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Hard America, Soft America: The Battle for America's Future

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As voters head to the polls tomorrow, analysts will watch anxiously, looking for patterns that will reveal the contours of the nation's political and cultural divides. Will the nation divide into what John Sperling has described as "metro" and "retro" regions? Will issues like abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage drive Americans into even deeper moral divisions?

None of these questions is likely to be fully settled on Election Day. It has taken decades for America to reach this moment of social polarization, and it will certainly take some time for the issues to be clearly decided both in private lives and in the public arena. At the same time, there are some who argue for a new way of understanding the American divide.

One of those arguing for a new conceptual understanding is Michael Barone, senior writer with U.S. News and World Report and a commentator on the Fox News Channel. Anyone who cares about politics in America knows who Michael Barone is—and recognizes him as the ultimate political junkie's junkie. In addition to his other responsibilities, Barone serves as "principal coauthor" of *The Almanac of American Politics*, the indispensable reference guide to the nation's political order published every two years.

Michael Barone is nothing less than a Fort Knox of political information. Like a baseball fanatic who can roll off batting averages from eighty years ago, Barone knows American politics in such detail that he can usually talk about individual congressional districts with great insight and accuracy. When it comes to the data of American politics, if Michael Barone does not know it, it probably cannot be known.

Yet Barone's latest book really isn't about American politics—at least not directly. In *Hard America, Soft America*, he offers an illuminating analysis into the real division that marks the American cultural landscape. As he sees it, Americans are torn between two poles of cultural energy—between hardness and softness as the texture of the society.

Barone begins by looking with admiration at the young men and women of the American armed services who fought with such spectacular success in Afghanistan and Iraq. These young soldiers were incredibly competent, marked by fierce resolve, and characterized by great personal discipline. But as Barone reflected, "I could not help thinking also that only a few years earlier these enlisted men and women, and not so many years earlier these officers and noncommissioned officers, were more or less typical American adolescents." As he continued, "For many years I have thought it one of the peculiar features of our country that we seem to produce incompetent eighteen-year-olds but remarkably competent thirty-year-olds."

How does this happen? Barone explains that American youngsters "live mostly in what I call Soft America—the parts of our country where there is little competition and accountability." But once these adolescents emerge into adulthood and

have to work for a living in a competitive economy, they find themselves in “Hard America,” where competition and accountability are the rules of the day.

Barone sets out his distinction between Hard America and Soft America with clarity. “Soft America coddles: our schools, seeking to instill self-esteem, ban tag and dodgeball, and promote just about anyone who shows up. Hard America plays for keeps: the private sector fires people when profits fall, and the military trains under live fire.” Clearly, Barone believes that hardness is necessary for the preservation and protection of society, and the training of young people into the responsibilities of adulthood. He does not argue that all softness is bad, noting that we shouldn’t “want to subject kindergartners to the rigors of the Marine Corps or leave old people helpless and uncared for.”

Without doubt, Barone believes that Soft America offers inadequate preparation for life, adulthood, and national destiny. He places the blame for Soft America at the feet of intellectual elites pushing what historian Robert Wiebe calls “bureaucratic” ideas. Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, whose ideas of “progressivist” education have warped the American educational establishment for almost a century, comes under particular critique. As Dewey looked to the public schools, he saw an opportunity for the transformation of society. Rather than focusing on “book learning,” testing, and personal competition, Dewey wanted to transform the schools into laboratories for social experimentation, nurturing children into life responsibilities and intellectual play. Instead of being guided by an authoritarian teacher, Dewey argued, children should be allowed to direct their own learning.

Much of the impetus towards a softening of American culture came in response to the “robber barons” and the fierce capitalism of the early twentieth century. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs represented a softening of life for many Americans, shifting much of the economic responsibility of the nation from individuals to the state.

As Barone demonstrates, the nation has moved back and forth between periods of intense hardness and softness. The successful Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite led Americans to demand an immediate hardening of public education. As Barone indicates, the impact of the National Defense Education Act, passed in 1958, was evident in significantly increased Scholastic Aptitude Test [SAT] scores in the early and mid-1960s.

Nevertheless, this hardening of the educational curriculum was not to last long, for the academic elites demanded increased softening and pushed a liberal agenda that once again looked to the schools as laboratories for social experimentation and the coddling of young people. As educational historian Diane Ravitch explains, the school curricula of the late 1960s and early 1970s reflected a loosening of standards, the marginalization of classical disciplines, and the substitution of grade inflation and social promotion for achievement. Barone points to education schools as the agents of softness in the educational arena. Leading educational theorists substituted a concern for self-esteem for learning, testing, and academic achievement.

All this leaves most young Americans unprepared for the real demands of adulthood. “The stubborn resistance to hardening America’s schools helps account for the fact that Americans up to age eighteen live mostly in Soft America,” Barone argues, “just as most Americans after the age of eighteen live in Hard America.”

Like the schools, the criminal justice system also became representative of Soft America. Criminals were increasingly not held accountable for their crimes, and “a broad swath of Americans who no longer felt morally justified in imposing hard penalties on crime deliberately and substantially softened the criminal justice system.”

Barone even argues that the war in Vietnam was a “soft war” because America’s fighting forces were prevented from applying winning strategies and battle-hardened experience to the conflict, while politicians forced them to fight a mostly “defensive” war.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Americans were increasingly frustrated with the failures of Soft America. Fed up with rising crime rates, Americans elected political leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Rudolph Giuliani, who called for tougher penalties, more police, and a more confrontational fight against crime.

As Barone sees it, the big question for America’s future is whether the nation will move in a harder or a softer direction. This means a choice between competition and coddling, between therapy and truth, between concern for self-esteem and pride in genuine achievement. Applying his skills of political and cultural analysis, Barone sees a hardening in America’s future.

Chastened by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has America been awakened out of its softness? Do Americans still have sufficient moral resolve to face the threat of world terrorism and the hard political, economic, and moral decisions of the present age? To at least some extent, those questions will be answered tomorrow. The political decisions made by American citizens in the voting booth will reveal this general direction. Will citizens choose the presidential candidate of Soft America [Senator John Kerry] or the candidate of Hard America [President George W. Bush]? Will Americans summon the resolve to protect marriage, defend the nation, and return personal responsibility to the center of America's public life?

Tomorrow's electoral results will not answer all of these questions conclusively, but the nation's voting patterns will tell us much about who we really are and what we really believe. One way or another, we will see a clearer vision of our future.

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