The Panel and Panelist Biographies
Commissioned Essays
Proceedings: Introduction
I. Who Are We Today?
II. What Can Philanthropy Do?

What is the condition of our national character or identity?

Multiculturalism, postmodernism, intolerant secular relativism, uncontrolled borders, a toxic culture, the rise of radical Islam, the decline in civic understanding and awareness, the growth of “transnational” beliefs and institutions—these powerful trends seem to be tugging at and undermining our peculiar American sense of national character or identity.

Who are we today?

American conservatism has always prided itself on its ability to define and defend our national sense of self. Liberalism, on the other hand, often seems less resistant—sometimes even hospitable—to corrosive contemporary trends.

What can we do to halt or reverse corrosive trends? What in particular can philanthropy contribute to this effort?

Commissioned essays on these questions by Wilfred McClay of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, the Manhattan Institute’s John McWhorter, and Fr. Richard John Neuhaus of First Things served as the basis for discussion at the 2007 Bradley Symposium held on Thursday, May 3, 2007. Ten distinguished panelists joined an audience of approximately 150 invited guests in vigorous discussion.

To request further information on this event or the Bradley Center, please contact Hudson Institute at (202) 974-2424 or e-mail krista@hudson.org. The transcript of this discussion was prepared from a digital recording and edited by Krista Shaffer. A summary and video of the discussion are also available online, at http://pcr.hudson.org. To request further information on this event or the Bradley Center, please contact Hudson Institute at (202) 974-2424 or krista@hudson.org.
The Panel

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**LINDA CHAVEZ**, Center for Equal Opportunity  
**ROSS DOUTHAT**, *Atlantic Monthly*  
**AYAAN HIRSI ALI**, American Enterprise Institute  
**AMY KASS**, University of Chicago and Hudson Institute  
**YUVAL LEVIN**, Ethics and Public Policy Center  
**JOHN MCWHORTER**, Manhattan Institute  
**RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS**, *First Things*  
**JOHN O’SULLIVAN**, Hudson Institute  
**STEPHAN THERNSTROM**, Harvard University  
**JAMES Q. WILSON**, Pepperdine University

Panelist Biographies

**David Blankenhorn** is founder and president of the Institute for American Values, a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to contributing intellectually to the renewal of marriage and family life and the sources of competence, character, and citizenship in the United States. He is the author of *The Future of Marriage* (Encounter, 2007) and *Fatherless America* (1995) and co-editor of five books, most recently *The Fatherhood Movement* and *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions*. In 1994, Blankenhorn helped to found the *National Fatherhood Initiative*, serving as that organization’s founding chairman. A frequent lecturer, Blankenhorn’s ideas have been cited in *Time, Newsweek, the Economist,* and elsewhere, and his articles have appeared in scores of publications. He has been profiled by the *CBS Evening News* and other news organizations, and has been featured on numerous national television programs, including *Oprah, 20/20, Eye to Eye, CBS This Morning, The Today Show, Charlie Rose, ABC Evening News, Equal Time,* and C-SPAN’s *Washington Perspectives*.


Ayaan Hirsi Ali is currently a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington D.C. She was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, was raised Muslim, and spent her childhood and young adulthood in Africa and Saudi Arabia. In 1992, Hirsi Ali arrived in the Netherlands as a refugee. She earned her college degree in political science and worked for the Dutch Labor party. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, she denounced Islam. In November 2002, she became a member of the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy) and served as a member of parliament from January 2003 to May 2006, working for the rights of Muslim women in Europe, the enlightenment of Islam and security in the West. In May 2006, she resigned her position in the Dutch parliament due to a controversy over the legitimacy of her Dutch citizenship. Hirsi Ali was named one of Time Magazine’s “100 Most Influential People of 2005,” one of the Glamour Heroes of 2005, and Reader’s Digest’s “European of the Year.” She is the author of Infidel (2007) and The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam (2006).

For over 30 years, Amy Kass has been an award-winning teacher of classic texts in the College of the University of Chicago, where she serves as Senior Lecturer in the Humanities. Beyond the academy, using similar literary materials, she has for many years directed nationwide seminars on civic leadership and philanthropic practice, beginning with the “Tocqueville Seminars on Civic Leadership” at the University of Chicago, and, most recently, in the “Dialogues on Civic Philanthropy” at the Hudson Institute, where she is also a senior fellow. Author of numerous articles and books on cultural, philanthropic, and related topics, including The Perfect Gift: The Philanthropic Imagination in Poetry and Prose and (with Leon Kass) Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying, she currently works with the philanthropic community—donors, foundation and non-profit leaders, scholars and trustees—to help develop more responsible, responsive, and civic-spirited philanthropy. Her latest volume, Giving Well, Doing Good, forthcoming with Indiana University Press, reflects these most recent efforts.

Yuval Levin is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC). An expert in domestic policy, science and technology policy, and bioethics, he also serves as director of EPPC’s Bioethics and American Democracy Program and senior editor of The New Atlantis magazine. He has served as associate director of the White House Domestic Policy Council and Executive Director of the President’s Council on Bioethics. His essays and articles have appeared in numerous publications including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Commentary, The Weekly Standard, The Public Interest, and others, and he is the author of Tyranny of Reason: The Origins and Consequences of the Social Scientific Outlook.
John McWhorter, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and weekly columnist for the New York Sun, earned his Ph.D. in linguistics from Stanford University in 1993 and went on to teach at Cornell University and UC Berkeley. His academic specialty is language change and language contact. He is the author of The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language, on how the world’s languages arise, change, and mix, and Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music in America and Why We Should, Like, Care. He has also written a book on dialects and Black English, The Word on the Street, and three books on creole languages. The Teaching Company released his 36-lecture audiovisual course The Story of Human Language in 2004. Beyond his work in linguistics, he is the author of Losing the Race, an anthology of race writings, Authentically Black, and Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America. He has written on race and cultural issues for numerous periodicals, and has been interviewed on television and radio on several occasions. His academic linguistic book Language Interrupted: Signs of Non-Native Acquisition in Standard Language Grammars, will be published in 2007.

Richard John Neuhaus is president of The Institute on Religion and Public Life, a nonpartisan interreligious research and education institute in New York City, and serves as editor-in-chief of the Institute’s publication, First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life. As a Lutheran clergyman, he was for seventeen years senior pastor of a low-income Black parish in Brooklyn, New York. He has played a leadership role in organizations dealing with civil rights, international justice, and ecumenism, and has held presidential appointments in the Carter, Reagan, and first Bush administrations. Neuhaus’ work has been the subject of feature articles in popular and scholarly publications both here and abroad, and he has been the recipient of numerous honors from universities and other institutions, including the John Paul II Award for Religious Freedom. Among his best known books are Freedom for Ministry, The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America, The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World, and, with Rabbi Leon Klenicki, Believing Today: Jew and Christian in Conversation. His most recent book is Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth, which was published by Basic Books in February, 2006.

John O’Sullivan is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute and author of the recent book The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World. He is also editor-at-large of National Review where he served as editor-in-chief for nine years. He was editor of the distinguished foreign policy quarterly, the National Interest, from 2003 to 2005 and editor-in-chief of United Press International from 2000 to 2003. O’Sullivan’s previous posts have included special adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, associate editor of the London Times, assistant editor of the London Daily Telegraph, and editor of Policy Review. O’Sullivan is the founder and co-chairman of the New Atlantic Initiative, an international bipartisan effort dedicated to reinvigorating and expanding the Atlantic community of democracies. He has published articles in Encounter, Commentary, Prospect, the New York Times, the Washington Post, Policy Review, the American Spectator, the Spectator (London), Quadrant, Hibernia and other journals.
Stephan Thernstrom, a recipient of the 2007 Bradley Prize, is the Winthrop Professor of History at Harvard University where he teaches American social history. His most recent book, co-authored with Abigail Thernstrom, is America in Black and White: One Nation. Indivisible. He is also the editor of the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, and the author of Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City; Poverty, Politics, and Planning in the New Boston; The Origins of ABCD; The Other Bostonians; Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970; and a two-volume survey, A History of the American People. He also has written widely in periodicals for general audiences, including The New Republic, the Times Literary Supplement, The Public Interest, Commentary, Dissent, Partisan Review, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.

From 1961 to 1987, James Q. Wilson taught political science at Harvard University, where he was the Shattuck Professor of Government. From 1985 until 1997 he was the James Collins Professor of Management and Public Policy at UCLA. Today, he is the Ronald Reagan Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University. He is the author or coauthor of fifteen books, the most recent of which is The Marriage Problem (HarperCollins, 2002). Others include Moral Judgment (Basic Books), the Moral Sense (Free Press), American Government (Houghton Mifflin) Bureaucracy (Basic Books) Thinking About Crime (Free Press), Varieties of Police Behavior (Harvard University Press), Political Organizations (Princeton University Press), and Crime and Human Nature (with Richard J. Herrnstein, Simon & Schuster). He has in addition edited or contributed to books on urban problems, government regulation of business, drugs, crime, and the prevention of delinquency among children. Many of his writings on morality and human character have been collected in On Character: Essays by James Q. Wilson. In 2003, President George W. Bush presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award. Wilson is a recipient of the 2007 Bradley Prize.
I WILL NEVER FORGET a conversation I had with two twentysomething Muslims not long after 9/11. One had been born and raised in the United States, the other had come here at a young age. It was clear from our conversation, though they gingerly avoided putting it explicitly, that neither of them entirely disapproved of what Osama bin Laden had done. There were, of course, multiple recitations of “I think what he did was terrible” — but delivered with a certain lack of emotional commitment. What came through was a sentiment that, in the end, something terrible had been necessary for bin Laden to get across a valuable message. I did not find it hard to imagine that the two young Muslims would have been more explicit about this with each other had I not been present.

The late Arthur Schlesinger Jr. is reported to have said that he could not walk down Fifth Avenue without wondering what it and the people on it would have looked like a century before. I share that type of historical curiosity — and it occurs to me that this conversation with the Muslims would have been very unlikely before about 30 years ago. There was a time when immigrants, if residing in America permanently, unhesitatingly embraced becoming Americans. Any sentiment that, say, Pearl Harbor was “understandable” would have been kept very, very quiet.

These two Muslims, however, thought of America as an opportunity, but not as an identity. Orientations like theirs are, in today’s America, perfectly normal — even among the unhyphenated, as I have learned in assorted conversations since 9/11. Among a vast proportion of Americans, one of the very defining traits of being an American is to lack pride in being one. One either has no conscious sense of American identity or, if one is given to lending the issue more attention, is ashamed of being American. To celebrate America, meanwhile, is considered naive and peculiar; one gets a pass by defining America as the sum of competing “diversities” — witness claims that Barack Obama represents “what America is” — which means that America is no one thing, and thus nothing, finally, but an address.
One thing that an American sent back in time to 1907 would have to get used to is how much prouder the American identity was among people of all walks of life. The term American carried a warmth and a swagger. People often referred to English spoken in our country as “American,” and were not always joking: H. L. Mencken titled his scholarly masterpiece *The American Language*, a highly unlikely title for a similar work today. The American Beauty Rose was named in 1875; today one imagines a new rose being given a name like Suri. The Gershwin brothers titled an early hit “The Real American Folk Song Is a Rag” in a spirit of jolly celebration. A series of revues called *Americana* — unironically — ran on Broadway starting in the late Twenties.

There was, to be sure, an element of parochialism in this apple-pie patriotism, and too often it shaded into an unreflective George M. Cohan–style jingoism. A century from now, though, what will appear equally unreflective is the opposite sentiment now held up as a sign of enlightenment: active contempt for the American experiment.

Nowhere is this contempt more explicit than among our intelligentsia. The humanities and social sciences enshrine the examination of power relations (or, more specifically, injustice) obsessively. The endless explorations of the *subordination* of the *subaltern*, and the possibilities of *contesting* and *transgression*, are a stark abbreviation of human curiosity. Legions of scholars nevertheless devote careers to this narrow conception of scholarship, out of a fundamental commitment to revealing our Powers That Be as frauds. There is little room for love of country in this view of the world.

Obviously, it is old news for intellectuals to be gadflies. In the 1922 anthology *Civilization in the United States*, editor Harold Stearns blasted “emotional and aesthetic starvation,” “the mania for petty regulation,” “the driving, regimentating, and drilling” of society. Strong drink, but these scholars were mostly opposed to how the lesser sides of human nature gum up the works in a country that could do better. One searches this book in vain for the kind of bone-deep, utterly dismissive contempt for all that America stands for that is now common coin in academia.

For example, a cherished observation on a certain circuit is that “America was founded upon racism from its very beginnings,” which regularly cops vigorous applause from white as well as black audience members. There’s some truth to this, to be sure — but in that we cannot change it, the charge implies that it would have been better if Jamestown and Plymouth had never been settled and Africans had remained in their villages. Patriotism, obviously, does not apply here.

Certainly one would not expect scholarly people to devote careers to mere celebration. But one might imagine them fashioning a nuanced but vigorous brand of patriotism, calling America on its weaknesses with a basic pride in what we do right. A model would be typical intellectuals in
France. Instead, we are taught that the enlightened orientation to our native land ought be more like the one that reigns in Germany, so deeply embarrassed about the Holocaust as to recoil at any prideful view of their Vaterland. The enlightened soul must therefore sneer at such notions as a U.S. policy titled Homeland Security.

The extreme nature of modern leftist academics’ writings suggests that empirical engagement with reality is not the driving force in such ideology. For example, most of this work, while presented as advocacy for the downtrodden, reveals a curious lack of genuine commitment to change. The tacit assumption is that nothing could make America a worthy project short of a seismic transformation in its operating procedures and in the fundamental psychologies of its inhabitants. No reasonable person could have any hope that this could actually happen, and this can only mean that people who think this way maintain their opinions for reasons other than practical ones.

Those reasons are emotional rather than political — a desire to wear alienation from the Establishment as a badge of insight and sophistication. It reaffirms that the wearers are good people, good in a way unavailable to those less learned and aware. This cynicism is calisthenic: It benefits its bearer rather than the people it purports to be concerned about. It is something I have elsewhere termed therapeutic alienation.

Therapeutic alienation is not, however, confined to the ivory tower. Beyond the campus, explicit, acrid contempt for the Establishment is a fringe taste — but the therapeutic alienation at the roots of this contempt is now widespread, and has equally dire consequences for proud American identity. Existential alienation and oppositional sentiment for their own sake have a way of discouraging people from saluting a flag.

CHAFING AGAINST ‘THE MAN’

In 1964, 76 percent of Americans reported trust in the government; by 2000 — long before the Iraq War — only 44 percent, fewer than half, did. The dishonesty of the Johnson and Nixon administrations about the Vietnam War and the awakening of the country to the unjust treatment of blacks sparked this change. But that was a long time ago, and alienation has come to reign even among people too young to recall that era. The alienation has raged unchecked even as blacks have become steadily more central to even the highest realms of American life, and even under a Clinton administration that liberals did not consider arrantly mendacious about policy. It is no longer a response, but a self-standing gesture. Initiated by an external stimulus, this alienated posture has settled in as what one is born to and inhales as a norm, one readily embraced because of its self-congratulatory appeal.

An example is the howling antiestablishment despair typical of heavy-metal music, embraced even by the mild-mannered as “cool.” Similar is the “gangsta” strain of hip-hop, full of excoriations of the police and celebrations of black people as “niggers” engaged in eternal battle against a racist AmeriKKKa, now a staff of life among legions of blacks under 50 and supported by a 70 percent white buyership. The modern American, having never known a time when music like this was not a norm, is given to assuming that it is, in the first case, a natural reflection of the rebelliousness inherent to youth, and, in the second, the inevitable reaction of blacks who have
suffered the abuse of racism. Yet hungry Okie migrants knew no such music, nor did the black sharecroppers watching lynchings year by year. No, music like this is the product of an attitudinal tic specific to our times.

Therapeutic alienation sends ripples throughout the culture. The late comedian Sam Kinison built a career in the Eighties on delighting audiences with tirades capped by open-throated screaming about The Man. Barbie is now fighting for her life against Bratz dolls, provocatively clad with smirky facial expressions hinting that they are not unfamiliar with sex. This is alienation and oppositionalism as fetish, posture, performance.

Alienation as performance, to be sure, began the first time an early Homo sapiens child had a tantrum. But under ordinary conditions of human society, this behavior, while more typical of some individuals than others, does not become a zeitgeist. It is treated as an emotional indulgence that real-life exigencies must keep in check. Societies living on the land, ever in fear that weather or warfare will leave them in danger of starvation, do not know of alienation as sport. Modern America, however, is a wealthy society where few are hungry, and where there has not been a war on our own soil in 150 years (and not one that all able-bodied men were required to participate in in 40 years). Under these conditions, the tantrum no longer constitutes a threat to survival. Enter, then, alienation embraced as a cathartic pose. It is no accident that America saw a preview of the same in the prosperous Twenties, when the Smart Set went about with their copies of the studiously cynical American Mercury, whose editor, Mencken, was devoted more to the rhetorically sonorous trashing the powers that be than fashioning a coherent alternative.

THE ALIENATED MINORITY

The reign of therapeutic alienation has also upended black America’s orientation to being American. A time traveler to 1907 would find peculiar how openly the black people, just a decade past Plessy v. Ferguson, were striving toward being “American.” At all-black Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., students were learning Latin. W. E. B. Du Bois taught Greek, and those who cherish his Marxist tilt later in life are often unaware that he could have conversed with Marx in German.

In their smash-hit musical Shuffle Along (1921), Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle included a ballad with language straight out of the operettas popular at the time: “Love will find a way / though now skies are gray / Love like ours can never be ruled / Cupid’s not schooled that way.” A photograph of black women protesting lynching in front of the White House in the Thirties includes a placard reading “Kentucky women demand justice for all American citizens” — as opposed to the more likely version in our own times, which would demand justice for “Black People.”

Since the Sixties, black Americans are much more concerned with maintaining a “black identity” — a term unknown to Victorian-era Du Bois — than with being “American.” Many would claim that this is because being black in America is to experience an ongoing assault from racist actions. But striving for Americanness was typical among a great many blacks in an era starkly racist to a degree we are blissfully past, when, as Richard Wright once put it, successful blacks
were rare “single fishes that leap and flash for a split second above the surface of the sea,”
“fleeting exceptions to that vast, tragic school that swims below in the depths.”

Of course, quite a few blacks and white fellow-travelers insist that little has changed since
Wright wrote; they willfully neglect the fact that today there are more middle-class blacks than
poor ones. Ideology also trumps empiricism in the insistences that (a) it’s school underfunding
that keeps black grades and test scores down (when many black students are amply documented
as thinking of doing well in school as a “white” characteristic) and (b) the reason black men are
overrepresented in the prison population must be “the prison-industrial complex” (when black
men also commit violent crimes in vast disproportion to their percentage of the population).

The dogged insistence on chronicling “racism” — when the larger problem today is so clearly
cultural, and not caused by racism — only makes sense as another manifestation of therapeutic
alienation. Again, improved prospects ironically pave the way for staged grievance. When
barriers to black advancement were concrete and pitiless, there was no room for poses about an
all-too-real injustice. Only now can such routines thrive, lending passing pleasure to a people
otherwise rising by the year. The result is that amidst musings on what black identity should be,
Africa plays a large part while being “American” is considered beside the point — even though
America is the only homeland black Americans have known for centuries, or ever will.

ROOTS OF DISASTER

There certainly exist people in the United States who have a self-conscious and positive sense of
their identity as Americans. They are more likely to be military than civilian, conservative rather
than liberal, working-class rather than upper-middle. They are on the defensive, regularly
dismissed as maudlin and uninformed.

Could there ever again be in the U.S. a widespread sense of pride in a single culture, as has been
typical of Greece, China, Thailand, or most other nations in human history? Sadly, I can think of
nothing that could create such an America other than a sustained violent attack upon our country.
Apparently, the single one that already happened has left the self-medicating oppositional
impulse intact. Leftist intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag were fashioning 9/11
as our just deserts for imperialism even while Ground Zero was still aglow. Chomsky’s pamphlet
on the issue sold like hotcakes. Good-thinking people have been taught to view al-Qaeda as
freedom fighters sticking a thumb in our eye for our government’s support of Israel.

Yet if we suffered a string of brutal nuclear bombings of several American cities à la television’s
24, in which it became a typical American experience to lose a relative or friend in carnage
wrought by fundamentalist Arabs reviling America as the Great Satan, we would suddenly be
back to the old days. Tragic, mercilessly concrete reality — maimed corpses, attending funerals
as a monthly ritual — would make self-medicating iPod theatrics seem instantly trivial. The
urgency of defending the life we know, American life, against murderous barbarians would
instantly wake us up to the value of what America, its flaws acknowledged, is, and what it has
achieved.
I regret to say that short of that, to be American will continue to be, for most who bother to think about it, what one might term a postmodern position: nurturing a sense of personal legitimacy upon a willful, bitter ambivalence toward a land one has no intention of leaving.

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COMMISSIONED ESSAY: Contract and Covenant: In search of American identity

by Richard John Neuhaus

This essay, which appeared in the April 30 issue of National Review, was prepared for the 2007 Bradley Symposium addressing the topic “Who Are We Today? American Character and Identity in the 21st Century.”

Psychologists tell us that there is no more important or complex process in childhood than the formation of an answer to the question “Who am I?” It is a recurring question that is not settled once and for all. From infancy through adulthood and until the day we die, we are defining ourselves, and we are defining ourselves in relation to others. Beginning with our parents and family, the question of who I am is inseparable from the question of who we are. In the Christian understanding of things, the questioning will continue until the end of time—until, in the words of St. Paul, “we know even as we are known” (I Corinthians 13).

The question is that of identity, which is a very big word in our cultural, political, and psychological vocabularies. The word is from the Latin idem, meaning “the same.” A standard dictionary definition of identity is “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances.” As much as we might wish it were not so, sameness is defined by difference, like is defined by unlike. In the jargon of the social sciences, identity may be ascribed, inherited, elected, achieved, or constructed—or all of these in confused combination—but it is always and inevitably a process of differentiation. Identity, whether personal or communal, also excludes. We are this and not that.

Today there is lively and confused contention about national identity, racial identity, sexual identity, and sundry other identities that are frequently expressed in “identity politics.” In this confusion the question of who we are as Americans runs up against the claim that there is no American identity but only a hodgepodge of identities in both complementarity and competition.
There is, it is said, no American culture but only a mosaic of subcultures in which individuals elect to be who they want to be and therefore most truly are.

Who are we Americans? The question is as old as the European settlement of this continent, and the settlers took many stabs at answering it, especially in distinguishing the New World from the Old. Almost 200 years on, Tocqueville remains the master analyst of American identity. Fifty years before Tocqueville, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in *Letters from an American Farmer*, “The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. . . . This is an American.”

Whatever else America is, America is new. Few politicians win elections by promising to preserve the status quo or restore the past. Conservatism, when successful, presents itself as the promise of the future, as in Ronald Reagan’s “morning in America.” The market economy is premised upon the anticipation of unrealized possibilities. The Great Seal of the United States speaks of the form of both government and society in declaring America to be a *novus ordo seclorum*—a new order for the ages. The oddity of American conservatism, as distinct from European conservatism, is that it reveres the past not in defense of an *ancien régime* but as the guide to the future. American identity is memory in the service of promise.

American identity defies the assumption that we must choose between the particular and the universal. With a confidence that can easily be mistaken as arrogance, and at times succumbs to arrogance, America understands itself as a particular in the service of the universal. From the founding of the constitutional order and, before that, from the Puritan “errand into the wilderness,” America was viewed as an experiment on a universal stage, and experiments can either succeed or fail. In Lincoln’s fine phrase, America is “an almost chosen people,” a people abiding by a social contract premised upon a transcendent covenant.

Both contract and covenant are integral to American identity. We are a nation under law by constitutional contract—a contract presupposing covenantal accountability. To say that we are a nation “under God” is to speak of promise, but it is, at least as importantly, to speak of a nation under judgment. Thus is contract tied to covenantal aspiration and covenantal aspiration restrained by contractual agreement.

This dialectic, if you will, between contract and covenant is the distinctly American way of joining the particular and the universal. Contemporary multiculturalisms that would embrace every culture but our own dissolve the dialectic, reaching for an inclusiveness that, were they to have their way, would result in the exclusion of American identity. Like Esperanto, the supposedly universal language spoken only by a small band of sectaries, multiculturalism as conventionally promoted rejects the particular for the sake of the universal and ends up betraying both. Multiculturalism, like Esperanto, ends up as the monoculturalism of a very small culture.

**THE STORY OF A PEOPLE**

America, it has been said, is the first universal nation, meaning that it is not constituted by tribal, ethnic, religious, or other identities but rather by principles, and is open to all who embrace those principles. As with multiculturalism, there is a measure of truth in this claim. But it fails to
appreciate adequately that the principles are embedded in a narrative. America is the story of a people—the people who are Americans and who aspire to become Americans. Samuel Huntington’s recent book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity*, has been largely ignored and, when not ignored, derided as an antiimmigrant or even nativist tract. This is, I believe, both unfair and unfortunate. While one may question some of his analyses and prescriptions (and I do), he poses hard and necessary questions to the claim that America is or can be a “universal nation” or even “a nation of immigrants” apart from the narrative of a particular people who joined contract and covenant in constituting this *novus ordo seculorum*.

That narrative of what might be called a contract within a covenant is nicely caught by Michael Novak in his 2001 book, *On Two Wings*, in which he displays the inseparability of religious faith and common sense in the American founding. (A particular merit of Novak’s account is his underscoring of the fact that, in the founding, Christian cannot be understood except as Judeo-Christian.) There is an important distinction to be made between a Christian society and a Christian nation, the one referring to the people and the other to the polity. In our republican ordering of democratic government, however, there is the danger of that distinction’s becoming a division which pits polity against people and people against polity, with the result that both the republican and the democratic character of this constitutional order are undone.

In a unanimous decision of 1892, the Supreme Court declared, “These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation.” Needless to say, such a statement by the Supreme Court today would occasion puzzlement, controversy, and widespread outrage. It is not immediately evident why this should be the case. By the measurements available to researchers, an argument can be made that America is no less Christian, and is possibly more Christian, than it was in 1892. It is commonly said that we have become a much more religiously pluralistic society, but that is a claim—and, on the part of some, no doubt a wish—that is unsupported by the evidence.

The frequently visceral reaction to the idea of “Christian America” has several sources. Since the rise to political prominence of the so-called Religious Right in the late 1970s, frequently hysterical alarms have been raised, and have now reached a climax, against the looming threat of a “theocratic” dismantling of our constitutional order. While conservative Christian voices are frequently strident, the stridency should, I believe, be understood as an aggressive defense by a large part of the population that has been made to feel that they are strangers in their own land.

Although their insurgency was not initially sparked by the Supreme Court’s imposition of an unlimited abortion license, *Roe v. Wade*’s exercise of “raw judicial power” (as Justice Byron White called it) has turned out to be the single most important factor in the realignment of public sentiment over the last half century that has resulted in what are aptly called the “culture wars.” Support for laws protective of the unborn has in very large part driven hostility to the idea of Christian America. In second place as a cause of the culture wars, with a force that almost nobody anticipated 20 years ago, is the effort to “normalize” homosexual relations, focused in the controversy over same-sex marriage.

In a larger historical context, it has been argued that the bohemian and libertine agitations of the 1910s and 1920s were merely interrupted by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Baby
Boom, and were then temporarily rerouted into the countercultural enthusiasms of the 1960s and 1970s, only to resume their direct assault on Christian America in more recent years. This is a suggestive argument and is not without heuristic value, but it perhaps partakes too much of historical determinism to be entirely convincing.

This is not to deny that hostility to the idea of Christian America has a historical lineage. One thinks, for instance, of “The Humanist Manifesto” of 1933 and its robust promotion of an ideology of secularism. It was signed by a wide and representative array of what today would be called “public intellectuals,” led by the formidable John Dewey. This ideology was powerfully reinforced by a series of Supreme Court decisions on church-state questions, beginning in the late 1940s, that repudiated the idea of Christian America and declared the state to be neutral toward or, in the view of some, hostile to the religio-cultural identity of the American people. These developments and their consequences I have described in detail in *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, and they have been insightfully analyzed from a legal perspective by, among others, Philip Hamburger in *Separation of Church and State*.

An unintended consequence of the torrent of literature warning against the threat of an impending theocracy may be an increased interest in the question of how America is and is not a Christian society, and what difference that may make. An additional reason for increased interest may be the realization, still slowly dawning on most Americans, that we are confronted by a militant Islam with no doubts that America is the Christian enemy, manipulated by a cabal of Jews. The Judeo-Christian factor in American identity is reinforced by the challenge of Islam, which believes it has displaced both Judaism and Christianity in the purposes of God, and by a violent jihadist ideology set upon forcing the submission of the world to Allah by any means necessary. Zev Chafets, an American-Israeli journalist, is among those who envision a rapprochement between American Jews and evangelical Christians, the latter of whom constitute by far the largest and most politically potent base of popular support for America’s commitment to Israel.

**A QUESTION FIT FOR POLITE COMPANY**

Whatever the several reasons, the subject of Christian America—long ruled out of order in polite company—is receiving increased attention. Representative is an article in the current issue of *Political Science Quarterly* titled “Is America a Christian Nation?” The author, Hugh Heclo, previously of Harvard and now of George Mason University, writes, “The question being posed is politically provocative in our own times because we have reached a stage of contesting the fundamentals of knowing who we really are.”

Like most thoughtful people addressing this subject, Heclo answers his title question in both the affirmative and the negative. Yes, demographically speaking, there is no doubt that America is a Christian society. But if one asks whether most Americans are morally guided by or doctrinally committed to Christianity, the answer is no. On the other hand: “America’s political institutions (especially in a legal separation of church and state) and America’s political ethos (especially in its moralizing, redemptive character) carry the imprint of the nation’s Christian heritage, making America still today a derivatively ‘sort of’ Christian nation.”
To which one might respond that a “sort of” Christian nation is all that might be expected in view of human sinfulness and the limitations of history. Revising Gibbon, it might be said that the Holy Roman Empire was sort of holy, sort of Roman, and sort of an empire, but there is no doubt that it understood itself to be Christian. Heclo relies, perhaps inevitably, on survey research, which is a notoriously unreliable instrument for discovering what people truly believe. Like other commentators, he is impressed by the fact that most Americans are reluctant to judge the religious beliefs of others and therefore concludes that they do not really believe the teachings of Christianity. This overlooks a general reluctance to talk to strangers about matters of ultimate concern, an American protocol of civility in declining to criticize other people’s religion, and a very Christian observance of the command of Jesus to “judge not that you be not judged.” I suspect that doctrinally the American people are a great deal more Christian than the sociological literature suggests.

Also like others, Heclo cites the prevalence of divorce and pornography, the trash of popular entertainment, and other factors as evidence that Americans are not seriously Christian, or not Christian at all. But morality is a dubious measure. In his classic 1970 work, The Unheavenly City, Edward Banfield notes that in early-18th-century Boston there were more brothels per capita than there probably are today, but nobody suggests that 18th-century Boston was not a Christian city. The pertinent fact is that Christianity majors in sin and forgiveness. A persistent problem in discussions of Christian America, both scholarly and popular, is the tendency to use “Christian” as both an honorific and a descriptive term. Except for those who make an idol of the nation and confuse America with the Church—and there are some who are prone to doing that—nobody contends that America deserves to be called a Christian nation.

There is truth in G. K. Chesterton’s observation that America is a nation with the soul of a church, and further truth in the observation that, in the “almost” of almost-chosen peoplehood, Americans are aware of failing the covenant by which the nation is constituted. Conservative critics frequently fail to appreciate that expressions of “anti-Americanism” can sometimes be better understood as Americans’ continuing the long tradition of the mourners’ bench of American revivalism. The late Jeane Kirkpatrick was right about the “blame-America-first crowd.” But it will not disappear; not only because some really do hate America, but because so many more believe America is called to be better. There is much to be said in favor of America’s accepting the fact that it is a normal nation, simply a nation among nations—but that is a very un-American idea.

So we return to the question “Who are we?” America is a capitalist nation, an English-speaking nation, a democratic nation, a compassionate nation, a law-abiding nation, a rich nation. We are not any of those things without notable exceptions, but we are, in general, all of those things. And we are, among all the things we are, a nation constituted by a contract within the context of a covenant. That covenant is the narrative of God’s dealings with the People of Israel, a narrative borne through time by a society that is incorrigibly, however confusedly, Christian America. I do not say it should be that way. There are reasons to wish it were not that way. But it has been that way and will be that way until, which is very unlikely, the narrative is displaced by another.

Fr. Neuhaus is the founder and editor in chief of First Things.
COMMISSIONED ESSAY: Out of Mortal Threat, an Opportunity

by Wilfred McClay

This essay, which will appear in the May 14 issue of National Review, was prepared for the 2007 Bradley Symposium addressing the topic “Who Are We Today? American Character and Identity in the 21st Century.”

THIS IS ONE of those moments in our history when we are asking ourselves, with fresh intensity, who we are, as a nation and a people. We are not the only ones in the world asking themselves such questions. The current national elections in France, for example, have brought to the surface a growing unease in the land over the fraying condition of French national identity, an unease that candidates are having to address. Europe itself, along with the countries composing it, suffers from a serious crisis of self-definition, as entrenched dogmas of transnationality and multicultural inclusiveness begin to look like signposts on the road to cultural suicide. But such questions pose themselves with particular force for Americans, whose sense of themselves as a people has always been strongly tied to their shared acceptance of certain conscious ideals.

There are plenty of reasons to be pessimistic. Our shared sense of what is central to our national character has become confused and eroded, as our knowledge of our distinctive history has waned, and as the meaning of citizenship itself has been diluted and diminished. Yet there also are reasons to believe that a considerable reservoir of American patriotic sentiment exists to be drawn upon, even if it is not always very visible or very eager to declare itself. There is still, in short, a continuing sense of the American national character, even if it is not always easy to define, and even if it shows its nature most clearly—in much the same way that individual character does—only on those occasions when necessity evokes it.

It should not detract from the urgency of our present concerns to note that they all have a familiar ring to them. We have been here before. Not exactly the same place, of course. History never repeats itself in that way, and many of the particulars we now face are quite unprecedented. But the general shape of the concerns is not. We Americans have always puzzled over the precise shape of our national identity, and worried about the state of our culture. We have always asked such questions about ourselves. Our readiness to ask such questions itself offers an insight into the kind of people we are.

RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING

Why are we this way? Perhaps we can thank (or blame) those fiercely introspective New England Puritans, who made soul-searching into an art form, with their copious diaries and gloomy declension narratives and thundering jeremiads, all animated by a profound sense of mission, of an “errand into the wilderness” that could not be permitted to fail. Or J. Hector St.
John de Crèvecoeur, whose proclamation that the American was to be a “new man” amalgamated out of the elements of the old ones offered a vision of America that has run, in various forms, like a brilliant ribbon through the nation’s entire history.

Or perhaps look to the lofty expectations of the Revolutionaries and the Founders, who proclaimed a Novus Ordo Seclorum, saw the new American nation as a successor to Rome, and wondered, with Alexander Hamilton, whether it was “reserved to the people of this country” to decide for all humanity “whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice.” Or to Abraham Lincoln’s more pithy description of his nation as “the last best hope of mankind,” a phrase suggestive of a secular errand just as fraught with ultimate significance as the Puritan one.

In other words, there was a steady succession of voices proclaiming that American history would be the carrier of a larger meaning. The particulars changed, the cast of characters changed, but the theme persisted, clinging tenaciously to our national consciousness and experience. America was to be a land of fresh promise and new beginnings, a grand stage for the regeneration of humanity. It would be the New Zion, or New Israel--or maybe a New Rome, New England, New London, New Amsterdam, New Canaan, New Harmony, New York, New . . . You-Name-It. And for all the complications of our history and tatters in its mortal dress, it has never lost its deep connection to that great theme of renewal and rebirth, even today—which is one reason immigration has always been such a thorny but vital issue for us, lying as it does so close to our sense of ourselves as a land of new beginnings and second chances.

Despite the dedicated efforts of several generations of scholars to exorcise it, there remains about American society a powerful sense of something that is called, imperfectly, American exceptionalism. It is not always clear what this term means. But it surely points toward the nation’s persistent sense of a larger purpose in the world. The one thing that Americans just cannot seem to reconcile themselves to is the idea of being just another country, in a world of countries. (In fact, they are far more ready to believe in the unique and all-pervasive evil of their country than to believe in its ordinariness. Like a Black Mass, this is one of those inversions that amount to a reiteration of the old faith, only with shadings reversed.)

It may seem hard to believe that this same sense of purposefulness could be lurking, latent and inarticulate, in the souls of even the most unpromising young people who cross one’s field of vision in contemporary America. But I would not bet against it. Get these young people away from the fog of their peer culture and away from the confections of their endlessly mediated world, and you may see a different picture. Human nature has not changed. The human heart is filled with endless chaotic yearnings, most of which point toward mirages and dead ends; but what it most yearns for is something that will give it definition, direction, meaning, focus, something that brings the formlessness of life to the sharpness and clarity of a point. That brings redemption to life’s wasted time. The illusions of popular culture will never give them that, and some will eventually be driven to look elsewhere. There are needs that one can’t understand, or even see, until the moment is ripe for them; and then they emerge. That is part of the mystery of character, and of new beginnings.
It is also important to recognize that many of our current problems arise out of distortions and misuses of otherwise good ideas and things. Multiculturalism takes a generous inclusiveness and makes it into a hard-and-fast principle of social separateness. Postmodernism takes a healthy skepticism and makes it into a dogma of weightless agnosticism. Dogmatic secularism reintroduces the very ideological coerciveness it once claimed to rescue us from, and thereby undermines the genial tolerance that is the chief virtue of a secular state. Openness to immigration and to the peoples of all nations has long been one of the defining features of American life—but not when that openness comes at the expense of the very idea of American citizenship and of a coherent and historically grounded national culture. Even our astonishingly toxic and corrupt popular culture tends to be defended by reference to gold-plated principles: free markets and free expression.

One can easily add to this list. Freedom itself, in whose name we justify much of what we do in the world, becomes meaningless when it is not ordered and directed by a sense of proper human ends, but instead serves as a charter for aimless self-indulgence and self-exaltation. The point is that without the right countervailing or balancing forces at work in our society, even the best principles may become pernicious. The corruption of the best can give us the worst. And in all cases, the countervailing forces that we need are fundamentally conservative ones, deriving not from clever abstractions or legalisms pulled out of the air, but out of a high respect for the accumulated wisdom of previous generations, and the sheer momentum of lived experience—which is to say, from common sense. But tradition and common sense are not an easy sell these days. It is hard to gain a hearing for sober, prudent wisdom in the acrimonious and character-assassinating public debates we now tend to have in this country. And it is hard to fight the sheer dynamism of American culture, our ingrained fondness for the new, even if we know that such dynamism cannot last for long without such underlying stabilizers as the rule of law, the discipline of work, intact families, and settled mores.

Hard, because there is no denying the fact that the American dream is in some respects a thoroughly romantic and liberating one: the song of the open road, the prospect of big skies and boundless possibilities, the chance to begin the world over again—or at least one’s own little corner of it. This understanding of America is extraordinarily vivid and powerful, and has deep historical roots; its optimism is a drawing card for people all over the world. It was part of the political genius of Ronald Reagan that, rather than disdaining these romantic impulses of American life, he embraced them warmly, and made them his own. By incorporating them into American conservatism, he provided exactly the countervailing elements and defining horizons that those impulses so badly needed—and endowed conservatism with an élan and vigor that had formerly been liberalism’s province. Conservatives may have winced whenever Reagan quoted Thomas Paine; but he knew exactly what he was doing. He understood that respect for the American dream had to be a part of American conservatism, and vice versa. This is why he remains such a signal figure.

SEEDS OF RENEWAL

As for the toxicity of our manufactured popular culture, which captures and amplifies so many of our other problems and plays a huge role in creating our problematic image in the world, we should not yield to pessimism about the possibility of cultural renewal, as if we were in the grip
of determinisms more powerful than those of physics. Conservatives, of all people, ought to reject the lazy deification of the marketplace; and Americans more generally should regain their former confidence in the possibility of making positive transformations in their national life. The realm of culture is precisely the area where intelligent philanthropy can accomplish a great deal of good, particularly in fostering new venues and institutions—think tanks, media, schools, colleges, and other avenues of intellectual and cultural renewal—which can both support fresh alternatives, and challenge the existing ones to do better.

Think for a moment of Renaissance Florence. The great cultural flowering that we associate with that time and place would not have been possible without the general prosperity provided by a vibrant commercial economy. But that was not enough. Great art also requires great patrons, and the economics of the market could never have produced the profusion of stunning works that now fill the Uffizi Gallery. That in turn suggests where philanthropy can enter, playing in our day a role not unlike what the Medicis and other great patrons of art played in theirs, giving support to worthy ideas and experiments that hold the promise of cultural renewal. The problem is admittedly vast, but there is no need to address it at every single point. The root of the problem with our popular culture is the degeneration of our elite culture, and the restoration of the latter would soon have a powerful effect on the former.

Finally, we should be mindful of the complexities inherent in the concept of “character” itself, whether applied to individuals or groups, including nations. In the end, character is a mystery of unfathomable depths, that defies all determinisms. We can guess at, but we cannot really know, a person’s character until it is put to a real test. Often the result that emerges will come as a complete surprise, even to the person himself. Braggarts and bullies may wilt in the time of trial, while Clark Kents become Supermen, and gentle mothers become fierce as lions. Ne’er-do-wells miraculously get their act together when the chips are down, while those with perfect pedigrees turn out to be perfect disappointments. That tattooed, body-pierced, video-sated lunkhead down the street may have heroic potential in him that will take your breath away, when the conditions are right to call forth those qualities that, amazingly, were in him all along. In the face of death, some react with bitterness and morbid self-preoccupation, while others respond generously, with gratefulness for the life lived. Why one and not the other? Who can know? Character is not a determinate “set,” something fixed and permanent, like a second nature. We can never know how we will respond until we have to.

So only a challenge can reveal what is there, concealed in the depths of character. Our character is elicited by life’s challenges, and is shaped and reshaped by our responses to them—a fact with immediate relevance to the present situation. In other words, human character must, so to speak, be scored dynamically, rather than extrapolated from current trends. The historian Arnold Toynbee saw the dynamics of challenge-and-response as the testing ground of a civilization’s greatness. The chief sources of growth in a civilization arise dialectically, from its responses to the mortal threats and sharp blows directed at it. The question is what the threats call forth. Do they generate energy and purposefulness? Or despair and inanition? Great civilizations, Toynbee thought, die from suicide rather than murder, which is to say that they die when they cease to have the will to respond vigorously and creatively to the challenges facing them.
The lesson for Americans is clear. There may be today, just as George Kennan famously observed 60 years ago of the Cold War, a certain providential quality to the challenges that have been placed before us at this time. Certainly the challenges presented by Islamist terrorism are ones that confront us (and even more profoundly confront Europe) in the very places where we are confused and irresolute, and force us to see that we have fallen into ways of thinking and living that we cannot and should not sustain. They represent a mortal threat—but they are also an opportunity. By forcing us to defend ourselves, they force us to take to heart the question of what kind of civilization we are willing, and able, to defend. Not merely as an academic question, but a question of life and death.

Mr. McClay holds the SunTrust Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. This spring he is Fulbright Senior Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Rome.
PROCEEDINGS
THE 2007 BRADLEY SYMPOSIUM
May 3, 2007

PROGRAM AND PANEL

8:30  Introduction by WILLIAM SCHAMBRA, Hudson Institute

8:35  Introduction by AMY KASS, moderator, University of Chicago and Hudson Institute

8:40–10:00  Panel discussion: Who are we today?
DAVID BLANKENHORN, Institute for American Values
LINDA CHAVEZ, Center for Equal Opportunity
ROSS DOUTHAT, Atlantic Monthly
AYAAN HIRSI ALI, American Enterprise Institute
YUVAL LEVIN, Ethics and Public Policy Center
JOHN McWHORTER, Manhattan Institute
RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS, First Things
JOHN O’SULLIVAN, Hudson Institute
STEPHAN THERNSTROM, Harvard University
JAMES Q. WILSON, Pepperdine University

10:00–10:15  Coffee break

10:15–11:00  Panel discussion: What can philanthropy do?

11:00–11:30  Audience questions

11:30 a.m.  Adjournment

Introduction

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: My name is Bill Schambra, and I’m director of the Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal at Hudson Institute, and it’s my privilege to welcome you to the third annual Bradley Symposium. The Bradley Center is a proud grantee of the Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation (www.bradleyfdn.org), located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And we’re honored this year, as ever, to have with us today so many of the members of the board of directors as well as some spouses, and of course, staff members. I’m particularly grateful to Vice President Dan Schmidt for all the help and assistance over the past several months in planning this event.
As ever, of course, the real work for the event was done by Hudson Research Fellow Krista Shaffer – so thank you so much, Krista, for everything you’ve done.

We join in celebrating the winners of the 2007 Bradley Prize: John Bolton, Martin Feldstein, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, and James Q. Wilson.

The question before today’s panel – who are we as Americans – figured prominently in the founding of modern American conservatism, now over half a century ago. We then faced a profound global threat in the form of totalitarian communism, but our intellectual elites seemed somewhat casual, almost neglectful, in responding to it. Perhaps their half-heartedness could be explained by the fact that they had spent the prior half century dwelling upon the ostensible flaws and defects of American liberal democracy: our economic system enriched the privileged while exploiting the poor; our political system was founded on a series of absurd myths about popular self-government; and our culture was empty, conformist, and low-brow, in their view.

If the new conservatism of the 1950s was anything, it was a vigorous effort to recover – or perhaps to create – a fundamental understanding of America that made it worth defending. No matter what our critics said, conservatives believed, America possessed a principled identity which made it a blessing to mankind, well worth preserving.

Now as Whittaker Chambers famously pointed out, this seemed to be a noble but losing cause, fifty years ago. In the subsequent decades, we found reasons to be a bit more hopeful. But today, even as the names of the challenges have changed, one can detect a renewed sense of doubt, perhaps even despair, creeping back into conservative conversation.

The Bradley Foundation thought this was a prime moment to ask again this question: Who are we today, as Americans? Bradley could find no better partner in this undertaking than National Review, the magazine that figured prominently in the creation of modern American conservatism and in the conversation ever since about our national identity. The focus of today’s discussion will be three essays, written by John McWhorter, Father Richard John Neuhaus, and Wilfred McClay, and thanks to Dusty Rhodes and Rich Lowry, published in recent issues of National Review.

To discuss them, we’re honored to have with us a distinguished panel of writers and thinkers who have reflected deeply on this question. I name, now, the panelists in alphabetical order¹:

¹ Professor McClay, while he was kind enough to contribute an essay to us, is spending this spring as a Fulbright lecturer in Rome, so he can’t be with us.
Here’s how we’re going to proceed. We’ll discuss the general question – who are we today? – until about 10:00. We will then take a fifteen minute coffee break, from which you will return promptly. (Laughter.) From 10:15 to 11:00, we will then discuss what philanthropy – what foundations – can do to address this question, who are we as Americans. And then in the final half hour, from 11:00 to 11:30, we will take questions from the audience.

To guide us through this conversation this morning, we’re glad to have as our moderator once again this year Amy Kass. Dr. Kass is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute, but more to the point, she has honed her moderating skills as an award-winning lecturer in the humanities for over twenty years at the University of Chicago.

So I now turn the proceedings over to Amy Kass.

AMY KASS: Thank you very much!

I. Who Are We Today?

AMY KASS: Who are we Americans as a people? This question, always important, always timely, seems especially so today. Often tacitly but sometimes explicitly, it informs many of our most contentious political debates, as we continue to grapple with issues like immigration policy, or the state of the culture, or the future of the family, or the war with radical Islam.

To help seed the ground for our discussion of American identity today, as Bill Schambra has already mentioned and I hope you are already well aware, the Bradley Center has commissioned three essays—by Wilfred McClay, Father Richard Neuhaus, and John McWhorter. The conspicuously different emphases of each of the papers naturally invite the question of whether these various views, regarded separately or together, adequately define who we are today and accurately assess the challenges we face to our national identity. That’s going to be the general
question for this morning’s discussion – but I’ll get to that in a bit. While you collect your thoughts about our topic, let me offer a short précis of each of the essays.

Stepping back from the powerful trends that appear to be dividing and undermining our sense of national identity, Wilfred McClay notes that today’s worries about who we are have a familiar ring: “We’ve been here before,” he writes. “Americans have always puzzled over the precise shape of our national identity.” Most important, he argues that current challenges grow out of, even as they distort or exaggerate, core liberal features of our national character—inclusiveness, skepticism, tolerance, openness, free markets and free expression—features of which we should not only be proud but also strive proudly to preserve:

“Multiculturalism takes [our disposition to] generous inclusiveness and makes it into a hard and fast principle of social separateness. Postmodernism takes healthy skepticism and makes it into a dogma of weightless agnosticism. Dogmatic secular relativism reintroduces the very ideological coerciveness it once sought to rescue us from, and thereby undermines the genial tolerance that is the chief virtue of the secular state. Openness to immigration and to the peoples of all nations has long been one of the defining features of American life—but not when that openness comes at the expense of the very idea of American citizenship and of a coherent and historically grounded national culture. [And] even our astonishingly toxic and corrupt popular culture tends to be defended by reference to gold-plated principles: free markets and free expression.”

Thus, though he is concerned about the corrosiveness of current trends, McClay is not despairing. With the right countervailing or balancing forces in place, he argues, these trends can be halted, even reversed. The forces most needed are fundamentally conservative: tradition, common sense, and stabilizers such as the rule of law, the discipline of work, intact families, and settled mores.

Bill McClay’s conspicuous silence on the matter of religion is amply supplied by Father Neuhaus, who emphasizes the essentially Christian character of American society. Father Neuhaus summarizes his own argument thus:

“What are we?” America is a capitalist nation, an English-speaking nation, a democratic nation, a compassionate nation, a law-abiding nation, a rich nation. We are not any of those things without notable exceptions, but we are, in general, all of those things. And we are, among all the things we are, a nation constituted by a contract within the context of a covenant. That covenant is the narrative of God’s dealings with the People of Israel, a narrative borne through time by a society that is incorrigibly, however confusedly, Christian America.

Integral to our identity as a liberal democratic polity, then, is our specific constitutional contract. But that contract, he argues, presupposes and stands under our idealistic and covenantal character as a society informed by Biblical religion. We are not only a nation under law but also a society “under God.” This fact both gives us great promise and blessed possibilities but also leads us to
hold ourselves more accountable for our national fallings short. The covenantal character of American society calls us to give an account of ourselves before a transcendent judge.

Father Neuhaus does not think that our American narrative is going to change any time soon—America is and is bound to remain a Christian society. But it is precisely in reinvigorating the Christian character of American society to which he looks for the recovery work that must be done, as we continue to face, in unprecedented ways, attacks on our national identity.

John McWhorter is much less sanguine about the state of American identity today, which, he argues, is largely negative. He is most impressed by our rampant anti-Americanism, or, as he puts it, the active contempt for the American experiment and the unwillingness of Americans proudly to define themselves as American. The prevalent attitude, which he calls “therapeutic alienation,” is most conspicuous among our intellectuals and academics, but, he argues, it has recently spread more widely through American society—including among our racial and ethnic minorities. Though McWhorter looks at America through a more secular lens than Father Neuhaus, Father Neuhaus’ thesis that America is defined by the need to answer for its failings before a moral judge may in part explain the disaffection of those for whom America has become little more than an address: driven more by the history of past injustice than by current facts, the moral condemnation of America easily satisfies the critics, McWhorter argues, while doing little for the people about whom they purport to be concerned.

McWhorter thinks that nothing short of an enemy attack is likely to rally our countrymen to affirm their identity or to see America as something worthy to be defended. Without that, he concludes, “to be American will continue to be, for most who bother to think about it, what one might term a postmodern position: nurturing a sense of personal legitimacy upon a willful, bitter ambivalence toward a land one has no intention of leaving.”

In very brief, then, for McWhorter our country will be defined only by and in relation to its enemies; for Father Neuhaus, by its Christian character; and for McClay, by its liberal national ideals—its generosity, healthy skepticism, tolerance, openness, and freedom loving ways.

So, my question: To what extent do any of these views, separately or together, adequately describe and define who we are today?

Before we launch into the general discussion, would Father Neuhaus or John McWhorter like to add or detract from what I’ve said?

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: I think it’s an admirable summary, and I’ve no complaints about it at all, Amy. (Laughter.) The only thing I would underscore is that, as I do say – and I hope it is more than saying in passing – in fact, in America and in increasing fact it must become the case that when we say “Christian,” we mean the history of the people of Israel; we mean Judeo-Christian. That is not simply a matter of politesse, a matter of signaling the dangers of anti-Semitism. It is substantive. To say “Judeo-Christian” is absolutely crucial to the reformulation for the future of a covenantal understanding of the American experiment – and I allude to Michael Novak’s very nice treatment of precisely this point in his book on the Founders, *On Two Wings*. And I think this will be an issue that will become more evident to
more people as we increasingly refine our understanding of the nature of the challenge of jihadist Islam in our common future.

JOHN McWHORTER: I think that the point I made in my piece about the anti-American sentiment among the intelligentsia has to also be understood as a more general mood, and I think that that comes in contrast in what is considered normal now versus what would have been considered normal a hundred years ago. And so my sense of the American identity being founded upon the ambivalence that I discussed is the kind of thing that you can see also in the general strain in our popular culture, which fetishizes anger as something to be authentic. Obviously, you could find shards of it in 1935, but the point is that you find so much of it now. And I by no means mean only hip-hop. It is a general sense that especially to be an enlightened person or an interesting person, one is to be an alienated person. I think that in many sectors of our society now, that seems so normal as to be unquestioned. But in terms of how human societies have operated throughout time and how they operate now, it is a peculiarity which is especially nurtured in this country, and I think it leads to a lot of questions.

AMY KASS: Thank you. So, the general question, again: To what extent do these views, separately or together, adequately describe and define who we are today?

Yuval, would you like to start?

YUVAL LEVIN: I’m glad to – thank you.

I was struck in reading these papers how differently, given the same question, these three writers saw the question and the issues at stake. They’re different not only in tenor and tone, and range from pessimism to an almost cheerfulness. They’re different in what the authors chose to emphasize, and I think the way you just put it, Amy, brings that out nicely.

To answer the question of who we are, do we look to American religion? Do we look to our liberal tradition? Do we look to cultural decline or the great struggles of the day? These different pieces don’t necessarily hold together. It is easy to say that they’re all right, that they’re just pieces of a bigger picture – and I think that’s true to an extent. But to dig a little beneath that and to get at the question itself, maybe it is useful to focus on the last word of the question, who are we today? Today as opposed to yesterday. And I think a lot of the differences between these papers and maybe between the kinds of answers that we’re going to offer in this discussion have to do with whether we think that who we are today is something very different from who we were yesterday.
Bill McClay and Father Neuhaus both suggest in different ways that who we are today is really not all that different, and that the challenge that we confront today, the challenge of American identity, is the age-old challenge of American identity. That doesn’t make it easy, but it makes it a little more familiar, and also gives us hope that maybe this generation, like the ones before it that confronted something of a similar challenge, has a chance to make something good of it.

John McWhorter thinks otherwise, if I read him correctly. He argues that our situation is more or less unprecedented. He thinks back to previous generations of immigrants and wonders if the culture that really welcomed them and transformed them still exists at all today. He argues that there just isn’t much of an identity left for us at all, and that it might take some disastrous cataclysm for us to act like Americans again.

I think that in these two ways of thinking about the relation of the past to the present, we have two strains of conservatism. One is conservatism of continuity that differs from the progressivism of the Left in that it says that the past really isn’t so different from the present, and what we need is what we’ve always needed – the institutions and the projects and the aims and the ways of thinking that have always served us. We have a reservoir to draw on and to sustain us in dealing with the challenges we have.

The other is a conservatism of – maybe this is a little unfair, but – a conservatism of a kind of near despair. It says that our time is a great decline from the past, and what we have to do is not sustain but recover, and not continue but resist. It generally also says that this task is almost impossible; it is a kind of conservatism of mourning, of memory, more than of continuity.

Both of these are very different from the liberal, progressive outlook, but they’re also very different from each other. And personally, it seems to me that in answering the question, “Who are we?” I’m certainly much more drawn to the conservatism of continuity, to the kinds of answers that Father Neuhaus and Bill McClay provided. I don’t think you really can describe the past generation in America purely as a kind of downward trend line. There are many ways in which we have seen decline – significant and meaningful decline – but there are also ways in which we’re seeing some forms of cultural revival and especially, religious revival. And I think that these are very significant.

There is obviously a risk in this kind of attitude, in saying that things aren’t so different – that is, the risk of downplaying the special challenges that we confront in this generation. This risk itself has a long tradition in America. Downplaying the challenges of American identity has always been with us. I had an occasion recently to read Federalist 2, in which John Jay describes why he has great hopes for the American union – and I have this written down because I just had to read
it to you. One of the reasons he cites is that the Americans are “people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government.” The striking thing about this is not how different this is from America today, but how totally wrong it is as a description of America back then. It is quite striking that so early there was an effort to define American identity by pretending that it already existed, and to define a certain kind of unity by just asserting it.

That is a very dangerous disposition. It is dangerous especially when we describe the past that way, because it really does rob us of hope, since it is an ideal that we can’t really meet. But it is dangerous also if we describe the present that way, if we go too far in doing so, because it does downplay the challenges we face, and we do face great challenges.

I think, though, that to answer your question, between them Bill McClay and Father Neuhaus do get to the general categories that should help us to describe who we are today – America’s liberal character elevated by America’s religious character is still America’s character. John McWhorter gives us very serious reasons to worry about the future of that character. But I don’t finally think that he describes who we are today. I think he describes who we have to continue to struggle not to become. And I think that Bill McClay and Father Neuhaus help us see how we might do that.

AMY KASS: Response?

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: I vote for the conservatism of continuity, too, although it’s certainly hard not to be gloomy about the state of our culture. Two days ago while walking across Harvard Yard to give a lecture, I noticed on a bulletin board a rather arresting sign, an announcement of an event, with the words in bold face “Slippery But Wet.” It was an announcement of the third annual Harvard Seminar on the Female Orgasm, open to people of all sexual persuasions. This seemed to me rather astonishing, something I could not imagine having appear at my university even ten years ago much less fifty.

Nonetheless, I do think that John McWhorter provided a stinging critique of the state of mind of many in the intelligentsia and in the elites more generally. While the Duke 88 are far out and hopeless, much of what we see today that seems like something close to anti-Americanism, I think, is so distorted by partisanship. If you could imagine – it’s hard, but – if you could imagine that in 1998 Bill Clinton had ordered an invasion of Iraq instead of a few airstrikes, I suspect the posture taken by many in the intelligentsia would have been quite different, as it was with the war in Yugoslavia.

I think it is worth noting that one way of thinking about how ordinary folks feel about these matters is the large body of survey research asking not only Americans but people in societies around the world, “How proud are you to be an ‘x’?”
Those polls consistently show that while levels of pride in one’s national identity are very low throughout old Europe – I think France is at 40 percent, and Germany is in the 20s – the United States is in the 80s. And I just looked a few nights ago at a more complicated study by Tom Smith at the National Opinion Research Center. The question is asked in thirty-four nations: “How proud are you of your country in each of the following areas: (1) the way democracy works, (2) political influence in the world, (3) economic achievements, (4) scientific and technological advances,” and – ten, there were ten domains in all. Then, the investigator carefully averaged out the ratings over all of the domains, and the United States, again, stands out as a population more proud of its own national identity than any other, and the differences with most European countries are enormous. So I do find this somewhat reassuring.

Certainly one element in this has to do with our history of immigration. It is, I think, interesting to note that some years ago investigators tried to figure out, looking at the American population in 1990, where it came from in the sense of when the first of each person’s ancestors arrived in the United States. The results of that investigation were that a third of the population derived from people – old-stock Americans – who were here by 1790, although those old-stock Americans included a great many enslaved African-Americans; one third came from the great migrations of the nineteenth century; and one third came from the twentieth century. That way of asking the question is, of course, rather distorted in that they were asking when one’s earliest ancestors came. You could do it another way. It happens that my grandparents came from Sweden in the 1880s. On the other hand, my mother was born in Canada. So from that point of view, I could be counted as having descended from a twentieth-century immigrant. So if you did it that way, surely we would have something like half of the population deriving from immigration in the twentieth century.

Certainly, the American sense of chosen-ness, that we are proud to be here because it was our choice and we weren’t just stuck here, is quite important in contributing to this national sense that we are a special people. It’s certainly part of the answer to the whole question of American exceptionalism.

LINDA CHAVEZ: Let me just react to a couple of things – first, to John McWhorter’s essay. I’ve always prided myself in being one of the most pessimistic people I knew – that is, until I read John McWhorter’s essay (laughter), and I decided that I’m absolutely a Pollyanna. I will say that some of what Steve (Thernstrom) has just said and some of what has been said earlier in terms of the disparity in attitudes among ordinary Americans and the elite was very present in John McWhorter’s essay, I thought. And my advice, John, to you as someone who is a great admirer of yours is that you need to get out more. (Laughter.) For the last decade or so, I’ve lived sixty miles northwest of Washington, DC, in a largely rural, small-town environment in Northern Virginia, in western Loudoun County, and I can assure you that were you to come out on Memorial Day or better yet, July 4th, you would see represented there an outpouring of patriotism and a sense of security about identity that seems to be missing in the academic world, certainly among the elite and the intellectual class.

But in general, I think that there were two issues that were not adequately covered in these three essays, which really do get to the heart of our anxiety about who we are today. There are two issues that cause us the most anxiety. First, America’s role in the world, exacerbated by the war in Iraq and the war on terror. Certainly this is an outgrowth of what we saw during the 1960s and the reaction to the Vietnam War. And I’m not going to comment on that; I have lots of opinions, but I don’t have as much expertise as others on the subject. But I would like to talk for a minute about the other issue that I think is driving anxiety about who we are, and that is the issue of immigration.

We are in a period of very high immigration to the United States. It’s the second highest period of any time during our history. And even in places like Purcellville, Virginia, where I live, if there is any anxiety about what it means to be an American, it is because of the presence of so many newcomers, most of whom do not speak English, look different, and seem to be very different from other Americans. Now, I say that as somebody who is very decidedly in the pro-immigration camp, someone who believes that we need comprehensive immigration reform, and one who is not all that anxious about whether or not these newcomers are going to be American. But I do know that that anxiety is out there, and I know it just by opening up my e-mail any time I write on the subject of immigration. Stephan (Thernstrom) talked about his background and whether or not he’s an old-stock American or someone who has come here more recently. The last immigrant in my family came in 1848 from Ireland. The last person in my family who lived in Mexico proper left Mexico in 1701. Now despite that, when I write on immigration I am continuously bombarded with requests for me please to go back to Mexico. (Laughter.) That’s going to be very difficult for me because I speak almost not a word of Spanish, like most – in face, 96 percent – of persons of Mexican-American origin who are at least third generation Americans. Ninety-six percent prefer to speak English at home. Fewer than one in five is actually even able to speak Spanish. This is not unique, but it does strike me that our concern about the large number of people who are coming here and our ability to assimilate them is driving some of the anxiety about who we are.

I would say that that really is in part because of what has happened in elite institutions, and in the public schools. We are not as committed as we were during other periods of large-scale immigration to the United States to teaching newcomers how to be Americans, to helping them acquire English quickly. Despite the statistics I just stated, Hispanics and Mexican-Americans in particular, in places like Southern California, are learning English in large part despite the public
school system. They learn it through watching television and through popular culture often more effectively than they learn it in school.

So I do think that one of the things that was missing in these essays is a broader understanding of what it is that causes ordinary Americans to be concerned about who we are.

AMY KASS: Let me just press you on one thing: Is the anxiety regarding immigration about our ability to assimilate immigrants, or about theirs?

LINDA CHAVEZ: It is about their willingness to assimilate. Now, that, as Stephan Thernstrom can attest, is nothing new. We were equally concerned – perhaps more concerned – about German immigrants, for example. The Bradley Foundation, located in Wisconsin, certainly understands the anxiety that was provoked by German immigration. I think that a lot of people aren’t aware that in 1900, one hundred thousand students in the United States were actually being instructed in schools – public schools as well as parochial schools – in German. So this idea that there has been very quick assimilation and movement towards English among immigrant groups in the past and much slower assimilation today is simply ahistorical.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I thought I might suggest one reason why these two conservatisms – the conservatism of near despair and the conservatism of continuity – might coexist uneasily at this point in time, and that’s an uncertainty, I think, about what our culture’s response to 9/11 has been. It’s interesting that both John McWhorter and Wilfred McClay take up this point in their essays, and they take up the premise that a struggle against a foreign adversary in particular might provide an opportunity to call America back to its truest self. Where McClay suggests that the opportunity still lies in front of us, McWhorter suggests that it’s already past, and that the 9/11 moment failed to halt America’s drift into what he calls “therapeutic alienation.”

My sense is that 9/11 occasioned great reasons for optimism among people who believe in a defined American identity, people who believe that patriotism is important and so forth. There was a tremendous outpouring of patriotism after 9/11, and a tremendous sense of cultural solidarity that manifested itself. But it also provided reasons for great pessimism, I think, in how we’ve allowed that to slip away.

While I’m inclined somewhat to John McWhorter’s view of the situation, I think I might apportion blame for that slippage somewhat differently. He mentions intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, and so forth, and I incline more towards Father Neuhaus’ view, which is that a certain kind of that oppositional spirit is always going to define America, and I think that particularly at a gathering like this, one thing we might look at is how American conservatism in particular, faced with this great opportunity to move from being an oppositional force in American culture to being really a governing force, has let that opportunity at least temporarily slip through our fingers. I think that one reason conservatives are so much in despair now is not just the polling numbers of the Bush administration, but also the sense that after this tremendous moment of optimism following 9/11, we’ve reached a point where the popular culture is drifting into something approaching 1970s’ levels of alienation. The younger generation – my generation – had a moment of feeling what Bill McClay calls “a sense of purposefulness,” but that, too, has slipped away.
I think that this should be an introspective moment in particular for American conservatives.

AMY KASS: Why do you think it slipped away?

ROSS DOUTHAT: I’d suggest three reasons, quickly. One, American conservatism as a cultural movement in particular is almost inextricably bound up with American Southern identity – and I say this as someone who is a cultural conservative and a great defender of religious conservatism as a force in American life. But I think one of the great challenges for conservatives over the last twenty-five years has been finding a way to translate the language of the religious revival that you’ve all mentioned, which has really been an evangelical revival, into a broader language of moral purpose. This is something Father Neuhaus has written a great deal about. It’s something that national greatness conservatism in the 1990s was trying to do. And I think in certain ways the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 came as close as anyone has to achieving this. But it fell short, and part of the reason for that is the gravitational pull of Southern-ness in this strange way, the fact that the language of evangelicalism still rings almost tinnily in the ears of many Americans and has a sectarian caste that social conservatives can’t escape. So that’s one reason, and maybe I’ll stop there.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: One of the great failures of national leadership after 9/11 was I think that with the important exception of people wearing military uniforms and their families, no one was asked to sacrifice anything. No one asked us to do anything for the common good. Really, quite the contrary – almost the opposite. And I think that this is an unprecedented experience. I can’t think of many previous experiences where in times of national emergency there was no call to common sacrifice. It is shocking to me, and I think – I hope – that if anyone had asked, Americans would have responded.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I think that one question this era has raised for conservatives in particular – and it goes to your point – is that conservatives expended so much energy over the last thirty years to both attacking the federal government and attempting to take it over at the same time. My sense of the last six years is that, having achieved that goal, conservatives were uncertain what to do with the federal government. It was almost as if 9/11 happened and it was like, “Well, do we ask Americans to sacrifice for a common purpose or do we tell them to go out and go shopping?”

DAVID BLANKENHORN: This ought to be a no-brainer! In every previous instance in our history with the possible exception, I think, of the kind of guns-and-butter, Lyndon Johnson
moment in the Vietnam War, I don’t think there’s been a single moment of national emergency where the people have not been called upon by the leadership to sacrifice for the common good and to win the struggle.

ROSS DOUTHAT: What should we have been asked to do?

DAVID BLANKENHORN: Well, every other time there has been a war, people have figured out ways for people to help win. I could think of fifty things.

AMY KASS: Name a couple.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: In the past, there have been everything from war bonds to forms of national service other than military, and to me –

AMY KASS: There has been a big push to voluntarism, and that was by the Bush administration. USA Freedom Corps was –

DAVID BLANKENHORN: I haven’t noticed it very much, but maybe it’s there.

FATHER NEUHAUS: But not related to the national emergency.

JOHN O’SULLIVAN: Just to make a narrow point, I’m sure you have noticed, and I think this confirms rather than goes against your point, that ordinary people actually do, obviously, feel the need for sacrifice in minor ways. I’ve witnessed five or six occasions, and I’m sure you’ve all witnessed them as well, in which people have gone up to soldiers and said I’d like you to take my seat in first class, if they’re on a plane, or I’d like to buy you a drink, or we’d like to pay for your meal. I admit that these are very small and modest things, but they do testify to the desire on the part of ordinary people not to sacrifice, exactly, but to show their regard for the people who are doing the fighting and who are making the sacrifices.

I have a couple of other points, but I’ll stop there.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Could I ask John (O’Sullivan), you wrote a piece in National Review – I think it was a couple of months ago – discussing a project that was put together after 9/11, I believe, with the idea that this might be a moment to capitalize on what had happened and make a big push for, say, a renewed civic education in America’s schools.
JOHN O’SULLIVAN: Yes – I was reporting that; I wasn’t any part of it. A Washington think tank – which I think has to remain anonymous since the people who told me this asked me to keep it so – did in fact draw up a whole series of ideas that would, in a sense, crystallize the mood and also give it political texture and shape and depth with a whole series of schemes, some of which were, as you say, renewed civic education, creating more of a drama and theater around some of the ceremonies of assimilation and so on – not simply citizenship. They proposed these to the White House, and the White House didn’t reject them or anything. It’s just that they finally drifted into the bureaucratic sands the way so many good ideas do drift in Washington.

I do think that was a moment lost, because although I agree with everything that David said, the fact is that in political life, like life in general, good ideas, good impulses, and strong moods eventually dissipate unless they’re given some kind of permanent force by organization and by being put in the shape of a very solid political argument which has adherents in the country who keep it going indefinitely. I’m not saying that’s true for everything, but it’s true for most things, and it’s certainly true for a revival of patriotism, to use that simple word, at a time when so many other cultural forces are moving in the opposite direction. And if you think it’s bad in this country – and sometimes I think it’s bad – it’s much, much worse almost everywhere else.

AMY KASS: There is general agreement about that? It’s much, much worse?

JOHN McWHORTER: I just wanted to comment on some of the comments on what I’ve written. All of those comments are very well taken.

I think that in looking at the issue of the American identity, there’s always a difference between what people might say and how people feel. And I think that the instructive contrast is that fewer than half of people polled rather recently trusted the government, versus over three quarters decades before that. And I think that all of us understand what the difference in mood is that that signals between the America where people wore hats in the early 1960s and before versus today’s America – and that poll cut across class. It was not just a matter of blue Americans or intellectuals; also included were the kind of people Linda (Chavez) was talking about in suburbs who would celebrate America in some other ways.

I think that polls are important, but when an American is asked whether he or she is proud of democracy, I think we also have to realize that in the actual human brain, that is not taken as, “Are you proud of the particular institution and its procedures as they are happening in your capital?” “Democracy” is a word with a certain resonance, a certain soundtrack, and I think that there’s a feeling that to say that you don’t like democracy or you don’t like the institutions upon which your country is founded or you are not a patriot is something that you’re supposed to step
aside from because of emotional issues rather than concrete ones, which maybe a poll asking how you feel about trusting the government can be seen to get at. I think there’s a difference.

It’s definitely true that the kind of feeling that I am talking about in the essay is more common in the America that I have spent more time in, having formerly been a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and now being very much a blue American myself. Certainly if I got out more and spent more time in the places that Linda (Chavez) is talking about, I’d see something different. And I think I know what she means, but nevertheless, because of fact that we are a country where the people who have that kind of reflexive patriotism are seen by most of what you might call “thinking people” as parochial or backwards or as needing to be taught something, there’s still a remark to be made.

And whether or not the people who are looking down on said people would agree with being patriots or not, one imagines just a simple thought experiment. The idea would seem to be that among a certain class of Americans, if you can go to Samoa – somewhere completely different from America and what we would consider a third world country – that last thing you’re supposed to do when you get off of the plane is ask for a hot dog. Rather, you’re supposed to do what Samoans do; you’re supposed to shed your American-ness completely. If they are selling hot dogs at the airport, you are supposed to bemoan that Samoan culture has been besmirched by your own. Whereas if a Samoan comes here, the last thing we enlightened people are supposed to do is give that Samoan a hot dog. And in fact, if that Samoan and other Samoans reproduced Samoan-ness perfectly in a neighborhood, we’re supposed to consider that wonderful – Lord forbid they watch *American Idol*.

It’s that particular orientation that I’m thinking of, because it didn’t happen before. Even among the people who would say that they are proud to be Americans, let’s say the people in the suburban neighborhoods celebrating on Memorial Day, we might want to ask what today would be the grounds for their pride in being American. So you might wave a flag. But to an extent, you could say that what they’re really saying is that they’re used to what they know. But if you ask, say, a European – even in the European countries where polls can be so pessimistic – “What are you proud of about being French?” there are certain cultural tokens that would come up. There are certain attitudes that would come up. It would not be just a sense that to be French is to be an ordinary person, and what else is there. There is a certain specificity in the pride.

In America today, it would not be considered apple pie. That’s not what someone would say nowadays.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: I think they would say, on Memorial Day, if asked that question, pretty much the answers you would get are, “I’m proud that this is
a free country, where you can rise as high as your talents permit. It’s a place based upon the idea of freedom for individuals to make a good life for themselves as my family has done for me and as I’m going to do for my family.” I bet you that’s what they would say.

JOHN McWHORTER: Is that a very uplifting conception of America, though?

DAVID BLANKENHORN: It’s what I would say!

JOHN McWHORTER: Immigrants will say that, certainly, because they’ve come to achieve. But is that really enough? Is that really what the Founding Fathers were looking for in terms of there being a –

ROSS DOUTHAT: Well, what should they say?

(Cross talk.)

AMY KASS: Hold on! Jim (Wilson)?

JAMES Q. WILSON: These are all thoughtful and excellent essays, but let me put it into a slightly different character – and I use the word “character” differently now from how I’m about to use it.

People all over the world have character. That is to say, they shun crime; they value their families; they’re attached to their countries. But it is in this country that a unique relationship exists. Not only do our culture and history shape our character, as is true in every nation, but here our public character is more important than it is elsewhere. Steve Thernstrom pointed out quite accurately, and all of the polls show, that Americans are more patriotic than any people in Europe. They are more supportive of their form of government, even though they usually don’t like the incumbents, than are people in the rest of Europe. They are more committed to individualism. They are more committed to capitalism. And they are deeply more religious. Forty to 50 percent of Americans go to church or synagogue on a regular basis. It’s 5 percent in France and 5 percent in England.

Why has this happened? It has happened because it seems to me, we are the products of a history that goes back at least to the eighteenth century, and in ways that present-oriented skeptics of America might find hard to believe, that culture and that history still seems to sustain us. America’s revolution was the first to say that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. France added equality and fraternity to that list, and have produced neither equality and certainly not fraternity. (Laughter.) The Russian and Chinese revolutions were about power, and so it has been for the rest of the world.

Out of that, we created a Constitution requiring limited government, where other constitutions simply replaced an all-powerful king with an all-powerful legislature. We have an independent judiciary that not only, alas, empowers tort lawyers, but it gives to every American the sense that the issues that separate them from other people have to do with rights, not with entitlements. And
so we fight about our rights, and as a consequence of fighting about our rights, we renew our attachment to the kind of freedom that Thomas Jefferson wrote about so many years ago.

We have a local government that gives almost every conceivable point of view a political base from which to be heard. And so although we are an entirely nationalistic nation, we are a nation divided among entities that pursue different versions of how that nation ought to behave.

We have a culture that encourages philanthropy to a degree that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

And as far as the middle class and immigration is concerned, I live in Los Angeles, and we import our middle class from Mexico. The first generation, when they come, are poor; they’re not entitled to work. They stand on street corners asking for work anyway. Work comes to them. By the second or third generation, they are indistinguishable except for their last names from Los Angelinos who have lived there since they moved in from Iowa fifty years ago. And they bring a certain solidity and comfort while people in and around university towns would like the United States to become more like their version of Europe.

In short, as Steve (Thernstrom) also said, there is a doctrine called American exceptionalism, which is true and quite remarkable and influences all of us.

Now, when we get to the problems that exist with us, as John McWhorter has rightly pointed out – hip-hop culture and an adversarial intellectual elite – let me point out that these things did not prevent that in the streets of America on the day after 9/11, American flags appeared everywhere – in Democratic voting precincts and in Republican voting precincts all over the country. Yellow ribbons saying “Support our Local Troops” are all over. David Blankenhorn may be correct – and I suspect he is – that the government should have asked more from us, at least purchasing war bonds in order to help pay for this. But they didn’t. That doesn’t mean that the sentiments weren’t there, and that they’re not being evoked.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: Right. Right.

JAMES Q. WILSON: With respect to universities, what they might remember, as Steve (Thernstrom) and I know all to well, is that this country produces forty thousand – forty thousand – PhDs every year. And the one thing that Steve and I know about PhDs is that there are forty thousand people looking for some new and original way to denounce the views of those who
came before them. (Laughter.) And the radicalized 1960s that now dominate so many of the
tenured ranks of American faculty members are spawning their own adversaries. I have no idea
what the next generation will produce in universities, but it won’t be what we see now.

And one of the final striking things is that – and I don’t know how to interpret this – all of the
opinion polls done among black Americans show that among young blacks, 25 to 30 percent
consider themselves Republicans. Now, they don’t yet vote that way, in part because young
people – black or white – don’t vote very much at all. But if this is a sign of the future, then it is
possible that the kind of alleged leadership that Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson give to that
community will be replaced by something more akin to the kind of leadership that Bill Cosby
gives to that community.

So I see that we have the lumps and bumps, but the tradition of Americanism and of American
exceptionalism, I believe, is alive and well.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I think it’s comforting for the world to see how Americans engage at least
early in the morning. (Laughter.) And as the only non-American here, and as someone who has
had the opportunity to be exposed to three continents, I think I can take part in this discussion,
although I cannot answer the question “Who are we today?” because I am not an American yet,
even though I’d love to become one. But I can answer it in relation to the other places I’ve lived and where I come
from.

In Africa, where I was born and grew up, I only remember
the “we.” I don’t remember the question, “Who am I?”
There was no place for an “I.” And as a “we,” I remember
that we described or at least defined ourselves as tribes.
The idea of nationhood and patriotism was attempted but
did not quite succeed. We were clans, we were tribes.
Anything that transcended that – for instance in religion, in
Islam – was “we” versus “they,” always in the collective.

I came to Europe and lived in Europe for fourteen years,
and I think that the “therapeutic alienation” that
McWhorter writes about is most acute there. In Europe,
there is an attempt at defining “who am I,” but that has
become in relation to the collective. It seems as if the
answer is only in the way Europeans can and must be good to others. All over Europe, there is
embarrassment about nationalism, national identity, and things such as patriotism are seen to be
incredibly dangerous. And yes, there are some Frenchmen who might define themselves as
(inaudible) or something like that, but today, in relation to the rest of the world, it seems as
though Europe is either apologizing for its history, or when it defines itself against America,
uniting in its calls and efforts to arrest or limit American power – which is very interesting
because when Americans discuss Europe, it’s all about how can we rescue them first from
themselves and next from radical Islam or whatever totalitarianism is in fashion.
Reading the three papers, I recognize all three of them. The three papers are not competing; they are complementary. America as a Christian nation is something you cannot hide from, whether it is evangelical or in whatever sense that’s Christian. Religion in America has not become a bad word as it has in Europe. Idealistic America is there for all of us to see – Warren Buffett and Bill Gates and all of the other philanthropists, the idea that Americans collect a lot of money and then go out there and give and are generous and are trying to bring about freedom.

The idea of America – and I think that is probably what makes America different from all other nations – not only who are we as Americans, but what is our role in history and how do we define ourselves in the world. What can we give to the world? I think that is present in all three papers. And for now, as we are in the round of descriptions, I’ll leave it at that.

AMY KASS: Let me press you on one thing. Don’t you think that “we” is necessary for patriotism?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Oh, yes, I think that “we” is necessary for patriotism. I’ve been here for only seven months, and when I try to approach the question “what is America,” my first answer was, “It’s a place where you can define, or you have the opportunity first to define or answer the question, “Who am I?” in the way you want to.

AMY KASS: Some people argue, however, that it is precisely that kind of individualism that really detracts or undermines any kind of real sense of patriotism or civic identity.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I disagree with that. I have been in places where you are not allowed to define you who are or give shape to your identity, give shape to your own future as an individual. Professor Wilson just described that where you have the freedoms, the institutions and the infrastructure that protect individual freedom produce individuals who are loyal, and out of their free will, through an obligation to that community, they feel the need to be patriotic and the need to defend that community, and perhaps even the need to go and bring it to the world.

AMY KASS: So do you think it is fair to say that immigrants are still attracted to this country precisely because of this heavy-duty emphasis on individuals or individual freedoms?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I don’t know the motive of every individual immigrant, but I know that most immigrants do come here for opportunity and to improve their lives, and I think that it is up to the Americans who are already here to make it clear to new immigrants the values upon which this nation is built and why, for instance, there is simply more opportunity here than, say, in Africa or elsewhere – Mexico or other places where immigrants come from. And I think that it is not – I think that it would be a bad idea to throw away individualism and to only insist on a collective, because that is not going to happen unless individual freedoms are guaranteed and respected.

JOHN O’SULLIVAN: Well, actually, you’re not the only non-American on the panel. I’m here in part, I think, as a representative of George III. (Laughter.) Incidentally, Jim (Wilson), it would have astonished the king to be told that he was all powerful because he was under the impression
that he was continually frustrated by parliamentary factions including in his prosecution of the American war!

I want not so much to challenge as to raise a question about what you said, Jim, toward the end of your remarks. I agree with most of what you said. But I raise a question about the idea that somehow the upsurge of patriotism immediately after 9/11 was a significant factor, yet the dilution of that since was and is not, particularly since, as you said, you thought that in the universities and elsewhere, a new generation is coming that doesn’t have the same rejectionism as the countercultural generation of the 1960s.

I may be wrong about this, and this is impressionistic, but aren’t people at least given cause to question this and maybe even think it’s slightly complacent by the phenomenon of the “net roots” – the spread in recent politics, through the internet, obviously, on the Left, of a set of opinions which is absolutely “therapeutic alienation.” Indeed, I go further; my own phrase for it is “counter-tribalism,” which is to say, people who feel the same kind of tribal emotions as a straightforward patriot, but they feel them for the other side in any case where the United States is in conflict with somebody.

I have this sense that the Democratic Party has taken a shift to the Left partly because it is responding to what it perceives to be the market necessity of doing so. There are very large numbers of people out there who are distinctly uncomfortable with American patriotism and feel the need to take oppositional attitudes to it. That’s why I actually prefer my very clunky phrase to yours, John (McWhorter), because I think “therapeutic alienation,” which I think is a fairly accurate description, nonetheless doesn’t convey the degree to which this could become a passionate political attitude against the policies of the United States. Your examples, which again I think are accurate, are examples of cultural distaste and a form of cultural snobbery, really, which finds the exotic world, well, exotic and embraces it. But I think when this becomes a political attitude, we see that it is very hostile and destructive to the institutions of America and, I suppose there’s no other word for it: It’s the opposite of patriotism.

JAMES Q. WILSON: Thank you, John! You and I, as George Bernard Shaw once said, are divided by the barrier of a common language. (Laughter.) You’re quite right about the role of the net roots, and you’re even more correct about the deep political polarization in this country, and you accurately say, and I, too, believe, that these two are connected. I have written pieces about the political polarization in this country, about which I am quite depressed. Almost all of my fellow political scientists deny it, saying that we’re all united, really. Since I’m in the small minority, my confidence in my correctness has mounted. (Laughter.)

It’s not simply the net roots. It’s the way district lines are drawn in Congress – in ways that guarantee the perpetuation of ideologically motivated incumbents both on the Left and on the Right. This is a very difficult process to change. The press contributes to it, although happily the
press is losing both readers and money every day as we speak. But the net roots are not, and the net roots have the great advantage of bringing people together, whatever their commitment may be – ranging from radical politics to child pornography to a desire to kill other people in order to carry out some Satanic wish.

I’m not sure there’s quite any other way to deal with this, other than to count on the fact that most Americans will not suffer these things lightly, and that most Americans will have, especially in difficult times, a greater commitment to the country and less of a desire to become a watered-down version of a French province than is true of presidential candidate Kerry.

I wish I could unravel the issues that you so correctly highlight, and I suppose if I had spoken, as I had told Amy (Kass) of my original plan, for an hour and a half, I would have addressed them. (Laughter.) She urged me to be somewhat briefer, and although I am now exceeding her urgings, I don’t know what we can do about it. Political polarization and the net roots are a serious problem, and I’m not sure how we will overcome them. But we have overcome so many other problems I thought were insoluble – we brought the crime rate down; we’ve begun to address some fundamental problems in our public policies which I thought were beyond reach – that I am now prepared to believe, even in my advanced age, that almost anything is conceivable.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: Jim (Wilson), do you think that both sides of the political spectrum are more or less equally to blame for this phenomenon, or do you put more blame on one side?

JAMES Q. WILSON: Right now, I put more blame on one side, which is to say, the Democratic leadership of the House of Representatives. I think they are much more crucially exposed not only to the net roots but to the money – from George Soros and others who fund not only much of the net roots but inject money directly into their campaigns. Moreover, they have benefited substantially from redistricting measures that have made their districts more or less secure. But there are the same people on the other side.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: And don’t you think these people are in some ways responding and mobilizing and trying to imitate the successes of their opposites on the other side?

JAMES Q. WILSON: Yes – of course. I believe that the people on the conservative side have many of the same failings. They are simply less visible. For example, the American public, if you ask them as a whole the question “What should we do about immigration?” you will discover that most Americans are worried deeply about immigration, but think that immigrants here for some period of time who have behaved well should be put on the route to citizenship. The right wing of the Republican Party won’t hear about this. Well now why, if that’s the popular view, will they not? The answer is: The people who have carved up their districts have
carved them up in a way so that the represent the anti-immigrant sentiment. And so it exists on both sides of the aisle; it simply happens to be more visible now on the Left.

ROSS DOUTHAT: If I could jump in and just push back a little on that point you made about the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, I think that conservatives in particular understate at their peril the extent to which the House of Representatives isn’t just responding to the net roots, to George Soros, and to the benefits of redistricting – which just two years ago were widely understood to have instantiated a permanent Republican majority. I think that it’s clear that there has also been a tremendous shift in public opinion on the very questions which the House of Representatives is taking up at the moment. Obviously, you can parse opinion polls about whether we should be funding the troops in Iraq and how much we should be funding them in a variety of ways, but I think the overall trend in public opinion, both where the Iraq war is concerned and where the Bush administration in general is concerned, it’s hard to underestimate how unpopular both our current president and the Republican Party are at the moment, and I think that it’s – anyway, I’ll leave it at that.

JAMES Q. WILSON: You’re quite right, and I think that public opinion has in fact in part been mobilized by the press, by net roots, and by the political leadership, but the deep division in public opinion is just that – a deep division. The Republican and Democratic Party self-identifiers in polls are so deeply divided about the war in Iraq and about the status of George Bush that it’s as if they were representing different countries. Three fourths of the Republicans, roughly, most months but not in all months, think it was right to go into Iraq, and they like Bush. Three fourths of the Democrats think it was wrong, and a significant fraction of them would like to impeach George Bush.

This did not exist during the Second World War. It did not exist during the Vietnam War. It exists now. Why? This is a puzzle that social scientists have not unraveled. But I think that it’s not simply the country becoming divided and the politicians following them. I think, in part, the politicians are divided and have persuaded the country to follow them.

LINDA CHAVEZ: Could I react a little bit to this discussion, having started off by saying that I wasn’t going to talk about the war in Iraq? I think that there is something we’re sort of missing in terms of that issue. Having sort of come of age in the 1960s, during the anti-war era, I hearken back to being a young student at the University of Colorado, and entering the university memorial center to see students snaking through the U.M.C. shouting “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!” It wasn’t just that they were opposed to the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. They were actively supporting the victory of Ho Chi Minh. Today I think there is a lot of skepticism, and obviously the Democratic Party capitalized on it and won the election on the
basis of it – control of both houses of Congress, about the war in Iraq. But I don’t sense the same kind of deep antipathy towards America or certainly our American troops that was evidenced back in the 1960s. People are not spitting on troops when they get off of airplanes now. They are doing just as John O’Sullivan has suggested, offering to take them out for a meal or give them their first-class seat. And I think there is something significant in that.

Now, it may be that the policies that the Democratic Party is supporting will in the end be the undoing of America, in my view, if in fact we fail in Iraq, but I think there has been a sea change in the acceptability of being anti-troops, anti-military, anti-American. It is just simply publicly unacceptable to be those things today, and that certainly was not true in the 1960s.

AMY KASS: You mean it is simply acceptable today?

LINDA CHAVEZ: No, it’s not acceptable to be anti-American, anti-military today.

PANELIST: Except in universities.

LINDA CHAVEZ: Except in universities – and again, it’s because all you people are off in the ivory tower. (Laughter.) I just don’t think that it is acceptable.

(Off mike.)

LINDA CHAVEZ: And the Upper West Side of New York – right. It is not acceptable to – every Democrat who voted to set a timetable for withdrawing the troops wants to claim to be in favor of our American troops. It was emblematic – there was a little item in the Style section this week of the Washington Post; Joan Baez tried to perform for some injured soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center – I mean, can you imagine Joan Baez in the 1960s? She was getting herself arrested throwing herself down in the street trying to prevent people from being inducted into the military.

AMY KASS: There is a big difference between supporting the troops and supporting the country.

LINDA CHAVEZ: Well –

AMY KASS: Hold on. I think Father Neuhaus wants to say something, and then Yuval.

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: So many interesting points have been raised. And to use a phrase like “historical perspective” is usually suspected of being – and rightly so – prelude to fudging hard questions. However, I am struck that here we’ve had a very lively exchange about “net roots.” Am I just particularly slow and out-of-it, or is it not the case that this term, “net roots,” is about three weeks old? (Laughter.) I think it was about three weeks ago when I first saw it popping up in the blogosphere. And all of a sudden we’re dealing with it as though it were a phenomenon that somehow has defining potency for understanding American identity. Please!
New things do that. The greatest new thing – and any discussion of this nature would be almost
risibly irrelevant if it were not at least mentioned – the greatest new thing, I would suggest, in the
last half century of American political, cultural, and religious experience is Roe v. Wade. The
decision has done more than any single thing to force a reconfiguration of religio-cultural, moral,
public, and political alignments in America. And until we arrive at something like a sustainable
political equilibrium on this question, most of what we’re going to be talking about with respect
to American identity is always going to have attached to it the proviso, “until we have somehow
worked through this question.”

So I think that’s very, very important, that it at least be on the record.

Let me say that on this whole question of continuities, discontinuities, it is an astonishing thing
that we do not have in this country any force of public potency that seriously challenges –
intentionally, seriously, and directly challenges – the Constitutional order itself. Now, you and
I – and I’d certainly join you in this – believe that there are a lot of people out there who
think they are working within the Constitutional order but who indeed are
undermining it. And if their policies were
pursued, it would indeed lead to the end of the
American experiment. But we have no forces
on the streets. I was talking recently at
Princeton, and one of the things that came up
in the question-and-answer period, a very, very
bright young woman said that she had walked
by Union Square in New York recently and
there was some kind of demonstration, and she
said, “You know, the one thing I noticed is that
only left-wingers demonstrate.” I thought that was an interesting way to put it, and I said, “Count
your good fortune. In countries where you have right-wingers on the street with the same kind of
fevered intensity and fanatical to their vision of a radically different order, you’ll have a lot more
to worry about.”

So the fundamental adherence to the Constitutional order – the contractual part of it, as I put it in
my paper – and to the idea that America should be better is on the Left and the Right. This is the
consensus in America. There are very different notions as to what is most wrong and what is to
be done about it. But the very notion that America should be better even among the victims of
therapeutic alienation – even they, press them – have this sense, which you do not find that in
other parts of the world, that America is obliged to be better – which is all the more reason why
they have to be so fierce in their criticism of what America is.
I’ll stop at this, Amy, but in terms of the encompassing character of the continuing power of the narrative of American identity, which is my theme, if you will, having experienced this in various placements, autobiographically – in the 1960s, I was very much a person on the Left, especially with regard to the war in Vietnam and above all, the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the conflation of the Civil Rights Movement and the war in Vietnam. My parish was in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, N.Y., then very poor, very black, and very depressed. It has subsequently has become quite chic and gentrified, but in those days it was different. In 1966, we held the first anti-war service at St. John the Divine – we called it St. John the Mundane to distinguish it from the Episcopal cathedral up in Morningside Heights (laughter). It was the first service of the turning in of draft cards. Not the burning of draft cards, mind you, but the turning in of draft cards then to be sent to Washington. In that service, where you had Abraham Joshua Heschel – I was just last night at JTS – Jewish Theological Seminary – at a conference, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great religious figures of the twentieth century, Father Dan Berrigan, Bill Coffin from Yale – we all remembered these characters, going down the nostalgia trail. In that service in Brooklyn, at the end when I was kind of presiding over this, I said, “You know, we should all now sing ‘America the Beautiful.’” And there was kind of a gasp. And then I explained – and you’ve all heard this before – that the song does not describe the America that is but the America to which we are devoted in some small way to help be born again. A lusty singing of “America the Beautiful” followed at that moment.

This catches – in this case on the Left – this catches that which is characteristic, I think, of the encompassing and empowering narrative, and that we who now are perceived to be and indeed, as Midge Decter said, finally join the side that we’re on, and therefore are conservatives, we have to remember that this is not simply our story. The story of patriotism, of American exceptionalism, etc., etc., we have to more persuasively propose – not in a narrow partisan way, which tends to undercut and sour and make toxic, but ought to be powerfully appealing – the narrative of the covenant encompassing the contract implying the opportunity and the obligation.

Well, enough. Thank you.

YUVAL LEVIN: To follow up on that, a number of things that have been said, and it strikes me that part of what we’re getting at is that the a healthy American society actually looks different from other healthy societies. That makes it harder for us both to define who we are and to diagnose our condition. I was struck by something that John McWhorter said, using a poll about trust in government to talk about patriotism. I actually think that in America, unlike in most places, trust in government has almost nothing to do with patriotism. And in fact often the most patriotic people are the least trusting in government. (Laughter.) And it has always been that
way. There was a modest exception after the Second World War until the mid-1960s. But before then and since then, the most patriotic Americans were the Americans who were least trusting of government, and the conservative movement since the 1960s has had a lot to do with the decline in trust in government. It actually encouraged Americans to trust government less – for kind of patriotic reasons. This makes us rather different – rather, it is one of the many things that makes us rather different. It makes it hard for us to compare ourselves in trying to assess the health of our society.

And if you think about the American narrative that Father Neuhaus talks about, we think of the United States as being a very young country and having a very short history, but in fact, if you walk around Washington and you look at the Capitol building, that building has housed the same legislature, the same form of government for about 205 years, now, since it came into the Capitol, in that same time, the French government, the home of the French president, has been a home, now, to kings; it has been a home to revolutionaries; it has been a home to invading armies; it has been a home to no less than four separate forms of democracy.

We have a very long and continuous democracy in America, and it has never been at ease, and it has never looked like a healthy society normally looks like. And I think a lot of that has to do with the discussion we had before about the “I” and the “we.” What people mean when they say – as David (Blankenhorn) said they do, and I agree – that the first thing they like about being American is that it’s a free country, they’re talking about the “I,” the individualism. Our sense of the “we” is defined by that “I,” which is also very unusual. It’s a good thing, but it makes it hard for us to look at ourselves in the mirror and say that we’re healthy.

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: Which is also a good thing.

YUVAL LEVIN: I agree. It causes us to talk about things like this.

AMY KASS: A sign of health is disagreement? A sign of health is polarization? I seem to think that Jim (Wilson) was pointing in a slightly different direction with the problem of polarization. Jim, do you want to have the last word on this – and then we have to have a break.
JAMES Q. WILSON: I just want to add a comment about the proportion of people who distrust government. It is true that it has fallen from a very high number when Dwight Eisenhower was president to a very low number today. The thing to be explained is why it was ever at such a high number. That is on the face of it outrageous. Three fourths of the American people trust the federal government to do the right thing? Today, if you put the proposition, they would ask whether those people were under the influence of some mind-altering substance. No! What they were under the influence of was, we had just won the Second World War; a military hero was president; we had the sole possession of the atomic bomb; the American dollar was the currency of the world; two thirds of all manufactured products were made in this country; and things were awfully good! And so people persuaded themselves – wrongly, I think – that you can trust the federal government to do things right. If polls had existed in a meaningful way before Dwight Eisenhower was president, I think we would have found a very different pattern.

So what’s to be explained is not that we have fallen from this peak, but the oddity that the peak ever occurred in the first place.

AMY KASS: Thank you very much. We’ll take a short break.

(Coffee break.)

II. What can philanthropy do?

AMY KASS (in progress): … I’ve had a request for someone to define what “net roots” is.

(Laughter.) But let’s hold that for a little while and turn our attention to the question of what philanthropy can do to revive, to renew, to reinspirit patriotism or civic identity.

This is not an idle question, especially in this audience. We have here some of the members of the board of the Bradley Foundation, one of the finest foundations in the country; I’m sure they are listening with eager ears to any suggestions you may have.

Again, to help seed this discussion, Bill McClay has made a very positive suggestion. Let me just read it to remind you, and then you are free to roam as you please. Bill writes,

The realm of culture is precisely the area where intelligent philanthropy can accomplish a great deal of good, particularly in fostering new venues and institutions—think tanks, media, schools, colleges, and other avenues of intellectual and cultural renewal—which can both support fresh alternatives, and challenge the existing ones to do better.

A little bit later in his essay, taking his bearings, really, from the unbelievably stunning works at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, he writes,

[Philanthropy can… play] in our day a role not unlike what the Medicis and other great patrons of art played in theirs, giving support to worthy ideas and experiments that hold the promise of cultural renewal. The problem is admittedly
vast, but there is no need to address it at every single point. The root of the problem with our popular culture is the degeneration of our elite culture, and the restoration of the latter would soon have a powerful effect on the former.

This is not a new idea; W. E. B. DuBois talked about the same thing in “The Talented Tenth” argument that he made almost a century ago.

So, what can philanthropy do?

JOHN McWHORTER: One suggestion that I would have along those lines is, I think that any efforts that could be made to restore to high school or definitely to university curricula a sense of pride in the use of our language would be important. I don’t say that just because I’m a linguist. I think that a culture with a true sense of pride in itself bases that pride on something more than just the natural sense human beings have that what they were born into is worth defending if something bombs it – which to me is just not enough.

Pride in our language is something that I think we’ve been losing in America in a precipitous way since the 1960s. For example, at the same time as there were people hanging flags out of their windows after 9/11, besides the fact that when I put a flag on my car at the University of California, Berkeley, it was ripped off twice, something that I found notable about how people felt there – but maybe that was just a small world, Richard Atkinson, who was then the president of the University of California was bemoaning the fact that he had seen twelve-year-olds being drilled in “big words” in preparation for the SATs, and he moved to have the verbal portion of the test eliminated. The media thought that was just wonderful; everyone had this warm-muffin feeling about how important it was that young, thinking people were not burdened with having to use the higher forms of the language. That sort of thing was a shame, I think.

For us to have more of a pride in the tongue that we speak, which is much more common even in countries with a kind of self-hatred in other ways, like France and Germany, than here. That might be something that would help us along the way towards having a pride in something positive about ourselves, and maybe less abstract than, say, “We’re a free country” – which in the mental representation of many people is practically one word. If you asked, “What do you mean be ‘free’? We’re free here. How are people no free in Japan?” that would be a tough question for a lot of people. Language is something more concrete.

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: When you say that it’s not an idle question, Amy (Kass), that’s a great understatement. Not only do we have here many members of the board of the Bradley Foundation, which has played, as you said, such a singular role and a creative role over these last thirty-plus years, but we have sitting around the table here and in the audience perhaps a majority of us who have a very quick – without any trouble at all – response to the question of
what philanthropists should do, and that is: Give us more money. (Laughter.) That’s not a terribly helpful response, necessarily, and certainly not surprising.

But I agree with what Bill McClay says about the marvelous additional factor in American exceptionalism that is philanthropy. The analogy with the Medicis I hope he doesn’t push; I’ve always appreciated that the Bradley Foundation among others hasn’t been anything like the Medicis in the way it exercises philanthropy!

A bigger question. Everybody has been talking for the last, it seems to me, twenty years about how we’re living through this time of unprecedented intergenerational transfer of wealth. Trillions upon trillions of dollars, presumably, out of the robust economic activity here in this country over the last twenty years. Why is it – and I’d really be interested in how people on the panel and others here would respond to this, because I’ve never quite figured it out – why is it that identifiably conservative, broadly construed conservative philanthropy is in such a minuscule position, relatively speaking, to “left of center,” “liberal,” “progressive,” “radical” philanthropy? The Bradley Foundation, which has played such a singular role, is – if somebody will correct me – number twenty in the country in terms of assets. (Editor’s note: The number is actually 81, according to the Foundation Center’s most recent data.) If you look at the top of the list, the big ones are Johnson, MacArthur, Ford, etc. Part of it, of course, is philanthropic bureaucracy and the professionalization of philanthropy that creates a powerful dynamic for any philanthropist no matter what his or her original intention to find the enterprise sucked into the general whirlpool of left-of-center American philanthropic management. But why is that?

It’s certainly not because most of the money is on the Left. It’s certainly not because people on the Left have a deeper appreciation of the importance of voluntarism and of individual initiative; on the contrary! Why is it that this endlessly discusses – or it seems to me endlessly discussed – historically unprecedented intergenerational transfer of wealth has not had significant consequences in the realignment of the partisan uses of wealth in American life?

JAMES Q. WILSON: That’s an excellent question, Father John, and some foundations have coped with it by putting themselves out of existence on the basis of a scheduled arrangement of payments so that, as with the Olin Foundation, the intentions of the founders cannot be lost. I think this is crucial issue for all foundations. I’m not here to urge the Bradley Foundation to put itself out of existence, but I am here to urge the Bradley Foundation to think very hard about the following question: How long will the intentions of the Bradley brothers be honored by the Bradley Foundation?
We know the answer for the Ford Foundation; Henry Ford’s intentions were honored until approximately fifteen seconds after he left the scene. The recruitment of professional fundgivers is recruitment from a world in which college educated liberals move, and there is really no obvious way to change that. One could try to create university programs that produce more cautious, indeed even more conservative people who would like to run foundations. But I doubt that that’s going to be very successful, because it’s voluntary and I’m not sure many people would do it. It seems to me that every foundation has to build in place a mechanism for deciding when its life expectancy ought to be brought to an end, and the charters brought up by founders in the future must contain that proviso. Every foundation wants to be immortal, so the person after whom it is named will achieve immortality. I doubt that Henry Ford wanted his name preserved in immortality in quite this way. The MacArthurs, however, I think are delighted that their name is preserved in immortality in the MacArthur Foundation because that’s very much what they wanted.

Once you face the question as an internal structure – if the founder was a liberal or the founder was a conservative or the founder didn’t care about politics, it makes no difference; preserving the intent of the founder is what should be done – then you ask the question of where the money should be spent. Here, the money is already being spent. So I’m going to mention three or four things which I think are particularly valuable and simply say that more money ought to be spent in this direction.

- The American Council on Trustees and Alumni is struggling to make alumni and trustees more active in the management of universities so that they retain their core mission. There have been some successes at Dartmouth and other places, and I hope that there will be successes elsewhere, but it requires a profound investment in alumni and trustee candidates to make this happen.

- David Horowitz is trying to get campuses to adopt a free speech amendment of a sort that the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) would have endorsed, had David Horowitz not endorsed it! They have backtracked on their long-standing commitment to free speech.5 And this has happened in a few places, but should happen everywhere.

- Financing films. Hollywood has more influence, I suspect, than any of the institutions of which we’ve spoken so far. How many people can write a movie that certifies or appeals to or captures the essence of good Americanism without discovering that nobody will pay the bill? I think

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5 The Bradley Center hosted AAUP president Roger Bowen as a part of a panel discussion entitled “Donors, Dogmas, and Degrees: Higher Education and Philanthropy” on January 24, 2006. Visit the center’s web site at http://pcr.hudson.org and click on “Past Events” to locate a transcript of that discussion.
that there are opportunities here, but these opportunities entail certain risks. I think it can be done.

- And finally – and here I want to give special credit to the Bradley Foundation, which helped start this – financing charter and voucher schools as a way of diversifying K-12 education. It is extraordinarily important. It began in a big way in Milwaukee, and the Bradley Foundation was a key player in making it happen. Other philanthropists have made it happen on a small scale elsewhere. The evidence that we’ve gathered so far is that these programs for many people – not all – represent a big step forward in acquiring academic skills; but what none of the studies talk about is whether they bring a different pattern of human action, a different emotional orientation toward the world. From the limited encounter I have had with them, I think they do – for instance, charter schools and voucher schools require students to dress up in uniform in order to moderate class differences, and they emphasize certain aspects of American history to a greater extent than is found in public schools.

All of these things which foundations have done should be done on a larger scale.

Thank you.

LINDA CHAVEZ: As someone who is totally dependent on the generosity of the philanthropic community for the work that we at the Center for Equal Opportunity do, please let me start off by begging, please, Bradley, do not go out of existence! We cannot afford it! Having said that, I’d like to talk a little bit more specifically about some of things the philanthropic community can do in terms of this whole question of assimilation and what it means to us as a nation and our sense of identity, and I want to hearken back to Amy’s question to me earlier, when she asked me who was to blame for this sense that we are not effectively assimilating immigrants – was it the immigrants themselves, or us?

I think I responded that people believe it’s the immigrants who don’t want to assimilate. I should have added that the real problem is us. It’s certainly our institutions. One of the biggest differences we are experiencing today in terms of the absorption of immigrants into our society is that we lack the kind of institutions that we had in the early twentieth century. There are no settlement houses now. There are no civic leagues for immigration or comparable groups today who see as their purpose trying to guide newcomers through the process of fully becoming American –
learning English, learning the history of the United States, learning to identify with American heroes as their heroes.

I happen to be writing a book now on immigration and assimilation, and one of the things I’ve had to do is go look at textbooks that are being used in public schools for teaching American history. And one of the things that you see is that it’s no wonder kids don’t identify with America! It’s no wonder that Mexican immigrant child comes into school and doesn’t learn to think of himself as American. The most popular textbook in California lists eight “representative people” through whom we’re supposed to view American history – four women, four men, three blacks, one Hispanic, one American Indian, etc. The Mexican-American children there are being taught to think of Juan Seguin as their hero – not Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. I had to look up who Juan Seguin was – I had no idea. He is a very minor character who played a role in the Alamo on the side of the Texans and a former mayor of San Antonio.

ROSS DOUTHAT: At least he was on the side of the Texans! (Laughter.)

LINDA CHAVEZ: At least he was on the side of the Texans – that’s right. At least it was Santa Anna they were suggesting as someone with whom to identify!

But my point is a serious one. The philanthropic community, I think, should be doing more to teach English. John McWhorter talked about teaching English; I think he was speaking more in terms of people who are already supposed to know English. But certainly in terms of people who need to learn English. Anyone you talk to in the immigrant community will tell you that classes for English acquisition are oversubscribed. There are simply not enough of them that are being operated by government, they say. Well, it shouldn’t be government operating the classes; it should be the community itself, through philanthropic efforts. And I think the same is true for civic education and for American history.

The public schools are not teaching these children to think of themselves as Americans. I think the folks who were involved in the philanthropic community would be well advised to look at opportunities there to make this happen. Regardless of what your position is on immigration and the levels of immigration, all of us should recognize that we’re not going to shut off immigration. We may try to reduce illegal immigration, but we’re going to have people coming to the United States. That is part of who we are as a people. And it ought to be our responsibility to help those people not just come here as sojourners and as workers but people who will, in fact, become part of our community and become American.

YUVAL LEVIN: I agree with every word of that, and I want to follow up on it with the thought that we should also remember the good that this would do for Americans. A project like this – there’s a wonderful passage in Tocqueville’s Democracy in America where he praises the jury system, which he says is terrible for the accused but is wonderful for the juror. It’s a way of using civic education to educate the educators. That sort of thing should not be underestimated. Involving young people who are inclined to volunteer teaching immigrants about America, provided it is done in the right way, would be very good for those young people.
The good it does for the immigrants shouldn’t be overstated. Assimilation is a long-term process, a process of acculturation. It takes generations. The most successful assimilation that we think of, the assimilation of the early twentieth-century immigrants, was something like a three-generation process. And so we shouldn’t expect too much to come out of these classes for the students, but I think that we also shouldn’t underestimate how much would come out of it for the teachers.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Just a word of caution on that. If you look at the approach, for instance, in some of the European countries that don’t call it “assimilation” because the term is seen as having a very negative connotation there, but instead call it “integration,” settlement houses and providing immigrants with the tools to integrate or assimilate often lead to negative results. The process makes people who are at first vibrant and want to become part of the society dependent; they are seen to be victims.

In an autobiographical way, I completely assimilated into Dutch society. I spent a few weeks in the place where Dutch classes were provided, and the classes were an obstacle. It wasn’t a place where I really got to learn the language. If as an immigrant you want to learn the language of the country into which you immigrated, then you need to talk and engage with the people who are already living there. And I think that one of the fantastic things about America is that you can find a job, usually – not only one job, but several jobs – and that is for instance what is missing in Europe because of the welfare state, because there is too much “help.”

Moreover, settlement houses lead more to segregation, more to the formation of ghettos and that sort of thing, and I would say if there is an immigrant – and I’m not being harsh on them – who really wants to assimilate into the society and like you say, assimilation is a long-term process and a very hard process, the best way to go about it is to leave it to the immigrant. Only when the immigrant gets stuck and needs help should help be there and be provided; we shouldn’t start with it.

LINDA CHAVEZ: Could I just respond really quickly? “Settlement houses” in the context of Europe today I think are quite different than what was the experience of early twentieth-century Americans. This is not the welfare state; in fact, this is an alternative to the welfare state. Immigrants generally, I think, should not be encouraged to become wards of the welfare state; I would even say that they should be prevented from it. That is a recipe for their non-integration into society – I totally agree with you, Ayaan.

But that’s very different from an employer like Chick-fil-A, for example, which does this very well. They offer English classes to their workers after work and during their breaks. These are
very, very popular; they bring the classes to the workers because they understand that these people work often sixteen hours a day and don’t have time to really devote to public school. And so it’s quite different than the experience of the welfare state in Europe.

DAVID BLANKENHORN: I’ve noticed that a lot of people go to their local libraries all over the country; they go for the discussions and so on just like people seem to increasingly go to bookstores for discussions and readings. My idea is to make a kit in a box called “What Is An American.” Libraries around the country could adopt it for book discussions or reading discussion series. A lot of these libraries are doing things where teenagers – kids – and their parents come in in the evening. So it’s a kit in a box. It’s developed by a philanthropy. And you put Amy Kass and a few other people together to figure out the best readings, and it can be tested out to make sure it’s interesting for people, provocative, and the readings are good. And then libraries all over the country would get this free content for their local programming that people want. They want to come into the libraries. And because it’s all voluntary, it might be easier than, say, trying to beat down the doors of the schools. So that’s just one idea.

AMY KASS: I’m very much in favor of having lots of discussions in public libraries, in schools – wherever! In communities. But first of all, who is going to lead these discussions? Secondly, who is going to choose those readings? And thirdly, do you really think that readings – intellectual knowledge – will be sufficient to inform also the heart?

DAVID BLANKENHORN: Well, it’s not the solution to everything. I just think it’s one good idea. And if a philanthropy established the programming, then the programming would be good. If the Bradley Foundation or some like-minded philanthropist developed it and figured out how to make it work, presumably it would have good content. And no, these readings and discussions aren’t everything, but I do think that there is a ready venue especially in small- and medium-sized communities. Anyway, it’s just one dumb idea.
But I have one other idea. If I had to pick one topic for who we are, what is America, one challenge that we have as a country that brings this issue up as dramatically and as – just the moment we’re living in today – it would be the importance of us engaging the Arab and Muslim world. And I think we’re doing just an awful job of it. I think we’ve failed in almost every way you could possibly fail at this. We’ve failed at the level of public diplomacy. We’ve failed at the level of private citizen-to-citizen initiative. And it just really makes me weep. And so I wish that for this great challenge of our generation, we would seek to be who we can be and who we ought to be, Father John. At this great challenge of seriously engaging the Arab and Muslim world in a discussion of human rights and values and what is a civil society and are we all God’s children – I just think that a task of philanthropy, if the question on the table is “What is an American?” “Who are we?” what more important venue to begin to work out that question than engaging this topic? I feel so strongly that we have not done – even remotely – what we could and ought to do in this area. The library thing is a small and specific thing, and this is a bigger thing with a million specifics, but I just wanted to put it on the table.

STEPHAN THERNSTROM: Presumably we would like to stimulate American patriotism and a stronger sense of national identity, and you can be an ignorant patriot, but I think it’s helpful to be knowledgeable about what you are patriotic about. Bill McClay sounded this theme – the ignorance of American history and institutions in our society. If you’ve read any one of a number of recent studies, you know that those wonderful little American history quizzes that Jay Leno gives on occasion are really not that far fetched. (Laughter.) I think those are actors, but a random sample would not be much better.

There is, I think, a refreshing, vague national consensus on this point. I’m impressed with two things. First, Amy (Kass) and I are both in the council of the National Endowment on the Humanities, and there is a program there, the “We The People” initiative (http://www.wethepeople.gov/) which has a lot of money – although not much by the standards of other federal agencies – and very strong bipartisan support. Everyone seems to think, yes, let’s invest in knowledge of our heritage. It’s also heartening that when an outrageously ideologically slanted national curriculum for American history done by a team at UCLA came before the Senate in the mid-1990s, it was deplored 95-0 or something like that. The Senate, at least, was not willing to endorse a perspective on American history that John McWhorter well described is common among the intelligentsia.

I don’t know if this is possible, but I just wonder if a philanthropic effort could – I think the institutional arena that is most in need of change, the single-most important area I can think of, are the schools of education. The Harvard Graduate School of Education, for example – I’ve had a few students from there who were quite good but were deviant. (Laughter.) They tell me that if
some question about American history comes up around there, people are told to look it up in Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. (Laughter.) And I’ve gotten impressionistic evidence that that’s a book that would be read in the School of Education at the University of Kansas or whatever. And I wonder if a great education school could be created. It would have to be, I presume, at a private university. If you could make Diane Ravitch the dean, or someone like that, but there is no one like that I can think of – perhaps a younger Diane Ravitch, it could for one thing help to train some of the teachers for the charter schools and private schools that voucher programs might stimulate to grow. But most important, it would be teaching American history in which – I know some parents have teenagers who’ve said that the most important figure in American history in the nineteenth century, according to what they’ve learned, is Harriet Tubman. I had thought for a time that Boston University’s School of Education was such a program, where there you had a culturally conservative president of the university who presumably was attempting to do something like that. It is not my impression that it has succeeded in becoming what I would think a beacon of enlightened education for teachers should be. But it should not be impossible to do something like that.

JOHN O’SULLIVAN: Actually, I want to make about a thousand points, but I’ll restrict myself to five hundred. (Laughter.) I want to agree passionately with Ms. Hirsi Ali on her point about worrying about official integration and assimilation courses. In so far as there is a role for the foundation here, it seems to be that of demystifying the official attempts and creating an alternative to them.

Just as Stephan Thernstrom has suggested, and I agree, setting up a counter-educational institute would be a wonderful idea and I don’t see why we shouldn’t have our own Sundance Festival as well – and a similar organization for television programs, because one of the most successful and important pieces of conservative intellectual propaganda in the last thirty years has been the television sitcoms *Yes, Prime Minister* and *Yes, Minister*, which are still shown and which are absolutely brilliant.

But I want to particularly stress agreement here in Europe. Because if you look at Europe, the problem is – and the British, conscious of the failure of multiculturalism, have just in the last few years tried to say, “Well, we must integrate foreigners. We must have citizenship exams. We must teach them how to become British.” And so on. Now, teaching them how to become British turns out to have almost nothing to do with what being British is. It particularly excludes history.
They regard teaching history as divisive. These people might feel, you know, that Nelson is not one of them. (Laughter.) The thing is, he is British – and quite famous, you know. And instead, what you get is an extremely diluted concept of Britishness which turns out to be something like membership in a social democratic debating club in which you address various feel-good policies – and I have to say that I’m in general skeptical of ideological theories of nationhood in which people assent to various propositions which are assented to by people in other countries with equal fervor, and which therefore don’t distinguish an American from anybody else.

Now, I also have to express some agreement with Linda (Chavez), but as she knows well, some disagreement. It seems to me that we cannot divorce questions of multiculturalism and assimilation from the question of levels of immigration. And I’m probably in a majority around the country but in a distinct minority around the table in what I’m about to say. High levels of immigration make multiculturalism plausible to other Americans. Their reaction to it, it seems to me, is quite reasonable. They say, “Well, there are lots of these people here. They speak different languages. We’ve got to make arrangements to make them feel at home until they actually are at home.” Although there is no doubt that our influence, so to speak – well, I should say your influence, because I myself am an unassimilated immigrant, your influence on immigrants through these programs is powerful, but you’re doing them partly because you feel you have an obligation to be friendly to the people. This makes these programs plausible.

Linda rightly pointed out that before the First World War, there were a lot of people speaking German. There were German newspapers. There were any number of expressions of cultural diversity of that kind – yes. And there were ideologies that were absolutely identical to multiculturalism that were extremely fashionable at the time. What changed that? Three things: the First World War – people stopped talking German; the quite draconian restrictions on immigration in the 1920s; and thirdly, the Depression, which meant that nobody was coming to America to get a job because even Americans couldn’t get jobs.

So for a period of time for these reasons, some of which were deliberate and some were just historical accidents, you had a situation in which America didn’t have a lot of immigrants coming in, and that was the period in which assimilation proceeded quite rapidly.

Now, just to make sure you’ll not misunderstand me, I’m not suggesting that we should cut off immigration. I simply want more moderate levels of immigration, levels that in my view would be economically and culturally more assimilable. What is that level? I don’t know. But I do know when that level is being exceeded, and that level is being exceeded when people express anxiety and discontent and nervousness – when it becomes a major political issue, as it now is. It becomes a major political issue not simply because of the levels of immigration, but because the official class, the
government and President Bush personally, seem to suggest that they don’t have any concept of any limits on the intake. It’s not just simply the twelve million people who are here. It’s also the fact that if you say that you’ll welcome in any willing worker who wants to work for a willing employer, you are integrating your labor market with that of the world, and there is no level in principle at which you’re going to stop. And that is what creates more anxiety.

Now, as I said, I have another five hundred points to make, but I think I’ll leave it at that. I’d simply like to repeat the main point, which is that if we want to have integration and assimilation of immigrants that works, we have to create the circumstances in which they will work, and the circumstances are a system of immigration which the American people think is reasonable.

And one final point in response to Professor Wilson: If immigration is an issue in which polarization is driving the Democrats in one direction and the Republicans in the other, how come the Democrats are absolutely resistant to joining the President at the moment on the immigration bill? It is because many of the people were elected by running to the right of their Republican opponents on this very issue or chiming in with the same argument because they were afraid this was the one issue which might make them lose their seat.

AMY KASS: Okay. It’s a long question – what could philanthropy do to influence levels of immigration? But let’s hold that for now.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I’d like to pull back to a broader point that I think both John (O’Sullivan) and Professor Thernstrom touched on, and I think it’s a tremendously important question for philanthropy, particularly conservative philanthropy going forward, and that’s the question of creating parallel institutions versus changing existing institutions. When I hear John talk about a conservative Sundance Film Festival, and when I hear Professor Thernstrom talk about a good education school, I wonder, looking at the record of the last thirty years and comparing the conservative movement and its attempt to create parallel institutions and, I guess, the leftwing attempt to make a long march through existing institutions, I might suggest that the leftwing march has been more successful in many ways. And I think that we should all, for instance, be profoundly grateful to the foundations that provide the money to create the American Enterprise Institute or the Institute for Religion and Democracy or what have you. But if it’s at all possible, I would rather see the Richard John Neuhaus of 2025 a tenured professor at Harvard University than a tenured professor at an alternative graduate school of religion that was founded in 2011.

And I’m not sure if this is at all possible, but I do look at programs like the James Madison Program at Princeton as a better way forward for philanthropic dollars than attempts to create alternative institutions.

And just to link this back to the point that I was making in the earlier discussion, I think that one of the things that conservatives need to recognize about the post-9/11 era is that there was a moment when conservatism had a change to essentially become the governing elite of the United States. I think that we’ve failed that test, and I think one of the reasons we’ve failed that test is because we exist still in parallel institutions that have failed to become plausible as the dominant institutions of American life. And while Harvard University is less important than it was perhaps thirty years ago, and the major national networks are less important than they were thirty years
ago, they are still important. They are still close to dominant. And insofar as philanthropic dollars can change them rather than creating alternative paths, I’d like to see that path explored.

AMY KASS: We have promised the audience that there would be time for some questions from the audience; I just want to indicate a couple of things. There is a conspicuous silence about the importance of some patriotic music, for example. Why not rousing renditions of “God Bless America” or something like that? Does that work anymore? When I was a kid, we used to have assemblies every Friday at our public school, and we’d march into the room to “Halls of Montezuma.” Where is that today – does it work anymore?

Second, there is a conspicuous silence about the role of the family and what one should do about developing families or supporting families and what we can do.

There is a lot to be said, of course, as people have indicated, on other educational venues.

I’d like Ayaan (Hirsi Ali) to have an opportunity to at least respond to David Blankenhorn’s very pointed comment about the importance of engaging the Arab and Muslim world – I think that was your main point, David. And I think Ayaan has written about this, spoken about this, and is much more knowledgeable about this than any of us. Is that possible? What might philanthropy do?

As soon as Ayaan is finished, I promise that there will be time – a little time – for some questions.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes, thank you. Let me first start by apologizing for misunderstanding you, Linda (Chavez). I think I just got a little agitated by the idea of immigrants being seen as victims, and that’s not what you do, and that’s not what you said.

What can we do to engage the Arab-Islamic world? And what of this idea that we’ve failed in diplomacy?

Diplomacy assumes, engagement assumes, that there must be some sort of shared value system. If the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia sits with his counterpart or anyone representing Saudi Arabia – whatever prince – what you have, pretty much, is a democracy and a theocratic dictatorship. And in that conversation, an American representative will mostly talk about the interests of the United States. What we have
seen the Bush administration do – and I think, rightly so – is to define as part of the American national interest exporting freedom to countries that are not free. Now, the Arab countries and whoever represents them, Muslim countries and their representatives, are not seeking freedom. They are seeking every possible strategy to preserve their own power. That makes diplomacy not only difficult, but sometimes, impossible – and we are seeing it happen increasingly.

In a world that is globalizing at the pace that it is, countries engage each other not only through diplomacy. What you see are large numbers of people leaving – emigrating from – Muslim and Arab countries to Europe and the United States – to the West, in short. I think it is, for those who come here, in engaging with them, it’s to say, “Look, you come here voluntarily. What we can offer you besides a good job and a place to find opportunity is the value system that we have built – which means attacking your value system.” What the Arab and Muslim world has been told for decades is that they can hang on to their value system. They can be Muslims in the West. They can have their Muslim schools, Muslim media, and so on and so on. And at the same time, they were told that they can be American. I think this is contradictory, and I think that just like we dealt with communism, part of the answer is to say, the set of ideas that you hold, the set of values, the recipe for society that you have devised does not work, and we have a better one. And I think that we can do that on a national level and succeed at it.

At an international level, it is more challenging, but it can be done. Living in Nairobi, Kenya, attending a Muslim girls’ secondary school, a system left by the British, it was Sister Aziza, a woman, who was born and brought up in Kenya, like me, who was first Westernized but then taken to Medina and indoctrinated there, and who came back all covered in black. She started to indoctrinate us as teenagers, living in Africa. I have in my time in Africa and my time in Europe seen so many nongovernmental organizations leaving the West to go out to these countries to help, but that help is always material – it is either relief, or it is to build bridges and so on and so forth. To engage in a very vague way – what you see for instance Arab-Islamic philanthropists do – is they go and export their ideology; they export a form of Islam. It’s a recipe which I think is detrimental to that society, an enemy to that society, and a challenge to this one. And we have not as yet devised a countermanage, and we’ve not started to compete with Islamic dominance the way we have competed with communism, for instance, and made it self-defeating. And we have ignored the dissidents within Islamic countries and also the dissidents living here. There is the government-to-government relationship. But there is also when civil society tries to engage with Muslims in general, and I think we’ve made a habit of engaging with those individuals who want to tell us what we want to hear, but who are not prepared to engage in that way.

AMY KASS: Thank you very much!

III. Question-and-Answer Session

AMY KASS: Questions from the audience?

PETER PROBST, terrorism consultant: I used to work for the United States government, and I was particularly taken with Miss Hirsi Ali’s comments and David’s comments about engaging the Muslim world.
I worked during the Cold War, which over time became a battle of ideas and ideologies. And we were very good at selling democracy and freedom. We engaged. We had professionals doing this – professionals who had been doing this much of their lives. We created parallel organizations. The communists created the World Federation of Trade Unions; we helped create the ICFTU, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. There were mass organizations not only for labor, but journalists, doctors, lawyers, newspaper editors, military veterans. We fought that battle and we won. We had a system of think tanks at universities – the Russian think tank up at Columbia, and the same thing for Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

At that time we had professionals running our public diplomacy effort. Currently, there are some very bright people involved, but from the advertising world. Selling democracy is not the same thing as selling soap. We have professionals who were very, very good political operatives from Texas, but working in the Middle East is quite different than operating in Texas.

My question is, what can we do to restore competency to our public diplomacy efforts so that we truly have an impact overseas?

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: Restoring competency more broadly is always (off mike).

JOHN O’SULLIVAN: Obviously, the quick answer to that question is very simple. You appoint able people with experience in these fields, you let them get on with it, and you guarantee them some tenure. In other words, you try to ensure that there is a bipartisan effort and support so that people will not change with every change of administration. And I completely agree with a lot of what Mr. Probst said.

The question, however, then has to be answered – and this is one I think on which Ms. Hirsi Ali and I might be on different sides – is this: If I understood what Ms. Hirsi Ali said, and of course she speaks with great authority, she seemed to be suggesting something like an ideological frontal assault on Islam.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes!

JOHN O’SULLIVAN: I don’t think that can work, and I think instead that we really would have to try and seduce Muslims – not, of course, in any direct way but by making it plain that the institutions of free society offer more to people by simply showing what they offer.

And secondly, I do think that we would have to seek allies in the Islamic world from among people who are the equivalent in Islam of social conservatives. This is highly controversial, but I do not, for example, favor taking sides with the Kamali secularists completely against the present government of Turkey. I think that there are members of that government who are, for example, trying to stop honor killings at the moment, and I think we have to try to see that the allies we choose in the Islamic world are allies that have hopes of converting other Muslims to something like our point of view, or at least to a tolerant, live-and-let-live approach toward us.
MATTHEW SPALDING, Heritage Foundation: Alluding to the first panel, I was struck by the fact that there was little discussion about the role of government. I’ve always been struck that our character is largely shaped in the Tocquevillian sense by our interaction as citizens. Of course, government itself plays an important role – a good role, in the Constitutional sense – of shaping the public character. But government and what it does has radically changed over the course of the twentieth century. It’s bigger and more involved in our lives, headed by a Supreme Court which defines things very differently than they would have been defined in previous decades.

What role does that have in your thinking about American character and identity? How are we to relate to that? Are we to form institutions in light of it, or are we to push back against it? How does that relate to your discussion?

YUVAL LEVIN: One thing that comes to mind, to begin with, is a point that Father Neuhaus raised – and actually, a point that you, Matt (Spalding), raised. The ways in which our government has become less democratic in the last generation or two have had a great effect on our civic culture. In one sense, the reaction to the ascendancy of the courts has actually had a positive effect, but it’s a positive effect in a defensive sense. On the whole, it certainly has not been positive.

The answer to the question of who we are has always had less to do with government, for Americans, than for most other people – and I think that is very much still the case. It is perhaps less so as government has grown and as the character of what American government does has changed. But I do think that it’s not necessarily a coincidence that a group like this talking about who we are doesn’t begin by talking about the government.

And it’s not only because we are also thinking about philanthropy; it’s because we’re thinking about America, and the American government is in some sense a reflection of who we are, but it is less a shaper of who we are than most governments are of most societies – still.

AMY KASS: Do you all agree with that?

PANEL: Yes.

AMY KASS: Another question?

BOB SCHADLER, American Foreign Policy Council: I have a quick answer and a quick question. The answer to public diplomacy, in small part at least, is to reinvigorate or reconstitute the United States Information Agency, which in an act of public diplomacy suicide we abolished on a bipartisan basis in 1999. The US Information Agency was 40 percent as large as the State
Department and quite effective overseas. And now it is a shambles, and the State Department is designed to do something else, and therefore it is not doing public diplomacy.

I also spent over ten years at the US Information Agency running a program called the International Visitors Program.

I think that John O’Sullivan spoke about immigration – I think that speaks in part to who we are today. We need to decide as a country who – and how many people, and why – we let into this country, and for what reason. The fact that we haven’t been able to give that an answer seems to speak to the fact that it’s a very pertinent question, and we don’t have a clear answer.

The question of how we help people is separate from giving money to people. In running the program, I had a group of international visitors in Los Angeles who were to be briefed by someone in the Education Department of Los Angeles. The woman began with what the city was doing for Mexican-Americans in the education system. And then she made the comment, “We had no idea how many Southeast Asian immigrants we had in our system until they popped up as valedictorians at high schools.” And then she said – literally – “And then it was too late to help them.” (Laughter.)

LINDA CHAVEZ: I’d like to take this as an occasion to respond to something that John O’Sullivan said in light of what was just said.

There is no question that the high levels of immigration now are causing lots of anxiety. However, I would argue that a lot of it is in fact being artificially created, and I will use as evidence of that some polling data about what are the most important domestic issues out there – something that the Gallup poll asks every year or every two years.

The greatest period of legal and illegal immigration to the United States in recent history occurred between 1995 and 2000. And if I were to show you a graph of immigration starting in 1994 and ending in 2004, it would look like this (bell shape). There was not a lot of anxiety about illegal or legal immigration in 2000 or in that period between 1995 and 2000, when the number was going up. The number was 1.5 million in 2000. In 2004, that had dropped to about 1.1 million, a decrease in 25 percent in the flow.

If you look at the polling data on that in 2002 – if you look at the response to the Gallup poll question of what the most important domestic policy issues in the United States are – and I’m probably going to get this off by a percentage or two, but my recollection is that 13 percent of Americans cited immigration as the most important issue. Today, or even in 2004, after the numbers had come down, immigration was one of the top issues cited. In fact, it was the top issue on the domestic agenda.

So I’m not sure John O’Sullivan’s point that this is being driven by the numbers is accurate. It’s being driven by talk radio, cable news, and by some of the immigration restriction groups out there who are sending literally tens of millions of letters out to fundraise on this issue.

AMY KASS: One last question. Yes –
CHRISTOPHER GARBOWSKI, Maria Curie-Sklodowska University: There has been a lot of talk about immigrants. What about the values that immigrants bring to the United States? We were talking about a covenant, earlier. The majority of immigrants are Christians, and perhaps some of those Christians are getting Americans to reexamine their faith – for instance, the Nigerian bishops who are getting Anglicans to read the Bible again. What about the values that immigrants bring with them to the United States?

AMY KASS: What about what about the values?

CHRISTOPHER GARBOWSKI: Yes – what impact does that have on the question of who Americans are?

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: Well, I think the answer is somewhat implicit in the way you framed the question. I’m very sympathetic to that, my friend John O’Sullivan, who of course has had a bee in his bonnet about this for a very, very long time, notwithstanding.

No, I think that the question of whether America is an immigrant nation – I think I allude to this in the paper that I did for this conference – Sam Huntington is certainly right that we have to deflate some of the mythology and legendary force that has gathered around the notion of America being an immigrant nation. But even if you crunch the numbers demographically, as he and others have done, the fact is that America has understood itself for the last hundred and fifty years to be an immigrant nation. And that self-understanding is thoroughly internalized into the American identity, if you will, coming back, again, to the sense of covenantal purpose. To separate that from the American sense of an historical exception, even providentially guided light to the world and light to the poor and huddled and everything written on the Statue of Liberty, I think would do very, very severe damage to precisely the subject of this conference, American identity. I’m also sympathetic, as I think all of us have to be, to a good many Americans who feel the very rough edge of illegal immigration that has gotten out of control in places such as the Southwest, but now increasingly in small towns around the country – which is to say, I don’t have an answer. But I know that we cannot stop being, in our own moral imagination, an immigrant nation.

AMY KASS: Thank you very much.

I think that it’s always a good sign that there are more questions to be asked than time to answer them, and that even among the panelists there are still clearly open questions to be mulled over.
I’d like to thank you all for coming, and thank all of the panelists for their participation.

FR. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS: Amy, could we violate the rules? Because I think Ayaan would like to respond to the question of whether she is really proposing an all-out ideological frontal assault on Islam comparable to the way we responded to communism.

PANEL: Yes, yes.

AMY KASS: Right – yes. Okay!

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes, I am proposing an all-out ideological assault on Islam, and it’s five years too late. And let me remind all of us that it was the other way around; on the 11th of September, the agents of Islam made an all-out frontal assault on America and American values. And if you only respond by saying, “Let’s talk,” and “Let’s engage,” and I think that’s what the West has been doing for decades, what we understand is that that has not worked.

I would like to make a distinction between Islam and Muslims. We should take Islam as a set of ideas – a religious set of ideas, perhaps, but a set of ideas – like we took communism, a set of ideas that competes with the set of ideas that the United States is based on. It’s very easy in this gathering to say that American values are superior to Islamic values. If we take Muslims as individuals like all of us, endowed with reason, I am optimistic enough to believe that once we confront them – and I’m not talking about a military assault here, but rather an ideological assault, which we have not tried – if we try, Muslims, too, can be persuaded to be reasonable human beings and choose freedom. And that is precisely what America has failed in.

AMY KASS: John (O’Sullivan), why don’t you and Ayaan continue this afterwards?

JOHN O’SULLIVAN: Absolutely. I simply love being portrayed as a white liberal! (Laughter.)

AMY KASS: Bill?

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Before we thank our panelists, I should add one more note for those of you who are interested in continuing this conversation. Thanks to the Bradley Foundation and action they took this week, there is in fact going to be a Bradley Project on Civic Identity, E Pluribus Unum. Anne Neal and her organization (online at http://www.goacta.org/) will be directing that project, and you all can check the Bradley Foundation web site, at http://www.bradleyfdn.org, for further information in a few days.

With that, let us thank our panelists for a terrific conversation.

(Applause.)

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