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Is the Culture War For Real?

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The idea of an American culture war is not new. With the nation torn asunder by the ideological divisions of the 1960s and the political disasters of the 1970s, Americans became increasingly aware that deep conflicts over the most basic issues of morality, politics, and law now dominated the American scene. Some of these divisions were fueled by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, while others emerged from the progress of the feminist movement and other progressivist trends. Where some saw liberation from an oppressive morality and discriminatory structures, others saw the destruction of the very fabric of civilization.

In retrospect, if any single event represented the fuse that lit our present cultural conflict, it was the 1973 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, *Roe v. Wade*, legalizing abortion on demand. With that decision, the nation was confronted with the fact that citizens were divided over the question of life itself. Where some saw the protection of fetal life as the paramount issue, others demanded that women be granted "liberation" from the condition of pregnancy—all in the name of equality with men.

Deep divisions over the Vietnam War—often disguised as a generational conflict—were added to a mix of cultural controversies. Symbolic evidence of deep division emerged during the 1970s, in retrospect, should have awakened the nation to the fact that these divisions were growing increasingly deeper.

The notorious "White House Conference on Families," organized during the administration of President Jimmy Carter, became a circus of competing ideologies, and the event's failure even to define the family served to symbolize the apparently insoluble crisis that loomed before the nation.

For many Americans, the first real taste of cultural conflict at the political level came in the 1980 presidential campaign, when former California governor Ronald Reagan ran with the support of a newly-energized movement of conservative Christians, focused on issues like abortion, family, and restoring law and order. President Jimmy Carter, who had received considerable political support from evangelical Christians in the 1976 election, was largely abandoned by conservative Christians in the 1980 election, contributing to the Reagan landslide. By 1991, sociologist James Davison Hunter was adding scholarly analysis to what many others had already recognized—Americans were now facing each other in a protracted culture war. Borrowing terminology from German conflicts of the early twentieth century, observers recognized that the polarizing controversies now present in American life represented something like a *Kulture Kampf*, or culture war, that could threaten the very viability of the democratic experiment. As Hunter explained, the culture war is

“the struggle to define America,” a war fought on fronts ranging from abortion and the death penalty to marriage, sexuality, and gender. Hunter described a nation divided between Progressivists and the Orthodox, whose fundamental views of life were seemingly incompatible and increasingly incoherent to each other.

In the U.S. News cover story, Jay Tolson returns to the now familiar division of America into “red” and “blue” states, representing the electoral map from the 2000 presidential race. As he notes, “even on the question of our divided condition, Americans, it seems, are strongly divided.”

Tolson laments the fact that the conflict is often reduced to stereotypes. “To many pundits, scholars, and activists, red and blue unquestionably delineate the two sides of a deep chasm running through the middle of American society, a geopolitical fault line, created, most say, by differences in cultural and religious values.”

Playing the stereotypes out, Tolson explains that red citizens are seen to be “NASCAR-lovin’, gun-ownin’, God-fearin’, Republicans who mostly inhabit the world, suburban, and small-town heartland stretching from the Deep South through the Great Plains and into the mountain states.” Blue folks, on the other hand, “are highly secular, latte-sipping, diversity-embracing Democrats concentrated in the urban areas on the two coasts and around the Great Lakes.”

Even as Tolson explains these descriptions as caricatures, most of the magazine’s readers are likely to recognize the truth in these stereotypical portraits. But while proponents of the culture war theory include both conservative and liberal observers, Tolson suggests that others believe the conflict to be overblown. Political scientist Morris Fiorina of Stanford University, for example, argues that the nation’s current cultural divisions are not that deep after all. “That divide,” he asserts, “is usually exaggerated.” In his new book, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina suggests that Americans actually enjoy considerable middle ground, even on some of the most contentious questions of morality and politics.

Sociologist Alan Wolfe presented a similar argument in his 1999 book, *One Nation, After All*. Wolfe looked at issues like abortion and homosexuality and argued that a majority of Americans occupied some kind of middle ground between two extremes. On abortion, for example, he argued that a centrist position that would allow abortion during the first trimester but would outlaw later abortions under most circumstances would garner support from a majority of Americans. In essence, Wolfe argued that a majority of Americans would be willing to sacrifice moral principle in order to establish some kind of social harmony.

Others aren’t so sure. Michael Barone, a U.S. News columnist and editor of the “Almanac of American Politics” series, argues that the two political parties now represent, in the main, the two opposing sides in the nation’s culture war. Barone, who points to a highly divided electorate, argues that “to an overwhelming extent,” the nation is divided by religion. As Tolson recounts from the 2000 presidential election, “The numbers spoke clearly: Conservative Christians (Protestant and Roman Catholic) and regular churchgoers in general went decisively for Bush. Liberal religionists and unchurched folk leaned far more toward Gore.”

The U.S. News article ends without a conclusive judgment, with Tolson arguing that “America’s two nations, red and blue, real or largely chimerical, are likely to be with us for some time yet.”

Mr. Tolson, the divisions are real, and the conflict is certain to remain the most important factor in our contemporary cultural life.

Why? The reason is actually quite simple—we have now reached the point when political debates deal essentially with the most fundamental matters of right and wrong, life and death, true and false, and are therefore incapable of being solved by negotiation and compromise.

Matters of economic policy, taxation, and the criminal justice system are tied to deep issues of ideological investment. Nevertheless, our political process allows for considerable give and take in dealing with these issues, and, in the end, our political structures are generally able to find some ground for compromise, even on these contentious issues.

When it comes to abortion, homosexuality, marriage, and the deep questions of morality, compromise fails as a means of adjudicating disputes and reaching a political resolution. Take abortion, for example. While the pro-abortion side reduces the issue to liberation for women and freedom from unwanted pregnancy, pro-life advocates begin with the non-

negotiable premise that human life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death. For both sides, compromise is anathema. The same pattern of intractable controversy and irresolvable division is encountered in debates over same-sex marriage, the normalization of homosexuality, and a host of issues from embryonic stem-cell research to euthanasia.

I take my stand with those who affirm the full dignity and sanctity of human life, who understand that though we may make progress stage by stage, we cannot rest until human life is honored and protected at every stage of development. We must contend for the dignity of human life down to the level of the smallest human embryo. Beyond this, we must serve as resolute advocates for sexual sanity and the preservation of marriage and the natural family. This is a charge we must bear, an unbendable principle we must hold. Accepting a negotiated form of same-sex marriage or civil partnerships is nothing less than a negotiated delay of the eventual destruction of civilization's central institution.

Whether or not the nation is truly divided between red and blue states, this culture is undeniably divided between two opposing worldviews. The 2004 presidential election is part and parcel of that conflict, though the culture war is certain to continue for years to come. No one said this was going to be easy.

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