

E Pluribus Unum Is a Rare Commodity Today.
Posted On:December 31, 1969

E Pluribus Unum is Latin for Out of Many, One. It is the motto of the United States, formed when thirteen colonies decided to form one nation in 1776. But even in this country, when most of the population was essentially one ethnicity (British) and spoke English, we did not always act like one. We split into two over an unresolved issue of slavery, which resulted in the Civil War, with the worst death toll of any American war even today. But the war ended with the states once more united under one government, and President Lincoln marked this change by saying "The United States is, not The United States are" We became one. And despite election differences, we are one country.

Europe. Even our nearest and dearest in political philosophy, spurred on by our own success, are not doing very well with "A United States of Europe." The noble experiment of creating the European Community is lurching along without much enthusiasm from the various countries that make up Europe. Why is it different for them than for us, since we all share the same political values (democracy and state and capitalism partnerships)? The difference is that these countries have several thousand years of existence with their own histories, languages, and even religions, differences that have caused many hundreds of years of warfare. Consider that the last war was only 60 years ago, and it was deadly! Even a common monetary unit is running into trouble because the cultures of the participants are not the same. Greece is not Germany.

The Muslim World. When Islam charged out of the Arabian desert to conquer a swath of the world from the Atlantic coast to Indonesia, there was a brief hope that one religion could unify a disparate world. However, almost immediately, Mohammad's unifying vision ran into trouble. The first Muslims, Arabs, considered themselves superior to the new Muslims of other ethnicities, and the converts knew, and resented it. The most resentful were the Persians (Iranians), forcibly converted by what they considered an inferior culture. They almost immediately broke off into a separate sect of Islam, Shia, which has been an obstacle to any sort of Islamic unity to this day.

More troubling still, a problem from the very beginnings of Islam, was the role of tribes and clans, each with its own warlord, dialect, and culture. Tribal Muslims unite only in the face of an outside enemy, otherwise they are always at war with each other. Economic dysfunction makes the fighting over crumbs even more deadly. Afghanistan is a poster child for this problem, making training a unified Afghan army almost impossible.

India. As multiethnic countries go, India has the most numerous ethnicities, languages, and even religions, under one government. When compared with many other cultures, such as those in the Muslim world, Indians have been largely tolerant. But it is still touch and go with them: depending upon the level of education, sophistication, and economic well being of the group. When India received its independence, the northern part of the country immediately dissolved into stampeding minority groups (Muslims in India and Hindus in the new Pakistan) fled what they expected to be genocides. They both got and produced genocides. Muslims in northern India are still fearful of radical Hindu neighbors today, and tribal Indians, such as the Bodos, are under assault by both their Hindu and Bangladeshi Muslim neighbors. Now 300,000 Bodo migrants have fled to refugee camps.

North Africa. The Berbers are restless again, after having been suppressed by Arab Muslims for so long. They no longer want to be Algerians or Moroccans; they want to be Berbers. And in Mali, the tenuous unity of that former French colony is now in meltdown after an Al Qaeda group chased out Mali's army. Militias are forming to take on the hated Islamists, leaving only a failed state behind.

Aside from the example of the United States, the only other cases of e pluribus unum were empires. Rome, Britain, France, Spain, and even Russia. They all did better than many of their former territories are doing now.

685 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of How Do You Know

That? You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.