

The Disunited States of America

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Commentary from a Contemporary Observer

Robert Dahl, *On Democracy*

Democratic political institutions are more likely to develop and endure in a country that is culturally fairly homogeneous and less likely in a country with sharply differentiated and conflicting sub-cultures.

Distinctive cultures are often formed around differences in language, religion, race, ethnic origin, region, and sometimes ideology. Members of these subcultures share a common identity and emotional ties; they sharply distinguish between “us” and “them.” They turn toward other members of their group for personal friendships ... and they often engage in group ceremonies and rituals that ... define their group boundary.

In all these ways and others, a culture may become virtually a “way of life” for its members, a country within a country, a nation within a nation. In this case society is, so to speak, virtually stratified.

Cultural conflicts can erupt into the political arena and typically they do: over religion, language, equality of access to education; whether the government should support religious institutions and, if so, which ones; practices by one group that another group wishes to prohibit, such as abortion or public prayer. And so on and on.

Issues like these pose a special problem for democracy. Adherents of a particular culture often view their political demands as matters of principle, deep religious or quasi-religious conviction, cultural preservation, or group survival. As a consequence, they consider their demands too crucial to allow for compromise. They are non-negotiable. Yet under a peaceful democratic process, settling political conflicts generally requires negotiation, conciliation, and compromise.

It should come as no surprise to discover, then, that the older and politically stable democratic countries have for the most part managed to avoid severe cultural conflict.... But changes began to set in toward the end of the 20th century that will almost certainly end this fortunate state of affairs during the 21st century.

Reflections

Shortly after the 2004 elections, former president Jimmy Carter wrote that “a strong majority of both Republicans and Democrats agree that our country is more divided than at any time in living memory”—this, in spite of the fact that George W. Bush had pledged four years earlier to be a “uniter, not a divider.”

Whatever its position relative to other periods of national division and disaffection—the McCarthy, Civil Rights, and Vietnam eras, for instance—it is abundantly clear that at the present time Americans are vexed with and feeling estranged from each other.

The current presidential campaign has produced ample evidence of fear and loathing in certain sectors of the electorate. Most of us have heard or read what’s been said at recent rallies. One candidate characterized her opponent as “not one of us” and as a “friend of terrorists.” He does not “see America the way you and I see America,” she insisted. These comments hit a responsive chord in her audience, from which shouts of “treason,” “terrorist,” and “kill him” have rung out.

Reactions such as these—which have been occurring for quite some time—led Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff to provide Barack Obama with a Secret Service detail earlier than any candidate in history. Such caution may be justified, for when the nation *is* seriously divided and in crisis, some people are capable of doing crazy things. Despite his sincere promise to bind up a broken nation’s wounds and treat the secessionist states with fairness and dignity, Abraham Lincoln’s defeated opponents held such a visceral hatred for the man that ultimately they would not suffer him to live.

Is the situation that serious today? It’s hard to say, but whoever takes office in January will inherit problems of a scale the nation has not seen for at least half a century. Whichever man prevails will have to deal not only with a dangerous world and dismal economy but with a good deal of untrusting and intractable domestic opposition.

To be politically effective, our next president will need to convince many more Americans that what we hold in common is far more important than our differences. Four years ago, Barack Obama

declared that “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America ... and there is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America. There is the United States of America.” If we are to get this country back on track, Republicans and Democrats alike will need to embrace and lend greater substance to those sentiments.

According to political commentator Gary Kamiya “America is not a particularly ideological country,” which means most citizens are not so tightly attached to a specific governing philosophy that they cannot entertain a different perspective. That’s the good news—that a significant proportion of Americans are independent-minded and therefore persuadable.

Nevertheless, a number of important factors apart from ideology have torn and tattered our

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social fabric and seriously compromised our ability to engage in dialogue and address our problems. Among the most significant sources of disunity are these: residency, livelihood, educational achievement, religious outlook, and attitude toward government. Let’s

look at each of these in turn.

Shortly after the last presidential election, Trina and I drive to Florida to visit my parents. I had yet to remove a political bumper sticker from our car, and I couldn’t help but notice that the farther south we traveled, the fewer I saw that resembled mine. But then, somewhere in Georgia, we were passed by a vehicle with Alabama tags and an identical sticker.

As it happened we both stopped at the next rest area, and, spotting our car, the Alabama driver came over to say hello. When I registered mild surprise over his presidential preference he said, “Most people in the North wouldn’t believe it, but a majority of people in Birmingham, where I’m from, voted for this guy.”

Today’s cultural and political disconnect is less and less about red and blue states, north and south, the coasts and the heartland. A more relevant distinction is between urban and rural. Look at the electoral maps of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, or Oregon. What do you see? Blue cities surrounded by a sea of crimson. Drive

south to Monroe or north to Sister Bay and the electoral yard signs tell a similar story: red farms and villages, purple and blue cities and towns.

This is an old pattern, but it’s probably become more pronounced in recent decades. For much of rural America, the city is still seen as a dangerous, disorderly place; a den of iniquity run by dishonest politicians, teeming with unfamiliar people with funny accents and unfamiliar customs. The excitement and diversity that attracts many people to America’s great cities is precisely what repels rural and suburban voters secure in their homogeneous ethnic and social enclaves.

This brings us to second, related issue: the difference between the parochial and the cosmopolitan. The latter, Todd Gitlin writes, “embraces the cosmos” whereas home is where the parochialist’s heart is. Because of their exposure to different cultures and more sources of information, urban dwellers trend toward the cosmopolitan while the hinterlands have remained defiantly parochial. Age is also a factor here. As a rule, younger Americans are more cosmopolitan than their elders.

This would not present a problem except that it raises the issue of patriotism. Who is the *real* American? People with a parochial point of view have a low tolerance for cosmopolitans because the latter typically have an international rather than a national outlook and are thus more likely to criticize U.S. policy and to question America’s moral rectitude. To be a patriot means to affirm that the United States is indisputably the best country in the world. Only an ingrate would question that.

For their part, cosmopolitans tend to be condescending and all-too-eager to dismiss patriots as either dangerous ideologues or gullible fools.

A shift in perspective wouldn’t hurt either of these groups. For their part, skeptical cosmopolitans ought to give patriotism a second look because, as Todd Gitlin writes:

Patriotism ... gives you a past and a future. You are in solidarity with strangers: their losses are your own.... Just as you have a given name and a family name, you also have a national name ... and a commitment to a particular place and way of life.

On the other hand, our more parochial citizens need to understand that willful ignorance about or avoidance of the world beyond our borders is no virtue. It is, in fact, antithetical to the national interest because to compete successfully on this globe, Americans need a better understanding of the globe.

Employment and educational experience are yet another source of division. On the one hand we have the blue or pink collar lunch-pail crowd—“Joe or Janet Sixpack”—and on the other side of the workforce people who play some role in the so-called “knowledge industries.” The latter deal with words, ideas, concepts, and equations rather than tractors or cash registers.

Many who perform skilled or semi-skilled labor can’t imagine that someone who doesn’t “make” something or provide a tangible service is really working. If you aren’t producing—and have callouses on your hands to prove it—what you are doing has little social or economic relevance. Folks in the knowledge business, on the other hand, tend to be unsympathetic to those who work in the trenches—growing crops, building houses, stocking grocery shelves, making widgets. For Joe Bageant, a writer who grew up in a family of factory workers, the tension between these two constituencies is palpable:

The source of much working class anger is ... the daily insults suffered from employers, from the government, and from more educated fellow Americans—the doctors, lawyers, journalists, academicians, and others who quietly disdain working folks.

Education is as much an issue here as one’s line of work. As a general rule, people who are better read and better educated are viewed warily by those with less academic preparation. “Educated liberals who have time to read, who in fact read so much that they join book clubs, are suspect,” Joe Bageant has observed.

The political implications of this particular division are significant. For many Americans, a stellar record of intellectual achievement is hardly an asset. Take this older woman, who spoke with Mark Danner shortly after the 2004 election: “It doesn’t matter if the man can talk. Sometimes, when someone’s real articulate, you can’t trust what he says, you know?”

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Now, to perform our duty as citizens, all of us need to be better informed and discipline ourselves to pay closer attention to the social, economic, and environmental issues that will affect our common future. In

this respect, recent trends are not encouraging. According to a 2004 survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, it would appear that the current generation of Americans is less well-read than any other since statistics began to be kept.

But an even bigger problem, as conservative commentator David Brooks notes, is that a large percentage of Americans have been persuaded that to be thoughtful and well-informed is the mark of an elitist. In an effort to win blue and pink-collar votes, Brooks writes, certain political strategists:

... have tried to engage in a form of social class warfare.... What had once been disdain for liberal intellectuals slipped into disdain for the educated class as a whole.

As a result of this insalubrious tactic, a self-congratulatory anti-intellectual element has arisen for whom hard facts and cogent arguments mean little. It is this constituency that the FOX news channel has worked overtime to attract, with troubling results.

We’ve all read negative commentary about FOX’s lack of journalistic integrity, but too often it has been purposely misleading. A recent survey showed that over 80 percent of FOX viewers held erroneous impressions of Saddam Hussein’s ties to al Qaeda, his possession of weapons of mass destruction, and the level of support abroad for American foreign policy. Only 23 percent of PBS/NPR listeners were similarly misinformed.

But FOX news itself isn’t solely responsible for this huge disparity. It could well be that supporters of public broadcasting consult more sources and search harder for reliable information than other viewers; that they are less likely to accept any single report or commentary at face value.

The best way to bring Americans closer together in this regard is to provide more and better opportunities for broad civic education and to repeatedly emphasize the long-term strategic importance of a well-informed electorate.

Religion is a fourth source of division in the United States today. At a recent political rally in Iowa, Arnold Conrad, a local minister delivered an invocation in which he petitioned God with these words: “Lord,” he said,

your reputation is involved in all that happens between now and November, because there are millions of people around this world praying to their god—whether it’s Hindu,

Buddha, Allah—that the *other* man wins.... And Lord, I pray that you will guard your *own* reputation, because they're going to think that their god is bigger than you, if that happens. So I pray that you will step forward and honor your own name ... between now and election day.

Although the American public is more religiously diverse than it has ever been, a sizable hard-core segment of the Christian community finds this development deeply troubling. For this group, America was, is, and always shall be a Christian nation. This is the source of past controversies over the public display of Christmas crèches and the ten commandments; over prayers before football games and the teaching of creationism; over school vouchers and faith-based initiatives. For a non-Christian or suspect-Christian to occupy the oval office would be deeply offensive to a large number of ardent believers.

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Millions of Americans, Joe Bageant warns, will "... have no less than the 'inevitable victory God has promised his new chosen people.'"

Fifth and finally, there is palpable tension between Americans who generally feel positive about government and those who tend to view it with contempt. That difference was highlighted in an exchange between Joe Biden and Sarah Palin during their recent debate. Addressing her opponent, Palin said, "You have stated that paying taxes is patriotic. In middle-class America where I have been all my life, that is *not* considered patriotic."

"That Government is best," Thomas Paine once wrote, "which governs least, because even in its best state government is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one." Not a few Americans would wholeheartedly agree with that statement.

The concerted effort in recent years to reduce taxes, cut services, and privatize as many government functions as possible reflects this sensibility. If the choice is between the all-knowing, self-correcting, invisible hand of the free market and the clumsy, unreliable hand of government, the answer should be obvious.

Of course, the contrast isn't quite that stark. When government attempts to legislate morality, social liberals also inveigh against it, and plenty of rural conservatives certainly appreciate government crop subsidies. Generally speaking, however, one segment of the electorate sees government as an expensive nuisance while another views it as a viable solution to many of our problems.

There are certainly differences other than the ones I have highlighted. The basic point is that the current presidential contest has brought to the surface issues that inhibit our ability to act in concert with one another. It's not that Americans need to reach common accord on all these matters. As James Madison wisely noted, "Where multiple interests compete, no single interest can dominate.... A diversity of interests, far from being a liability, is a handmaiden of liberty."

But a healthy divergence of interests is not the same as polarization, and that's what we are faced with. In stable democracies, citizens encounter each other with equal dignity and try to ensure that no voice is left unattended. Such democracies feature, as Robert Dahl observed, negotiation, conciliation, and compromise.

It may well be that tough economic times will bring us together in unanticipated ways—that Americans will make a greater effort to focus on what unites rather than divides them. We've dug a pretty deep hole for ourselves and the next administration won't find it easy to repair the damage.

But we can assist in that process by venturing out of our own comfort zone to look, listen and to learn. The fact is, we no longer can afford the luxury of being so fearful, resentful, and disdainful of one another. It's time we learned to all be better patriots—together.