The US Is Not 'One Nation' — And It Never Was

Patrick Buchanan is an informative and interesting writer. On foreign policy, especially, he's long been one of the most reasonable voices among high-level American pundits.

When it comes to cultural matters, however, Buchanan has long held to a peculiar and empirically questionable version of American history in which the United States was once a mono-culture in which everyone was once happily united by "a common religion," a "common language," and a "common culture."

Now, he's at it again with his most recent column in which he correctly points out that the United States is culturally fractured, and speculates as to whether or not Thomas Jefferson's call to "dissolve political bands" in the Declaration of Independence might be sound advice today.

Buchanan is correct in noting that the US is culturally divided today.

But, he appears to have a selective view of history when he contends there was a time when this was not so. If there ever was such a period, it's unclear as to when exactly it was.

Buchanan can't be referring to the mid-19th century when Northern states and Southern states were becoming increasingly hostile toward each other. Many of these differences flared up over slavery, but larger cultural differences were there too, exemplified by a divide between agrarian and industrialized culture, and the hierarchical South versus the more populist North. The result was a civil war that killed more than 2 percent of the population. It was a literal bloodbath.

Was *that* version of the United States culturally united?

Nor can Buchanan possibly be referring to the US of the so-called Gilded Age. After all, during this period, the US was flooded with immigrants from a wide variety of backgrounds,

Historian Jon Grinspan notes:

> *American life transformed more radically during the 19th century than it ever had before. Between the 1830s and 1900, America's population quintupled … at least 18 million immigrants arrived from Europe, more people than had lived in all of America in 1830.*

This hardly led to a period of religious or linguistic unity.

Certainly Catholics of the 19th century in the United States – who were commonly denounced as being non-Christians by the majority Protestants – would be at a loss if asked to describe the way the United States was united by a common religion.

This alleged unity would be news to the Catholics whose schools were being closed by government edict – as happened in Oregon where the state government deliberately outlawed private schoolsin the hope of eradicating the Catholic education system. This unity was certainly absent for the Catholics who were victims in the Know-Nothing riots in Philadelphia in 1844.

The Mormons may have fared even worse, and fled to the wilds of Utah. Even there they couldn't avoid the iron fist of the federal government. When disagreements flared over polygamy and territorial representation, James Buchanan sent 2,500 troops to Utah in 1857 as part of a shooting war with Mormons to force them into better compliance with federal law.

Nor were the foreign languages of immigrants immediately stamped out as many imagine in their nostalgia. Well into the 20th century, German continued to be a widely-spoken language, with Americans of German descent demanding their own German-

language schools and government documents printed in German. Many Germans actively sought to avoid cultural integration with others by demanding more taxpayer-funded German-language-only schools.

According to historian Willi Paul Adams:

> *[S]ome states mandated English as the exclusive language of instruction in the public schools, while Pennsylvania and Ohio in 1839 were first in allowing German as an official alternative, even requiring it on parental demand. Some public and many private parochial schools taught exclusively in German throughout many decades, mostly in rural areas.*

Nor was the German lobby confined to these two states. The original Colorado constitution, for example, mandates that all new laws be distributed in German, Spanish, and English, so as to cater to speakers the three most common languages in the area.

According to the census bureau, there were more than two-million German-speaking foreign-born United States residents in 1920, which means more than 2 percent of the population was speaking German. If the same proportions held up today, there'd be more than six million foreign-born German speakers in the US. Moreover, Germans weren't even the largest foreign language group at the time. There were even more foreign-born speakers of "Slavic languages" including Russian, Czech, and Polish. Taken all together – out of a population of 100 million – there were more than ten million foreign-born Americans with a "mother tongue" other than English in 1920. It is likely that many of these people also knew and spoke English – some of the time. But the reality hardly paints a picture of linguistic and cultural unity as imagined by Buchanan.

And then, of course, there is the Spanish-speaking population. As noted above, the State of Colorado was tri-lingual from the

day it became a state. And then there is New Mexico where Spanish speakers prior to statehood comprised at least half the state's population. Not surprisingly, the New Mexico constitution has always stipulated that the Spanish language enjoys special status, and that no citizen of the state may be denied any state services or rights based on being only able to speak Spanish.

Much of this linguistic diversity was a legacy of the Mexican War in which the US annexed vast territories that included many Spanish speakers. Generally forgotten today is the fact that the Mexican border was once located a mere 100 miles south of Denver along the Arkansas River. The special status granted Spanish in the 19th century in these regions was not a result of an influx of new immigrants. It was the result of a linguistic reality imposed on the population of the American Southwest by an American war of conquest.

We might also mention ongoing ethnic tensions caused by the war, such as those caused by the notorious Land Act of 1851 which robbed the Californios of their property. And then there were decades of anti-Mexican policies in southern Texas that disenfranchised the Spanish-speaking minority there. In some cases, this led to outright violent rebellion as with Juan Cortina and his guerrilla fighters.

So, is the cultural disunity in the United States something novel and unprecedented as Buchanan imagines? It's unlikely.

Any theory about unity in American history that just breezes over the American Civil War is questionable at best, and English is likely more widespread today than at any point in the last 150 years thanks to the dominance of American popular culture.

Nevertheless, Buchanan has a point.

There are very real divides in the US today, especially between the religious and the anti-religious, between the

urban residents and suburbanites, and between leftists and conservatives. Recent data even suggests that communities are now segregating themselves along ideological lines.

So what is the answer?

As is so often the case, the answer simply lies in decentralization. As Buchanan seems to suggest, now may be the time to "dissolve the political bands which have connected" Californians with Texans and Vermonters with Indianans.

After all, as Buchanan notes, if unity were put up to a vote, would the confederation we call 'the United States" even survive?

> *Could the Constitution, as currently interpreted, win the approval of two-thirds of our citizens and three-fourth of our states, if it were not already the supreme law of the land? How would a national referendum on the Constitution turn out, when many Americans are already seeking a new constitutional convention?*

The answers to these questions are not obviously "yes."

Buchanan also correctly points out that the US does not qualify as "a nation" – at least not according to the romantic definition he uses. Buchanan quotes the Frenchman Ernest Renan who identifies at least two criteria for status as a nation: "One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received."

Buchanan suggests this description no longer applies to the US. He's half right. It doesn't apply to the US today. But unless we studiously ignore and gloss over the enduring religious, linguistic, cultural, and ideological differences that have always existed, we must admit it never really

applied to the United States at all.

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