from members of the population at large.

This – assigning others' identities a value and, worse, choosing identities for them – may well represent the ultimate challenge to the moral authority of a democratic state, which depends on individuals being free to choose and change their own associations. No democracy can afford to be tweaked like this for long, and certainly not by those who would attempt to create an alternative power structure rather than work within the political system.[23]

Actually, the issue of authority, perhaps even the existence of the state, presents democracy with a tricky problem. All governments must flex their muscles from time to time in order to demonstrate that they (still) have them. Usually, control is easy to display. If the country is not

at war, there is still crime for state authorities to counter, or taxes for them to collect. To maintain control, though, means also engaging in surveillance.

Surveillance is troublesome in a democracy, yet necessary in a state.[24] From the perspective of individuals already sceptical and critical of federal power, any oversight can suggest that their freedoms are under seige. Driver's licences, licence plates, checking accounts, phone records, social security numbers – all of these permit government (and other large institutions) to track people without their permission, or even their being aware. It is no coincidence, then, that these are precisely the documents that self-proclaimed sovereigns rip up.

As Michael Barkun explains in this volume, there are many reasons beyond suspicion and paranoia for individuals to dissociate themselves from broader society. Put most broadly, people disengage because on some level they consider their principles and society's to be out of synch. Either society is too permissive or not permissive enough. So long as these individuals stay solitary, they present government with little reason to interfere. In fact, if they are very good about keeping to themselves the government may not know *to* interfere. Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, is the perfect example of just such an individual. But so was Chris McCandless, the subject of Krakauer's bestselling biography about an intense young vagabond who starved to death alone, while on a journey of self-discovery in Alaska.[25]

Group a Kaczynski or McCandless with others just like them, though, and the dynamic shifts. Then society and government are faced with a social, and not just anti-social, problem. A democratic government may be able to accommodate dissociative individuals – in fact, it may have little choice – but not separable societies. For one, democracy depends too heavily on the social contract being made directly between individuals *and* the state. Individuals who break this contract put themselves at risk, but this is their choice, just as the state's responsibility is to then punish them should they harm others. Because Ted Kaczynski did inflict damage, he will now spend the rest of his life in prison.

However, when a group denies the government's right to punish any of its members – the position taken by adults in Randy Weaver's cabin, and in compounds occupied by the Branch Davidians, the Montana Freemen and the Republic of Texas – people move from dissociation to opposition, from being a collectivity of defiant individuals to being a

group defiant in its differences, and the government then has little choice but to react *with* (and as) authority.

The problem is that whenever this occurs the hierarchical – not democratic – organization of authority is revealed. Citizens already wary of government may read this as betrayal. Worse, by surrounding a compound and ordering the surrender of all its occupants, government agents expose the extent to which they regard the occupants as group members, not as individuals. This too highlights the government's hypocrisy when it comes to the democratic presumption that the state will always protect citizens *as* individuals first.

The problem compounded

Unfortunately, though government officials may have little or no choice about how they respond to collective defiance, by responding as they do they also offer their critics little choice in how monolithically they then view 'government officials'. Both sides thus wind up trapped in a vicious cycle from which there is no easy exit. This, at any rate, is what the literature on militias and the anti-government movement suggests.

However, the literature may understate both the history of dissociation in the United States and the significance of exit options. Though it is now *pro forma* to trace the jumbled pedigrees of militias back to the Ku Klux Klan and 1866,[26] separable societies have always formed. So why suddenly do they cause so much alarm? The answer is presumably because they engage in anti-government activities, their members are heavily armed, and they proselytize. Probe a little further, though, and it is also likely that they have taken this turn because their options are increasingly constrained. Both literally and figuratively, the disaffected have run out of room.[27]

Not only have millenial fears boxed in those who believe in Tribulation, but free land no longer exists. New arrivals to an area will rarely go unnoticed, while even if people are able to hide, they cannot do so for long if they seek to recruit new members. Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the Southern Poverty Law Center track and condemn any group they suspect is separatist or supremacist, augmenting whatever surveillance government agencies may already be conducting. Just in terms of daily life, escape for any group seeking autonomy proves difficult, if not impossible.

But also, on an altogether different plane, there are very few individual rights left to be won in the US. Thanks to identity politics, individuals in virtually every imaginable category are now protected by law. In this more existential sense Americans may be fast approaching a truly destabilizing set of limits, as they increasingly bump up against certain impossible determinations: Do the unborn have rights? When does life begin? Do the terminally ill and dying have rights? When should life end?

Who are we, meanwhile, to make such determinations? This is the most haunting question these others raise, while the fact that they have become issues at all is a reminder that, regardless of status as fellow citizens, joined together beneath the tent of a common (culturally American) civil religion, US citizens may not in fact share even the most fundamental of values, let alone a common world view. Small wonder, then, that some dissociate.

Solutions: Huntington's temptation

No wonder, too, that those who have studied nationalism and American history voice their alarm. Eight years ago Schlesinger Jr. critiqued the disuniting of America,[28] while two years later Huntington forecast the disuniting of the world.[29] One can sense the same passion underlying both arguments: something has to be done in order to restore Americans' indivisibility, or else. Schlesinger advocates a rethinking of the education system. Huntington, on the other hand, casts about for the US's most likely external enemy.

Since the end of the Cold War it has become all too standard to claim the US needs an enemy.[30] Determining who the next foe of the United States might be is tactically prudent. It is also clever strategy, since leaders have long recognized that having a suitable villain without unites people within.

What is interesting about Huntington's approach is that he does not seem to be promoting a hot war. Instead, his clash of civilizations argument stokes the fires for a cold war between democracies versus anyone/everyone else. At first glance this appears quite clever. The Cold War was everything a nationalist could have hoped for: Americans faced an enemy that perpetually attacked but never directly fought them, and to boot, Communists were easy to demonize.

But was it really the Cold War which kept Americans united? *Were* they united? How one answers clearly depends on how much attention

one wants to pay to movements that were just beginning to fight for civil, women's and other rights in the 1960s, which themselves suggest that not all Americans felt equally included, accepted or united.[31] Perhaps, then, it was the homogenizing effects of the Second World War which had still not worn off, holding everything together. Not only did World War II intensify large scale internal migrations in the US, thus mixing populations, but conscription did the same for individual Americans.

In many regards, conscription may be the ultimate democratizer, not only because individuals are its unit of account, but because the military is effective in fusing individuals into a whole greater than the sum of their equally interchangeable parts. In this sense, the draft during World War II may have comprised a far more effective crucible for promoting nationalism than did combat. From all accounts, combat *per se* contributes little to civility. Instead, soldiers routinely find themselves *forced* to get along whenever they are not engaged in firefights. In most wars (if not in the military generally) individuals spend an inordinate amount of their time learning how to be peaceably bored together. Thus, to borrow from Ortega y Gasset, war*time* and not war may be more significant for teaching men how to 'nationally live together'.[32]

At first glance this would seem a further reason to embrace Huntington's cold war temptation. But if we reanalyze the nature of solidarity and cohesion from the level of the individual on up, the national need for a next enemy is not what should preoccupy Americans. Instead, they should be more worried about what vehicle they might have (apart from conscription) for forcing civility – particularly as they run out of elbow room.

The problem already solved: a counterintuitive solution

One thing *The Federalist Papers* make clear is that *civil* order depends on the kaleidescopic ability of individuals to move in and out of social groups of their own free will, shifting affiliations as their interests shift. Only this can guarantee the persistence and proliferation of groups which, so long as there are enough of them, means none is likely to persist 'as is' for very long. In other words, if democracy is to be kept humming there must be room for flux and reflux.

From the outset, the federalists had scale on their side. But they also had space, and time. Who had declared a revolution before? It took the British months to wheel themselves into place and prepare to do battle,

only to then find themselves having to locate and pin down colonial forces that had more to gain by remaining disengaged. Quick victory was impossible. In the meantime, this first 'national' war never galvanized all or even most Americans.

Having said that, though, the aftermath of the Revolutionary War did afford the founding fathers innumerable opportunities to experiment with fresh Enlightenment ideals, and a relatively unspecialized division of labour. In contrast, how much creative socio-political engineering can leaders afford to engage in today? Not only is the country more crowded and compressed in practically every sense but, even more to the point, the landscape in which the founding fathers and successive governments operated was still relatively empty. Whatever did not fit the codified scheme of things could be removed, segregated or ignored. Thanks to so much land, so small a population and so little surveillance, democracy – and those who disagreed with one another – had breathing space. Inclusiveness included the possibility of exclusion – whereas now? Today, purity is danger.

For the United States to function as well as it has requires individuals to remain separable, and to be held accountable as individuals first and members of groups second. Separable societies which fix (and fixate on) singular identities pose a series of dangers. No matter how counterintuitive it may seem, this is also why allowing individuals to claim as many identities as they want as often as they wish only makes sense. The government should want identities to morph. The reason? The more mixed up people are in terms of how they identify themselves, the more difficult it becomes for them to be divided.

Presently, neither class nor race seems nuanced enough to serve as *the* salient divide in the United States, while the more hairs people split the more unruly all of their labelling becomes. For example, something so seemingly straightforward as 'male' or 'female' hardly captures gender which, as a concept, is being stretched increasingly to refer to sexual preferences, sexual orientations and past sexual history. Similarly, there are whole batteries of ethnic categories from which to choose, so that on some government forms Hispanics are granted a completely separate category from Whites (who are of European descent) or African-Americans (who are of African descent), though Hispanics can be of Spanish origin, implying presumably that Spaniards are non-European *and* non-White.[33]

Although the current welter of choices is full of contradictions and is nothing if not confusing, all this divisibility actually represents a

politics of intense engagement, not disengagement. Even better, by going along with (if not fostering) such a refractive selection process, the government proves itself ever-expansive and inclusive at every level. By soliciting and being so solicitous of how citizens *self*-identify, and by nurturing a contentious, non-coherent, but also non-exclusive nation, government puts the state up for grabs but also keeps it out of any one group's permanent grasp. Even better, the more the state affords people the opportunity to switch allegiances from group to group, and protects their rights to act as free agents on their own, the less fixed or separable any of their factions can become, the more equitable government seems, the more secure citizens feel, and the less anything approaching a primordial identity *has* to matter.

In the end, the fact that Americans seem unable to stay *socially* (never mind geographically) put may prove the greatest antidote to communal violence.

NOTES

1. See Anna Simons, 'Democratisation and Ethnic Conflict: The Kin Connection', *Nations & Nationalism* 3 (1997) pp.273–89.
2. As Marina Ottaway wrote in 1995, 'Sometimes political openings themselves can set in motion reactions that become obstacles to democracy … Ethnic conflict has intensified in Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria, all countries that held elections recently': 'African Democratization: An Update', *CSIS Africa Notes* 171 (1995) p.5. For example, Melchior Ndadaye was kidnapped and killed by Tutsi extremists in October 1993, less than six months after he was elected president of Burundi. His death led to ethnic violence which claimed the lives of as many as 50,000 Burundians and helped trigger the consequent 1994 genocide in Rwanda. More recently, the 1997 civil war in the Congo grew directly out of campaign violence preceding elections in that country.
3. See Rapoport, this issue.
4. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
5. Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
6. Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).
7. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 'Has Democracy a Future', *Foreign Affairs* 76/5 (1997) pp.2–12.
8. Samuel Huntington, 'The Erosion of American National Interests', *Foreign Affairs* 76/5 (1997) pp.28–49.
9. Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) p.15.
10. I draw from James MacGregor Burns, *The Vineyard of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982); Jack Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Walter MacDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Walter Millis, *Arms and Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981/86); and Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) among other works.
11. Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96/1 (1967) pp.1–21.

12. As Albert Hirschman has put it, 'Even after the closing of the frontier, the very vastness of the country combined with easy transportation make it far more possible for Americans than for most other people to think about solving their problems through "physical flight" than either through resignation or through ameliorating and fighting *in situ* the particular conditions into which one has been "thrown"': *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) p.107.
13. Greene (note 10) p.206.
14. It seems critical to note that these are most often 'groups' only when looked at from without. They have little sustained coherence when considered from within – and thus, are probably better referred to as categories.
15. See James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1788/1987).
16. Charles Lindholm and John A. Hall discuss trust in the public sphere – one of the attributes of culture-based American exceptionalism – in 'Is the United States Falling Apart?', *Daedalus* 126/2 (Spring 1997) pp.183–209.
17. 'Ethnic' mafias, whose members aim to contravene the law and evade federal authority, are one glaring exception.
18. This is a process I explain in Anna Simons, *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).
19. See e.g. Fergus Bordewich, *Killing the White Man's Indian* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).
20. In this section I draw from works by James Aho, *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Alan Bock, *Ambush at Ruby Ridge* (Irvine, CA: Dickens Press, 1995); Joel Dyer, *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Philip Lamy, *Millennium Rage: Survivalists, White Supremacists, and the Doomsday Prophecy* (New York: Plenum Press, 1996); and Kenneth Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).
21. Arguably, Heaven's Gate members escaped government surveillance for four reasons: first, they were not heavily armed; secondly, they did not engage publicly in inflammatory rhetoric; thirdly, they did not actively or aggressively dissociate themselves from broader society (if anything they hid by operating just as any other citizens would); and fourthly, children were not involved.

    In no sense, then, did Heaven's Gate constitute a truly separable society. The group was not striving to be self-sufficient, and it certainly was not capable of self-reproduction. Only if one considers members' ultimate separation (from their containers, as they put it, or life, as we know it) can one construe the group as having had unusual control over individuals. But in no other way did members pose a threat to democracy, or by extension the government. If anything, their very association reaffirmed the potential limitlessness of what a democracy will foster and accept: adults choosing their own company, constructing their own identities, and charting their own futures.
22. Lindholm and Hall (note 16) p.201.
23. However, subversion from within frightens some people far more than does rebellion from without. As Jennifer Taw reminded me, government can be co-opted by those who gain positions of authority, with dire consequences. If people who assign a moral weight to identity gain election to political office, who can those they condemn turn to for assistance? Genocides have resulted from just such transfers of power. Yet one of the unforseen benefits to plural, fluid identities in the US is that it is difficult to imagine a consensus forming around who to target. In this sense, Americans are acephalous, and threats from a self-defined monolithic group will likely cause others to group in response, and large-scale warfare (rather than genocide) would result.
24. See Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
25. For McCandless' vivid 'biography' see Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).

26. See e.g. Stern (note 20) p.43.
27. This is a point that Nancy Rosenblum makes in a different context in 'The Right of Association and Paramilitary Groups: Conspiracism and Clear and Present Danger' (unpublished manuscript, 1996).
28. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992).
29. Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (1993) pp.22–50.
30. See e.g. Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); and Aho (note 20).
31. See Engelhardt, ibid., and also David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).
32. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Invertebrate Spain* (New York: Norton & Co., 1937) p.43.
33. See e.g. the University of New Mexico's Voluntary Equal Opportunity Information Survey.