

Man Bites Poodle



The Oxford Union is the world's most famous debating society, holding a debate each week during term in its Victorian chambers, the largest

hall in the world built for such purpose. Because of the Union, Oxford University wins the European debating championship regularly, a competition that goes all the way back to 1820. These last 184 years, all the great and the good have debated in the Union, certainly all British prime ministers and most American presidents. Last week was my turn, although I had won my first debate there in 1986, when Auberon Waugh (son of Evelyn) and I wiped the floor with England's Lord Chancellor and another high-priced lawyer over the motion that gossip was a necessary part of journalism.

Last week's motion was "This House Believes that Britain is America's Poodle." Defending the motion were Charles Glass and myself. Against it were the formidable Lord Parkinson, who as Cecil Parkinson was Margaret Thatcher's closest adviser and trade minister, and the even more formidable Nicholas Soames. Apart from being Sir Winston Churchill's grandson—his mother is Winnie's only surviving child, Mary—Nicholas's other attributes are a Falstaffian girth and sense of humor, a booming voice and cut-glass accent, and as an ex-minister of the armed forces and present shadow defense minister, an inside knowledge of how the world works. All four of us are fast friends, especially Soames and myself, who have known each other since our teenage years.

So, on a brilliant summer evening—Waugh would have described it as *jejeune*—we met among the dreaming spires and romantic punters, dressed in tails and about to give verbal battle. The beautiful Victorian hall is a replica of the House of Commons. The president of the Union is seated with two assistants—all three were women—high

above the podium where the speakers stand. One is allowed notes, but it is not considered cricket to read out a speech. The hall was packed with around 400 undergraduates, while heads of colleges, or dons, sat on the front benches as they do in Parliament. Once everyone is seated, the speakers walk in and are introduced to loud applause.

Soames was first up and did a very good job. He was self-deprecating, funny, and described the long and friendly relationship between the two nations separated by language. Charlie Glass was emotional and very anti-Bush; the American president ordered Blair to go to war, and Tony jumped like the poodle he is.

Lord Parkinson's was the best speech of the evening. His take was that long after Bush and Blair are gone, America and Britain will be co-operating, and words like poodle will refer only to canines. His lordship knows how the world works inside-out, happens to be a very nice and good-looking man, and by the time I rose to speak, the opposition was way ahead. Or so I thought.

My side, however, had an obvious advantage. We were defending the popular notion that Blair had taken orders from Bush to invade Iraq. My read on the master-poodle relationship was a historical one. FDR had done more damage to the British Empire than Hitler or Stalin or any tin-pot African dictator ever had. The Americans set out to use Lend-Lease to pressure the Brits to open their imperial markets and to relinquish their empire, particularly their possessions in the Western hemisphere. They also made sure that the British depleted their gold reserves to pay for the war against Germany. As the formidable Martin

Gilbert has written, "It was a hard bargain, depriving Britain of what was left of her economic strength and as a result, Britain went from being one of the world's creditors to being one of the world's leading debtors. And at the end of the war, the USA owned two-thirds of the world's gold reserves."

I reminded the audience that Britain serves a purpose for Uncle Sam. When Sam breaks international law, he leaves it to the supposedly legally punctilious British to assure the world that the breach of law is only temporary and so on. Britain prides itself as a nuclear power but cannot use its weapons without U.S. permission. Just as Raytheon controls the Tomahawk, so Lockheed controls Trident. Mind you, I could have debated on either side of the podium. Roosevelt and Stalin wanted to execute 50,000 Germans after the war. Churchill objected. British people do not like mass executions; nor do Americans. It is the only concession given to Churchill in Yalta.

In closing, I reminded the audience of the great affection I had for Nicholas Soames and his family—I have romanced his sister—and recounted to them what one of his girlfriends had said to me about him very long ago. "How's Nicholas in the sack?" I had asked her. "It's like being hit by a very large chest of drawers with a small key," she answered. The place went wild. Soames pretended to be angry. The vote took place and my side had won.

We retired upstairs where three of the most beautiful girls I've ever set eyes on talked with us late into the night. Talk about *Brideshead Revisited*. Modern Britain can be a very depressing place nowadays, but at Oxford no one used the F-word, everyone was civilized and kind, and the girls are beautiful, graceful, and very, very feminine. I think I'll move there in the very near future. Anything to get away from unfeminine American feminists. ■

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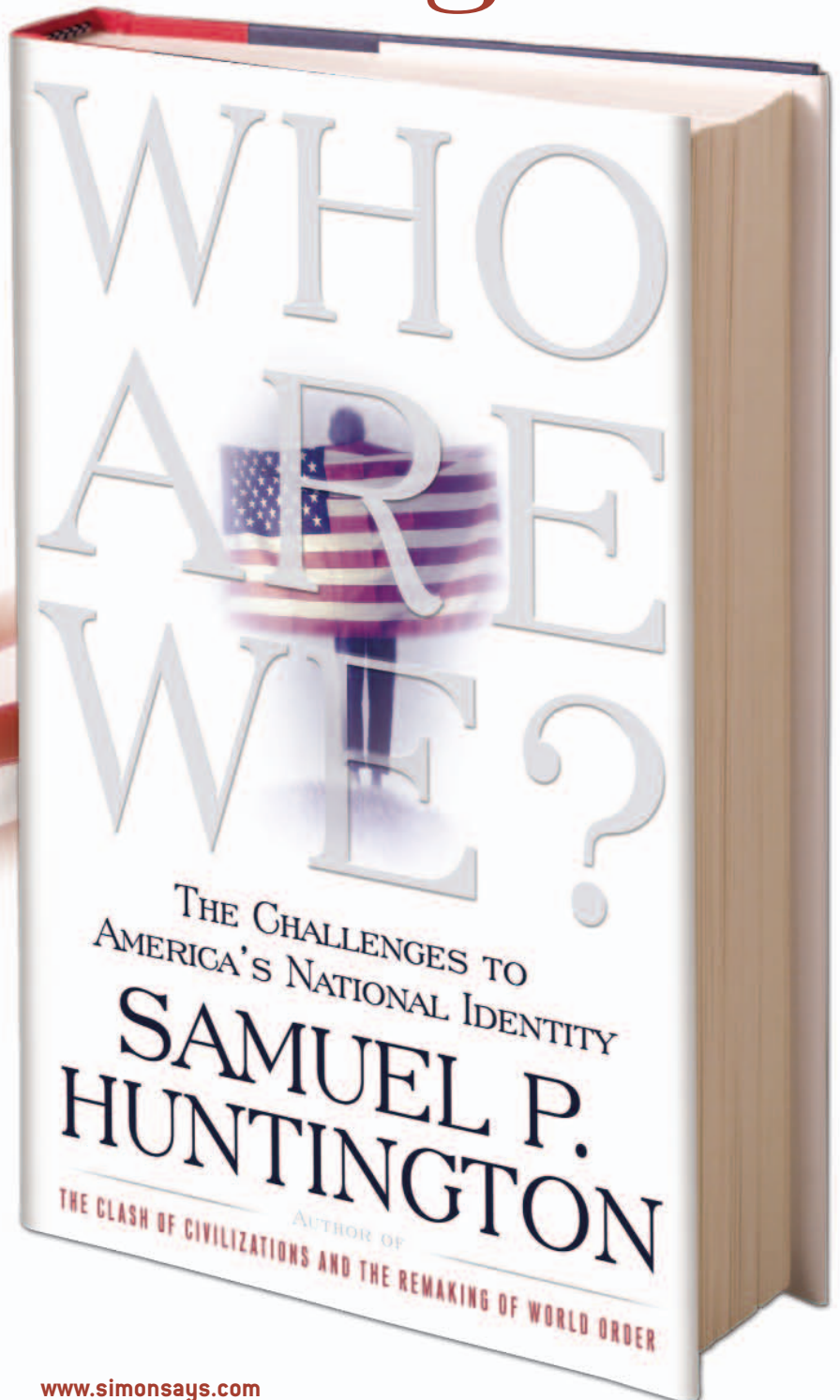
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