

BOOK REVIEWS

Cultural Amnesia: America's Future and the Crisis of Memory

Stephen Bertman

Praeger Publishers, 2000

The six Regents universities in Kansas host a summer academy for the top high school graduates before they go on to college. It rotates among the universities, and comes to Wichita State University, where this reviewer teaches, every six years.

During the summer three years ago, I was invited to be one of the academy's speakers in a panel on "Racism in America." In my opening talk, I sought to place the racial experience of the United States into historical context. My message essentially was that the presence of slavery, brought in by the slave trade, had run counter to the central *ethos* of American sensibility, which was powerfully oriented toward the Enlightenment. It was Britain, with its navy, that abolished the slave trade, responding also to the classical liberalism that predominated in its thinking. It wasn't long before slavery itself was abolished. The century and a third since that time has not been easy, but has marked the efforts of a society, again moved predominantly by humane instincts, to grapple with difficult human issues.

My remarks were followed by those of a vivacious, highly articulate "black activist." She excoriated virtually everything about "a racist United States," and was eloquent in her complaints of "victimization." She was followed by a black state senator, who mildly seconded her point of view and devoted most of his attention to refuting mine. The fourth panelist was a conservative from Pakistan who did a much more effective job than I did of countering the charges of American "racism."

During the question and discussion period, the response by the thirty or so students present was revealing. Unanimously, they were vehement in support of the activist's attacks on the United States; and no one voiced any sympathy whatsoever with the perspective I had presented. The three or four black students among them were asked by the activist whether they thought of themselves primarily as

black or primarily as American, and they all answered, "black."

What this episode illustrates is the enormity and success of the ideological attack that has been made on American institutions and ideals by the alienated intellectual culture that has, virtually without rebuttal, reached this generation of students through the schools they have attended. The image of the United States that I grew up with is not only obsolete, it is held in contempt. There is no "cultural memory" of the United States as a decent, humane and classically liberal repository of the best aspirations of humanity. The emphasis is entirely on negative factors, seen with hindsight, without any historical context, and with an outraged, alienated emphasis.

In any discussion of the loss of cultural continuity and consensus in the United States today, it is indispensable to take into account the profound alienation of the artistic-literary culture for as far back as the 1820s. The alienation against mainstream America began long before the counter-cultural years of the 1960s. Another factor, of increasing importance, is the role of immigration. Within the past few weeks, three delightful students in my classes – two from Vietnam and one from China – have obtained their American citizenship. It is highly doubtful that they are steeped in alienation, but one thing is bound to be true: that their cultural associations and memories have no deeply set continuity with the American past. Vast immigration brings in new memories, new cultural associations, and thus discontinuity so far as a unified American culture is concerned.

Stephen Bertman, in his book *Cultural Amnesia*, does not discuss these things, but enriches our understanding by pointing to other, more existential, forces that are at work to shatter what was once the cultural consensus within the United States. He says that "each day, fewer and fewer of our nation's long-term memories survive." The causal factors that he discusses are summed up when he says: "The long passage of time, the urgent call of the senses, the accelerating power of technology, the lure of materialism, and the newness of our nation have all collaborated in obscuring the past and its meaning." Science, he says, challenges the validity of age-old traditions, while technology shows that antiquated things deserve to be replaced. Materialism "demeans subjects that can't be converted into cash." Education is focusing on job-preparation, which forces out the humanities.

As in his book *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Praeger,

1998), Bertman, a professor of Language, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Windsor in Canada, makes the account especially interesting by classical references and relevant background information. He begins and ends the book by telling of Homer's Ulysses, whose memories of his experiences during the ten years following the Trojan War, and his longing for return to his home and family in Ithaca, were recounted in *The Odyssey*. Bertman also spices the discussion of cultural amnesia with a detailed review of how memory works within the human brain, telling of the brain's physiology and about the various forms of amnesia. Perhaps most relevant is his account of how civilization establishes memory through oral traditions, language, writing, books, libraries, ruins, statues, and the like. He finds disturbing the rapid loss of monuments around the world because of pollution, and the deterioration of films.

The fact that Bertman seems unaware of the ideological "culture war" could be reason to discount his writing, but it would make better sense to listen to what he has to tell us about the forces that he does see at work. They are themselves of sufficient weight to make problematic the entire continuity of culture, not just of American culture but of any culture that is subject to the same forces (as all are, to one degree or another, today). We are "as the flies of summer."

Dwight D. Murphey

A Republic, Not an Empire

Patrick J. Buchanan

Regnery Publishing, Inc. 1999

Patrick Buchanan was a senior White House adviser to Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan; has long been a political commentator, syndicated columnist and television panelist; is the author of four books; and is in 2000 making his third run for the presidency, for which he recently moved to the Reform Party.

A Republic, Not an Empire devotes several chapters to a review of American foreign policy going back to Washington's first administration. Its scholarship, grasp of essential facts, and easy readability make it an ideal primer on a central feature of American

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