



IS THERE A CULTURE WAR?

A DIALOGUE ON VALUES AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

*Is America at war with itself over cultural issues? Or does the conflict exist primarily in the minds of political activists and pundits? In a new collection of essays entitled *Is There a Culture War?*, two leading scholars examine the cultural divides within American society and their implications for American politics. James Davison Hunter is a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, where he also is executive director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. Alan Wolfe is a professor of political science at Boston College, where he directs the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life. This executive summary, drawn from the book's introduction and essays, summarizes their arguments. The volume is part of the Pew Forum Dialogues on Religion and Public Life, a series of books edited by E.J. Dionne Jr. of the Brookings Institution and Michael Cromartie of the Ethics & Public Policy Center.*

In 1991, University of Virginia Professor James Davison Hunter published a book that was destined to change the national debate over cultural politics. In *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America*, Hunter argued that there was a battle raging between “traditionalists,” who were committed to moral ideals inherited from the past, and “progressivists,” who idealized change and flexibility. These different world views, Hunter argued, were responsible for increasingly heated disputes over such issues as abortion, sexuality, education and the role of religious institutions in society. “Cumulatively,” Hunter says in his essay, “these debates concerning the wide range of social institutions amounted to a struggle over the meaning of America.”

The culture war debate intensified with the appearance of another influential book in 1998, Alan Wolfe’s *One Nation, After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homo-*

sexuality, Work, the Right, the Left and Each Other. Wolfe argued that if there was a culture war, most Americans weren’t taking sides. “Americans believed in both traditional religious values and personal freedom,” he says now, “and it was not always easy for them to decide which was more important.”

So which is it, a culture war or one nation after all? Hunter’s reflections about the origins of the culture war are the starting point for this discussion, followed by Wolfe’s response and brief commentaries by Gertrude Himmelfarb, professor emeritus of history at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, and Morris Fiorina, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and Wendt Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. The views expressed in the volume and the executive summary are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brookings Institution or the Ethics & Public Policy Center. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life is a project of

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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HUNTER ON THE CULTURE WAR

James Hunter says he first became aware of what he called the culture war in the late 1980s, when he noticed similar tactics being used by activists on both sides of a range of issues, from abortion and gay rights to anti-smoking campaigns and protests against nuclear power. “Many of these conflicts were playing out in local settings around the country with no connection to each other,” Hunter notes, “yet across the range of issues the lines of division were similar, the rhetorical strategies and cultural motifs were comparable, and the patterns of engagement were alike.”

Looking for “a cultural thread that could make sense of this confusing jumble,” Hunter offered his culture war theory. “The heart of the culture war argument,” Hunter writes, “was that American public culture was undergoing a realignment that, in turn, was generating significant tension and conflict. These antagonisms were playing out not just on the surface of social life (that is, in its cultural politics) but at the deepest and most profound levels. ... Thus underneath the myriad political controversies over so-called cultural issues, there were yet deeper crises over the very meaning and purpose of the core institutions of American civilization. Behind the politics of abortion was a controversy over a momentous debate over the meaning of motherhood, of individual liberty, and of our obligations to one another. ... Behind the contentious argument about the legal rights of gays and lesbians was a more serious debate over the fundamental nature of the family and appropriate sexuality.”

One of the dividing lines that Hunter discerned in these disputes involved new alliances of conservative Protestants, Catholics and Jews on one side of the issues, and liberal Protestants, Catholics and Jews on the other side. Those alliances led him to question traditional definitions of “left” and “right” based on economic and class interests. Instead, Hunter suggested a new “axis of tension” centered on *cultural* concerns. “The historical significance of this new axis has been evident in the ways in which it cuts across age-old divisions among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews,” he writes. “The orthodox traditions in these faiths now have much more in common with each other than they do with progressives in their own faith traditions, and vice versa.”

Hunter notes that his critics often cite public opinion data to support their position that there are no religious-cultural differences that are politically significant in America. But in Hunter’s view, those critics mistakenly define culture as simply “the sum total of attitudes, values and opinions of the individuals making up a society.” A better, more complete definition of American culture, he says, includes our

complex networks of institutions, individuals and rituals.

“It was and is only at this level,” Hunter writes, “that the term culture war – with its implications of stridency, polarization, mobilization of resources, and so on – has its greatest conceptual force. It

explains, among other things, how it is that our public discourse becomes disembodied from (and hence larger than and independent of) the individual voices that give it expression. In this way it explains how our public discourse becomes more polarized than Americans as a people are.”

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Hunter also argues that public opinion polling can mask subtle differences, making it appear that politically moderate Americans are all alike. A closer look at the data, he says, shows that moderates are divided by subtle political leanings that make them susceptible to mobilization by various political elites. While his critics dismiss elites as “noisy extremists,” Hunter believes their framing of public discussion and rallying of citizens is crucial. He notes the tendency of elites to swoop into local controversies, galvanize the population and use the disputes to promote their own interests. The general population is not as polarized as these activists, Hunter notes. But the power of elites is made even greater by the larger public’s inability to challenge their stark, uncompromising framing. This leads to polarized choices at election time, forcing Americans – even those in the middle – to choose sides.

Finally, Hunter argues, cultural conflict is inevitable, since culture always involves individuals and institutions competing for resources and position. He suggests that his critics fail to acknowledge that “given,” and instead mistakenly look for consensus in public opinion. He says those who continue to dismiss cultural conflict risk ignoring the diversity essential for a healthy democracy. “For the social sciences,” he says, “this is not merely a lapse but a missed opportunity.”

WOLFE: THE CULTURE WAR THAT NEVER CAME

Alan Wolfe is among those who argue that if there is a culture war, it barely exists beyond the minds of journalists and political activists. Rather than assigning the conflict great impor-

tance, he instead asks, in an echo of Vietnam-era protestors, What if they gave a culture war and no one came?

Most Americans do not know or care about the culture war being fought by partisans and pundits, Wolfe says, and when asked, do not have strong sympathies with either side, even on “the so-called moral issues” that the partisans and pundits say are most divisive. He suggests that the important cultural conflicts take place not *between* Americans but *within* individuals, as they struggle to live meaningful lives and make difficult personal decisions about life, death, relationships and family.

Cultural issues become polarizing and pervasive, he says, because political parties and ideologically driven interest groups rely on conflict to energize fundraising and help elect candidates. In Wolfe’s view, shifts in politics and religion have brought those two worlds closer, fueling this elite culture war.

Wolfe argues that the political parties have become more ideological, allowing one-issue activists to set much of the agenda. Conservatives have gained more political power, he says, yet they feel *less* powerful because their political gains have not enabled them to change cultural behaviors. As Wolfe describes it, a central paradox of the culture war is that “America has moved to the right politically at the same time it has moved to the left culturally.”

Wolfe says the growth of religiously conservative denominations has also contributed to the culture war. However, he rejects Hunter’s claim that the most devoutly religious of each

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denomination are pitted against the least observant. For example, he says, there is little tension within the African-American or Jewish communities, which remain overwhelmingly politically liberal. He also challenges the notion that there has been a strong shift to the right among Catholics. The realignment that Hunter describes simply has not happened, he argues.

In Wolfe's view, the country is becoming neither more religious nor "entering a period of rampant secularism," as some observers argue. The proportion of Americans who identify themselves as having no religious preference is growing, he says, but the proportion who say they believe in God remains high – further evidence that Americans are not divided along religious lines, as Hunter believes.

Wolfe identifies two changes in national politics that he says would end what he sees as a conflict of elites. The first has already occurred, he says, because the Democrats have declared a "truce" by moving toward the political center. Next, he says, "Conservatives motivated by passionate anger about the moral decline of their country will need to become more introspective [and]...consider that politics, even conservative politics, cannot help them if their marriages are unhappy, their children rebellious, and their willpower weak."

Americans, he concludes, want moderation and balance in their own lives and from the country's leaders – not conflict and polarization. "We are not a nation of zealots determined to make enemies of each other," he says. "We are instead a society that, faced with crises in the past, eventually found ways to come together in defense of our common heritage."

HIMMELFARB: THE OTHER CULTURE WAR

"The culture war has taken an interesting turn," Gertrude Himmelfarb says in the introduction to her essay. "Combatants on both sides are declaring victory and, in doing so, pronouncing the culture war over and done with." Indeed, she writes, "for some – for Alan Wolfe most notably – there never was a war," or if there was, it is "on its last legs."

Himmelfarb reserves her sharpest criticism for those conservatives (she does not place Hunter among them) who "report that the [culture] war is over (or almost over) because they are winning it." These "cultural triumphalists," as Himmelfarb calls them, bolster their case by citing statistics showing a decline in the incidence of crime, violence, abortion, divorce, out-of-wedlock births and the like. "The statistics are encouraging and very welcome," she writes, "but not, unhappily, altogether conclusive. If the divorce rate is stable ... it is because fewer people are getting married. ... If the proportion of children in married-parent families rose by a single percent, that still leaves a third of children with unmarried parents."

In any case, those on either side who say the culture war is over may be missing the point, she suggests. They are debating a *political* war, a conflict quite different from

one that is genuinely *cultural* – and it is the latter that really matters, she maintains.

Some of the weapons in the true cultural conflict take unlikely forms, such as the television cartoon series *South Park*, a show conservatives find appealing because it targets a liberal cul-

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ture of political correctness, but that also contains vulgarity and raunchiness that conservatives should find offensive. “To an old culture warrior like myself,” Himmelfarb says, “*South Park* conservatism is an oxymoron, being not only anti-liberal but anti-conservative as well.”

While Wolfe contends the culture war does not touch ordinary Americans, Himmelfarb says the broad public is “enormously affected, every day in every way, by the kind of culture symbolized by those *South Park* brats.” Citing examples of increasing cultural acceptance of vulgarity and explicit sex, she argues that the public has become so accustomed to “escalating assaults” on traditional values that people hardly remain aware of them.

Conservatives “may be winning the war over one sense of culture, that measured by the indices of crime, violence, illegitimacy, and the like,” she says. “But they are losing the other war, the war over the popular culture – losing it by default, by sheer, willful inattention.” They are losing the “minds and hearts, the sensibilities and spirits” of a public “in thrall to the popular culture.” The real culture war, Himmelfarb concludes, is by no means over.

FIORINA: AN ELITE CULTURE WAR

Morris Fiorina, like Wolfe, believes that the culture war is an elite phenomenon that does not resonate with the larger public. “Political elites may be engaged in a culture war,” he says, “but they are not reflecting popular preferences.” This elite culture war, he argues, pushes politics into areas where the public would rather it keep out.

But Fiorina disagrees with Wolfe on at least one point: he rejects Wolfe’s contention that

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the United States has become both more politically conservative and more culturally liberal. Things only appear that way, Fiorina says, because America’s political system is majoritarian – adopting policies to which the minority must resign itself – while its economic system represents

many minority tastes when it comes to culture: Society readily caters to a demand for music, books and movies that a majority might well reject. The result, according to Fiorina, is that

while minority preferences are masked in politics, they are always apparent in popular culture. This creates an illusion, he says, that the country has become more conservative politically and more liberal culturally than is actually the case.

Fiorina also questions Hunter’s argument that elites control the conversation about culture, countering that “elites naturally like to believe in their own importance, but that they tend to exaggerate it.” A culture war among elites could lead to polarization among the general public, but Fiorina believes it is more likely to cause the wider public to further disengage from politics.

Finally, Fiorina insists that Hunter is wrong in saying that cultural issues have overshadowed the importance of traditional economic issues. The income gap between white Republican and Democratic voters has grown rather than diminished, Fiorina says, and continues to be a major factor in American politics.

HUNTER AND WOLFE RESPOND

Hunter disagrees with Wolfe’s and Fiorina’s basic approach to the question of a culture war because in his view they focus too much on politics – elections, campaigns, voting behavior

and party ideology. His own focus, he maintains, is culture itself, and that fundamental difference in emphasis is why they disagree about the pervasiveness of the culture war. "It is not just that they are approaching it differently," he says. "They are actually analyzing different things."

For him, the political elements of the culture war are merely the most visible symptoms of a deeper conflict. "Culture nearly always leads politics, not the other way around," he says. Thus the political shift to the right and the cultural shift to the left mean that cultural conservatives are on the losing end of the more important conflict because they have sought political solutions to deeply cultural issues. "What political solution is there to the absence of decency?" he asks. "To the spread of vulgarity? To the lack of civility and want of compassion? The answer, of course, is none – there are no political solutions to these concerns, and the headlong pursuit of them by conservatives will lead, inevitably, to failure."

Wolfe, in turn, rejects Hunter's definition of culture as a network of institutions and organizations because he believes it downplays the power of individuals. As Wolfe states, "I am distrustful of those who argue that structures

put a culture war in place even if ordinary people do not want one to exist."

Wolfe concedes that differences exist between traditional and progressive people in America, but he maintains that the divisions do not imply an all-out war. He further argues that conservative voters in many instances show themselves to be *non*-traditional in their personal lives – by switching religious faiths, moving from place to place or divorcing and remarriage. Liberals, he argues – and liberal faiths – are often much more traditional at heart.

Americans form a single society, Wolfe maintains, because they cherish the same core values of tolerance, pluralism and commitment to individualism. Any differences are political, not cultural or religious, he concludes. And thus our best hope as a nation is to "build on the consensus among ordinary people as a counter to the extremism that characterizes so much of our current political elite."

This, ultimately, is where Hunter and Wolfe agree – that Americans share a belief in and commitment to the project of democracy. Where they disagree is on the nature and consequences of the diversity inherent in such a democracy.

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