

A War for the Soul of America

A History of the Culture Wars

Second Edition

WITH A NEW CONCLUSION

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Introduction

When Patrick Buchanan declared “a war for the soul of America” during his raucous primetime speech before the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, he reiterated a theme that had animated his underdog campaign against President George H. W. Bush in that year’s primaries. This theme was the “culture wars,” a struggle, in Buchanan’s words, “as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” With such urgent rhetoric, the right-wing former adviser to presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan aimed to elevate the stakes of that year’s presidential election. The nation was confronted with more than a choice between Bush and the Democratic challenger Bill Clinton: it was a decision “about who we are,” “about what we believe,” about whether “the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which this nation was built” would survive.¹

Buchanan’s notorious speech punctuated a series of angry quarrels that dominated national headlines during the 1980s and 1990s. Whether over abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, evolution, family values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, media, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, sex education, the Western canon—the list of such divisive issues goes on and on—the United States was beset by “culture wars.” Buchanan’s “war for the soul of America” was on.²

The issues at stake in the culture wars were real and compelling. Such a seemingly straightforward notion defies a well-worn argument, forwarded by Thomas Frank in his 2005 jeremiad *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, that the culture wars were superficial and helped engender an irrational political landscape. In pithy fashion, Frank re-

lates the hullabaloo over the artist Andres Serrano's blasphemous *Piss Christ*, a photo of a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine, to his thesis that "culture wars get the goods." "Because some artist decides to shock the hicks by dunking Jesus in urine," Frank writes, "the entire planet must remake itself along the lines preferred by the Republican Party, U.S.A." Frank's argument goes as follows: religious conservatives often voted against their own economic interests due to their illogical obsession with the culture wars, to which Republican politicians cynically lent rhetorical support as they attended to more important matters, such as rewriting the tax codes in favor of the rich. Frank's fellow Kansans defy his populist expectations that they direct their anger at the wealthy—at those responsible for making their economic lives so precarious. In this schema, debates about the idea of America are sideshows.³

But the history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America. Ever since the nation's founding, Americans have wrestled with Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's famous 1782 riddle: "What then is the American, this new man?" Disputes over this knotty question have marked out the battleground of American cultural conflict. And such disputes intensify during tumultuous times of rapid change. The unique period in American history known as "the sixties" and the turbulent decades that followed were just such times.⁴

The sixties gave birth to a new America, a nation more open to new peoples, new ideas, new norms, and new, if conflicting, articulations of America itself. This fact, more than anything else, helps explain why in the wake of the sixties the national culture grew more divided than it had been in any period since the Civil War. Americans split over how to think about this new America. The gulf that separated those who embraced the new America from those who viewed it ominously—those who looked to nurture it versus those who sought to roll it back—drew the boundaries of the culture wars. Sociologist James Davison Hunter put it like this in his important 1991 book *Culture Wars*: "Our most fundamental ideas about who we are as Americans are now at odds."⁵

The history of the culture wars, often misremembered as merely one angry shouting match after another, offers insight into the genuine transformation to American political culture that happened during the sixties.

This is not to say that these transformations emerged from the sixties whole cloth. The sixties counterculture—the ethics of “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll”—flowered from the earlier cultural sensibilities of Beats like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who brought bohemia to the masses with their unconventional poems and books. New Left organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society were sustained by the earlier political sensibilities of leftist intellectuals like C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman, whose radical visions for America transcended Cold War conformism.⁶

Likewise, those sixties conservatives who supported violent police crackdowns on student protestors at the University of California at Berkeley, which Governor Ronald Reagan called a “haven for sex deviants,” emerged from the earlier cultural sensibilities of those angered by Elvis Presley’s pelvic gyrations on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. New Right organizations like Young Americans for Freedom were nourished by the earlier political sensibilities of intellectuals like William Buckley Jr., whose withering critique of “secularist and collectivist” professors gave life to a powerful conservative imagination that had supposedly been rendered obsolete.⁷

Similarly, the demise of intellectual authority and traditions, another upheaval in American life that helped spark the culture wars, was not necessarily new to the sixties. This so-called postmodern condition, or the realization that “all that is solid melts into air”—liberating to some, frightening to others—had long ago shaken the foundations of American thought. The French philosopher Michel Foucault, the most widely read theorist in the American humanities since the sixties, was thought to have revolutionized American intellectual life with relativistic statements of the sort that “knowledge is not made for understanding, it is made for cutting.” In fact, Lynne Cheney, who chaired the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1986 to 1993, argued that Foucault’s “ideas were nothing less than an assault on Western civilization.”⁸ But by the time Cheney had written those words, it had been nearly a century since the American philosopher William James made the antifoundationalist claim that “‘the truth’ is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.” Germane to this point, in the 1940s university students across the country, particularly at elite schools like Harvard University, were assigned to read the American anthropologist Margaret Mead, who, according to the historian David

Hollinger, “explicitly and relentlessly questioned the certainties of the home culture by juxtaposing them with often romanticized images of distant communities of humans.” That many Americans gained familiarity with Mead’s cultural relativism—which promoted the idea that much of what was called “natural” was, rather, “cultural”—was an indication that perhaps part of American political culture had fractured well before the sixties.⁹

But the sixties universalized fracture. Many Americans prior to the sixties, particularly middle-class white Americans, were largely sheltered from the “acids of modernity,” those modern ways of thinking that subjected seemingly timeless truths, including truths about America, to a lens of suspicion. Put another way, prior to the sixties many Americans did not yet recognize the hazards of a world freed from tradition. They did not yet realize that their sacred cows were being butchered. Many Americans felt their world coming apart only once they experienced such chaos as a political force, as a movement of peoples previously excluded from the American mainstream. They grew wary of “an assault on Western civilization” only after the barbarians had crashed the gates. The radical political mobilizations of the sixties—civil rights, Black and Chicano Power, feminism, gay liberation, the antiwar movement, the legal push for secularization—destabilized the America that millions knew. It was only after the sixties that many, particularly conservatives, recognize the threat to their once great nation.¹⁰

After the sixties—and during the culture wars—whether one thought the nation was in moral decline was often a correlative of whether one was liberal or conservative. Joseph Epstein called the sixties “something of a political Rorschach test. Tell me what you think of that period,” he wrote, “and I shall tell you what your politics are.” Those who argued that the sixties had shepherded in ethical anarchy, and that such confusion threatened the very fabric of the nation, tended to be conservative. For instance, conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote: “The beasts of modernism have mutated into the beasts of postmodernism, relativism into nihilism, amorality into immorality, irrationality into insanity, sexual deviancy into polymorphous perversity.” Conservative jurist Robert Bork echoed these sentiments: “The rough beast of decadence, a long time in gestation, having reached its maturity in the last three decades, now sends us slouching towards our new home, not Bethlehem but Gomorrah.”

Himmelfarb and Bork's right-wing declension narratives advanced a theory of historical change that, no matter how hyperbolic in tone, was more or less accurate. An older America had been lost.¹¹

In the postwar years—the nearly two decades between the end of World War II and the assassination of John F. Kennedy—a cluster of powerful conservative norms set the parameters of American culture. These cultural standards are best described by the phrase “normative America,” an analytical category I use to refer to an inchoate group of assumptions and aspirations shared by millions of Americans during the postwar years. Normative Americans prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own. Normative Americans lived according to stringent sexual expectations: sex, whether for procreation or recreation, was contained within the parameters of heterosexual marriage. Normative Americans behaved in ways consistent with strict gender roles: within the confines of marriage, men worked outside the home and women cared for children inside it. Normative Americans believed their nation was the best in human history: those aspects of American history that shined an unfavorable light on the nation, such as slavery, were ignored or explained away as aberrations. Normative Americans often assumed that the nation's Christian heritage illuminated its unique character: the United States of America really was a “city on a hill.”¹²

The normative America of the postwar years—the normative America of the 1950s—was more omnipresent, and more coercive, than it had been before or has been since. During the 1950s, an unprecedented number of Americans got in line—or aspired to get in line—particularly white, heterosexual, Christian Americans. Even those Americans barred from normative America by virtue of their race, sexuality, or religion often felt compelled to demonstrate compliance. In part, such an extraordinary degree of conformity had to do with Cold War imperatives: a global struggle against an alien system required cultural and ideological stability. But even more, the cohesiveness of postwar normative America was a byproduct of the internal threats to it—threats made manifest during the sixties. It was as if dark clouds of dissent were visible on the not-too-distant horizon. It was as if Americans embraced cultural conformity in order to suspend disbelief about what lurked beneath such a facade.¹³

The new America given life by the sixties—a more pluralistic, more

secular, more feminist America — was built on the ruins of normative America.

This basic historical fact explains the flood of laments about a once great America that emerged by the 1970s. President Nixon expressed such an idea in his second inaugural address of January 20, 1973: “Above all else, the time has come for us to renew our faith in ourselves and in America. In recent years, that faith has been challenged. Our children have been taught to be ashamed of their country, ashamed of their parents, ashamed of America’s record at home and its role in the world. At every turn we have been beset by those who find everything wrong with America and little that is right.” For Nixon, American renewal meant forgetting the sixties, when too many Americans quit loving their country unconditionally.¹⁴

Newt Gingrich, Republican Speaker of the House from 1994 until 1998, wrote an entire book, appropriately titled *To Renew America*, on a similar proposition. “From the arrival of English-speaking colonists in 1607 until 1965,” Gingrich wrote, “from the Jamestown colony and the Pilgrims, through de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, up to Norman Rockwell’s paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, there was one continuous civilization built around commonly accepted legal and cultural principles.” For conservatives like Nixon and Gingrich, the America they loved was in distress. Returning to the values that animated the nation in the 1950s was the only way to save it.¹⁵

Those on the left, by contrast, tended to view American life through the eyes of the sixties — through the eyes of the women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, secularists, and other Americans whose existence symbolized a challenge to normative America. For them, American culture was always fractured. Conservatives viewed American culture as something that, once whole, had been lost; they felt challenges to normative America to be the shattering of worlds. Whereas the Left considered post-sixties American culture a closer approximation of its ideal form, the Right considered it an abomination. None of which is to say that the American Left was entirely victorious — far from it! In the realms of economic policy and electoral power, conservatives did very well — a historical development that has been amply documented. But in the sphere of culture, the Left had its share of victories. The culture wars were fought on this terrain where the Left was successful.¹⁶

The culture wars were battles over what constituted art, and over

whether the federal government should subsidize art that insulted the most cherished beliefs of millions of Americans. The culture wars were debates over transgressive films and television shows, and over whether insensitive cultural programming should be censored. They were brawls over the public schools, and over whether American children should learn divisive subjects like evolutionary biology. They involved struggles over the university curriculum, and over whether American college students should read a traditional Western canon or texts that represented a more diverse range of perspectives. The culture wars were fights over how the nation's history was narrated in museums, and over whether the purpose of American history was to make Americans proud of the nation's glorious past or to encourage citizens to reflect on its moral failings. In sum, where the Left enjoyed success—in the nation's cultural institutions—conservatives fought back with a ferocity that matched their belief, as Patrick Buchanan put it, that “culture is the Ho Chi Minh Trail to power.”¹⁷

This dramatic struggle, which pitted liberal, progressive, and secular Americans against their conservative, traditional, and religious counterparts, captured the attention of the nation during the 1980s and 1990s. For a period of about two decades, the culture wars, like a vortex, swallowed up much of American political and intellectual life. The culture wars were the defining metaphor for the late-twentieth-century United States. This book tries to make sense of the war.