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Culture war' still raging in America today

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'Culture war' still raging in America today



Columnist

Is the culture war over?

Some say the moral combat America has engaged in since the 1960s has ended.

We have rejected traditional values, they say, and have moved onto the soggy middle ground of moral ambiguity.

Perhaps it's not entirely clear what these so-called cultural issues are.

They address moral, social and religious values, how we organize our society and govern our personal behavior, rather than how we earn money or how the government deals with our economy.

I have some friends who say that cultural conservatives are only closet racists and that all this social values talk is only a cover for repressing minorities.

Communists or racists?

I have other friends who say that cultural liberals are only closet communists, whose real agenda is the destruction of the American family, organized religion and personal moral values so that elite in government and the media can reorder our lives.

I believe they're both wrong.

Both sides are strong and vocal and, in my opinion, honest in their convictions, not just masquerading. They have not morphed into a single body.

You can have a spirited national debate about tax reductions, the minimum wage or Social Security, but these economic issues do not generate nearly the same emotional firepower as gay marriage, affirmative action or late-term abortion.

Consider a few more of these battleground cultural issues: abstinence or contraception for teenagers; same-sex marriage or the union of a man and a woman; hate crimes laws or equal justice for equal crimes; the death penalty or not; sex and violence in music, TV and movies or limits on free expression; wives in combat or wives at home; the Boy Scouts or the gay, lesbian, transsexual, transgender alliance; free or restricted access to handguns; personal or societal responsibility for individual actions; it takes a village or it takes two parents.

Except for organizations of the left and right, scholars and journalists, most people do not sit around thinking about culture wars between liberals and conservatives. But they do very much care about specific issues, and when you roll them together you have something very much like a culture war.

What happens more often these days, however, is that people take positions that are not consistently left or right.

They may oppose gay scoutmasters, preferential and discriminatory treatment based upon race or ethnicity, single moms and integrated male-female military training and at the same time favor stem-cell research, limits on gun ownership, no vouchers for public schools and limits on school prayer, all of them liberal icons.

Independent nonvoters

More people today view themselves as independent thinkers, not taking guidance from churches, parents, ethnic leaders or politicians. But the fact that people are making their own decisions about right and wrong, justice and injustice, fairness and discrimination, sex and marriage does not mean they don't care about those decisions.

Some of these issues are made for moral ambiguity, but people still get fired up politically about their moral and religious convictions.

That's one reason why, as political parties maneuver for political advantage, slicing and dicing these moral issues, most Americans stay home and don't vote.

So the culture war goes on, occasionally pushed into the background by economic troubles, but still the most potent force in American politics.

David Bowen of Jackson is a former member of Congress who represented Mississippi's 2nd District. Bowen, a writer and consultant, is a regular contributing columnist to *The Clarion-Ledger*.

8/30/01

Diversity a strength of the Democrats

The days of a Republican operative defining what it means to be a Democrat in Mississippi are over.

We, the Democrats of Mississippi, believe:

■ That every American, regardless of race, gender, or economic status, is created equal and is due equal protection under the law.



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■ That every worker is due fair pay for honest labor and a secure retirement when the work is done.

■ That every student must be given access to the highest quality public education and the opportunity to achieve in school and in life to the best of his/her ability.

■ That every one of our God-given natural resources must be conserved and protected with responsible stewardship.

These core principles are the cornerstones of generations of sound public policies advanced by our party, and are integral components of America's greatness. Those who would differ are simply wrong. We know what our party has done and is doing, at its best, and we are proud of our record as the oldest, largest, and most successful political party in the history of the world.

To bandy the words "conservative" and "liberal" about adds nothing to the debate. Both words have been abused beyond recognition, and it is a mighty small mind that can be described with just one word. The truth is, as David Bowen wrote ("Culture war" still raging in America today," Aug. 21 guest column), "people take positions that are not consistently left or right." When either of our major parties is "hijacked" by reactionary single-issue groups, the cause of American democracy is not well-served.

State Republican Party Chairman Jim Herring has invited "conservative" Democrats to switch parties. The Republicans just don't get it. Within the boundaries of our core Democratic principles there is plenty room for diversity of thought and perspective, and that diversity is what attracts candidates, activists and voters to our party in the first place. And if "switching" is such a hot idea, why didn't it work for Pete Johnson, Ed Morgan, Daryl Neely, Mike Parker . . . or even the Honorable Jim Herring?

Rickey L. Cole

Chairman

Mississippi Democratic Party

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'Culture' popular, but empty word

In David Bowen's column ("'Culture war' still raging in America today," Aug. 21), he correctly observes that the culture war still rages in America. He further adds the caveat that the lines are not as clearly drawn as we might imagine with many taking "positions that are not clearly left or right."

I cannot help but see in the public discourse a rather superficial understanding of the many basic, and yet unexamined, assumptions which lie beneath the present cultural debate. Notions, such as rights, state, reason, faith, freedom, and church, are often rather glibly used without an understanding of their nuances and their history.

Given the importance of understanding the foundational elements of culture, it is rather ironic that the term "culture" has become such a popular, but empty, buzzword today.

We have cultural centers, cultural resources and cultural preservation; yet for all of the hoopla, one seldom encounters any real commitment to understanding those depths of culture that underlie our everyday lives.

With the educational system increasingly oriented toward training good producers and consumers, culture has become little more than a trivial pursuit. Consequently, is it any wonder that the battlefield of the culture wars is enshrouded in smoke and darkness, where the soldiers shoot blindly, defending causes they do not understand?

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