

Should We Encourage a 'Spirit of Ethnicity'?

Recently, Jimmy Carter spoke on the issue of "ethnic purity" and, just the other evening, President Ford kept the issue in front of us by praising our individual ethnic heritages as "... a great treasure." If we dismiss political motivations for the moment — if possible in an election year — it is dismaying for our national leaders to extol the virtues of ethnicity. In the final accounting, is not "ethnicity" a euphemism for "ethnic separation"? Should the land of the mythical "melting pot" maintain the spirit of ethnicity which has ultimately led to a resurgence of polarization of blacks, Chicanos, Jews, Italians, Irish, et al.? Are not the problems in Boston of recent days graphic evidence of the dangers of just such a spirit? Politicians, and others, will continue to discuss Mr. Carter's remarks at least until November, but are they really serving the people by concentrating on words and not on the problem?

While it is true that the tumultuous times of the late '60's were a result of many and varied factors, one result stands out among the others: ethnic

separation. The Black Panthers, the militancy of the Chicanos and the Native Americans, the Jewish Defense League, and other such groups were not born of "ethnic treasure," but rather of the frustration of minority ethnic groups in trying to establish parity with the dominant ethnic "character" of the United States which has for so long insisted that ethnic "treasure" be of only one variety. Does the encouragement of ethnicity serve us well in our search for a society which does not encourage the burning of school buses and the subtle discrimination in housing, employment, and education?

Jimmy Carter's remark should not haunt him; if he had said ethnic "character" instead of "purity" the ensuing outcry would not have occurred. President Ford's use of "treasure" was certainly a circumspect choice: who can deny his or her instinct for treasure? Yet, it appears that the treasure is tarnished and, what is potentially worse, is being coveted for its own sake.

If we continue to encourage ethnic fences, can we be far from agreeing

with the neighbor in Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" when he says "good fences make good neighbors"? Perhaps we would all better served if we said, instead: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall..."

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