

## One Nation?

“Bowling Together” by Robert Putnam, in *The American Prospect* (Feb. 11, 2002), 2000 L St., N.W., Ste. 717, Washington, D.C. 20036, and “A Stronger Nation” by Alan Wolfe, in *The Responsive Community* (Spring 2002), 2020 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Ste. 282, Washington, D.C. 20006-1846, and “The Continuing Irony of American History” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *First Things* (Feb. 2002), P.O. Box 401, Mt. Morris, Ill. 61054.

“As 2001 ended, Americans were more united, readier for collective sacrifice, and more attuned to public purpose than we have been for several decades,” writes Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard University and the author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). If any further proof of this proposition is needed, then Putnam has it, in the form of extensive public-opinion data on such matters as trust in government before and after September 11.

Yet as Putnam points out, it’s one thing to feel united and another to do something about it. “Civic solidarity is what Albert Hirschman called a ‘moral resource’—distinctive in that, unlike a material resource, it increases with use and diminishes with disuse. Changes in attitude alone, no matter how promising, do not constitute civic renewal.” Putnam prescribes a vastly enlarged government-sponsored youth volunteer program, “more activist civics education in our schools,” and enactment of a “progressive” agenda to bridge “ethnic and class cleavages.”

Wolfe, the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, at Boston College, sees another sort of solidarity growing out of September 11. He believes that President George W. Bush’s praise of the nation’s Muslims is an important step in the redefinition of America’s understanding of the basis of its moral character. A nation that defined itself first as Protestant, then Christian (in order to embrace Catholics), and then Judeo-Christian (after fighting the genocidal Nazis) is ready to redefine itself again. The United States already has more Muslims than Episcopalians, and it’s only a matter of time before Muslims outnumber Jews in America.

At the same time, notes Wolfe, the fact that the nation’s leaders could assemble in the National Cathedral and follow religious leaders of many faiths in prayer without causing a ripple of controversy suggests that Americans have turned a corner with regard to “one of our most contentious issues.” Maybe “common sense” will allow us to make more room for religion in public life.

From McClay, the most conservative of this trio of writers, comes a cautionary note. He is as “ready to roll” as anyone, but he’s bothered by the simplistic moral calculus the war has encouraged. Recalling the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a committed Cold War anti-communist who nevertheless warned America not to be blinded to its own moral failings by the righteousness of its cause, McClay calls for a more sophisticated understanding of what’s involved in the war against terrorism.

He writes: “It is not good, [Niebuhr] would say, to call Osama Bin Laden ‘the evil one,’ a phrase deliberately suggestive of Satan—not so much because our opponent is not evil, but because we are not pure enough ourselves and cannot honestly offer ourselves up as children of light, poised against the children of darkness.” September 11, McClay argues, should remind us of certain universal truths about human nature.

“We should not imagine that the problems we faced on September 10 have gone away,” McClay concludes. Abortion, human cloning, and other issues of great moral import remain. “We should not fail to see, in fact, that the same prowess we use to defeat mass murderers a world away is threatening us too, arising out of our greatest areas of strength—our scientific and technical skills.”