

America Knows No Tribe

June 22, 2004

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This fact was first brought to light for me by a Sikkimese businessman during a three hour interview I conducted with him on our trip to South Asia earlier this year.

We had a wide ranging discussion of South Asian politics, cultural dynamics and geopolitics. Having spent eight years in Switzerland, he had a broad based view of both Western and Asian cultures and politics, as well as countless generations of local ancestors to provide grounding and context.

It was during our discussion of geopolitics that the issue of America's ignorance of the concept of tribe was mentioned.

My initial response was mixed between immediate interest in this insight and native defensiveness at such a broad brush indictment of American society as a whole. My interest won out, and I stifled my urges of self-righteous defensiveness in favor of learning what I could from those around me in foreign lands, an approach that has served me well during our travels. As he explained his position, I began to see that his contention was intellectually sound and arguably irrefutable.

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America is a young country, only a couple of hundred years old. That's less than a nanosecond in the span of civilizations that have passed through the course of human history. America has not existed long enough in an undiluted form to evolve its own tribe.

Compared to the rest of the world, America's lack of class structure is astounding, with living examples of people rising from nothing to levels of success unimaginable elsewhere literally an arm's reach away in any metropolitan area. Nowhere else in the world can anyone attain anything they personally set their mind to achieve more than in America. This upward mobility has kept new blood, cultures and traditions flowing into America at a rate that overwhelms any possibility of forming a stable, long-term, purely American tribal identity.

America is also a literal melting pot of cultures, nationalities, backgrounds, languages, allegiances and legacies. Its diversity is staggering, with ATMs in the Bronx allowing the selection of any of 11 languages. Throughout its history, people have come in waves from all over the world to add their threads to the tapestry that makes up American culture. English, Scottish, Irish, Norwegian, Swedish, Germans, Italians and other Europeans led early surges of immigrants to America's shores. South Pacific Asians, Japanese, Philipinos, Samoans, Chinese and other Asians joined them. Africans were dragged to America in chains, and later came in droves on their own volition seeking opportunity. South Americans, Central Americans and Mexicans added Latin textures to the American mosaic and are creating a new dominant minority in American society.

All of this adds up to the world's most diverse society. America is a society that accommodates a dizzying array of religions, cultural traditions and races. It is a society that taps into the energy that the diversity of cultures creates, provides a fertile environment for the ideas that spring from this energy and capitalizes on the opportunities that these ideas bring to fruition.

No other society has created more discoveries and advancements in science, medicine, chemistry, psychology, electronics, software, commerce and every other field of human endeavor. It is no accident that the world's most diverse society has become the world's most dynamic, advanced and prosperous society. Truly, in America's diversity lies America's greatest strength.

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Yet in all this progress and capability, America lacks a single element that the rest of the world knows intimately and is bound to at its most elemental, atomic level: the tribe. Every other society America interacts with on the planet has the tribe as the most fundamental unit of measure of its society. But for all America's knowledge, for all its cloistered academics, for all its advancements, America is incapable of truly comprehending, understanding or relating to the concept of tribe.

In other societies, the tribe is a superset of family and is a major component of community, government and commerce, forming the basis of nation states. Tribe determines social position, social and economic potential, marital choice and peer group. Tribe determines geographic position, establishes alliances and determines enemies. Tribe is immediate and tribe is timeless. Tribe determines the tiniest of daily interactions and establishes immortal destiny. Tribe loyalty is not a decision; tribe loyalty is an essential component of one's soul and life force. Tribe is the honeycomb that defines the hive of life and the cell of individual existence. Tribe is all, pervasive and all encompassing.

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Every year, the little town I grew up in, Adel, Iowa, has a town celebration called the Sweet Corn Festival. Free sweet corn is provided for all, and the usual town festival vendor booths, charity food stands and crafts are offered. In addition, the wonderful tradition of an all-year high school class reunion is held, where graduates of all years are brought together to share memories, bask in the glow of glorified mutual past experiences and display photos of children and grandchildren. This experience of community, common history and shared values is perhaps as close as America comes to the concept of tribe that the rest of the world lives.

The only potentially comparable analogy in modern American society would be one of sports allegiance, with the Cub Nation, University of Michigan loyalists or Texas high school football fans being examples of groups of Americans who share common experiences, goals and outcomes.

Both of these examples are pitiful, pale shadows of what tribe means to the rest of the world, and America needs to keep in mind how feeble its grasp of the concept remains.

This is especially important in today's world as America faces enemies who have tied hatred of the West, and especially America, to a litmus test of tribe allegiance. In this context, America needs to understand that tribe supersedes logic, supersedes nation states and supersedes international agreements and treaties. Tribe, in the rest of the world, is the ultimate trump card.

The Sikkimese businessman who first introduced me to this fact of geopolitical life had this to say about America's challenges, "While it astounds me that the country that invented modern marketing and advertising has allowed its enemies to define America, to control the messaging and positioning of America, and to dominate the world's media with negative messaging about America, I still see America's greatest geopolitical challenge in the near to mid term as its inherent inability to relate to the concept of tribe. In this regard, America is trying to play the geopolitical game without a complete deck of cards. While America's diversity is undoubtedly its greatest strength, its diversity also fundamentally prevents America from understanding a primary component of every other society it is competing and cooperating with on the planet."

This insight, proffered to me in the shadow of the world's third highest mountain in the upper reaches of the Himalayas, resonated with me through nearly every one of the 6,500 miles we rode through the Islamic Middle East. It is a powerful factor in the challenges America faces in this region.

It is an important and inescapable fact.

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Some faces from a few of the world's tribes that we've visited in the last year.



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