

America Today: Burkean Nation?

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This morning I intend to examine Burke's concept of nationhood and of the forces that must constitute its essence. The question is whether these views can serve as a framework for contemporary America. Put another way: Is it possible in America to speak of nationhood and expect patriotic allegiance to what passes for a nation within the boundaries of the United States? Drawing on Burke is there a way of postulating the interaction of values and behavior other than that dominating current public policy scholarship that posits an accurate reflection of contemporary America?

Probably the best source of Burke's view of nationhood is to be found in his Reflections on the Revolution in France. And this is especially useful today because the characteristics of the French Revolution against which Burke was

reacting were essentially the genesis of the moral, economic, and political chaos wreaked by contemporary American pluralism. Burke's address to the Electors of Bristol also provides insight into the distinction between nation and narrow self-interest, an imbalance which today taints the American scene. In Burke's view the interests of no one person nor those of a group of persons could represent a nation. For Burke a nation consists of a fundamental constitutional law and a social fabric consisting of traditions and morality. (95) The abstract rationalism of the revolutionaries ignored the "comprehensive connected view of the various complicated external and internal interests which go to the formation of that multifarious thing called a state." (96-133)

Burke is clear that there is such a thing---perhaps not tangible, but certainly real---as a nation and a national interest. Government is an integral part of this national interest and it is incumbent on its leaders to think in terms of the nation as a whole. Public officials have an obligation to avoid those superficial and abstract formulations that can have the effect of tearing apart the social fabric woven over many generations. Effective government must be the "trustee of the *whole* , and not for the parts." (108—303) Otherwise, we are looking at government embodying "one great play-table" where "few can understand the game." (108—310) Thus, for Burke there was a clearly embodied basis for allegiance to the

nation. There was both a nation and a history of support therefor composed of the sacrifices and contributions of citizens throughout the ages.

The question for Americans of the 21st century is the extent to which Burke's concept of nation and the values undergirding it are relevant to the United States. The England of Burke's time was culturally homogeneous and was the product of centuries of tradition and struggle. America, its erstwhile colony, has a comparatively short historical story, but perhaps more important America is far more diverse than England has ever been. Irrespective of liberal criticisms of the idea, America is an exceptional nation. Can then Burke's ideas provide a useful framework for America as a nation, or do they stand as some sort of set of ideals too abstract to be capable of application?

In the twentieth century liberal thinkers of pluralist and behaviorist orientation have been more effective in dividing America and promoting value relativism than in providing a basis for nationhood. Much of this approach is traceable to John Dewey and his group description of American politics in works like the Public and Its Problems (1927) For Dewey, not only was America a composition of group activity, but the government itself should be viewed as simply another, perhaps more extensive, group. Dewey's ideas received enthusiastic support from the

pluralist movement in political science beginning in the 1950s with David B. Truman's highly influential The Governmental Process (1951) and his nominalism was easily compatible with the so-called behavioralist revolution in the social sciences.

Glendon Schubert went perhaps the farthest in undercutting the possibility of a national identity, declaring that the idea of a public interest was an exercise in make-believe. In American politics, he argued, there cannot be such a thing. In his words, "it is difficult to comprehend the justification for teaching students of political science that subservience to the public interest is a relevant norm of official responsibility." (The Public Interest (1960), 220)

Theodore Lowi was one of the first political scientists to see the debilitating effects that such an orientation had on American government. The depredations of pluralist politics had, Lowi declared, issued in a state of "interest group liberalism" in which authoritative government disappeared in the solvent of group and institutional processes. (The End of Liberalism, 1979) In the context of pervasive process authoritative decisions are no longer possible. An issue simply moves from one stage of the process to another. As one commentator has put it: "Americans do not solve issues; they simply replace them with other issues."

Thus, we have the so-called “spin cycle,” in which public issues are rather rapidly replaced by others, and behind, indeed stimulating, such a dynamic are the various organized groups clamoring for access to the public mind and to the public’s funds. It is this phenomenon that today poses the most serious challenge to Burke’s view of nationhood. Group activity has, of course, been a staple of American history. Tocqueville, for example, is often quoted on the importance of associations in the young American nation. But it should be emphasized that Tocqueville’s America was framed by both strong religious fervor and patriotism. It was also relatively homogeneous socially.

We should be clear at this point that Burke’s attacks were aimed not so much at the power of self-interest as at the hubris of the human ego engendered by Enlightenment thought. Again and again, Burke railed against the claims of reason made by the French leaders. Their comprehension of reason in the political sphere was pitifully limited. The successful statesman, Burke asserted, worked with the valuable institutions and traditions of the past which through their longevity have embodied the reason of generations. In contrast the French revolutionaries drawing for public policy on unworkable geometrical, arithmetical, and financial calculations shunted aside the institutions and traditions of the past as “mere rubbish.” (98—267, 285, 296-97)

The revolutionaries, seduced by the rationalistic claims of Enlightenment France, moved to implement the dictates of what they saw as reason. Thus, a seven-day week was to be replaced by a ten-day alternative. Burke was reacting to such excesses of reason stemming from the French Revolution, and what he saw as reason and what the revolutionaries offered in this regard differed greatly.

In America today the forces of self-interest have replaced those of Enlightenment reason, although the hubris exemplified by the French revolutionaries remains unabated among liberal reformers. In contrast to Burke's view of a nation, no self-respecting pluralist would speak in terms of a national interest. And if there is no such thing, then what happens to the idea of citizen allegiance to the state---to a citizen's willingness to sacrifice all for his or her country?

In contrast pluralist divisiveness, we might profitably consider the contributions of Russell Kirk toward a normative sense of what has constituted the American nation. Drawing heavily on Burke's thought in his seminal The Conservative Mind (1960) Kirk traced the basic assumptions that have provided a continuous and sound foundation for American beliefs. In his influential The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America (1976), George Nash notes that Kirk was criticized for his attempts to identify a morality that encompassed both British

and American history. Kirk, however, maintained that there exist moral prerequisites for American thought and action that have served as a counterweight to the rationalistic pride of reformers, and more recent policy-oriented thinkers have rendered, sometimes by default, support for Kirk's tenacity on this point.

In his aptly titled book , The Rule of Nobody (2014), Philip K. Howard examines the deterioration of values and authority in contemporary American culture. He chronicles the attempts of legislatures to compensate for the moral vacuum in American public policy by enacting detailed legislation, thinking that the greater the detail the more likely that national goals will be met. The problem, of course, has been that legislation must be implemented and that implementing agencies have taken refuge in process. Procedures have replaced individual judgment, and, most important, this moral neutrality, perhaps impotence would be a better term, has led to egregious examples of outright stupidity, if not tragedy. In Howard's words, "The philosophy of neutral rules pushed society another giant step toward immorality by basically abandoning any pretense of moral responsibility. Just go by the book." (77)

Government policy has engendered far too many situations in which no one is willing or required to accept blame. Howard offers the example of the nursing home in which patients are often badly mistreated, but which consistently meets the regulations established by the state. Even more devastating is the instance of emergency personnel on a California beach refusing to help a drowning man because he was outside the border of their jurisdiction. (78 ff.) Everyone follows the rules, but the purposes of government---care of the elderly, better education, safety at the beach---become subsumed to those rules. Howard urges that public officials must be empowered to “apply social norms.” (113)

The point that I am making, and with which I expect that Howard would agree, is how can citizens be expected to give allegiance to a government without authority? Theodore Lowi’s analysis pointed directly at this problem when he described the dilution of government caused by the pluralists’ promotion of what he labels “interest group liberalism.” Government, Lowi declares, is more than another group—simply more extended as Dewey would put it. Government must provide for the national defense. Government has the power of life and death over its citizens. Government must be authoritative. Burke made this very point as well. For him government must engender a “manly, moral, regulated liberty.” (89) Powerful, legitimate government requires first and foremost an

underlying moral direction----“a sure, solid, and ruling principle”---that defines and guides a nation. (104, 282) “Nothing turns out to be so oppressive and unjust as a feeble government.” (355)

I and Professor William T. Bluhm have attempted to address the need to recognize the importance of morally based policy with our formulation of the theory of prudential pragmatism, an approach that works to combine the importance of basic values with Americans’ practical cultural orientation. Basically we argue that contemporary America holds together because of the existence of fundamental values assumed and accepted by the citizenry. These values vary from policy to policy and change over time, as Burke would acknowledge have those of the English, but they are values----they are normative. They reach beyond the day-to-day behavior of individuals that serves as the shallow, shifting undergirding of the pluralists and their fellow travelers the behavioralists. We would argue that to speak in terms of a national interest on a day-to-day basis is not relevant to the average American and is unfortunately open to all kinds of interest manipulation.

But there are fundamental norms that surface in times of national emergency or need, and American history has demonstrated this again and again. The Japanese

attack on Pearl Harbor and Americans' willingness to battle the evils of the Nazis are in a sense paralleled by the national response to the attacks of 9/11. Today Americans stand, as well, pretty much together in efforts to thwart Islamic extremists. Here the issue is not the lack of American unity but the inability to fashion an effective response. In the 1940s throwing military prowess at a threat was a generally sufficient response; today that works not nearly so well. My point is that national beliefs exist to which Americans willingly give due and sincere support.

Working with more narrowly focused issues Americans are usually not called upon to give their all, and disagreement often seems pervasive and insurmountable. But such is not the case. Public policy issues are "nested" within normative assumptions. One can choose almost any issue of public controversy and find that over time fundamental value positions emerge that frame the public's response. These, of course, evolve, as with gay rights, smoking, immigration, or health care. There is no question that around these issues swirl the claims of self-interested advocacy groups. But the point that we urge is that these claims should not be taken as the essence of American democracy or of the American nation.

As Lowi and Howard have recognized, what the pluralists have done is to mistake the epiphenomena of American politics for the essence of American politics. One of the most glaring examples of this mindset is the brief history of democracy written by Robert Dahl. Dahl was in his day one of the leading proponents of pluralist theory, a president of the American Political Science Association, and a leading scholar in the Yale University Department of Political Science, which in 1950s, '60s, and '70s in the words of its chronicler, Richard M. Merelman, “contributed necessary scholarly foundations” of pluralism to “popular accounts of American politics.” (Pluralism at Yale, 14)

In his book, On Democracy (1998), Dahl begins with the classical Greeks and culminates with the modern era. Nowhere in this brief survey is religion mentioned. It is difficult to comprehend that in over two millennia of struggle and emancipation the importance of fundamental human values plays no role for Professor Dahl. How can such a superficial mindset passing for theoretical analysis be considered a workable framework for articulating the realities of the American political sphere? Unfortunately, Dahl is only applying the modus operandi of contemporary social scientists whereby morality is simply of no concern to them. It is far easier to construct a survey, assign numerical values, and correlate extensively. There is thus no need to utilize the relevant historical

context. Any normative framework for national allegiance is either ignored or disparaged, ala Schubert. In fact Schubert, perhaps to his credit, specifically rejects the idea that it is incumbent on him to provide a theoretical framework for policy after what he sees as his “iconoclastic” handiwork. (224)

What we are contending is that scholars in public policy and political theory have an obligation to move beyond frankly the laziness and superficiality of pluralist description and acknowledge that moral values can be and are relevant, whatever the policy issue. Such an orientation would turn toward leadership and institutional reform to provide the encompassing perspective to reassert the tangibility of nationhood. Burke was speaking from the perspective of a history and politics in which norms and beliefs normally flowed from the upper reaches of society down through the population generally. What Kirk showed, and what Dr. Bluhm and I contend, is that in a nation such as America where beliefs and values tend often to bubble up from the general public, encompassing norms continue to exist and continue to provide a framework for effective policy. It is our responsibility as scholars, indeed as Americans, to insist that these be recognized as such. One would think that the term “scholar” denotes a striving for integrity and accurate analysis. Instead many today passing as scholars have allowed themselves to be sucked into the maelstrom of competing groups and

their shifting claims of public interest, parochially defined. The academic community owes the nation much more than this.