

LIVING IN THE PAST:
HOW LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES ARE FAILING AMERICA

By E.J. Dionne, Jr.

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The categories that have dominated our thinking for so long are utterly irrelevant to the new world we face. The international alliance assembled against Iraq would have been inconceivable just two years earlier. Indeed, the very weapons we used against Saddam's forces were built for a different conflict in a different place against a different enemy. So much of the debate over Iraq was shaped by the Vietnam conflict, as if the use of American force always means the same thing in every part of the world and against every adversary.

Most of the problems of our political life can be traced to the failure of the dominant ideologies of American politics, liberalism and conservatism. The central argument of this book is that liberalism and conservatism are framing political issues as a series of false choices. Wracked by contradiction and responsive mainly to the needs of their various constituencies, liberalism and conservatism *prevent* the nation from settling the questions that most trouble it. On issue after issue, there is consensus on where the country should move or at least on what we should be arguing about; liberalism and conservatism make it impossible for that consensus to express itself.

To blame our problems on the failure of 'ideologies' would seem a convenient way to avoid attaching responsibility to individuals. But to hold ideologies responsible for our troubles is, in fact, to place a burden on those who live by them and formulate them. It is also a way of saying that ideas matter, and that ideas, badly formulated, interpreted and used, can lead us astray. We are suffering from a false polarization in our politics, in which liberals and conservatives keep arguing about the same things when the country wants to move on.

The cause of this false polarization is the cultural civil war that broke out in the 1960s. Just as the Civil War dominated American political life for decades after it ended, so is the cultural civil war of the 1960s, with all its tensions and contradictions, shaping our politics today. We are still trapped in the 1960s....

To argue that the polarization around the issues of the 1960s is irrelevant to most Americans is to defy many of our political assumptions. If race is no longer a divisive

issue, why did Willie Horton play such an important role in the 1988 campaign, and why did racial quotas loom so large in 1990? If we are approaching a consensus on moral issues, why does the abortion issue seem to divide us into such passionate factions? Before taking on these questions directly, it is worth examining briefly how much we already hold in common on 'the sixties issues' of race, gender, and Vietnam.

Overwhelmingly, the country accepts the entry of women into the workforce. The vast majority of Americans see their presence as, at least, an economic necessity and, at best, a positive good.... Yet if Americans, on balance, agree with liberals that women are in the workforce to stay, they agree with conservatives that not all the effects of this revolution are positive. They worry especially about what will happen to children in the new world we have created. They are concerned that in women's rush to the workforce, the children are being left behind, since men do not seem eager to take up the slack. The debate the country wants to hear is not one involving false choices between an ideal 'feminism' and an idealized 'traditional family.'...

Abortion is a more morally complex and personally wrenching issue. It is a difficult issue to straddle or compromise. Yet the evidence from polls is that even on this question, Americans resist 'yes/no' answers. The polls show that Americans overwhelmingly believe that abortion should be available in the 'hard' cases, involving rape, incest, or danger to a mother's life. The polls show that Americans are uneasy with government restrictions on abortion in other cases, too, believing it is a 'private' matter. Yet the same surveys show that Americans are uncomfortable with how many abortions are being performed and feel that women often resort to abortion in circumstances where they should avoid it. Americans oppose outright bans on abortion but favor a series of restrictions, including requirements that minor girls get the permission of their parents before getting abortions....

In dealing with America's racial dilemma, the public, black and white, accepts that the last thirty years is not all good news or bad news but a mixture of both. The civil rights revolution was, first, a revolution in *attitudes*, and this revolution was largely successful. Racist views that were routinely expressed by white Americans and their leaders just three decades ago are now beyond the pale. By overwhelming margins, whites support integrated neighborhoods and integrated schools and oppose racial discrimination in jobs, housing, or public accommodations. This change is too easily dismissed as mere politeness, the result of whites' saying certain things simply because they believe the polltakers want to hear them. Over time, when people stop *saying* things publicly, they stop *believing* them privately. And when they stop *acting* on them.

The Parties, Looking to 1992/Dionne/continued

Tearing down the barriers of segregation has had a series of highly positive results. A substantial share of the black community has seen its incomes and its opportunities grow. The black middle class, which was once hemmed in by racial prejudice, now enjoys something approaching equality with whites. In black families headed by a married couple, 89 percent are above the poverty line. That is still below the 95 percent rate among comparable white couples, but the gap has been closing. In families where both husbands and wives work, black and white incomes are virtually equal.

But this relatively good news is counterbalanced by a great deal of bad news. Overall, the black median family income is just 56 percent of white family income. Nearly a third of all blacks, as against only 10 percent of whites, live below the poverty line. Among black children, 45 percent live in poverty, as against only 15 percent of white children. These grim figures are closely related to another statistic: Half of all black children, as against only 15 percent of white children, live in families headed by a woman. Perhaps the grimmest statistic of all is this one: Black men account for 3.5 percent of America's college students but 40 percent of its prison inmates....

The tragedy of our politics is that the concerns aroused by a Willie Horton should be unifying rather than divisive. Blacks and whites agree that the condition of the black poor is a national crisis that needs attention. They agree that the public schools, which in the big cities are increasingly black schools, need to be improved. They agree that life in black neighborhoods needs to be enhanced, in particular by cutting the crime rate. They agree that young blacks should have better job opportunities and enhanced job training. They agree that teen pregnancy needs to be reduced. Blacks and whites also agree that the problems require spending money.

But blacks and whites also know that money alone will not suffice. They agree that the problems of the poorest people in urban areas have to do not just with economics but also with a moral crisis. They agree that

whatever money is spent should be directed not only at improving opportunities but at changing values. Fathers need to be required to care for their children, work should be required from those who receive social benefits, young women need to be encouraged to avoid pregnancy and stay in school, criminal behavior needs to be sanctioned severely. Both blacks and whites agree that the broader society has an obligation to lift up those trapped in poverty; both blacks and whites agree that the poor have obligations to society, and themselves....

As for the foreign policy debates fostered by the Vietnam War, events have at last forced us to engage in some new thinking. They have also showed us how flawed our old thinking was. On the one side, liberals would never have believed that at the end of Ronald Reagan's defense buildup, the Cold War would end. Liberals and conservatives can debate how much Reagan's policies had to do with what happened and how much of the change was 'inevitable,' given the Soviet Union's internal difficulties. What is clear is that in 1980, few people thought that what has happened in Eastern Europe was at all 'inevitable.' Here, conservatives, no less than liberals, proved themselves to be poor prophets. In the late 1980s, many conservatives were convinced that the world would succumb to 'the totalitarian temptation.' They saw the victory of freedom not as inevitable, but as highly problematic. Most conservatives believed that internal transformations within the Communist block were impossible. 'Totalitarian' governments controlled by Communists could never change their stripes. But they did....

It is far too early to know the long-term effects of the Gulf War. If America is lucky, the war will help close the book on thirty years of dead-end arguments. But it will not end the popular hatred of politics unless the country's politicians seize the opportunity to settle the cultural civil war and transform the nation's political discussion into a real debate over how to maintain America's standard of living, reduce the economic pressures on the nation's middle class, and restore hope to the poor....

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