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# The Maturation of American Identity: A Study of the Elections of 1996 and 2000 and the War Against Terrorism

Edward R. Shapiro\*

Though there is a deep human need for community, and though democracy itself flourishes most richly when it is founded on the consensual will of tightly knit communities ... those [communities] that yield the highest degree of intimacy, membership, solidarity, and fraternity are those rooted in strong communal ties ... of blood, narrow belief, and hierarchy: the demonization of outsiders. (Benjamin Barber, 1995)

## **Abstract**

This paper traces the unfolding struggle of citizens to discern an American identity across the last two presidential elections and the events of September 11, 2001. Drawing on an in-depth study of unaffiliated voters in 1996, I outline voters' longings for an integrative picture of the world that would allow them to locate themselves as Americans. Though both political parties moved toward the middle in 2000, the extraordinary division in the country underlined the failure of the parties to provide a national mission. At the millennium, as ethnic Americans moved into the majority, the political chaos of the split election evoked familiar projections about the political and social meanings of ethnicity. The politicization of the Supreme Court was evidence for a political struggle about American identity that was interrupted by the events of September 11. I will suggest that these background developments and the dynamic and ethnic significance of the attack on America provide an opportunity for Americans to discover a new and complex picture of their role in a multinational, multi-ethnic world.

This paper stems from my reflection on the experience of public disarray during the American Presidential election of 2000 between George Bush and Al Gore. During this period, Americans witnessed a

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remarkable internal political polarization and an unprecedented politicization of the judiciary to solve the political impasse. In addition, there appeared to be systematic interference with voting in ethnic and lower income areas. The split vote was extraordinarily precise, dividing the country in half. The political map presented on newscasts illustrated this political division by delineating in red the Republican centre of the country and, in blue, the Democratic coastlines. This paper traces one speculative formulation of this precise political division in terms of the dynamic use of ethnicity in America and its relation to the evolution of American identity.

In this red and blue political map of 2000, I saw an illumination of a split national identity where our outer boundaries (at the ethnically diverse edges of our country) were liberally opening for contact with the outside world, while our internal life remained conservatively stable. It reflected to me a picture of national, political, and internal tension, with the centre of our country holding a set of traditional Republican values about the importance of the individual and our outer boundaries illuminating the Democratic value of a differentiated community. It seemed to me as though the pressures of outside influences were leading us at our boundaries to renegotiate our identity, putting pressure on our internal sense of stability and familiarity.

## IDENTITY

Erik Erikson defined identity as developing congruence between a person's internal view of the self and the views of that self coming from others (Erikson, 1956; Shapiro and Fromm, 2000). Identity formation is a developmental step in adolescence, negotiated through relationships with others as the adolescent's body changes and the child begins to individuate from the family, undertaking a more mature role in a larger community of adults. Impediments to taking up an adult role can include reluctance to give up certainty (Shapiro, 1982), intolerance of ambivalence and complexity, hatred of difference, projection of limitations, and other developmentally induced rigidities. A successful negotiation of identity requires a painful modification of the adolescent's narcissism. Beginning to recognize one's self in the less than idealized reactions of others marks a significant step toward maturity, and strengthens the capacity for flexibly grasping the realities of the larger world with their complexity and limitations.

Nations have identities as well as individuals. Erikson's formulation about identity formation can be applied to the identity of nations, which is negotiated and renegotiated both between its citizens and across its borders. A mature identity would incorporate an increasing

congruence between internal and external views and include mature openness to complexity, increasing tolerance of differences and acceptance of limitations. Such a maturing identity would result in a modification of national narcissism and strengthen the capacity for flexibly grasping the realities of the global community.

America, as a nation, emerged from its home in England over two centuries ago. American identity has developed over time and is in the process of continued development. A review of the last two presidential elections and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 suggests the presence of a national struggle within our citizenry about grasping an American identity in transformation. Changes in the world are pushing us to give up a narcissistic position of moral superiority and move beyond subgroup identifications in order to find ourselves, as Americans, in an increasingly global society and claim a role in the larger world.

### STUDYING THE INDIVIDUAL VOTER

Prior to the national election of 1996, I participated in a large study of selected unaffiliated voters for the Center for National Policy in Washington (Center for National Policy, 1996; Shapiro, 2000). Unaffiliated voters are those without clear party identifications. Their political significance lies in the recognition that their votes inevitably determine the election. As a group, unaffiliated voters illuminate issues that affect both parties and thus allow access to significant national trends. Psychologically, they are the leading edge of our identity-information.

In addition to our extensive group interviews, I personally talked with randomly selected individual voters across the country. These voters, from all ethnic groups, were feeling a loss of shared values in this country, and talked passionately of the loss of a sense of community, a breakdown of rules, and a view of America as 'rudderless', without clear goals, direction, or a sense of vision. In a post-cold war world where information technology, 24 hour media coverage, economic globalization, and the presence of powerful multinational corporations are blurring national boundaries, people could not effectively discover a larger context that allowed them to link their experiences and values to those of other Americans in passionate, meaningful commitments. Beyond the familiar structures of their own family and church, and their untested but strongly experienced membership in ethnic subgroups, they could discern no larger framework. Their grasp of the larger social scene was obscured by social turbulence, economic insecurity, gender and racial tensions,

political disenfranchisement and disaffection. They spoke of a 'loss of authority' in the country and resultant anxiety and uncertainty about the future. There was a widespread feeling that 'life was not as it should be' in terms of their personal and family circumstances, their community life, the direction of the country and 'American life' in general. Many talked about feeling disconnected from wider social and political contexts, as if they were 'all alone', 'voiceless' or just 'numbers' in a 'political game' in which they simply did not count.

The voters had great difficulty articulating what America 'stands for' today, although they were quite able to describe what it used to stand for. Voters could not identify core American values and beliefs. They were unsure of how to identify themselves in relation to others in a global community, and whether they could think of themselves as 'American' or only in terms of their ethnic/racial/religious group.

In the absence of an external enemy against which a shared national boundary could be discerned, ethnicity emerged as a binding framework that individuals could join. Though ethnic identifications frequently emerge in subgroups of white Americans, I am using the term here to refer to those whom whites characteristically think of as 'people of colour', ranging from Native Americans to African Americans, Latinos, Hispanics, Asians, and the more recent immigrants from the Near East, the Moslems. For our voters, their ethnic identifications brought them together with others, linked them in a shared history that often included social trauma, and provided a framework for shared beliefs and values. For some, ethnic identifications offered a way of managing social projections.

Frank was a 38-year-old Black single waiter. He was interested in 'diversifying his skill set'. He knew there was no job security in waiting tables and he had no hopes for a management position. Frank says, 'If a Black man represents the restaurant, the customers get scared. They say they are committed to you, but you can't trust it. My business is to take care of me. I've been burned. They treat you like a prostitute. It's a cold world. If you can manage your emotions and deal with it, it's OK – it's reality. Talent is not seen. You are seen as Black first. White males are hung up on power. If they can't control you, they diminish you.' Active in his church, Frank thought about social issues. He says, 'In this country, Presidents are not in charge. No one is in charge – it is just happening. Something big will have to happen before things can change, like a revolution. People are fighting back now. Either they just manage their emotions like me, or get broken down through their anger – like vagrants and the homeless. Parents are working; the streets are raising the kids.'

Teachers are not paid enough to teach, so they don't care what kind of values they teach.'

Frank's internal world, like that of many people I interviewed, is organized around his ethnic identifications. He does not experience himself as an individual American struggling with diverse opportunities and complex constraints. Instead, he locates his experience within the imagined context of other African Americans who, he believes, passionately and deeply share his picture of the ethnically oriented social world around them. Frank lumps whites into an imagined privileged oppressor group against which he can organize his aggression and develop his adaptation.

In addition to this repetitive ethnic focus, our voters associated their uncertain American identity with a perception of a declining work ethic. They felt the loss of a sense of a united society and of many previously taken-for-granted conditions (affordable education, safe schools, job security, community life, a manageable picture of crime and violence, recognizable national goals). Voters were deeply disaffected with politics and politicians, whom they felt were manipulative, dishonest, and driven by self-interest. They felt the judicial system was inefficient and overly litigious, with a jury system increasingly racially polarized and unsympathetic to ethnic Americans.

Despite their shared anxiety, cynicism, alienation, and loss of faith in the system, voters were aware of their need to renegotiate their connections with others and with changing work environments in order to respond adequately to turbulence and change. They needed help to do this.

It seemed to me that these voters needed an interpretation, potentially offered by their leaders, which would both affirm and help them bear their painful experience by placing what they had repressed or dissociated in a larger context. Government leaders have the information and perspective to articulate the sources and social significance of rapid change, allowing voters to grasp their differentiated roles in an evolving free society. Such an integrating interpretation, plus resources to connect with others, might allow voters to escape their experience as isolated individuals and find new ways to join others to participate meaningfully in their world. They needed a synthesis of what they felt was the 'partially' correct Republican picture (the need to mobilize individual competence) in combination with the Democratic view (strength in diversity and community and resources for those in need). They grasped that individualism without community leads to deadening isolation and that welfare programmes run the risk of crippling people's competence.

They wanted help in learning how people could work together to learn from their differences and discover a larger frame of reference.

Our research strongly suggested that in order to engage the spectrum of voters, political leaders needed to recognize individual competence while affirming the importance of neighbours, neighbourhood, and community. Leaders should articulate the dangers of isolation, acknowledge resource limitations (including their own), and define a mission that capitalized on American strength in diversity, a central value this country represents to the larger world. Leaders should demonstrate how painful differences could be both affirmed and transcended in the service of an American identity. This would allow citizens to move beyond identifications with others in their subgroups toward an identity that both affirmed their individuality and allowed them to join a larger common purpose. Though the larger purpose required definition, what emerged in our study was the binding power of ethnicity and America's historical commitment to incorporating, recognizing, bridging, and transcending differences.

### THE WHITE MAJORITY AND THE ELECTION OF 2000

These political trends in 1996 and the voters' wish for a synthesis contributed to the movement of both parties toward the middle. Despite significant differences in political philosophy, the election of 2000 showed little differences in the substance of the message from the two parties (*Washington Post*, 2001). While the issues – education, retirement security, how to use economic prosperity – captured the country's attention, there was no significant effort to mobilize the competence of the electorate toward a larger vision, or to link our internal national struggles to those of the outside world.

Just under the surface of these political discussions, the population was undergoing a significant change. Immigration, increasing ethnic identifications, and the emergence of major cultural voting blocks were changing the definition of 'American'. At the millennium, ethnic subgroups, once considered minorities, are becoming a larger part of the population, the majority in many cities and states. This change coincides with a similar shift away from the majority of American families being a heterosexual couple with their own biological children. The politics of diversity is moving into a new era.

In American society, whites have always held power and, in recent years, have used that power to increase the economic gap with non-whites. The white majority has managed a sense of unity through projection of difference. The unconscious message is, 'We whites are all the same; you ethnics are different.' These dynamics, characteristic of

unconscious group functioning, provide external support for ethnic bonding in racial and ethnic subgroups. As my interview with Frank illustrated, the shared feeling is, 'If we ethnics are not in power, at least we are together with our brothers.'

On election night, David Letterman said on American television, 'Al Gore is not the President of the United States. George Bush is not the President of the United States. Can't we keep it that way?' The electorate tried, but the election came down to a polarized, Kafkaesque (Conant, 2001) vote counting that laid bare the inequalities in the mechanics of voting. We learned from the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, with little surprise, that, 'Voters in congressional districts with low average incomes and high percentages of Black and Latino voters were far more likely to have had their ballots discarded in the presidential election than voters in wealthier districts with fewer minorities' (*Boston Globe*, July 9, 2001). Government, organized by white elites, does not pay attention to upgrading voting facilities in low-income, ethnic neighbourhoods. Despite our democratic ideals, we have a system that suppresses ethnic minorities and sustains the power – both political and economic – of the white establishment.

Instead of either party recognizing and providing a deeper integration and synthesis of individual and community in the context of a newly articulated national mission, both responded superficially to the developing ethnic transformation. Gore chose Lieberman as an ethnic partner. (Though Lieberman does not fit my definition of an ethnic, he was mobilized in that role and accepted the job in exactly that spirit.) Bush chose Powell and Rice. Though these are all serious people, their positioning failed to address underlying national divisions, leaving ethnic subgroups feeling split off, marginalized, and angry.

The parties dealt with the split vote in 2000 by using all the tactics at their disposal. But, in the end, the conservatives of the Supreme Court made the decision, pulling authority away from the electorate and the messy politics of democracy. In a country where disengaged and unintegrated citizens do not take up the complex work of democracy, the law increasingly regulates social and human issues. In 2000, the electoral process itself was handed over to the courts, de-linked from the democratic process and the Constitution. Perhaps in an unconscious recognition of the incipient loss of their majority, the white establishment seized power in a way that politicized the legal system and disenfranchised ethnic voters.

### THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

For a period of time after the election, it seemed as if the antipathy to



the election process would contribute to a mediocre presidency and a dispirited American public, more preoccupied with Congressman Gary Condit's suspicious sexual relationship and the declining economy than with engagement in political life. Despite post-election rhetoric about bringing people together across the political spectrum, there was evidence of familiar American conservative trends in the government's abandoning the ABM treaty for a National Missile Defense, withdrawing from collaborative international efforts around global warming, and providing tax relief for wealthy individuals. All three policies represented a retreat from joining a differentiated and integrated community and the substitution of an isolated, intensely defended individuality.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 transformed everything. Led by an affluent Saudi, the terrorism was fuelled by the passions of marginalized Islamic ethnic groups enraged at affluent, white organized American culture and society. Suddenly, the unconscious anxiety that ethnics would take our country over from within (manifest most clearly at our Republican centre) was transformed into a shared conscious anxiety that ethnics would destroy us from without.

From the perspective of the internal national split, the attack could be understood dynamically as a return of a dissociated mental representation of historical racism, causing massive psychic disruption and reorganization. The right wing saw with shock their denied hatred of difference returning as an ethnic attack, the left saw their own disconnection from fundamental values returning as a rageful picture of America's godless liberalism. The shock of recognition indicated that this defensively split construction of our national identity had not worked; it demanded an internal shift to acknowledge a more complex reality. Facing this transformation was our conservative Republican president and a management team experienced in war.

The *New York Observer* wrote in October:

The injury to national security has made everyone a conservative overnight. The most hawkish statements have come from the mouths of liberals ... The crisis has resuscitated not only Mayor Giuliani, but also another problematic figure of the last generations: the patriarchal (and usually white) male. We are comforted by the presence of big men ... Who doesn't wish that there were some form of racial profiling on airline passengers ... Liberals have been forced to worship security.

The pre-eminent question became that of 'security', whether an illusion of security through projection and attempted destruction of externally experienced evil, or a genuine security to be discovered through internal integration and competent boundary management.

If America was struggling with a developmental internal split with fundamental values held internally and differences projected to our outer boundaries, the terrorist attack evoked a crisis. Americans – as articulated by our president – were stunned that outside ethnic groups hated us. We faced a manifest identity crisis between our narcissistic self-idealization (our president called us ‘a good and kind people’), and a vicious external retaliation for our foreign policies that had contributed to the marginalization of ethnic subgroups.

The attack came from a fundamentalist group committed to violence. The fundamentalist view is aimed at simplifying a complex world (Barber, 1995). Complexity is the enemy because it dissolves pathological certainty and promotes dissent. The thinking of this absolutist group was not different in focus from our own fundamentalists. For instance, it was not Osama Bin Laden who said: ‘The termites are in charge now, and that is not the way it ought to be; the time has arrived for a godly fumigation’, it was Pat Robertson (*New York Magazine*, August 18, 1986). In the fundamentalist polemic, America represents a godless loss of basic beliefs, a nation whose not easily graspable identity promotes ambiguity, ambivalence and dissent – both internally and externally.

Examining the larger world, Barber (1995) formulates this strife as, ‘Jihad versus McWorld’ or ethnic identifications versus global capitalist multiculturalism. Barber suggests that these are two sides of the same coin, noting that:

Human beings are so psychologically needy, so dependent on community, so full of yearning for a blood brotherhood that commercial consumption disallows ... that [capitalism] has no choice but to service, even to package and market [ethnic identity]. (p. 155)

Barber asserts that, ‘The two are locked together ... neither willing to coexist with the other, neither complete without the other’ (p. 157). Barber is articulating the tension within our own country.

Unlike the war in Vietnam, where the issues were complex and ambiguous and the dynamics suggested some form of American bullying, the war on terrorism gave us clearly delineated ‘bad guys’, who were ethnically identifiable. The recognition that ‘they are trying to kill us’, mobilizes powerful defences, and with a clearly recognized ‘all bad’ external enemy, internal differences in this country momentarily disappeared in a moving surge of patriotism. But the developmental tension between experiencing all difference as outside versus discovering a sense of ‘otherness’ within remained. It was visible in the contrast between the episodic vicious murder, beatings, and harassment of Moslems and Sikhs across the country and the moving

obliteration of ethnic differences in the escape from the Towers. Both of these responses are recognizable as historically American.

Our Republican government's response to the attack was reasoned, sophisticated, multilateral, and determined. The election promises of genuine delegation and decisiveness seemed fulfilled, as were the potentials for bipartisanship. And the media moved us quickly into a massive educational forum about terrorism and a review of the motivations for such intense hatred of America. We are beginning to learn about America's dynamic role in the world, the group projections into us, the intense stereotyping that we have invited by our policies. Though America has contributed to international humanitarian aid, our nation has regularly supported oppressive regimes that act against our national values. These policies have provided the basis for projective processes from abroad, supported by our wealth, power, and relative isolation. Our newscasts, managed and filtered by the white power elites (Lewis, 2001), have maintained our isolation by focusing on local issues and paying scant attention to the larger world.

Terrified by our sudden vulnerability and facing an unprovoked attack, our response has necessarily been to use our vast military might to attempt to destroy those disaffiliated ethnic groups that we experience as 'other'. As one general put it, 'We must destroy the conditions that lead to terrorism'. While we have the power to be successful militarily, only our coalition building can support the deeper integration and renegotiation of identity that we need. Without the coalition, we run the risk of deepening America's regressive narcissistic position of invulnerability that contributes to isolation, withdrawal, and mutual projection. This would entrench us in a familiarly rigid defensive posturing in which 'otherness' remains projected out, our illusion of internal goodness and certainty is maintained, and the integration of our internal differences is once more postponed.

Our vulnerability, however, can also be an opportunity to recognize the vulnerability of others and the need for us to help 'ameliorate' rather than 'destroy' the very conditions we have participated in developing. Recognizing our internal ethnic tensions, we might more readily recognize our relatedness to the world's anger. We know how to do this. In our role as therapists, for example, we hear from some of our patients about their identification with the terrorists. We listen to their relentless hatred, envy, and wishes for retaliation and revenge against those with resources who withhold them in order to take care of themselves. If we work with their families (Shapiro and Carr, 1991), we see how such polarization, rage, and marginalization can shift through identification with the 'other' to a depressive position of guilt, concern, and connectedness.

Americans now have the opportunity to recognize our internal polarization and participate more fully in living out our values. Erikson describes 'integrity' as a commitment to the most mature meaning available, requiring the discovery of larger social tasks to which the individual can become committed (Shapiro and Fromm, 2000). This is what awaits America as it recognizes its multi-ethnic role in a global community.

## DISCUSSION

The dynamics of ethnicity have long been a major focus of irrational psychological and political behaviour. Members of ethnic subgroups become symbols that hold emotional meaning; all diversity can serve as foci for projection. As Singer notes:

Enormous psychic and political energy, locally and globally, centres around the theme of diversity, whether it concerns the Aborigines in Australia, the Blacks in Africa or America, homosexual people throughout the world, women in the workplace, the disabled in public places – all the minorities as defined by whatever differences one can think of. The shadow or darker side of diversity, we call 'disintegration', which expresses itself in the fragmentation of families, the breakdown of nations, the rise of tribalism, fundamentalism and factionalism at every level of social organization. (1999, p. 16)

The alternative polarity is 'integration', where diverse forces come together into a differentiated whole. This polarity contains a major focus for irrational behaviour in the behaviour of individuals, groups, and nations.

American identity was first crafted in opposition to experienced tyranny. The openness, spaciousness and freedom in our nation supported a powerful sense of American individualism. As we developed, we recognized the significance of community, of interdependence, in accomplishing national goals. In fact, acceptance of diversity was one of America's greatest strengths, particularly as long as those who were accepted were white. Is our current collective use and misuse of ethnic boundaries a larger group manifestation of American individualism? Is the way we so easily define ourselves as individuals or in narrowly defined subgroups a collective defence against our difficulty in discerning a larger identity as Americans? Do we need an external enemy to discover the ways that freedom and interdependence are inseparable? Or, can we finally discover a collective identity in which we learn from our differences, integrate our unique history and values, and face – without flinching – others' complex reactions to us?

There may be congruence between the way the white power elite

currently see our nation and the way we are seen from the outside. Our collective picture of America as a nation run by affluent, powerful white men – while manifestly accurate – is also a defensive compromise formation, requiring a repression of our multi-ethnic complexity. Like any defensive structure, this view helps us manage the anxiety derived from a full engagement with our history and our internal diversity. Such a defensive American identity will inevitably continue to sap us of the creative energy we might discover with a more complex integration of our differentiated strengths and capacities.

Our voter, Frank, says, 'If a Black man represents the restaurant, the customers get scared'. As long as this is true in America, we will be illustrating the ways in which we cannot convincingly sell our mission of integration, interdependence, and democracy to the world's customers. Though it is manifestly simpler to form our identities along ethnic lines, we are now faced with a more complex challenge. American citizens have psychological and political work to do in order to discover all of ourselves in each of our multi-ethnic representatives. And, if we discover that we cannot identify with some of those who are different, we might, in the service of our national mission, be able to approach those differences as opportunities for learning from our diversity rather than to hate these others as 'not us'.

The former Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, John Shattuck (2000), when asked about his learning in his role said, 'The good guys don't always win'. America, as a developing experiment in bringing together different ethnicities, histories, and capacities can have a significant international role in reducing the projective distinctions between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. This might reduce the dangers of political disintegration as ethnic conflicts challenge the integrity of existing multicultural nation states (Ferguson, 2001) In assuming its own mature responsibilities for contributing to the marginalization of subgroups both within and without, this country can offer a realistic hope for transcending differences in the service of a larger integrative mission. The hope for a more complex vision of a global community may depend on the integration of America's identity and its willingness to recognize that the so-called 'good guys' have to take their share of responsibility for their creation of disorder and rage in an evolving world.

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# *King Lear*: The Lost Leader; Group Disintegration, Transformation and Suspended Reconsolidation

Dennis Brown\*

## Abstract

The article discusses group dynamics within the small royal party in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605–1606). The work of W. R. Bion and S. H. Foulkes and their followers is used to examine the way Lear's loyal retainers attempt to aid and 'cure' the king after his onset of madness. The main focus is on the crucial 'heath scenes' (Act 111, Scenes 4 and 6). The importance of dialogic interaction at quite primary levels of awareness is underlined. The paper concludes by indicating how the 'anti-group' of Lear's opponents succeeds in destroying both the lost leader and the group attempts to reconsolidate and transform their mutuality, leading to paralysis within England as a public sphere and a corresponding uncertainty of interpretation of the play within the extended group-work of modern literary criticism.

*King Lear* (1605–1606) is the primary enactment of psychic breakdown in English literary history. It constitutes, also, the most spectacular instance of a controlled explosion of the formal 'container' in Western drama – such that it not only violated whatever Aristotle or Boileau might have to offer on the proper structure of tragedy, but provoked, too, the very different sensibilities of Dr Johnson and Count Tolstoy. Set in its raw pre-Christian world, the play remains the major Shakespearean rebuttal of Sophoclean fearful symmetry (*Oedipus Rex*) – corrosive in its existential negativity, yet paradoxically fructive in spawning such twentieth-century 'counter-transferential' progeny as George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* or Edward Bond's *Lear*. Keats, on rereading it wrote about the 'bitter-sweet' of being 'consumèd in the fire', with all the intensity of one closely associated with 'Consumption'. From a postmodern standpoint, there are

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