“Is There a Culture War?”

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DR. JAMES HUNTER: My opening gambit is this: politics is sexier than culture. It is certainly more immediate that culture. Its movements are more obvious. But culture is more profound than politics. It is prior to and it leads politics. Therefore, in my opinion, it is more important than politics in tracking the nature of the social order and its changes. What I want to do in the next 20 minutes is to lay out four points where I think this debate exists, and through those four points make the case that we are still in the midst of a culture war. Then I want to conclude by talking a little bit about what is at stake, in my opinion, in this debate.

The first point is conceptual and methodological. The second point is empirical. The third point is theoretical. The fourth point is perspectival.

The issue of concept and method is really a query about the nature of culture and culture wars. How do we understand culture conceptually, and how do we measure it? How do we think about it methodologically?

In the social sciences, there are a number of discrete views, but two general tendencies.
methodological strategy within the social sciences, it was capitalizing on a view called the culture and personality school of thought that essentially equated culture with values and beliefs. So a culture is essentially the sum total of values and beliefs held by individuals. These norms, these values, these moral preferences of individuals — again, cumulatively — amount to American culture or any culture.

This is what social scientists call methodological individualism. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, even as survey research got better and much more capable of refined analysis, it became clear among those who do the sociology of culture and who study culture anthropologically and otherwise that this kind of methodological individualism is fairly limited in its scope. Surveys are good, but they don’t tell the whole story of culture.

And so toward the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, the social sciences were rediscovering the neoclassical view of culture, coming back to structuralist and post-structuralist views of culture that tend to emphasize a different part of what culture is. They emphasize the production of culture and look at the artifacts of culture, the resources and institutions that produce those artifacts, the elites who are disproportionately involved in running those institutions and producing that culture. It’s an approach that looked seriously at public symbols and rituals, collective narrative, public discourse, the structures of authority that under-gird cultural systems and collective identity. All of these things are extremely important, but you can’t get at them very easily through survey research; you have to go a different route.

So at one level, just to cut right to the chase here, the debate over the culture wars — does it exist or does it not? — hinges on these different views of culture. The bottom line is that every single one of the criticisms of the culture wars hypothesis has been based upon survey data, rooted in an approach to the study of culture that is highly individualistic, that looks exclusively at the beliefs, values and moral preferences of individuals.

The argument that I laid out focused primarily upon a public discourse, the public symbols and rituals surrounding that discourse and how that discourse gets polarized within competing institutions and among the elites that run them. As I argued, public discourse is a discourse of elites. That is where you find this conflict at its most incendiary.
So in my view, the critics all looked for conflict where it was weakest. From my vantage point, none was addressing the culture in culture wars, or at least the more complex elements of culture in culture wars. So on the face of it, the disagreement would seem to be conceptual and methodological and not substantive.

In the book I too argue that the average American was not really caught up very much in the conflict. Most people live their lives away from the front lines. But on occasion, episodically, something will happen: a daughter will get pregnant out of wedlock, a son will come out of the closet, an issue will come up in the local school. And all of a sudden, even ordinary individuals find themselves caught up in a drama that is already present, scripts that are already pretty well worked out and written. And so that story can be told locally as well as nationally.

The second point is empirical, and here I want to come back to survey data itself. It seems to me that in looking at the culture war in terms of survey data, you actually have to know where to look for conflict, where to look for polarization. There are different ways to approach this. But it seems to me that no matter how you slice the pie statistically, you end up with about 5 to 7 percent of the American population on each side who represent the white hot core of opposition. And this is based upon random public opinion surveys.

These people are disproportionately motivated, disproportionately active. They are the ones who send in money to special interest groups. They write their congressperson and so on. Beyond that 5 to 7 percent at each end, there is probably another 12 to 15 percent on each end that lean strongly, though are less motivated. So right now you are up to about 18 to 20 percent of the population, at each end, who are pretty well located culturally at opposite ends. Beyond that 18 to 20 percent on each end, it seems to me that there is probably a larger public, maybe an additional 15 or 20 percent, who tilt one way or another, and in an election likely turn one way or another depending on the issues.

So it seems to me that one can in fact find conflict and polarization on cultural kinds of issues within survey data and within public opinion, but you have to know where to look for it. Now, that 5 to 7 percent may seem like a small number at each end. But we are really talking about 10 to 12 million people on each end. That is a lot. And when you
expand it out in concentric circles, you are probably talking about 60 million people oriented in one way or another.

What I have left out of this empirical part so far is the role of elites, the political professionals, the special interest leaders. The critics of the *Culture Wars* hypothesis tend to minimize their role or to dismiss it all together. I find the role of elites to be extremely important, and it’s precisely because of the disproportionate role that they play in framing public discussion. It’s they who lead the institutions, who have the resources available to them, who have a disproportionate access to the media. It is their sound bites that frame the debate. From my vantage point, the power of culture is the power to define reality, the power to frame the debate, and that power resides among the elites. But they are supported in concentric circles by increasingly large numbers, though of less and less passion.

Steven Brint, a sociologist at the University of California, posed the question in his review of my book, can you have a proper war when two-thirds of the army are non-combatants? And the answer is, in fact, you can. In fact, total war is a fairly recent and a rare phenomenon in history. Through most of history, war has been a minority affair, and there are all sorts of illustrations one could call attention to.

So even within the framework of survey data — that is, on the terms that the critics are using to challenge the *Culture Wars* hypothesis — I actually think the data show very clearly that there is far more polarization, far more mobilization, than one might imagine.

My third point is theoretical. As I say, the power of culture is first and foremost symbolic. It’s the power to name things; it’s to define reality, to frame debate. There are different actors in any culture; even in the most homogeneous culture, there are different actors, different institutions that do this, that have differential access to resources. But this is especially true in a society as diverse and complex as ours.

So culture by its very nature is contested. As Philip Rieff has put it, where there is culture, there is struggle. It is the form of fighting before the fighting begins. And this is so even if
it is not always reflected in public opinion. And when there is a real war, the culture part of it is the center-most part of the war. The bloodiest conflicts, it seems to me, are fought over symbols.

The fourth point I want to make is perspectival. It seems to me that in looking at this debate, a lot of the difference of opinion can be understood in terms of the distinction between the politics of culture on the one hand and the culture of politics on the other. The politics of culture is primarily about the push and pull of the mechanisms of power over cultural issues. The focus is primarily upon the mobilization of parties, the creation of coalitions among interest groups, the manipulation of public rhetoric over cultural issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, funding for the arts and so on.

The culture of politics perspective is fundamentally different. The focus here is on the symbolic environment within which political institutions are embedded and political action occurs. In other words, the culture of politics perspective focuses on the frameworks of meaning that make particular political arrangements understandable, desirable and so on. What I am getting at in the culture of politics side of things has a lot to do with what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “habitas,” what the Canadian moral philosopher Charles Taylor called “social imaginaries.”

The culture of politics perspective reflects what Michael Oakeshott famously said. He said a political system presupposes a civilization. It has a function to perform in regard to that civilization, but it is mainly a function of protection, and to a minor degree mechanical interpretation and expression. Thus political activity may have given us the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, but it did not give us the contents of those documents, which came from a stratum of social thought far too deep to be influenced by the actions of politicians.

The debate over the culture war in some respects is a debate between those who take the politics of culture perspective versus people like me who take the culture of politics perspective. So as I see it, in many respects the debate is a non-debate. There is a lot of talking past each other. The real debate is over the conclusions that we draw from all of this.

So what is at stake? It seems to me that liberalism as a philosophical movement and as a cluster of political ideas and ideals is rooted in the challenge of difference. Liberalism
sought to provide a human solution to the challenge of different communities and shared political space. And this is at least one subtext of the culture wars debate. What is legitimate difference? Because, again, liberalism seeks to offer in new and challenging contexts a framework for toleration, freedom and justice.

Who is a member of the political community? Whose voices are taken seriously and whose grievances are legitimate? When new claims are made and criticisms expressed, how do the institutions of liberal democracy integrate them and mediate them? When liberalism was first imagined, the context was, of course, deep, primarily religious, difference. It has seemed over the last 200 years that those differences have disappeared. They have certainly waned quite a bit.

The argument of my book was essentially the argument that maybe those differences have not disappeared after all. Maybe those deep ontological and religious differences remain very present and maybe they still animate different political visions. And it seems to me if that is true, then liberalism itself faces a new challenge of how to reconcile, how to negotiate those differences. I’ll leave that there.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, James. Alan Wolfe is a professor of political science and director of the Boisi Center on Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. He wrote One Nation After All, which came out in the late ’90s. Alan has written several very important books more recently, including The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Practice Our Faith.

DR. ALAN WOLFE: Thank you. I feel somewhat the same as James. Sometimes I think our differences are just so profound that we are talking about different worlds, and then sometimes I think we agree on a lot of things. And it is hard to separate some of these issues. I don’t want to spend that much time on the conceptual and theoretical issues that James raised; I’ll just say that he argues that there is something called methodological individualism, which looks at how individuals think and act, and that tends to downplay the importance of more timeless and permanent institutions and structures.

But there is also something called structuralism that focuses on timeless institutions and structures and tends to negate the extreme importance of individuals and their behavior.
And it seems to me that in a democratic society, the votes and opinions of individuals matter greatly, and that not only is it normatively important to take what people say in surveys as valuable because this a democracy and we do base our decisions on public opinions, but also that what people say and how people think in a democracy does shape their culture and does shape their institutions.

So to me, rather than saying that surveys are kind of a flawed or second-best way of looking at how divided we are, I think they are absolutely essential to framing the kinds of issues that we are concerned about. But rather than reply to James at that conceptual level, let me try to do it through examples of some of the issues that are going on in American society at the present time.

In *One Nation After All* I argued that the culture war was definitely something that happens kind of “inside the beltway,” among intellectuals and elites — and now, since the book was written, on cable television — but that it did not have deep roots in the culture. I spent time in four different communities in the United States — in Oklahoma, Georgia, California and Massachusetts — talking with people about the big sort of culture war issues.

And the bottom line was that I found this notion that we’re somehow divided between traditionalists, who want to get back to the old-time religion and old moral values, and more modern people, who are much more individualistic and kind of libertarian in their social views, actually characterizes most people in the United States, that it is not a division between red state and blue state America; it’s a division inside every person, or at least almost every person in the United States. And so I tended to argue that the culture war would not be a permanent and long-term force in American life.

I’ve gone up and down on that since. When there was this effort to remove President Clinton from his office as president of the United States, the public seemed to respond with a big shrug and I said, “Hey, look at that; I was right; there isn’t this furious thing.” But then the 2000 election happened with the red states and the blue states, and I said, “Well, golly, maybe I was wrong.” But then Terri Schiavo happened and there was very little public outcry and I said, “Hey, I’m right again.”
But at the moment I think I am pretty correct. I think that Terri Schiavo was a kind of major war that didn’t happen. In the ’60s when I carried all of those signs in the protest, one of them said, “Suppose they gave a war and no one came.” And that really did seem to me to characterize the Terri Schiavo affair. Everyone was geared up to fight this huge culture war and the public was just totally indifferent. It is also very hard for me to imagine that at this point, given everything that is going on in this country, failing to pass a gay marriage amendment will suddenly rally the electorate out in the mid-term congressional elections and produce some kind of Republican triumph. I just don’t see it happening. I think that even at the elite level, our culture war is increasingly something we are going to talk about in the past tense.

In order to explain why I think that is happening, I will try to engage some of the arguments that James raises. First of all, James raises this very interesting point: does politics drive culture or does culture drive politics? I’m not at all persuaded that culture is the sort of indelible unchanging thing within which politics then operates because these things — these so-called cultural values, these moral values, these religiously inspired values — are not at all timeless in our country but change very, very dramatically.

To cite my favorite example — in 1973 when the infamous decision of *Roe v. Wade* came down, the Southern Baptist Convention, which is America’s largest evangelical Protestant denomination, endorsed it. That is a remarkable fact that is almost totally neglected given the fact that the Southern Baptist convention sort of embodies everything that we think of when we think about being on the right side of the culture war issues.

But there were a number of reasons why the SBC endorsed *Roe v. Wade*. One of them was that they knew Catholics were opposed to abortion, and in our country if Catholics are in favor of one thing, the Baptists are always in favor of the opposite. But even more seriously, the Baptists in America have had a very long history and tradition of separating church and state and of being strong believers in religious liberty.

And I think for many Baptists in America, as recently as the 1970s, the idea that the state could tell the woman what to do with her body was not all that different from the idea that the state could tell a religious believer what to do with his or her mind. There is a libertarian impulse in the American Baptist tradition, a distrust of the idea of the
established state. And certainly American Baptist history is filled with a kind of anti-
theocratic sense, a sense that the blending of church and state is something that any good
Baptist should be instinctively suspicious of.

So there were valid theological and religious reasons for the Southern Baptist Convention
when Roe v. Wade came down to say, hey, this is something we can support. But 10 years
later they repudiated their support. They issued all kinds of apologies for what they had
done. And they wound up on the other side of the issue. I don’t want to get into the
politics of why they did that.

The point I want to make is this: if the notion of the right to life is so culturally embedded,
if it is supposed to have such deep religious roots, if it is supposed to be one of those
timeless things and then politics is epiphenomenal against that, how could it possibly
change so radically? It seems to me that what we witnessed in this shift from one side to
the other on this issue was in fact politics becoming much more important than religion.
It wasn’t that religion was the timeless thing at all. In its new formulation of these issues,
the Southern Baptist Convention and its leaders talk about accommodationism between
state and church rather than strict separation of state and church.

But, again, all of these things suggest to me that what happened in the United States,
using this as an example, is that politics was enormously important for people, to the
point where their position on a political issue determined their theological and religious
views, and not the other way around. It couldn’t have been that religious and theological
views came first and political views came second and led to this change. It had to be the
other way around.

And because it’s the other way around, I think it has important consequences. It was a
huge step for conservative Protestantism in the United States to reverse its usual hostility
towards blending state and church, to become more theocratic in orientation. And
whether that will persist is an open question. I strongly feel that over time we are likely
to see a return within conservative Protestantism to the position that used to exist
throughout most of its history, which is a suspicion of politics, a suspicion of too much of
a worldly engagement in what are very much political rather than timeless matters.
If you were a conservative Protestant, is this what your religion would really mean to you — that politics comes first? It suggests to me that there will be a rethinking of this close identification between politics and religion among conservative Protestants in America.

So if James is right and the culture comes first and things are timeless, don’t we have to view the culture war as the aberration? If the timeless things are really there, won’t people go back to the suspicion of politics? And then we’ll look back and say, Well, conservative Protestantism has always been suspicious of too much active political engagement, except for that brief period when they sort of allied themselves with the Republican Party in the culture war, but now we are back to religion as usual.

There is another aspect of this discussion that James brings out in his book on the culture war, which I think was the single best thing in the book and really the most lasting contribution. And that is the idea that the culture war in its essence is really about how conservatives within each religious tradition have found more in common with each other than they’ve found with liberals within their own tradition. Historically, religion and politics in America has been characterized by differences between religions. And so Protestants were hostile to Catholics and Protestants and Catholics together were hostile to Jews, and Protestants and Catholics and Jews together were hostile to Muslims and so on. So it was a conflict between one religion and another.

But James pointed out that some of the most increasingly divisive conflicts in the United States are within particular religions. All you have to do is look at the Episcopal Church now; here is a church really seemingly about to engage in a world historical schism over the issue of the ordination of gay priests. And obviously a liberal Episcopalian and a conservative Episcopalian are at odds with each other, and it just seems logical to suggest that people who have strong feelings about abortion or gay marriage or whatever within each religious tradition will seek people who feel the same way and feel a strength of identity with those from other traditions who share those views.

This seems so insightful and also so axiomatic that we have come to accept it as true. I am not at all sure it’s true. If it was true, I am not sure it’s going to continue to be true. And in fact, I think under the surface, what we are witnessing in the United States now is something of a return to a situation in which the more united religions are among
themselves, the more hostile to people of different religious traditions they are than we have seen for some period of time.

This is, in other words, a kind of reassertion of Catholic-Protestant hostility as well as hostility between Christians, Jews and so on. All of these are really tentative indications, tealeaves, if you wish. But I raise them for your consideration. If it is true, it’s the most significant development that may happen over the next couple of decades with respect to religion and politics in the United States.

One is this widely shared view that the Republican success has been fueled by a combination of both conservative Protestantism and conservative Catholicism. I think it would be wrong to conclude from that that conservative Catholics and conservative Protestants are forming some kind of broader Christian alliance in American politics. Certainly at the elite level, I think we are actually seeing the opposite. I think at the elite level, we see this very interesting phenomenon that we now have five Catholics on the U.S. Supreme Court.

And this has fueled the sense that perhaps Catholics can provide the intellectual argumentation that conservative Protestants seem unable to provide. But this in turn exposes a kind of long-standing but somewhat suppressed tension between Catholic intellectuals and Protestant intellectuals over indeed whether or not Catholics can provide the theology necessary for the more theocratic-leaning orientations of some of the American Protestants in our nation.

There is also this real issue in American politics that conservative Protestants have now become best friends with the State of Israel, and that evangelical Protestantism, which has had a history of being anti-Semitic just as it has been anti-Catholic throughout the American experience, is now celebrating its new-found alliance with American Jews.

That too, if it happened, is in danger of crumbling. In the last year, two very prominent spokesmen for the American Jewish community, Abraham Foxman and Eric Yoffee, have given speeches saying, “beware of conservative Protestants who say that they are friends of the State of Israel; their real effort is to Christianize the United States, and no good American Jew can welcome that prospect with equanimity. They are historically anti-
Semitic and now they are philo-Semitic, but really there is no difference at all.” And so once again, there is a reemergence of a certain kind of tension.

If some Jews are not happy with conservative Christians, others are made uncomfortable with Islam. Among these people, it isn’t that they feel that the Christian right is not an enemy to the Jews; they actually do feel that. It is that they feel the Muslims are a so much greater threat to the Jews, so why focus on the Christian right.

That is interesting because it then brings up one more reemergence of some of these hostilities. Muslims have not reached the level of political importance in terms of representation in Congress that other religious groups in the United States have. But I think we see anything but an alliance between conservative Muslims and conservative Jews and conservative Christians. In fact, conservatives in those three camps are bitterly divided these days. And so under the surface I kind of return to one religion being against another.

Finally, one last point. If religions are reemerging with some of their sense of distrust of each other, it follows that within each religion there may be greater unity than we have come to imagine, and again, I would say that despite some of the evidence of Catholics, for example, becoming more willing to vote Republican, I see these religious labels — Catholic, Protestant and so on — as retaining a tremendous amount of importance.

This, again, is anecdotal evidence and it’s pretty much based upon the Catholic institution in which I teach, but Catholics at Boston College are very noticeably and distinguishably Catholic. Irrespective of whether Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, there is something about their Catholicism that simply stamps them. And it’s interesting because it’s not necessarily religion. I’m not talking about people who attend mass regularly. I am talking about kids who tell me they are Catholic but don’t know the century in which Aquinas lived, kids whose theological knowledge of their own church is much lower than mine and I’m not Catholic.

But there is a clear Catholic sensibility. And it takes the form that even though I have students at both ends of the political spectrum, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, my conservative Catholic students are never quite as conservative as the conservative Protestants I run into in evangelical America, and my
liberal Catholic students are never as liberal as the liberals among my Jewish friends in Brookline and Cambridge.

And it is that distinctively Catholic perspective that will make my liberal Catholic students always have qualms about abortion and euthanasia and other moral issues, and my most conservative Catholic students somewhat sympathetic to measures that promote equality, very uncomfortable about the Bush tax cuts, and even have mixed feelings about Clinton’s welfare reform and other such issues. And so the idea that they are going to automatically seek out allies elsewhere in other religious traditions – maybe they will, but I wouldn’t be too quick to rush to that conclusion.

So to close, I argue in the contribution I make to this book on the culture war that I still think the idea that the culture war never took deep roots is true. Why then did it take place among the elite? I actually think that the years in which the culture war predominated among the political elite were years in which no other issues did. We had a remarkable vacuum of political issues in the United States. Communism collapsed in 1989. Our foreign policy, which had been so long based upon the Cold War against communism, lost its rationale. During the ’90s we had this remarkable economic growth. Remember Clinton and remember economic growth and prosperity.

So there wasn’t an overwhelming and burning foreign policy issue; there wasn’t an overwhelming and burning domestic issue. And in that environment, the elite jumped off of the culture wars. But look at what has happened since. Foreign policy issues have emerged with a vengeance: terrorism, the war in Iraq and so on. The Bush tax cuts have raised major issues about the kind of domestic society we want to be. Certainly Social Security and the efforts to transform or even in some cases seemingly abolish Social Security aroused a public that has been somewhat uninterested in domestic politics for a long time to prevent the president and his Republican allies from doing that.

So I think we had this interregnum in which the big issues weren’t there and the culture wars just filled in. But the big issues are back, and now I think politics in the United States is going to return to the more normal state that I have outlined in my remarks.

**E.J. DIONNE, The Washington Post:** I want to ask if the frame of what they said is true, what are the implications of that fact, that there is some level of cultural conflict at the
ends of the spectrum, but something much more like consensus or internal conflict in the middle? My second question is, where does this new immigration fight fit into the culture war analysis?

DR. HUNTER: Let me just affirm that to the point we have a disagreement, I think it is rooted methodologically and conceptually. I don’t want to deny the importance of public opinion or of the electorate in shaping the culture, but my main point is that it’s not enough. The heart of my argument is that what animates these conflicts is in fact something that goes far deeper.

But it does play out in public opinion and it does play out in voting patterns and so on. And it certainly plays out in the kinds of strategies that are used by traditionalists and cultural conservatives. The main strategy that cultural conservatives have embraced — that I think everyone has embraced — is to find political solutions to the things that trouble them the most. They have sought political solutions to the issues of abortion and women’s rights and gay marriage and a whole range of other issues. And it is precisely because they have chosen a political strategy, which is in effect a short-term strategy, which is primarily about the instrumentality of power rather than building a foundational normative consensus, that I think conservatives are going to lose.

I think Alan is exactly right in the paper that he wrote when he says that conservatives have done extremely well in mobilizing within the Republican Party. They have had huge successes over the last several decades in this way. But these are short-term successes. And while they have gained in politics, they have lost in the culture, and it is precisely for that reason that they will lose politics eventually as well. So I actually think we are kind of agreed in terms of where this is going in the long-term.

It does raise another question, though. You asked about the implications of this. We are going to see these conflicts for a long, long time. I don’t doubt that. But I do think there is a movement in the direction of all of this. I think the bigger question in many respects is not about the polarization but about the center itself.

To say that conflict is not the main story is not the same as saying that citizens are becoming civic minded or that political participation is increasing, or that concern for the
most vulnerable members of our society is increasing as well. My sense is that what is referred to as the center is a statistical phenomenon. It is not rooted in a common sensibility or in common political ideals; it is not animated and motivated in those ways. I think, in fact, that your argument about why Americans hate politics gets at that very well: that is, the center is not clear and purposeful; it is, rather, a kind of statistical phenomenon and not much more than that.

DR. WOLFE: One of the things I think we tend to forget when we just lump different religious groups together is that Catholicism has been a universal church, while Protestant churches grew up closely tied to the nation states in which they flourished. And so nationalism has always been much more important in the Protestant tradition than it has been in the Catholic tradition, and American Protestants have in particular identified the American nation as God’s will, a chosen nation, whereas most Catholics are proudly and deeply patriotic but think of the American nation as one nation among many. So being more open to immigration isn’t just a politically opportunistic move but reflects a Catholic universalistic sensibility, whereas opposition to immigration, putting up borders around the nation states, is much more rooted in various Protestant national traditions. So on this issue I see a huge divide between conservative Protestants and Catholics.

AMY SULLIVAN, The Washington Monthly: James, you don’t seem to think that there is necessarily a unifying philosophy that draws this middle together. I would like to hear from both of you whether you think that is something that is just inevitable in a political system like ours that is driven so much by interest groups. And whether if there aren’t any kind of institutional structures to represent that middle voice, if there isn’t a platform for them to be heard and there are no leaders who are visible for them, if that means that this type of polarization is inevitable at least in terms of how it plays out on a political stage.

DR. WOLFE: I think the center is vital and strong, powerful and determinate of what happens in politics in the long run, but totally incoherent. That is one of the problems of the middle: its positions are completely incoherent. I think women should have the right to have an abortion but I think there is something morally problematic about it. I think that if we go to war in Iraq we should also consult the United Nations. I think that Social
Security needs to be changed, but it shouldn’t be abolished. I mean, you name the issue and the middle position is completely and totally incoherent, but I think that is its strength.

It’s a very important question: do we have institutions that can protect the incoherence in the middle? And part of what we talk about when we talk about the culture war is the decline of what were once more neutral kinds of institutions, disinterested kinds of institution, really elite institutions — in another sense of the word “elite” — that essentially took politics out of things in a certain kind of way.

If the Supreme Court hadn’t ruled nine to nothing in Brown v. the Board of Education, if we didn’t have that kind of elite that said, “Here we are; we are unanimous; we just simply impose this,” we would have probably fought, and the questions about racial segregation would have gone on for another 20 years. An elite can kind of stop that. But when courts are divided five to four, when there is no sort of authoritative neutral position that can just put an end to politics, then politics becomes a Kentucky blood feud and goes on and on and on. That is what I think is happening.

DR. HUNTER: If the center was that vital, why can’t it get any of its candidates elected? Why are there so few people who represent a vital middle ground? It seems to me that it’s not just the parties and the party activists and the party professionals who are polarized, but even the institutions of civil society are increasingly lining up this way. I mean, even philanthropy gets divided; philanthropy tends to fund the culture war in interesting ways. Professional organizations will oftentimes align themselves. I wish that the center were more vital. I don’t know how it could be vital and incoherent, but that is another question.

Yes I do think that it is inevitable. I think it’s partly inevitable right now because of the growth of special interest groups in the post-World War II period. And it’s not just the character of the special interest groups that take a winner-take-no-prisoners policy, but also the fact that litigation becomes the first and primary means of negotiating these conflicts: the first thing that happens is to take it to a court room, to litigate, and in that context, it’s a zero-sum logic, which again polarizes. It is very hard, it seems to me, in that
discursive and that public arena to create a discourse that is principled but somehow not at either extreme. So I think that the structural tendencies toward polarization are very strong, but that also represents an opportunity.

**ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE, The Economist:** I think if you look at America versus Europe, it is quite evident that there is a culture war and that it is an incredibly powerful and important thing. I wonder if you can address the issue of why America is so exceptional, so different from Europe when it comes to abortion, the death penalty and the world of religion. And also if the real question is not whether the culture war is dying down in the United States, but whether we are going to see the culture war exported to Europe, whether we are going to actually see European politics going in the same direction, particularly over the Muslim question.

**DR. WOLFE:** Europe is bitterly divided over issues involving head scarves, issues involving religion — those are essential to Europe. And it seems to me to bear a striking resemblance to the kinds of things that we struggle with. If anything, I think we do a better job than the Europeans have done on many of these issues because of our different kinds of traditions, because of the separation of church and state. We don’t have the question that you would have in Europe where there is a state church with its ability to lavish funds on one particular religion, which has consequences for others. It almost automatically makes them second-class citizens in a way that doesn’t arise when you have separation of church and state. So I see Europe struggling with many, many similar kinds of issues.

**DR. HUNTER:** It is commonly observed in the social sciences that the amount of law in a society is inversely related to the amount of common culture that exists. The more litigation, the more law, the less of a common culture that you have, shared understanding, the habits of the heart, and so on. And my sense is that if one can speak of a master narrative, certainly in the Western world, it is one of fragmentation. And that fragmentation oftentimes manifests itself in polarization. And I think that that fragmentation is certainly something we are seeing in Europe and the attempt to define Europe, but that will play out as polarization as well.
LISA ANDERSON, Chicago Tribune: I wanted to ask you about the idea that Protestants are the religious right, and if they would rethink their close identity with politics after having spent over 40 years developing a fabulous organization to move things along in the direction they want. Why do you think they might suddenly feel sullied by this association to the point that they would want to back away from what they have achieved?

DR. WOLFE: Because I think that if religion is really central to your life, at some point there is going to be a call that is going to tell you that you have been going down the wrong road. And I think that some of the most prominent evangelicals in America have begun to hear that call. I have gotten to know Rick Warren pretty well over the last few years. I am absolutely and thoroughly persuaded that he has genuinely been called to serve the cause of poverty and AIDS and the devastation of AIDS in Africa — that it is what he thinks he should be doing as a Christian. Fighting for domestic politics, against issues like gay marriage, is not what he thinks he should be doing as a Christian. And it seems to me to be as simple as that.

DR. HUNTER: I think the disaffection from politics will also be animated by historical reasons. The trajectory of evangelicals in America for the last 150 years has been a movement from the center of reality, defining institutions and education and so on, to the periphery. And I think so much of the religious politics of the 20th century, from Scopes all the way to the present, has been an attempt to find someplace within the center, or to defend its place within the center.

ROD DREHER, Dallas Morning News: On the question of fragmentation, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre observed that you can only have true community built around a shared moral sense. The culture wars are about authority and where it is properly located. If we keep going down this path of culture war, given the radical individualism that characterizes American society, I don’t really see how we can avoid this. How do you see the question of authority playing out politically? What interests me is MacIntyre’s point that Americans, absent a commonly held moral sense, increasingly feel less loyal to their country, but merely obedient to their government as a procedural democratic entity. Is that a valid concern?
MR. CROMARTIE: Why don’t we think about that question while we get a couple more questions in.

CARL CANNON, National Journal: You said that the good news is that politics can regain some of its equilibrium, and you seemed to cite two reasons. The first one is that politics itself is now returning to some of the most divisive and polarizing debates it’s ever had, and that this is a good thing because I guess it will get out of the churches and back into politics. And the second reason was that we are also going to return to the worst sectarian feelings we have ever had in this country. What is reassuring about that?

DR. WOLFE: I didn’t say anything reassuring. I thought I said pretty explicitly that I wasn’t taking a position on whether it’s better to have intra-religious conflict or inter-religious conflict. That wasn’t my point.

I think the question of whether or not we can live together without a common morality is an empirical question and not a philosophical question. I think we pretty much do. If you believe, as our founders and as George Washington put it in his farewell address, that you need to have a common religion to have a common reality, we have not had a common religion for a very long time, but I think we have a moral consensus in this country. Until recently it has held together pretty well. So I just find MacIntyre’s views on these things overly dramatic and I think he needs a good sociologist.

DR. HUNTER: I think that the question is empirical as well. Can an Enlightenment-era institution, namely modern American democracy, survive in an increasingly post-Enlightenment culture? The fact is, we don’t know. As to predictions, I’m a little less sanguine. It’s not because you have to have a common religion or anything like that. At the same time, you have to have something normative that holds it all together. Again, my sense of the center right now is that it is incoherent and that it isn’t vibrant. Moreover there are all sorts of other things going on in the center of culture that are deeply problematic for what center we would hope could emerge, including the commodification of everything, the politicization of everything, and so on.
In my most pessimistic moments, I sense that authority is devolving into power. And I see that, again, with the increase in law. It’s a straightforward measure; law is the language of the state, and the state is many things. But at the end of the day, the state is about coercion; legitimate coercion. And that’s why it seems to me that opponents in the culture war appeal to law so quickly: because what they’re doing is appealing to the patronage of the state, and when you have the patronage of the state, it means that you don’t need a moral consensus; you force it.

**DR. WILLIAM GALSTON, Brookings Institution:** “The vital center” wasn’t simply a slogan that Arthur Schlesinger invented. It pointed to a reality, a reality of a specific point in American history where, despite deep religious differences on the one hand and political squabbles on the other hand, there was a rough-and-ready agreement among elites about the way the world worked. There was an elite agreement to keep the divisive cultural issues off the public agenda. So it’s against that backdrop, it seems to me, that we think about the question of where we stand now. It’s a comparative judgment. And I have to say I think something fairly basic has changed since then. But it’s not so much at the level of culture as it is at the level of the collapse of a shared understanding between the political parties and among elites about the way the world works. And you can see this writ large in the extraordinary conceptual divisions that have arisen between the parties over the Iraq war.

**DR. WOLFE:** To me, this is just a much more profitable way of talking about divisions in American society than what we are calling culture war talk, because I think you’re right, we’ve been through a period that’s very different. And I think you’re absolutely right that the reason why it’s different is that this notion of having some kind of disinterested elite that can keep really divisive issues off the table is what’s happened over the course of the last 30 or 40 years. That elite no longer exists and can no longer do that, and we’re paying the price.

It was the “new left” and the ’60s and the counterculture that was the first to really question whether such an elite was desirable, and that played a major role, I think, in slaying it. By itself that probably wouldn’t have had such a devastating effect on our politics if it weren’t for the fact that the “new right” came along and actually was much
more successful in many ways in undermining that ideal. But that’s what I think we’ve witnessed in this historical period.

**DR. HUNTER:** Just very quickly on the paradox. You’re absolutely right, Bill, and in my presentation I sort of stated it that way. The question is, how does that struggle manifest itself? How do the institutions that produce culture mobilize resources? A lot of time, to the extent that there is cultural struggle or tension, it manifests itself at a very, very low level of intensity. And so what I’ve called the culture war I believe has roots at the deepest level of culture in terms of, again, the social imaginaries based upon different conceptions of moral authority and so on. You can trace this back a couple of hundred years. But it has manifested itself in the last 30 or so years through the configuration of different institutions, the emergence of new institutions, and that’s something that was new and it was rooted in what I believe is a fundamental realignment in public culture.

But I think, as to the “vital center,” the agreements that you talked about among those elites were not just political agreements; they were shared sensibilities as well. We can talk about it as a kind of WASP sensibility, but that WASP sensibility – which is, again, not just political but cultural — disintegrated, which in a way created the context where this new set of positioning could take place.

I think what has also changed is not just the disappearance of these disinterested elites, but I think the elites themselves have changed. There are different kinds of actors on the stage, and that makes a difference too.

**MICHAEL LUO, The New York Times:** The survey data that we went through yesterday seemed to articulate that there is a culture war, especially with the Pew data that got more precise in terms of getting beyond labels and getting into church attendance, and it seemed to be so compelling. But then on the other hand, I’ve read the other data and I’ve read Alan’s book and Morris Fiorina’s book, and that’s really compelling to me too, that we have remarkable commonality, that there is this center. And I guess I just wanted to hear each of you respond to the survey data challenge. So, Alan, how do you respond to the very real sort of linear relationship there seems to be with church attendance and how things line up? And, James, how do you respond to the survey data that show that there is a lot of commonality?
DR. WOLFE: I have to accept the church attending findings; religion really has become a predictor of how people vote in a way that social class may have been in the past. So it’s a very real phenomenon. And, you know, to some degree it does seem to challenge some of the things I write about, but I’ve never said that we shouldn’t have Republicans and Democrats, that they shouldn’t disagree with each other, that people shouldn’t be attached to one political party or the other and that’s the essence of democracy. The question is, is the term “culture war,” or the way the culture war argument has been used, which suggests something far deeper than just the ordinary partisan conflict — is that justified?

We are seeing some real changes in American politics, and to some degree they are orthogonal to what I’ve been arguing. And the fact that the Republicans are lining up as a very conservative party, having gotten rid of many of their more liberal people, and that the Democrats jettisoned the conservative factor – we now really are witnessing the Europeanization of our political parties, standing for very different conceptions of the world. Party discipline and the way they vote in Congress is now British style in terms of one unified party after another, and they are divided over issues.

So there are factors that suggest much more intense partisanship in the country, much more intense political division in the country. “Culture war,” though, I think, is just not a helpful term when what we’re witnessing can be discussed in so many other terms.

One of the real scandals in American journalism is the fact that when the evangelicals were developing their political views, this was almost completely ignored in the press, and also among political scientists. Now I worry that we’re paying much too much attention to it, that the New York Times sees religion everywhere. It can’t run a story without bringing in the religious angle.

We are divided over our religion. To say that we’re moving from fighting within to fighting between religions is anything but a hopeful story. It suggests where we have serious divisions. My only question is whether “culture war” and all the things that sort of go along with that best capture the conflict.
DR. HUNTER: Just a couple of comments, first of all about the term “culture war.” I spent the first two years of graduate school wandering the corridors of phenomenology, for better or for worse, but one of the basic lessons of phenomenology is that you try to understand the intentionality of the social actor — of all your actors that you want to understand. And as I was doing the research for this book, again and again and again the actors were saying, “It feels like war. It feels like war.” And, you know, organizations like the National Organization for Women have their war room. So, is it a good metaphor? Is it a good term? That’s probably debatable; it’s more or less useful. But I think it was certainly an accurate term for describing the experience of many of the people who find themselves caught up in this or who are leading it.

Because this conflict is primarily cultural in the sense that I’ve described it, and not merely about attitudes — it’s a cultural conflict, not just an attitudinal conflict — it seems to me that the culture war is always there below the surface of public life. And there are events that act like triggers — the retirement of a Supreme Court justice, a controversial decision in Massachusetts or California or Texas, or, say, locally, a controversial curriculum — and these events act as triggers that bring that conflict up to the surface and politicize it in the ways that we’re most familiar with. And once it gets to the surface, I think it’s important to say that our public discourse is far more polarized than we as a people are, though I do think it is reflected in attitudes and opinions.

DR. WOLFE: I don’t know; if the president says we’re in a war on terror, I don’t think it necessarily means we’re in a war on terror. And if people say they’re in a culture war, I don’t think it necessarily means that we’re in a culture war. “Cultural war” — there’s something narcissistic about the term. There’s something spoiled about the term. We’re a country that had a huge war called the Civil War — bloody, horrifying massacres — and other countries have had the same. I mean, “war” is just one of those terms that I think should be reserved for very, very extreme circumstances in which horrible things happen to people. And to use this term “cultural war” to describe what strikes me as still a country that’s relatively unified — in the world’s history of great democracies, we are one of the great, enduring, long-standing democracies — I just feel it is narcissistic.
DR. HUNTER: But the Civil War, when it finally broke out, was preceded by 30 years of a culture war on precisely the issue that the real war was fought over. And the Civil War wouldn’t have happened had it not been for the kinds of polarizations that had happened culturally, symbolically, 30 years prior. This is why real wars don’t always follow culture wars, but you never have a real war without a prior culture war.

And it seems to me that the kinds of realignments in public culture, the kind of conflict, the way in which this is driven by the extremes — this is something that democracy, especially in the context of a post-Enlightenment world, needs to pay attention to.

I believe that political institutions of American democracy have a lot of momentum behind them. They have a lot of strength. There is memory there. But one should never, ever take for granted their long-term vitality. They constantly need to be renewed and it seems to me this represents a fundamental challenge.

DELIA RIOS, Newhouse News Service: Is there any single issue like slavery that is driving the current culture war?

DR. HUNTER: Well, I think culture wars become especially bloody over one issue in particular, and that is the issue of who is a member of the political community — who is a member of a common community and therefore worthy of its protections? You start excluding people and culture wars tend to become violent wars. And you see this, of course, in all sorts of cases historically.

MS. RIOS: But that period leading up to the Civil War was dominated by slavery and there isn’t any parallel central issue.

DR. HUNTER: I think that the reason why the abortion issue has been the longest standing and the most contentious, and quite frankly the most violent part of the culture war, is for precisely that reason.

DR. WOLFE: I don’t want to get into that analogy between abortion and slavery. I don’t accept it at all, but I don’t want to get into the reason.
I want to say one other thing, and this is meant to provoke debate. I don’t think the term “culture war” is a neutral term. I think there is a long-standing division philosophically between liberals and conservatives over the appropriate use of the word “war” to describe domestic politics. Liberals have traditionally viewed the purpose and function of politics to be to create true government, a way of calming passions domestically to enable some kind of neutral rules to work so that domestic passions never get out of control. Whereas, for much of conservative thought, especially in Europe and especially among a group of writers I could name, but the most prominent of whom is Carl Schmitt, all politics is war. And civil war is the inevitable condition of domestic politics.

So to call something warlike in domestic politics is in a sense to take a conservative view of politics over a liberal view of politics. And I’m struck by the degree to which so many prominent conservatives that I know and respect are insistent that there is a culture war.

Now, sometimes war really does break out. Liberal institutions fail and politics really does become a Hobbesian struggle of all against all. But I think one way that you try to avoid that is by using careful terminology that doesn’t anticipate the very position you’re trying to analyze. And I worry that the term “culture war” leaps us to a conception of politics in which we’re at each other’s throats; that just the use of the term brings that situation one step closer, and I don’t want to do that.

JOHN SINIFF, USA Today: Mr. Hunter, you said, “what conservatives have gained in politics they have lost in culture.” And you said that would catch up politically. So, one, I’d like you to expand on that and explain what you mean and what you see to indicate that; and two, is there a discernable historical cycle in this, or is this today’s phenomenon?

DR. HUNTER: I think that evangelicals have been playing a defensive game in this conflict. And the strategy of their defense has been a political one. They say to themselves, If we can just get our person into the White House, if we can just get our people onto the Supreme Court, if we can just get our people in Congress and so on, we can halt this slippery slide into a kind of libertarian decadence.
That’s a caricature, of course, but they are trying to hold back something that is taking place culturally, a certain vulgarization of popular entertainment and things like that, certainly a sense of disintegration of the family. They’re trying to halt those things politically, and they’ve become very expert at doing so. They’ve become extremely sophisticated in how to mobilize money, people and other resources to achieve those political ends.

This comes back to the question of culture and politics and the priority of culture over politics, and I don’t want to separate those things too much, but it seems to me that the culture, especially among cultural elites, had come to a consensus about the legitimacy of homosexuality, of gay rights and of gay marriage, far earlier than any kind of legislation or court decision that would ratify that consensus.

So it seems to me that politics is a short-term solution, and because it’s a short-term solution, it’s a failed solution. Nothing is challenging what I think is an emerging or already established consensus among cultural elites for the kinds of things that evangelicals and other religious conservatives really find worrisome. There is no de-census at that level.

MR. CROMARTIE: But, James, can I challenge you on that one point? “A short-term solution is a failed solution.” You wouldn’t say that, for instance, about any civil rights laws that were passed. Why would you want to say it about other laws? Is it an overstatement to say it’s a failed solution? You might want to say it’s a short-term solution to a larger problem.

DR. HUNTER: Again, I think, as Bill said yesterday, civil rights needs to be considered separately. But here’s where I would say that it supports my argument: I think that there’s an underlining narrative in our culture at the deepest levels about freedom. And it seems to me that in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the court decision was ahead of the culture in many respects, certainly ahead of public opinion. But it was still part of a deeper narrative in our culture, a narrative about a long trajectory toward freedom. This is clearly one reason for the success of the gay rights movement. They have understood that there is this underlying narrative flow in American culture; there is a deep structure that they have tapped into very successfully. So when conservatives challenge gay rights, whatever rights they are, it sounds like they’re against freedom. And that’s a losing proposition.
DR. WOLFE: One of the things that has really fascinated me in the research I do among conservative Christians is why certain issues rise to the level of such importance and others don’t; why issues involving gay marriage, abortion and so on — in other words, issues involving the body — seem to be so prominent, whereas issues like torture and economic inequality don’t.

And I’m persuaded from talking to lots of people that that’s not just cherry picking; that this is genuine. The feeling that gay marriage or abortion represents the true decline in the morality of the United States is as strong and sincere a feeling as one can have. I’ve heard people speak in the most moving language about how horribly difficult it is to raise children in this atmosphere, exposed to Hollywood and its totally pervasive, decadent sexuality. And I believe it’s real and genuine.

The idea, however, that this is the fault of liberals is what is going to make that whole point of view increasingly problematic in the future. For a long time it was possible to blame it all on liberals — liberals on the Supreme Court, the lecherous president of the United States, and so on. But how much longer can you tie the genuine conviction that moral decadence and sexual decadence is so prevalent in our society to liberals when the government is conservative? At what point do you have to raise the issue if you are a conservative evangelical in Oklahoma that divorce rates in Oklahoma are so much higher than they are in Massachusetts, that broken families are so much higher in our world than they are actually in the world in which liberals live? You can’t say, if you’re a conservative, well, that’s just because people are richer in Massachusetts.

You have to at some point say, do we have a problem? Is it our problem? Is there something wrong with the way we’re raising our children? Is there something wrong closer to home? I think that recognition is inevitable. And that’s what I mean by turning away from politics. I think it was a false avenue in some ways to think that we could solve this problem just by replacing one political party with another. After all, look who pays to the Republicans — Comcast — and it sponsors pornography and all kinds of morally dubious gambling industries and so on. It just seems to me it’s got to come home at some point.
MR. DICKERSON: Turning away from politics, if people of faith or conservative Christians or whatever we want to call them may be disappointed with the results they’re getting, it seems to me that one of the things that struck me the most about covering George Bush when he was governor was what I would hear from people of faith. Most of the time I heard, “He’s one of us.” They recognized and felt an affinity for his personal story. I wanted to get your reactions to that notion, which is that they may be disappointed, but as a political force they’re still going to be making judgments about candidates based on this kind of gut level association.

DR. HUNTER: I think you’re exactly right. I think that there are limits, though, to loyalty based upon certain personal affinities. And we saw that with Jimmy Carter, and I think we’re already seeing that right now in the religious right, such as it is — not just a disappointment but a real disaffection, I think, with the Bush administration on certain issues.

TERRY EASTLAND, The Weekly Standard: Listening to both of you, I get the sense that there has been a decline in institutions, and particularly those with authority to make statements that are compelling across the country. I wonder if there is not a sort of contrary piece of evidence. I would like for you to address the Supreme Court as an institution. The court is at the heart of many of these issues that we have been discussing here. I am struck by a decision like Planned Parenthood v. Casey, in which the joint opinion is written by three justices, and it explicitly caused the contending parties to come together and to abide by this decision. The court has confidence apparently to do that. How is it that the court seems not to have suffered a decline? How is it that the court seems to have the confidence to settle all these issues?

If you regard the joint opinion in Casey as a center, I’m wondering if you think that that opinion will endure, and perhaps also whether the partial birth abortion opinion will endure.

DR. WOLFE: I’ve always heard that one of the reasons those three judges wrote the opinion in Casey as they did was that they were feeling explicit pressure from “Bush I”
and wanted to really make the point that the court is an independent branch of government. Whether that’s true or not, I don’t know.

John Roberts evidently made a speech just in the last couple of days talking about the need for fewer 5-4 decisions on the court. I think the court’s legitimacy is at stake to the degree that all of its decisions are 5-4, 5-4. I don’t think you can have a country in which Sandra Day O’Connor and now Anthony Kennedy decides all these issues of such importance to people.

So I think the court is definitely wrapped up in this, but I think if Roberts is serious, we just might see an attempt to really strengthen the court as a kind of above-the-fray sort of entity.

**DR. HUNTER:** I think the legitimacy of the court is both stable and tenuous at the same time, and its legitimacy is challenged mainly at the level of political appointment before the judge or judges get confirmed. But once a judge gets confirmed, most of these justices, at whatever level, are not nearly the demonic figures that people make them out to be during the political process. And I think most justices — again, whether they’re conservative or liberal, however they would identify themselves — take the pedagogic role of the court very seriously. And its ongoing legitimacy, it seems to me, depends in part on taking that role ever more seriously, being above the fray, trying to articulate a kind of historical consciousness: how we got to this decision and why it’s the right decision. That’s a pedagogic role that you don’t find in very many places in American politics.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Ladies and gentlemen, let’s thank both of our presenters for an excellent discussion.

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