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# **A War for the Soul of America**

**Andrew Hartman**

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I began researching my book about the history of the culture wars in 2007. But really the book, or at least my curiosity about the culture wars, originated in at least two earlier moments in my life. The first was in 2001, when I lost my job as a high school history teacher in Denver, Colorado area for being too left-wing for the school administration (my lessons inspired students to organize against the pervasive military recruiters in the school). I learned first-hand that teaching history to children can be an intensely political act. That was something I knew in the abstract but needed to experience to truly understand. This sparked my scholarly curiosity about conflicts over education and history, conflicts that form the bedrock of my book.

Another formative experience was George W. Bush's reelection in 2004. I opposed all that he stood for with every fiber of my being, so the fact that over 62 million of my fellow Americans voted for him gave me more motivation than ever to learn about the strange country that I call home – the United States of America.

In this I was not alone. The left-wing critic Thomas Frank's bestselling 2005 book, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, was his attempt to understand how the nation could reelect Bush. Such a thing seemed so irrational to Frank, and many others. I read *What's the Matter with Kansas* within weeks of its publication, and at the time I remember nodding my head in agreement with his argument that the culture wars are superficial and help make our politics irrational. But the more I studied the history of the culture wars the more I realized Frank was wrong.

Frank argues that religious conservatives often vote against their own economic interests due to their illogical obsession with the culture wars. In this line of thought, Republican politicians cynically lend rhetorical support to culture war issues as they focus on more important matters, such as rewriting the tax codes in favor of the rich. Frank relates the controversy over the artist Andres Serrano's blasphemous *Piss Christ*, a 1987 photo of a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine,

to this thesis that “culture wars get the goods.” “Because some artist decides to shock the hicks by dunking Jesus in urine,” Frank wrote, “the entire planet must remake itself along the lines preferred by the Republican Party, USA” (Frank: 10, 8).

Frank is a liberal who grew up in Kansas (the “heartland”) and is disturbed by these developments in his home state, and in the larger nation. Frank’s fellow Kansans – his fellow Americans – defy his populist expectations that they direct their anger at the wealthy – at those responsible for making their economic lives so precarious. This might be compelling logic, but by this logic alone, the culture wars are mere sideshows, bread and circuses.

My argument is different. The history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America, about what it means to be an American. When the conservative politician and now television personality Patrick Buchanan declared “a war for the soul of America” during his rowdy speech before the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, he offered one answer to this perennial question about American identity. He did so by restating a theme that had defined 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, Buchanan wanted to raise the stakes of that year’s election. More than a choice between Bush and the Democratic challenger Bill Clinton, Buchanan stated that the nation was confronted with 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 (Buchanan). In other words Buchanan knew what America was, and Clinton was not it.

Buchanan’s speech punctuated a series of angry debates that dominated headlines during the 80s and 90s and that came to be called the culture wars. The list of divisive issues that were battles in the culture wars is long: abortion, affirmative action, controversial art and censorship, evolution, family values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, sex education. And the list goes on but no single one of these issues defined the culture wars. Rather they were merely ways to work out larger arguments about American identity, and even about human nature.

These types of arguments are always present in American political life – a nation founded on capacious and contradictory ideas like

“liberty,” and “the pursuit of happiness,” is bound to have such debates. This is especially true during times of rapid change. Take for instance the 1960s.

The 1960s gave birth to a new America, 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 the nation grew more divided during and after the 1960s than at any period in American history since the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

So that is the crux of my larger argument: the 1960s transformed American culture, and the culture wars are the legacy of those changes. That said, to say as much is not to say that these transformations emerged from the 1960s whole cloth. The 1960s counterculture – the ethics of “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll” – grew out of the earlier sensibilities of Beats like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who brought Bohemia to the masses with their unconventional poems and books.

On the other side of the spectrum, those who supported violent police crackdowns on protestors at the University of California at Berkeley – Governor Ronald Reagan called Berkeley a “haven for sex deviants” – these conservative attitudes emerged from the earlier sensibilities of those angered by Elvis Presley’s pelvic gyrations on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (Kahn).

Most crucially, the radical political mobilizations of the 1960s – civil rights, Black and Chicano Power, feminism, gay liberation, the antiwar movement, the legal push for secularization – these movements destabilized the America that millions knew. It was only after the 1960s that many Americans, particularly conservatives, recognized the threat to their once great nation.

After the 1960s – and during the culture wars – whether one thought the nation was in moral decline was often directly related to whether one was liberal or conservative. Joseph Epstein called the 1960s “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” (Epstein quoted in Gerson: 144). Those who argued that the 1960s had ushered in anarchy, and that such confusion threatened the very fabric of the nation, tended to be conservative (Himmelfarb: 6). For instance, conservative judge Robert Bork, whose nomination to the Supreme Court by President

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<sup>1</sup> The “1960s” is a period in U.S. history roughly bookended by the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy and the 1974 Watergate scandal that ended Richard Nixon’s presidency (Isserman and Kazin; Gosse and Moser).

Ronald Reagan was derailed in 1987 by liberals fearful of his views on abortion and civil rights, later wrote: “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” (Bork: vii). Bork’s right-wing declension narrative advanced a theory of historical change that, no matter how hyperbolic in tone, was more or less accurate. An older America had been lost. This is where conservatives get the 1960s right. This does not mean we have to agree with them that the 1950s were better. But we do need to recognize that conservatives were right about things changing. In their eyes, things fell apart.

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 a group of assumptions and aspirations shared by millions of Americans during the postwar years – the 1950s. Normative Americans prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own. 1950s Americans lived according to stringent sexual expectations: sex, whether for procreation or recreation, was reserved for heterosexual marriage. 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. Television often conformed to these expectations with shows such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. 1950s 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. They assumed that the nation’s Christian heritage demonstrated its unique character: the United States of America really was a “city on a hill.”

The normative America of the postwar years – of the 1950s – was more pervasive, and more coercive, than before or 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 this idea of American identity 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 this American culture was a byproduct of the internal threats to it – threats made manifest during the 1960s. It was as if the 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 façade. It was as if they knew the 1960s were coming. It was as if they knew American cultural stability was a house of cards.

The new America given life by the 1960s – a more pluralistic, more secular, more feminist America – was built on the ruins of normative America. This basic historical fact explains the culture wars. It also explains the flood of jeremiads about a once great America that emerged by the 1970s. President Richard 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 1960s, when too many Americans quit loving their country unconditionally (Nixon).

Newt Gingrich, Republican Speaker of the House from 1994 until 1998 – who became famous when he engineered a Republican House majority in 1994 by directly taking on the Clintons – wrote an entire book, appropriately titled *To Renew America*, on an idea that was similar to Nixon's. He wrote:

From the arrival of English-speaking colonists in 1607 until 1965, 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. (Gingrich: 7)

Simply put: 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.

So the 1960s divided us. Those on the left, in contrast with conservatives like Nixon and Gingrich, tended to view American life through the eyes of the 1960s, or rather, through the eyes of women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, secularists, and other Americans whose existence symbolized a challenge to normative America.

We can now better understand the major debates of the culture wars through this historical lens. 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. The culture wars were fights over how the nation's history was taught in schools and narrated in museums.

Concerns about history climaxed during the national controversy surrounding the attempt by the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum to build an exhibit dedicated to the *Enola Gay*, the bomber used to drop an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The *Enola Gay* had never been put on display prior to this because of the ambivalence people felt about what it represented: although for many Americans it represented the victorious conclusion of what is often called the Good War, for others it stood for the onset of the nightmare-inducing nuclear age. But by the late 1980s Smithsonian officials had concluded it was time to display it. But given that Smithsonian curators were imbued with 1960s sensibilities, they thought that it should be presented in somber fashion. It should not be celebrated. Thus curators were tasked with creating an exhibit consistent with Air and Space director and astrophysicist Martin Harwit's curatorial philosophy: "I think we just can't afford to make war a heroic event where people could prove their manliness and then come home to woo the fair damsel" (Linenthal: 15).

In July 1993, the Air and Space Museum released a planning document that outlined its objectives for the exhibit:

to encourage visitors to undertake a thoughtful and balanced re-examination of the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War in light of the political and military factors

leading to the decision to drop the bomb, the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the events of August 6 and 9, 1945. (Mohan: 180)

In short, the exhibit took on some of the questions that historians had been seeking to answer since the 1960s. Was the dropping of the atomic bombs necessary to end World War II? Many historians had made the revisionist argument that the atomic bombs were unnecessary to end the war. Truman, they contended, used them against Japan in part to better position the United States vis-à-vis its erstwhile ally and future enemy the Soviet Union (Alperovitz).

Another question: If the US had had to invade the Japanese mainland in order to end the war – the rationale given by Truman at the time and by supporters since – how many American casualties might we have expected, which is another way of asking: how many American lives did the bomb save? Historians put their estimates around 30-50,000, estimates consistent with predictions made by American military intelligence in 1945. Truman put the figure much higher after the fact – in his memoirs, published in 1955 – and most Americans tended to follow suit in thinking that the bomb saved upwards of one million American lives.<sup>2</sup>

The curators also raised the moral specter: was using a bomb of such horrific power immoral? The script thus included Admiral William Leahy's retrospective declaration that dropping the bomb adopted the "ethical standards common to barbarians in the dark ages." In this vein curators sought to include accounts by Japanese victims, alongside artifacts and images of the blast zones – content intended to spur visitors to think critically about the destructive force of nuclear weaponry and about the moral question ("Crossroads").

When the script was made public in early 1994, conservative veteran's organizations, led by the Air Force Association and the enormously powerful American Legion, coordinated a highly effective campaign to block the exhibit. They called the script "politically correct curating" (Correll: 24). They sent thousands of letters to members of Congress demanding the exhibit be stopped. One form letter stated that: "it is an insult to every soldier, sailor, marine and airman who fought in

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<sup>2</sup> In 1959, Truman rationalized his decision to drop the bomb as such: "I wanted to save half a million boys on our side..." (Truman quoted in Bernstein: 38).



the war against Japan, or who were on their way to the invasion, to defame this famous plane by using it as the center piece of a negative exhibit on strategic bombing” (Bennett, Jr.). A letter signed by 24 members of Congress described the script as “revisionist and offensive to many World War II veterans.” The Senate resolved that the Smithsonian “should avoid impugning the memory of those who gave their lives for freedom” (“Sense of the Senate”).

Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole warned of the threat posed by “the arbitrators of political correctness” and “government and intellectual elites who seem embarrassed by America” (Dole: 5). Texas Republican Sam Johnson, who sat on the Smithsonian Board of Regents, proclaimed that the nation wanted the museum “to reflect real America and not something that a historian dreamed up” (Johnson quoted in Linenthal and Engelhardt: 59). Conservative pundits also chimed in. George Will charged that Smithsonian curators “rather dislike this country” (Will in *This Week with David Brinkley*). Rush Limbaugh labeled the Air and Space Museum interpretation “blasphemous” and got into a lengthy discussion with his enormous radio audience about the premise of history – history, he said, is “what happened,” no more, no less (*The Rush Limbaugh Show*). This of course goes entirely against the grain of how academic historians think about history as not merely a body of known facts but rather as a set of explanatory schemes or interpretations that are meant to be debated, challenged, revised.

But no matter that the curators wanted the exhibit to reflect the best practices of historians. The Smithsonian caved to the backlash. After several revised scripts failed to please veteran’s groups, the museum decided to display the *Enola Gay* alone and without context. In sum, those who saw it learned nothing, and were not changed by seeing it – thus going against the stated mission of the Smithsonian to educate and enlighten the public.

What the history of this controversy makes clear is that the norms of knowledge production on the two sides of the ivory tower differ. Outside the academy, in the so-called “marketplace of ideas,” knowledge that resonates with powerful interests, such as the idea that the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to save lives and end a just war, gain traction. Inside the academy, where the norms of academic freedom and peer review regulate the production of knowledge, ideas that fail to attract popular support elsewhere, such that the United States dropped the atomic bombs for reasons other than benevolence, sometimes, though not always, secure a foothold.

This difference proved especially true during the culture wars, when anti-intellectualism worked well alongside powerful conservative interests. When academic historical knowledge threatened powerful interests, it was treated as just another political obstacle to be destroyed. This clash of knowledge cultures is one of the lessons of the culture wars.

Although in my book's conclusion I argue that the culture wars are history, that the logic of the culture wars has been exhausted – an admittedly provocative conclusion – the nation's history wars continue, especially in the schools and museums. There is an ongoing controversy over revisions to the Advanced Placement US History (APUS History) framework that serves as a case in point. APUS History is an exam that smart American 16-year olds take for college credit, and it is created and administered by a private organization called the College Board, which also administers other admissions exams like the SAT which is required by all for admission to college (Hartman). Conservatives charge that the new APUS History framework deemphasizes or even destroys the idea of American exceptionalism. It is true that these revisions were meant to help fulfill the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's maxim that we see "ourselves amongst others" – definitely not consistent with American exceptionalism – an approach to history that has long been normal in academic history (Geertz quoted in Bender: 10).

An end to hostilities in these history wars is unlikely in the foreseeable future. We might chuckle and shake our heads in disbelief when failed Republican presidential candidate and brain surgeon Dr. Ben Carson warns that the new APUS History curriculum will convince young Americans "to go sign up for ISIS" (Strauss). But we should not easily dismiss the conservative rationale undergirding such outlandish sentiments. This is because such sentiments are rooted in the culture wars, that dramatic struggle which pitted liberal, progressive, and secular Americans against their conservative, traditional, and religious counterparts. The culture wars have been the defining metaphor for the United States since the 1960s.

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