

The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society
(Revised and Enlarged Edition – 1998)
by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Reviewed by Darrel Smith

Pulitzer Prize winning author and historian, Arthur Schlesinger, sees both benefit and danger in the trends toward ethnic awareness. The benefits include the new recognition of minorities in academic and cultural spheres. “But pressed too far, the cult of ethnicity has bad consequences too.... Its underlying philosophy is that America is not a nation of individuals at all but a nation of groups, that ethnicity is the defining experience for Americans...” p. 20. He goes on to say that, “The multiethnic dogma abandons historic purposes, replacing assimilation by fragmentation, integration by separatism. It belittles unum and glorifies pluribus.

“The historic idea of a unifying American identity is now in peril in many arenas—in our politics, our voluntary organizations, our churches, our language. And in no arena is the rejection of an overriding national identity more crucial than in our system of education.” p. 21.

Schlesinger notes on page thirteen that, “Events each day demonstrate the fragility of national cohesion. Everywhere you look, tribalism is the cause of the breaking of nations.” On page 124, he quotes Theodore Roosevelt who said “The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities...”

The Author discusses the ethnic divisions happening around the world, even in stable civilized countries like Britain, France, Belgium, Spain and Canada and says, “In a world savagely rent by ethnic and racial antagonisms, it is all the more essential that the United States continue as an example of how a highly differentiated society holds itself together.” p. 25.

He devotes a chapter to the use of history as a weapon and claims “The result has been a reconstruction of American history partly on the merits and partly in response to gender and ethnic pressures.” p. 71.

Schlesinger feels “that the cult of ethnicity in general and the Afrocentric campaign in particular do not bode well either for American education or for the future of minorities.” p. 80.

He encourages us to return to the centrality of what a foreign visitor, Gunnar Myrdal of Sweden, called “the American Creed.” He said that Americans “of all national origins, regions, creeds, and colors” hold in common “the most explicitly expressed system of general ideals” of any country in the West: the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings, of inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and opportunity. p. 33.

What do radical Indian apartheid activists think about Schlesinger’s ideas? Ward Churchill evidently agrees with him about our vulnerability. On page 422 and 423 in the book *Struggle for the Land* he says, “Anyone who doubts that it’s possible to bring about the dismemberment of a super power state using internal forces in this day and age, ought to sit down and have a long talk with a guy named Mikhail Gorbachev....These megastates are not immutable. They can be taken apart. They can be destroyed. But first we have to decide that we can do it, and that we will do it.” In her Introduction to the same book, university professor and vice presidential candidate, Winona LaDuke says on page 5, “Native North America is struggling to break free of the colonialist, industrialist, militarist nation-state domination in which it is now engulfed. It is fighting to ‘secede’ from the U.S. and Canada.” Is that what this country wants? Did we fight the Civil War in vain?