

America vs America

Trump presidency deepens clash within: Ideals of equality and freedom vs its pre-1965 history.



US president Donald Trump (File Photo)

“Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so far short of its ideals. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment.

But it can be disappointment only because it is also a hope.” These epigrammatic lines, written in 1981 by Samuel Huntington, are hugely pertinent today. Trump’s rise and his first policy pronouncements are intimately connected with contestations over America’s identity.

Huntington’s epigrams expressed a long-held view of America’s national identity. Being American was not an ethnic identity. Rather, Americanness

symbolised a political creed, or a set of ideas contained in the Declaration of Independence, 1776, which laid the foundations of the American Republic.

Three ideas were critical: Equality, freedom and republicanism. Unlike the “old world” Europeans, the “new world” Americans were free, not chained by historical tradition; they would be equal, not ranked by birth-based, ascriptive hierarchies; and they would govern themselves via elected representatives, not be ruled by a dynastic monarch.

In Europe, only one nation approximated these ideals, France, but only after the French Revolution, and not entirely resolutely. Elsewhere in Europe, ethnicity, linguistically expressed, was the foundation of nationhood (with the exception of Switzerland). Both the US and France were civic nations, not ethnic nations.

The dilemma, Huntington argued, was that societies can't easily achieve these ideals in their fullness. Given human imperfections, these ideals, especially equality and freedom, were much too lofty. At the time of the Declaration of Independence, African Americans were neither free nor equal. Their slavery ended in 1864, terminating America's founding contradiction between the ideal of freedom and the fact of slavery. But intense racial discrimination and violence continued. Only in the mid-1960s did African Americans achieve legal parity.

America is not a “lie”, said Huntington, because genuine progress towards freedom and equality had been made. But the pace of progress was “disappointing”. However, precisely because more progress can be made towards those ideals, “hope” would mark America's evolution. The ideals of freedom and equality, though tough to attain, were far too deeply ingrained in the American psyche to be tossed permanently aside.

Huntington was not the only scholar to make these arguments. Moreover, the

arc of agreement did not stop at American shores. Several major European scholars, most prominently Alexis de Tocqueville, had made similar claims.

How do these foundational ideas apply to Donald Trump?

They do not. In his world, and that of his supporters who got him elected, an alternative conception of American identity exists. In his influential book, *Civic Ideals*, Rogers Smith argues that the Huntington-Tocqueville idea of America is not the only idea that has reverberated in American history. Investigating more than a century of American legislation and judicial decisions on immigration and citizenship, Smith argues that these laws “manifested passionate beliefs that America ... was a white nation, a Protestant nation, a nation in which true Americans were native-born men with Anglo-Saxon ancestors.” These “inegalitarian ascriptive traditions of Americanism” were not only used against blacks and indigenous Americans, but also against Irish and Italian immigrants, who were Catholic, and against Jews, all of whom were viewed as “inferior races” when they came to the US.

With respect to some non-white immigrant groups, American laws became especially draconian. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, later expanded into exclusion of all Asians, ensured that migration into the US was overwhelmingly white for many decades. Essentially, resentment against each new wave of migrants has repeatedly appeared in American history.

America’s national identity is thus not only about a set of ideals, especially freedom and equality. It is also about what Smith calls the ascriptive white superiority. It is against this long-standing duality that the Trump moment is to be viewed.

Though not without flaws, post-1965 US has been closest to the American ideals that the US has ever been. Externally, the immigration reform of 1965 ended national/racial quotas. As a result, after 1965, most immigration into

the US became non-white. Hispanics from central and south America have been the biggest immigrant group and Mexicans the largest among them. Muslims from various parts of the world also arrived after 1965 (as did, incidentally, the Indian Americans, most of whom came to the US after the mid-1960s, as a new book, *The Other One Percent*, by Sanjoy Chakraborti, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh, meticulously documents).

Internally, the Voting and Civil Rights Acts, passed in 1964-65, severely undermined state laws that licensed racial discrimination, especially against African Americans. While the racial situation is far from ideal, it is noteworthy that at no point in American history have African Americans acquired such prominent positions in public life. In Obama, America had a black president for eight years, something inconceivable until some time back. Hispanics too have risen to the highest levels of the polity.

Census specialists now predict that by 2041, the US will cease to be a white-majority nation. It is this racial anxiety and the impending loss of white privilege that forms the bedrock of Trump's base, strewn widely over middle America, as also in the smaller towns on the two coasts. It is especially concentrated among the non-college educated whites. The Protestant-Catholic divisions are no longer salient. A new white nationalism is reborn. The proposal to build a wall on the Mexican border and a ban on Muslim migration is the contemporary incarnation of white nationalism.

Against white nationalists are fighting those who defend the deepening of post-1965 American politics. Institutionally, the courts thus far are leading this fight (they did not always, and they may not). And in terms of mass support, hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of Americans who have come out in protest, represent the post-1965 charge.

Notably, Trump's temporary Muslim ban did not provoke only American

Muslims to protest. Large numbers of non-Muslims, including thousands of whites, have come out in support of an American ideal they hold dear. Moreover, we also have the strong voice of women defending women's dignity, mocked in such an unseemly manner by Trump.

In sum, the US is witnessing a deepening clash between those who wish to take the country to its political ideals of equality and freedom regardless of race and ethnicity, and those who wish to drag America back to its pre-1965 history. A political battle is underway.

The writer is director, Centre for Contemporary South Asia, Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University