
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN ESTABLISHMENT

Only a couple of decades ago, scholars could still speak with some plausibility of **The Power Elite** (C. Wright Mills, 1956), **The Protestant Establishment** (E. Digby Baltzell, 1964), or **The Higher Circles** (G. William Domhoff, 1970). Today, the authors' precise inventories of the social institutions that were thought to sustain the ruling elite seem antique, almost comical. "A person is considered to be a member of the upper class," Domhoff wrote in introducing one such inventory, "if his sister, wife, mother, or mother-in-law attended one of the following schools or belongs to one of the following groups . . ."

In retrospect, Baltzell emerges as the foremost seer of the group. He understood more clearly than his counterparts did that America's elite—and all three had very different definitions and opinions of the elite—was on the verge of dissolution. Rather than welcoming talented newcomers into the national "aristocracy," the nation's White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) governing class was engaging in a suicidal attempt to bar the doors, especially against Jews. "The traditional standards upon which this country was built and governed down through the years are in danger of losing authority," he wrote, "largely because the American upper class, whose [WASP] members may still be deferred to and envied because of their privileged status, is no longer honored in the land. For its standards of admission have gradually come to demand the dishonorable treatment of far too many distinguished Americans for it to continue, as a class, to fill its traditional function of moral leadership."

Baltzell said there was still time for the WASPs to save themselves—and thus the Establishment over which they presided—but his warning went largely unheeded. Today, it is the Protestant remnant that goes unheeded. There are still WASPs with power and WASPs with money, but they no longer constitute an Establishment with moral authority. This decline has been amply documented and celebrated in a number of books, from Peter Schrag's **The De-**

cline of the WASP (Simon & Schuster, 1971) to Robert C. Christopher's **Crashing the Gates: The De-WASPing of America's Power Elite** (Simon & Schuster, 1989). They represent two of the main schools of thought about the WASP's demise. Christopher believes that the tide of political and demographic change in 20th-century America was so powerful that no adaptations could have saved them. Schrag, somewhat like Baltzell, suggests that the WASPs were brought down by their own shortcomings: "They grew great as initiators and entrepreneurs. They invented the country and its values, shaped the institutions and organizations, and tried to teach the newcomers—lest they become uncouth boors—how to join and behave. But when technology, depression and the uncertainties of the postwar world frightened and confused them, they drew the institutions around themselves, moved to the suburbs, and talked prudence."

Today there is great nostalgia for the old days of the Establishment, as evidenced by the popular appeal of books such as **The Wise Men: Architects of the American Century** (Simon & Schuster, 1986), by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, and by a lengthening procession of Establishment biographies (though not all of these are flattering) and memoirs. Edmund Morris's **The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt** (Putnam, 1979), for example, is only the best of several studies of this founding father of the national Establishment. Godfrey Hodgson's portrait of TR's protégé, **The Colonel: The Life and Wars of Henry Stimson, 1867-1950** (Knopf, 1990) casts its subject, who served as Herbert Hoover's secretary of state and Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of war, as a giant who set the mold of the Establishment man. Other books include Ronald Steel's **Walter Lippmann and the American Century** (Little, Brown, 1980); Thomas Powers' **The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA** (Knopf, 1979); Clark Clifford's **Counsel to the President: A Memoir** (with Richard Holbrooke, Random House, 1991). Joseph

Alsop's memoirs are soon to appear and biographers are now at work on lives of John J. McCloy, Dean Acheson, and Robert S. McNamara, among others.

In part, the nostalgia for the Establishment reflects a longing for consensus and stability in the governance of national affairs. It seems also to reflect a feeling that some of these leaders were in important ways superior to their successors. Henry Stimson, for example, is cast in noble terms by his biographer: "The ideas that did touch and move him were for the most part old ideas: traditional religious loyalty and practice; the patriotic traditions of the Founding Fathers; old and stirring ideals like 'justice, duty, honor, trust.'"

The WASP ideal that Stimson represented lingers in the popular mind, but hollowed of its moral content and reduced to style—Madras shorts, Ralph Lauren sweaters, horn-rimmed glasses. Americans no longer aim to emulate WASP virtues but, as the preppie fad of the 1980s and the sumptuous *faux* austerity of the Ralph Lauren ads suggest, to live a fantasy version of the WASP *lifestyle*. It is the rugged, TR-style outdoorsmanship of George Bush that we see constantly on display—the Maine retreat, the cigarette boat on choppy seas, the dogged golf games. It was Bush's genteel WASP *values*, his corny geniality and his platitudes about public service that earned him scorn as a wimp early in the 1988 presidential campaign.

Where have all the Stimsons gone? In an essay in **Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century** (Pantheon, 1985), historian Warren I. Susman suggests that American culture bred a new type of individual after the turn of the century. The 19th-century "culture of character" was based on the principle that "the highest development of self ended in a version of self-control or self-mastery, which often meant fulfillment through sacrifice in the name of a higher law, ideals of duty, honor, integrity." This sustained "the human needs of a producer-oriented society." But the new consumer society of the 20th century required a different sort of person, Susman speculates, and early on "interest grew in personality, individual idiosyncrasies, personal needs and interests. The vision of

self-sacrifice began to yield to that of self-realization." This sort of culture produces Bart Simpsons, not Henry Stimsons.

Another explanation, not considered by many writers, concerns the neglected P in WASP: the possibility that the decay of religious faith among the elite helps explain the decline of the public-service ethos that sustained the Establishment. The thought is entertained by Richard Brookhiser, an editor of the conservative *National Review*, in **The Way of the WASP: How It Made America and How It Can Save It . . . So to Speak** (Free Press, 1991), but even he discounts it. WASP culture, he believes, still nourishes a form of civic-mindedness, but it is misdirected towards a progressivism in politics and religion that is badly out of step with mainstream America.

The new Establishment that many observers seem to pine for may not be possible. The country is much more populous and prosperous (and more politically divided) than it was during the Establishment's heyday. The makings of a new Establishment seem to be available in the new "inside-the-Beltway" institutions described, for example, by Hedrick Smith in **The Power Game: How Washington Really Works** (Random, 1987). If the other books make anything clear, however, it is that it takes more than motive and opportunity to make an Establishment. A certain conviction, spirit, and sense of common moral purpose are needed. And because they made their money on Wall Street (much as the founding fathers made theirs on the farm), the old Establishmentarians could more plausibly claim to play a disinterested role in public affairs than today's "players" from K Street can.

The old Establishment was built on the industrial fortunes of the 19th century. The new rich of the Information Age, like the Trumps and Milkens, have so far only flaunted their wealth or flattered themselves by purchasing glamor. A century ago a rich man's first thought might have been to found a prep school or college; today he puts his name on an art museum. Yet though we may resent today's rich and powerful for lacking the fiber of their predecessors, it is not so clear that, lacking it ourselves, we would know enough to honor it.