

Progressive journalists and historians soon cemented his reputation as a presidential failure and turned him into a symbol of a

greedy and self-indulgent age. That may not have been quite the way it—or Warren G. Harding—was.

## *Toward a New Patriotism*

“Identity Politics and the Left” by Eric Hobsbawm, in *New Left Review* (May–June 1996), 6 Meard St., London W1V 3HR.

Even its adherents see the Left today as essentially a coalition of “identity groups”—feminists, gays, blacks, and others, each with its own self-interested agenda. Too often forgotten, argues Hobsbawm, the eminent British Marxist historian, are the Left’s grander aspirations to equality and social justice for all of humanity.

“The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for *all* human beings,” he writes. “However we interpret the words, it isn’t liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn’t equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only. This is perfectly evident in the case of ethnic or nationalist movements.”

The rise of identity politics has come about, in Hobsbawm’s view, as a result of profound social change that has weakened people’s traditional ties to nation and class and a “cultural revolution” that has eroded traditional standards and values, leaving many people feeling “orphaned and bereft.” Never, he says, has the word *community* been used so indiscriminately and emptily as in recent decades, “when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life.”

Although identity groups all claim to be “natural,” exclusive identity politics does not in fact come naturally to people, he contends. “No one has one and only one identity. Human beings cannot be described even for bureaucratic purposes, except by a combination of many characteristics.”

In the past, Hobsbawm argues, identity groups were not central to the Left. The mass social and political movements inspired by the American and French revolutions and by socialism “were indeed coalitions or group alliances, but [they were] held together not by aims that were specific to the group, but by great, universal causes through which each group believed its particular aims could be realized: democracy, the Republic, socialism, communism, or whatever.” Now, however, “the decline of the great universalist slogans of the Enlightenment” has deprived the Left of any obvious way of formulating a common interest.

Hobsbawm believes that the Left should look to “one form of identity politics which is actually comprehensive. . . : citizen nationalism. Seen in the global perspective this may be the opposite of a universal appeal, but seen in the perspective of the national state, which is where most of us still live, and are likely to go on living, it provides a common identity. . . ‘an imagined community’ not the less real for being imagined.”

At times in the past, Hobsbawm says, the Left not only has wanted to rouse the nation but “has been accepted as representing the national interest, even by those who had no special sympathy for its aspirations.” In Britain in 1945, for instance, the Labor Party was chosen “as the party best representing the nation against one-nation Toryism led by the most charismatic and victorious war-leader on the scene.” Yet today, he laments, “the words ‘the country,’ ‘Great Britain,’ ‘the nation,’ ‘patriotism,’ even ‘the people,’” are seldom spoken by leaders on the British left.

## *Was Brown’s Way Wrong?*

“Coming Clean About *Brown*” by Richard E. Morgan, in *City Journal* (Summer 1996), Manhattan Institute, 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Arguments against judicial activism soon run up against the almost sacrosanct example of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954),

the Supreme Court’s famous decision outlawing segregation in public schools as a violation of the 14th Amendment’s equal

protection clause. Morgan, a professor of constitutional law and government at Bowdoin College, argues that it is time to admit that, constitutionally, the Court was simply wrong.

In *Brown*, he notes, Chief Justice Earl Warren brushed aside 70 years of precedents, relying instead on social science findings (since called into question), showing that black children were psychologically damaged by racial segregation in the schools. That the Court was using sociological, rather than constitutional, reasoning was widely recognized at the time, but most critics held their tongues, seeing the outcome as morally right, whatever the reasoning used.

While many people have similarly regarded the *Brown* ruling as historically essential because it triggered the civil rights revolution, Morgan contends that recent scholarship has found otherwise. Very little actually changed in the segregated South, he says, before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, along with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, “provided the federal government with the statutory muscle to undertake the heavy lifting involved in dismantling Jim Crow.”

Nor did *Brown* fuel the drive for that legislation: civil rights protest activity dropped after the Court handed down its decision. In fact, Morgan says, “by dramatically increasing racial tension in the South, [*Brown*] froze progress, at least in that region.” If the ruling contributed to positive change, he believes, it was only in a perverse way: the “ugly” conflicts over subsequent school desegregation mobilized northern public opinion in favor of civil rights.

Protections against racial discrimination are now firmly enshrined in law, but *Brown*’s legacy of judicial activism continues to influence the way these laws are interpreted, Morgan says. All too often, legislation that was “born color-blind” is given a race-conscious spin in the courts. The best way to correct that—and to clear away the *Brown* obstacle to stopping other exercises in judicial activism—is, in his view, a constitutional amendment barring government from making decisions that discriminate for or against persons on the basis of race. That would “align the text of the Constitution with our national ideals, and bury Jim Crow the way he should have been buried in the first place—by votes in legislative assemblies.”

## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### *Let the People Rule*

“A Democratic Foreign Policy” by Eric Alterman, in *World Policy Journal* (Summer 1996), World Policy Institute, New School for Social Research, 65 Fifth Ave., Ste. 413, New York, N.Y. 10003.

Americans have “a consistent set of values” with regard to international affairs, but U.S. foreign policy frequently fails to reflect it, contends Alterman, a columnist for the *Nation*.

The views of the foreign policy Establishment fly in the face of public opinion, he says, citing quadrennial surveys conducted since 1978 by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. Whereas “opinion leaders” “are ideologically committed to free trade and widespread military intervention,” the general public “believes that the United States should protect American jobs and mind its own business whenever possible.” Asked in 1994 if the United States should go to war to defend South Korea from a North Korean invasion,

84 percent of the elite, but only 45 percent of the public, said yes. More than 80 percent of the public deemed protecting the jobs of American workers “a very important goal”; barely half of the opinion leaders did.

“The values of the foreign policy establishment,” Alterman asserts, “are less reflective of the political interests of poor and middle-class Americans than of the transnational class of bankers, lobbyists, lawyers, and investors.” Ordinary Americans, in contrast, are “liberal republicans,” much as the country’s founders were.

Alterman urges adoption of a “liberal republican foreign policy.” Its goals would include:

- “A stable peace enforced by the United Nations, NATO [the North Atlantic