

AMERICA'S SPIRITUALITY, EUROPE & "WHITE" AMERICA

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Poster for the United States Food Administration during the First World War, by Charles Edward Chambers, 1917.
Source: Library of Congress.

As Americans become less demographically European, will American foreign policy focus less on traditional European allies?

Last December during a major speech in Berlin, Germany's then foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, claimed that America's focus is shifting and that traditional transatlantic ties are starting to "crumble."

According to Gabriel, who was also then head of the

Social Democratic Party and Chancellor Angela Merkel's junior ruling coalition partner:

US society is changing rapidly, and soon the majority of Americans will have not European but Latin American, Asian, and African roots. That's the reason why the relationship between the US and Europe will not remain the same after Donald Trump.

Gabriel's remarks revealed differing European and American understandings about national identity, which for the former is traditionally tied to ethnicity. American self-understanding has been based much more on the collective experience of melding immigrant populations and adherence to American civil creeds.

Merkel inflamed European politics with her sudden acceptance of one million mostly Muslim immigrants from the

Middle East and elsewhere. To what extent these new German residents will ever be regarded as Germans by other Germans or themselves is a great incalculable.

Most European nations have struggled to successfully incorporate large, new immigrant communities, Muslim or otherwise. America has at times struggled but comparatively less so. The lack of ethnic commonality among Americans, the hybrid ethnic background of most Americans, and the creedal understanding of American citizenship have facilitated a relatively smoother integration of waves of new immigrants across centuries.

This difference in European and American self-understandings is not always fully understood by Europeans. It's true that most Americans have always had European ancestors. But their ancestry has not necessarily inclined them favorably toward Europe. Many European immigrants to America were escaping persecution, war, or poverty. They gladly quit their homeland in pursuit of a new post-ethnic American identity. Their European origins in many cases inclined them against American alignment with European nations.

American exceptionalism is largely premised on the rejection of ancient European cultural and political struggles. It professes that Americans are a multiethnic and creedal people who have a special global outlook that often gives the US unique universal responsibilities in terms of modeling an egalitarian democratic ethos.

George Washington's warning against entangling alliances, the Monroe Doctrine's claims



Girls in quinceañera dresses at US-Mexico border fence in Tijuana. By Romel Jacinto, April 2009. Source: Flickr.

over the Western Hemisphere, and traditional American pseudo-isolationism were all generated by the descendants of European immigrants who desired distance and distinction from the Old World. For Americans, Old Europe equaled corruption, and America was the antidote, not the proud descendant.

Of course, America's immigrants have never been exclusively European. Starting at Jamestown, Africans were brought to our shores in chains, and their descendants were enslaved for two centuries or more. Black Americans of today often have lineages in America dating back to the 1600s and 1700s, long before most white Americans' European ancestors moved here.

Do black Americans, as 13 percent of our population, deeply identify with Africa and correspondingly push for an Africa-focused foreign policy? There's little evidence that their African roots that Foreign Minister Gabriel cited have or ever will tilt American attention away

from Europe per se. After 400 years in America, the descendants of Africans, although having a powerfully unique historical experience rooted in slavery and discrimination, do not significantly advocate foreign policies different from those policies that the descendants of Europeans promote.

Gabriel also cited Americans of Latin American descent, who now account for 18 percent of the population. Are they shifting America away from Europe? Typically, they are partially the descendants of Europeans, mainly but not exclusively Spanish and Portuguese. And in many ways, Europe influenced the Latin nations more than it influenced the United States. Most of these nations were governed by European colonizers long after July 4, 1776. Their subsequent cultural and political ties to Europe were nearly always stronger than America's ties.

Latin America has always been a chief concern for US foreign policymakers, arguably more in the past than now as the



US in previous centuries more routinely intervened in Latin American affairs because the Monroe Doctrine hegemon ostensibly protected the hemisphere from European imperialists. It's hard to see how American Hispanics, most of whom are of Mexican descent, have or will tilt US foreign policy away from Europe. Their political advocacy often addresses immigration policy but does not typically amplify US foreign policy attention to Latin America. One exception has been the Cuban immigrant influence on US policy toward communist Cuba.

Asian Americans are less than 6 percent of our population, perhaps too small to exert major influence on US foreign policy. Most are Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. Their experiences with communism may have contributed to American resolve during the Cold War. Indians are a growing population, and their numbers may contribute toward growing economic and strategic cooperation with India as a counterweight to China. But Asian economic and political

ascendancy by itself ensures growing US engagement with Asia, regardless of American demographics.

As the world outside Europe, especially Asia, becomes wealthier and strategic power is less centralized among the major Western powers, America's expanded engagement with non-European nations necessarily expands. Perhaps America's increased ethnic diversity facilitates this expansion but does not decisively drive it. American exceptionalism has often claimed America is the first universal nation, with political principles and culture that compellingly speak to the whole world. Growing ethnic diversity might amplify this narrative.

Arguably, the decline of white or European America is exaggerated, confirmed by a new study by political scientists Dowell Myers and Morris Levy at University of Southern California. The US Census Bureau estimates the white majority in America will end in 2042. But such estimates exclude persons who self-identify as white and something else (i.e., persons of mixed parentage). According to Myers and Levy, "under a more expansive definition that counts as white anyone who so identifies (even if they also identify with another race or ethnicity), the white population is not declining; it's flourishing. The Census Bureau's inclusive projections show a white population in excess of 70 percent of the total for the foreseeable future."

So, European America is not declining; it's transitioning to an ethnically zestier version, which has always been at least partly true for America. With the comparative decline

of racial and ethnic prejudice, it's becoming even more blended. The German foreign minister and many others ignore this reality. More importantly, they ignore the extent to which Americans are ultimately defined as much, if not more, by their beliefs rather than their parentage. The Anglo-American project has always been dynamic, fluid, and incorporative of new nationalities. Great Britain of centuries ago was a magnet for Protestant refugees from Catholic Europe and for many others, especially artisans and merchants who sought the prosperity of Britain's emerging capitalist economy. America inherited and exponentially expanded this tradition.

The spiritual nature of the Anglo-American tradition was key. Protestant dissenters created a culture of religious, pan-Protestant diversity, toleration, individualism, and entrepreneurship that was key to developing the American creeds. This tradition endures as immigrants, whatever their religious origins, eventually adapt to this broadly Protestant ethos. Many actually convert to an American evangelical religion.

Whatever America's ethnic composition, its ideals are inextricably European in origin, from classical antiquity, medieval Christianity, the Reformation, and Enlightenment. Consciously or not, Americans of all ethnic backgrounds embrace and universalize these ideals. Whatever Europe's economic and strategic decline relative to Asia and elsewhere, America cannot be America without Europe. ■

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