

# Fearful Establishment

JOHN R. WALLACH

---

BOOK REVIEWED:

Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*.  
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.

---

Since the Reagan victory in 1980, the political anxiety of the democratic left has focused on the new right, both as the quasi-religious, technological populism of the Moral Majority and the National Conservative Political Action Committee, or as the more elitist neoconservatism of *The Public Interest* and *Commentary*. This has caused the neglect of a form of conservatism that is rooted in a distinct part of the American establishment. It includes the internationalist, corporatist, and moderate liberalism of *The New York Times* as well as the academic conservatism of the American Enterprise Institute. One of its most influential voices has been Samuel P. Huntington, whose longstanding antipathy to democracy has found its most recent expression in his book *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*.

Huntington's work is remarkable for its attempt to synthesize his own practical experience (with the State Department, various branches of the armed forces, and the National Security Council) and scholarly writings, on the one hand, and, on the other, the major interpretations of American political life represented by the work of Tocqueville, Bryce, Croly, Parrington, Beard, Myrdal, Hofstadter, Lippman, Boorstin, and most important, Louis Hartz. Hartz's *The*

*Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) sought to explain the absence of original American political thought by identifying the enormous power of Lockean liberalism to consolidate a political consensus and stifle the emergence in American history of conservative and radical traditions of thought. Although this consensus has promoted national unity—with the exception of the Civil War—it also, according to Hartz, has encouraged intolerance of political diversity at home and indifference toward the unique political experiences of other nations. To overcome these harmful tendencies, Hartz believed that Americans have to “transcend” their liberal tradition. Huntington likewise believes in the force of the American political consensus, and that it makes the United States “exceptional.” Also like Hartz he believes that it harbors perils as well as blessings, promise and disharmony, for American political life. But Huntington has settled on a different kind of cure for America’s political ills.

Huntington constructs arguments for a strong state and against radical change. The viewpoint is American, conservative, and proestablishment. In an article published in 1957 Huntington argued that the authentic marks of a conservative are not so much beliefs in a set of permanent principles, or associations with a particular class, but rather the committed defense of “the established order . . . against any serious challenge.”<sup>1</sup> For American conservatives this produces the ironic necessity of having to defend the relatively liberal political institutions of the United States. Huntington has adopted this political stance as his own. He believes that preserving a viable American consensus requires not ideological innovation, as does Hartz, but the dampening of popular political activity. This means both discouraging citizens from making use of traditional ideals to criticize existing political practices—or to foster equality and political participation—and encouraging the strengthening of the state.

Supposedly, the basic intellectual materials with which Huntington assesses American political life are indigenous to the United States. But as we shall see, his book’s historical moorings are suspect. Actually, the book is anchored less strongly in the dynamic course of American politics than in a new kind of state conservatism, by way of his love for West Point, admiration for superpower, anxiety about instability, affection for authority, and fear of democracy.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” *American Political Science Review*, 51 (1957): 455.

Huntington bases his interpretation of American politics on the "American Creed." Creeds are characteristically religious; as authoritative testaments of faith, however, they may serve as ideological rites of passage for membership in any organization. For Huntington, this has been the function of the American Creed in the United States. While its citizens may share a common language, they lack a common ancestry of race, ethnicity, or social culture, and the task of uniting the people falls to the political structure. Formally, this framework is the Constitution, but for Huntington a more basic element, replacing the absent primordial ties, is the American Creed. The Creed possesses an integrity and strength that insulates it from changes in America's economy and society and saves the nation from disintegration by factions associated with region, class, race, and ethnicity.

Contributing to the Creed are five political ideas that stem from various branches of early American political culture: constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy, and egalitarianism. During political crises, interest groups employ one or more tenets of the Creed against each other, but enough elements of the Creed are continuously shared by all to prevent any revolutionary political strife from arising. But in Huntington's view, the Creed not only enhances stability; it generates a kind of political conflict whose power exceeds that of political antagonisms rooted in the "social structure" (i.e. class and status). By highlighting the political role of the American Creed, Huntington enshrouds the divisive forces of capitalist development, geographic and military expansion, and racism in American political life. Indeed, Huntington's political focus is so state-centered that he never discusses the power or authority of corporations and the marketplace. This permits him to argue that major political conflict in America does not reflect battles between rich and poor, white and black, the powerful and the powerless, but between "the movement" and "the establishment."

The source of this central conflict for Huntington is not the separate ideas that comprise the Creed but a common strand among them, which Huntington calls "the antipower ethic." It engenders habitual opposition to authority in general and government in particular, even as it holds the Creed together. Moreover, this ethic represents the political use of America's democratic ideals. One could argue that the various elements of the Creed constitute an ideological foundation for the democratic structuring of political power. After all, a citizenry that characteristically possesses a critical standard for judging the exercise of power is a citizenry capable of maintaining its effective sovereignty. But Huntington sees power and authority as properties of elite institutions rather than politically associated citizens, and he sees the Creed operating as a "norm" antagonistic to the power and authority of corporate and governmental institutions, in opposition to what Huntington believes are the necessary features of institutional self-maintenance: hierarchy, inequality, specialization, and expertise.

The antipower ethic generates the “anxiety,” “agony,” and “disharmony,” of American politics that erupt periodically in a futile effort on the part of the people to close a “gap” between institutions and ideals (“the IvI gap”). The most enduring feature of American political life is, therefore, a continual experience of legitimation crisis:

The widespread consensus on liberal-democratic values provides the basis for challenging the legitimacy of American political practices and the authority of American political institutions. . . . If people try to make government more legitimate by bringing practice more into accord with the political principle, they will weaken government rather than strengthen it. . . . As a result of the IvI gap, the perennial gap between the actuality of *institutional* practice and *ideal* standards, the legitimacy of American government varies inversely with belief in American ideals.

**G**iven the extraordinary stability of American political ideals and institutions through the past two hundred years—even a Civil War didn’t shake them too much—how does Huntington manage to produce so much worry about our ideals threatening our institutions? How does Huntington’s view of American history encourage his readers to defend the American state, suppress their motivation for political reform, and question the validity of American ideals rather than the justice of such stark phenomena as capitalism, bureaucracy, centralization, inequality, technological imperatives, racism, social disintegration, sexism, or militarism?

He does so in the name of political realism, first of all by introducing a sobering comparative perspective. All other European, Latin American, and Asian societies, he alleges, are more deferential and authoritarian than the United States. They also experience a lesser degree of disharmony. The most “harmonious” society is “traditional India,” where the caste system legitimates all social inequalities. Japan receives Huntington’s most lavish praise. Its traditional values permit a “vertical” organizational structure. Huntington agrees with Chie Nakane, who asserts that the great strength of this structure “lies in its effectiveness for centralized communication and its capability of efficient and swift mobilization of the collective power of its members.” Huntington then cites these traits for their “relevance” and “usefulness” for large, industrialized, bureaucratized societies such as the United States. The message is clear: the United States is antiauthoritarian in the extreme; it should become more moderate and less democratic.

American history confirms Huntington’s charges against the Creed by view-

ing the past role of the Creed through a psychological lens. The American Creed has operated as a mechanism for "coping" with the "cognitive dissonance" generated by the IvI gap; its form varies according to the intensity of belief in the Creed and the clarity of perception of the IvI gap. Huntington describes the four stages in which the Creed appears in American history as attitudes toward the gap: "*moralistic reform*" or "eliminating the gap," "*cynicism*" or "tolerating the gap," "*complacency*" or "ignoring the gap," and "*hypocrisy*," or "denying the gap." Although Huntington does not seek to prove that the "logic" of this pattern always repeats itself in history, he finds these states of mind appearing historically as political neuroses, each of which in succession hangs up America to some degree according to a wearying pattern of eternal recurrence.

"Moralism" is the most dangerous part of the cycle and Huntington's greatest concern. When it holds sway, middle- and lower-socioeconomic classes outside the establishment, normally politically silent, become mobilized along with the vocal segments of the country's elites. They join together, engage in political protest, and try to close "the gap" by political reform. In Huntington's American history, four periods stand out because of their excessive "moralism," and he calls them "creedal passion periods." They are the Revolutionary, Jacksonian, and Progressive eras, and "the years of protest, exposure, and reform of the 1960s and early 1970s." In them, the antipower ethic of the Creed leads to a popular focus on

some combination of economic and political power: imperial power, money power, slave power, corporate power, executive power. . . . The common goal in all four periods was the break-up or reduction of organized power, its reform and control, the opening up of the processes of decision-making to public participation.

These periods parallel the periods of "critical realignment" identified by Walter Dean Burnham as watersheds in American history, during which "a major change rooted in the behavior of critically large minorities of American voters . . . directly alters electoral coalitions, the shape of election outcomes, and the flow of public policy." However, three other periods in American history that Burnham also categorized as eras of critical realignment notably do not qualify as "creedal passion periods": the early 1800s, the 1860s, and the 1930s. Why? Because according to Huntington, the "focus of change in these periods concerns the role and power of social forces; the focus of change during creedal passion periods concerns the structure and character of political institutions and practices." By redrawing the boundaries of major eras of political conflict according to this conceptual map, Huntington makes the excluded eras morally and politically benign. And the conflict of creedal passion periods now seems less important for the development of the country's basic institutions, more readily under-

standable as an essentially psychological affair. Thus, when Huntington differentiates creedal periods from other periods of realignment because of the kind of politics involved, he suggests a contrast between emotionalism and realism. Creedal politics "has been more intense, more idealistic, more infused with moral passion than it has been at other times when the pragmatic bargaining among interest groups predominates the scene."

Huntington's effort to sully and psychologize the motivation of democratically inspired protest becomes manifest in his description of the five major characteristics of all creedal passion periods. Each one, he claims, exhibits five characteristics: 1) abundant moral passion and concern for political ideas; 2) affirmation of the "democratic ideals of liberty, equality, individualism, and popular control of government, and opposition to authority, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and especially power"; 3) a high degree of political participation and spontaneously generated organization; 4) an outpouring of means of communication; 5) an "obsession" with exposing presumed sources of corruption that "may soon spread to a concern with the evils of corporation, church, school, and association." The first, third, and fourth traits are obviously essential to popular political activity and describe these eras. As to the second and fifth traits, there is good reason for doubt on both scores. A closer look at the Revolutionary era, "the prototypical period of creedal passion," illuminates how Huntington uses his conceptual matrix to derogate the political rationality of democratic protest.

Huntington relies on the respected work of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and others to characterize the creedal politics of the Revolutionary era. Yet these accounts, in contradiction of Huntington's position, argue that American revolutionaries were not motivated by hostility toward authority and power. First, acceptance of economic inequalities and deference to social hierarchies were universal in the colonies.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, while the many ideological sources of opposition to the Crown—the thought of classical antiquity, the Enlightenment, English common law, dissenting Protestantism, and Radical Whiggism—enabled American revolutionaries to advocate the overthrow of British rule as both necessary and just, no pamphleteer of the Revolution ever challenged the idea of governmental authority but rather its source, not the power of political rulers but rather their unprecedented use of it. Arguments for liberty and against pow-

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 282, 302; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 72-75.

er were rhetorical vehicles for transferring sovereign political authority to the colonists.<sup>3</sup>

To some extent, Huntington believes that the Revolution was, in his words, a "rational response" to the usurpation and abuse of authority by the Crown and its agents. Yet he makes clear his belief that in each of the subsequent creedal passion periods, the politically activated "moralism" of Americans increasingly damaged the effectiveness of their political institutions. As guides to political action, American political ideals became increasingly anachronistic because, for Huntington, lasting political change materializes independently of morally inspired efforts at political reform; it emerges from long-term processes such as "industrialization," "modernization," and "global involvement." Huntington believes that these "objective" historical processes, unbridled by moral ideals, ought to provide the basic guidelines to which "realistic" political thought and action should adapt.

A historical analysis that erases the presence of moral concerns during years of political change explains why Huntington can exclude the Civil War and New Deal eras as creedal passion periods. Yet it is not easy to see how the period of the Civil War, when Americans slaughtered one another over constitutional interpretations and the legitimacy of slavery, did not concern "the structure and character of political institutions and practices." In addition, how can Huntington exclude the New Deal, which at least led to the national recognition of minimal rights for organized labor and activity by the federal government to promote the general welfare? If the Civil War and New Deal eras were creedal passion periods, Huntington could not call "idealistic" political activism in America "obsessive." Instead, activism would appear "effective" in American history and it would have to be acknowledged as a source of some of the United States's most redeeming, egalitarian features. Huntington is not a racist, and he favors the New Deal. He simply wishes to neutralize the politicalness of those eras so that their positive value in American political consciousness may be viewed primarily in their contributions (which there certainly were) to administrative centralization.

For Huntington, the historical appearance of morally inspired political protest does not reflect the disarray of economic, social, and political institutions, but rather the periodic eruption of atavistic ideas in the American moral consciousness. It should not be surprising, then, that Huntington advises Americans to cool their political aspirations. The origins of ideological norms, he claims,

<sup>3</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, pp. 58-59, 71-83; Wood, *American Republic*, pp. 21-25, 77-78, 350, 383.

are historically obsolete, and because their roots are subjective and psychological rather than objective and political, they will be unreliable guides to "rational" political action. Rather than reforming institutions to fit their ideals, Americans should conform their ideals to fit their institutions.

If democratic ideals provide a faulty compass for beneficially directing political practice, why should we trust the guidance offered by institutions? What is it that they require that makes political protest "obsessive"? The answers belong to the conservative's stock of knowledge, and Huntington's conservative answers flow from a theory called "functionalism" that he uses to defend the inherent goodness of established institutions. This theory posits the existence of objectively ascertainable needs for social institutions—as if they possessed natural urges toward environmental adaptation. Their health consists of their stability or equilibrium; institutional imperatives are nonideological and value-free. Thus Huntington believes that in later creedal passion periods serious conflict arose between America's "developmental need" and its "ideological norm" of the Creed. Drawing on this theory, Huntington also argues that institutions function most efficiently if they operate independently of any class base.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, political activity that reflects class antagonisms must be kept to a minimum because it hampers institutional adaptation to the "realities" of modern life. In this view, popularly motivated social and political change becomes obsessive because it uselessly generates instability and disrupts institutional equilibrium. Since functionalism ratifies the existing structure of power as rational and condemns political protest as irrational, it has an obvious use in Huntington's political analysis. It authorizes free action for elites because the domain for legitimate politics shrinks to include only technical problems of system management whose solution must come from the top.

Given Huntington's view of the existence of functional constraints on the health of institutions, individuals who operate them must do so competently and can do so according to nonideological, "objective" criteria. Such competence is much easier to judge if the institution is organized in a clearly hierarchical pattern of authority, because then a unitary standard of expertise exists. Effective military organizations have such a structure and follow such a standard. Not surprisingly, Huntington's first book lamented the incompatibility of typical American values with those that foster the competent performance of the military function. If Americans more warmly embraced the military ethic, he urged,

<sup>4</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 9.

their political climate would offer a more suitable atmosphere for the expert solution to America's security needs.<sup>5</sup> This need for Americans to adjust their values is particularly necessary, said Huntington, in America's contemporary condition. Before World War I, the primary question concerning security affairs was "what pattern of civil-military relations is most compatible with liberal democratic values."<sup>6</sup> Security concerns could be subordinated to democratic needs. Now, America's world-wide economic and military preeminence downgrades the importance of preserving democratic values. Security must become our paramount preoccupation; and it is provided by the state.

**T**he primacy of "national security" in Huntington's thought, fused with his interpretation of the American Creed as an antipower ethic, has disturbing political implications. In *The Soldier and the State* Huntington argues for "objective civilian control" of the military in all matters outside the domain of the military's professional competence. Although he took pains to differentiate the ideology of fascism from "conservative realism," the two possess, nonetheless, some unsettling resemblances. The values of conservative realism include nationalism, loyalty, pessimism, corporatism, power, order, hierarchy, and a belief in the "permanence, irrationality, weakness, and evil in human nature."<sup>7</sup> Besides their military usefulness, such values automatically bestow moral virtue on pyramidal structures of authority and the selfless pose of bureaucrats who resist emotional appeals from below. Huntington's belief in conservative realism imbues the power of hierarchical institutions with moral authority and emphasizes the political priority of the state's security against hostile forces. As a result, when issues of military security dominate politics, as they must for Huntington's America today, the preoccupations of national security acquire primary political value and become the keystone around which other social institutions ought to be coordinated. The effect is to eliminate any justification for politics.

This subordination of authoritative moral and political activity to the security operations of the state, stitched to a functionalist theory of institutions, drains the natural political competence and authority of the people and invests it in the elite of the nation's military, governmental, and economic institutions:

5 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 80-96, 143-92, 464-66.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 59-79, 91-94.

popular limits on institutional authority must weaken institutional power; popular direction of institutional power must diminish institutional competence and legitimacy.

Such beliefs enable Huntington to advocate unspecified limitations, in *The Crisis of Democracy*, on popularly inspired attempts to shape governmental policy and, in *American Politics*, on programs for political reform shaped by "creedal passion." In the former, Huntington urges the greatest possible dissociation of a president's "electoral coalition" from his "governing coalition," which must include "key people in Congress, the executive branch, and the private establishment."<sup>8</sup> In the latter, he worries out loud whether today, when America's "increasingly sophisticated economy and active involvement in world affairs seem likely to create stronger needs for hierarchy, bureaucracy, centralization of power, expertise, big government specifically, and big organizations generally," the American Creed can sustain an "effective system of government" able "to compete internationally" and to handle its "foreign enemies."

More specifically, Huntington's world picture of "conservative realism," combined with fears about a pervasive "antipower ethic," leads him to argue for new protections for the powerful from political criticism. Political leaders responsible for deploying American power should not be asked to publicize their actions if they are to perform their job well. Given the "obsession" of Americans for "exposure" during creedal passion periods, "the most effective exercise of power is the concealment of power; to cover up power becomes the first imperative of power." Top political leaders, as a matter of course, must hide what the function of their office requires of them in order to satisfy the antipower ethic of the American people. Accordingly, Huntington minimizes Nixon's subversion of open government as a political crime. The secrecy surrounding the bombing of Cambodia was necessary in order to "avoid embarrassing Prince Sihanouk and complicating peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese." Regarding Watergate, Huntington believes that "along with his other misdoings, Nixon was guilty of not carrying over into his private conversations with his aides the hypocritical clichés demanded of public rhetoric."

Indeed, what is most threatening about creedal passion periods, for Huntington, is not the "abuse of power" but "the erosion of authority." During creedal passion periods, the fragility of political authority and power increases. Abuses of power and authority are no greater than at other times; only popular sensitiv-

8 "The United States," in Michael J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 113-15, 97.

ity to them has heightened. Moreover, by the time the public becomes aware of abuses of power and authority, the power and authority under attack have already weakened; the danger has diminished. Protest is therefore superfluous because the problem already has been solved. Effective public criticism does less to correct abuses of power than to delegitimize the institutions associated with the abuses. In addition, such erosion of authority makes leaders uneasy, more likely to abuse their power. According to Huntington, illegal wiretaps on newspapermen and foreign policy personnel in the administration after the leaked *New York Times* story on the bombing of Cambodia were not the fault of Nixon, Kissinger, and Hoover. At fault was the American passion for exposure. Huntington's message is that "moralism" generates a passion for exposure that induces an inordinate desire for secrecy in government and leads to abuses of power. Huntington does not want a corrupt government; he wants a privatized one, one that receives less flak at home and exercises greater freedom of action abroad.

**I**n the final chapter of his book, Huntington produces his most breathtaking paradox. While he has taken great pains to show that popular political movements in American history have failed to close the gap between reality and ideal, and indeed have often produced the opposite of the intentions of the protestors, there is one form of action that has successfully bridged the gap: American military action in foreign countries. After a cavalier analysis of the causes of the dictatorships of Trujillo, Batista, and Somoza, and of the effects of American military intervention in Chile, the Philippines, Vietnam, South Korea, and the Caribbean, Huntington informs us that abuses of power by the right in those nations always appeared after the withdrawal of American military forces. It is still possible to realize the ideals of the American Creed if the arena for their actualization is beyond America's borders and their advocates are American armed forces.

Huntington's effort to resolve America's legitimation crisis results in him closing his book with the following political advice: "The promotion of liberty abroad thus requires the expansion of American power; the operation of liberty at home involves the limitation of American power." This amounts to urging more military protection for corporations abroad and more economic freedom for corporations at home. It encourages attempts to maintain America's domestic peace and international predominance by depoliticizing its citizenry and militarizing the nation. To ensure institutional stability, the public must become disciplined, supportive servants of the state. Huntington's interpretation of the function of the state actually translates as the unfettered ability of the executive to administer the realm. Democracy becomes equated with mass loyalty, while the most harmonious political environment means the quiet ascendancy of a presidential administration in alliance with the country's hegemonic social and

economic forces.

But the promise of disharmony in American politics does not force a choice between our ideals and our institutions, as Huntington would have it. Democratic ideals have never entailed the abdication of leadership, the eradication of authority, or an antagonism towards power. The real choice is between democracy and empire, because empire destroys what democracy requires: a close link between the ideals of citizens and the workings of their institutions, the participatory power of citizens in sustaining them, the active cooperation of the citizenry in the determination of their common ends wherever they live and work in common. In Huntington's America—structured to enhance the authority of the executive, the use of the military, and the power of corporations—such democracy has no place. Huntington has summoned Americans to deactivate their ideals for the well-being of their institutions, so that democracy becomes safe for empire.

If no one seems in control these days, if power seems ineffective and political competence a thing of the past, the cause does not stem from the potency of American ideals but from the program of "the established order"—the expansion of the military, the pauperization of the middle and lower classes, the greater concentration of capital in the economy, and the diminution of the role and resources of political bodies at every level that develop the virtues and skills of the citizenry as a whole. This program continues to destroy the fundamental conditions for leadership, authority, and competence in a democratic society, namely the political power of the people, Huntington's real fear.