Symposium Introduction: Immigration and National Identity

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On February 2, 2005, newly elected Florida Senator, and former Housing and Urban Development Secretary, Mel Martinez, a Cuban-American immigrant, "shattered a 216-year tradition of the U.S. Senate . . . when he used the ceremonial occasion of his first floor speech to speak three sentences in Spanish."[1] This event represents the first time a language other than English was entered in the Congressional Record. He did so in support of Mexican-American Alberto Gonzales' nomination to the post of Attorney General. Martinez was rhetorically addressing his remarks to immigrants, whom he described as having come to America to seek a better life. He described Gonzales as "uno de nosotros," or "one of us."

This event is notable for more than simply the use of a language other than English on the floor of the U.S. Senate. First, Martinez's use of Spanish is just the latest example of the growing comfort across a variety of political stripes and segments of American society with the use of Spanish in public and official environments. After all, President George W. Bush delivered a weekly radio address in Spanish, itself a precedent-shattering moment. Second, the apparent expression of social identity—"nosotros"—with Mr. Gonzalez, a Mexican-American, is emblematic of a slowly emerging pan-ethnic identity among Latinos across a variety of national origin groups. Finally, what is perhaps most remarkable is that both the speaker and the subject of his comments represent the right of the American political spectrum.

This event perfectly illustrates the circumstances described, and decried, in Samuel Huntington's latest book, *Who Are We?* In his latest effort, Huntington lays out an argument regarding the nature and origin of American national identity. America, he suggests, is an Anglo-Protestant society, at least culturally, and it is the values and customs of this culture that are uniquely responsible for American greatness. But this identity is seriously threatened, he argues, by the large-scale immigration from Latin America—and especially Mexico—that has characterized the last three decades. Latino immigrants, he contends, do not share salient aspects of this Anglo-Protestant culture and, unlike generations of immigrants before them, seem disinterested in acquiring them.

While newly articulated, the core claims of Huntington's argument are actually quite familiar. Elements of the intellectual contentions can be found within a longer line of thought which includes Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Disuniting of America;* Peter Skerry's *Mexican Americans: An Ambivalent Minority*; Nathan Glazer's *We are All Multiculturalists Now;* and Patrick J. Buchanan's *The Death of the West,* among countless others. Certainly, there are important points of departure that distinguish each of these works from Huntington's, as well as from each other, but each reflects one or more aspects of the national angst that has historically been engendered by the twin issues of immigration and assimilation. These arguments and fears find political expression in the outspoken comments of Congressman Tom Tancredo (R-CO), the passage of anti-immigrant initiatives in California and Arizona, English-only laws and initiatives in a variety of states, as well as the public advocacy of groups like U.S. English and the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

The American experience, of course, is not entirely unique. Contentious debate over immigration, occasionally accompanied by violence, has emerged in several parts of the European Union, Australia, Canada, Israel, and elsewhere. Whether it is changes to asylum and nationality laws in Germany, banning of head-scarves for Muslim school-girls in France, or riots at the gates to the Spanish North African enclaves of Cueta and Melilla by North Africans seeking to migrate to Europe, the movement of culturally, racially, or religiously distinct peoples across international boundaries, and the implications of these to the national character and identity of the receiving society, continues to be the subject of ongoing political contestation. Moreover, the relatively poor fit globally between international boundaries and culturally homogenous populations has repeatedly raised questions about the ability of culturally and linguistically heterogeneous populations to hang together as functional and successful polities.

The American experience, however, is at least somewhat different in that the United States was never an "organic" nation, at least not in the way that Western Europeans would recognize. Even in the earliest stages of non-indigenous settlement of North America, there was

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considerable ethnic and religious variation among the European settlers, which besides the English included Scots, French, Germans and Dutch in substantial numbers, to say nothing of Africans held as slaves and the presence of a substantial indigenous population. This variation only increased in the years immediately after independence, both through the acquisition of Louisiana and Florida by purchase and Texas, California, and the Southwest by conquest, as well as large-scale Irish immigration in the middle of the nineteenth century. The fight, then, over who is an American, and what constitutes "American-ness," is and has been an on-going one for virtually the entire history of the United States. Debates about immigration and national identity cut to the core of our national self-image as a nation of immigrants, and invariably includes allusions to the past—real and idealized—as a way of understanding and coping with social and demographic changes today.

In this effort, we use the publication of Huntington's book[2] as a useful moment to pause and reconsider the central claims of an entire line of argument regarding national identity, immigration, and threat. In the papers that follow, a collection of scholars representing a variety of intellectual traditions offer their views on the notion of national identity, the role of culture and the necessity of cultural unity in maintaining that identity, and the challenge that the global movement of people and peoples has raised to those identities. More specifically, in light of large-scale Latin American immigration, the symposium devotes considerable effort to investigating the empirical claims regarding Latino immigration and assimilation often made by those who perceive threat. Our goal, then, is a more reasoned and scholarly consideration of how American national identity might evolve, and how political scientists might come to understand that evolution.

Notes

1 Holland 2005, A-9.
2 A review of Huntington's scholarship appears in the book review section of *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (3): 640–642.

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