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# Legacy of Rage: George Wallace and the Transformation of American Politics

By DAN T. CARTER

AFTER NEARLY SEVEN YEARS OF CONSTANT PREOCCUPATION WITH THE figure of George Wallace and his influence on American politics, I have found it difficult to focus my energies once more on the legacy of the aging Alabamian. Perhaps it is because I keep hearing the warning of my wife that a “furrow too often plowed can well become a rut.” I have, after all, already had something to say about this Deep South politician.

Or then, perhaps it is because—as I sat down to compose these remarks—I was settling in to a year of teaching at Cambridge University. Each morning I walked to Sidney Sussex College through the open common and beside the River Cam, with the corporation swans gliding between early morning punters. As the spires of Kings College rose to greet me, I didn’t need Dorothy to remind me that I wasn’t in Atlanta any more. George Wallace and his political legacy seemed far away.

Certainly England’s press or television news gave little notice to American politics. Snippets of President Bill Clinton’s speeches on Bosnia were sandwiched between endless recapitulations of the O. J. Simpson trial and head-shaking accounts of the latest mass murder among the colonials. (With the possible exception of our dog-eat-dog health care system, nothing so baffles the English as Americans’ toleration on their streets of the kind of weapons of mass destruction the Brits associate with a light infantry company.) In eight weeks of watching television news, reading the *Times* of London and the London *Independent*, and browsing through another half-dozen papers, I

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never saw a picture of Newt Gingrich and I read only an occasional thumbnail summary of the latest domestic pronouncements of Democrats or Republicans.

If the main American political actors were absent, why—like Yogi Berra—did I often have a sense of *déjà vu* all over again? Perhaps it was the daily headlines about British politics: “Welfare Costs Escalate Over Last Decade”; “Community Leaders Dismiss Claims of Falling Crime Rates”; “Health Care Costs Approach Crisis Levels”; “‘Industry Can Do It Better,’ Say Proponents of Rail Privatization”; “Polls Show Level of Public’s Cynicism Over Government on Increase”; “Traditional Church Leaders Warn of Decline in Public Morality”; “Schoolyard Theft Ignites Racial Clash”; “Euro Court Outlaws [Exclusive] ‘Jobs for Women’ Programmes.” And even though I did not have Newt Gingrich around to excoriate government bureaucrats and extol the virtues of the free enterprise system, I saw in the pages of Rupert Murdoch’s *Times* of London the same faith in the miracle-working wonders of the unfettered market place.

As in most examples of comparative history or politics, however, the subtle differences between the two English-speaking societies may be as illuminating as the similarities. In early October, party leaders at the Labour and Conservative parties’ annual conferences conducted their scaled-down versions of an American nominating convention for the party faithful and—even more so—for the television cameras.

Tony Blair, head of the Labour party, seemed to have hired President Clinton’s hairstylist along with a superior team of speechwriters. However, with their party leading in the polls by more than 25 percentage points, Labour’s political managers appeared intent on staging the equivalent of one of those interminable English football matches in which the visiting team, up by one goal in the early stages, plays defense for the remaining fifty minutes. The Tories provided real entertainment. Desperate to turn the tide of public opinion, they had rummaged through the grab bag of gimmicks and slogans that American politicians, particularly American conservatives, had used in their long quest for victory. Blackpool’s Winter Gardens was a sea of waving Union Jacks; there were even rumors that a Madison Avenue political consultant had given advice on the decor of the dais and backdrop so that television viewers would receive the proper “image.”

While party leader John Major sat smiling genially at the head table, his party’s right-wing spokesmen strode to their American-style teleprompters and, with voices rising and falling in a descant of indignant sound bites, denounced the excesses of the welfare state, sang the praises of the free enterprise system, extolled the greatness that had

once been Britain's before the Common Market bureaucrats of Brussels had contaminated the sceptered isle, and promised a future in which—in one observer's acid rendition—"nobody pays any taxes at all . . . and everybody is in prison." ("And a jolly good thing too," he added.)<sup>1</sup> Britain's Defense Secretary Michael Portillo drew the heaviest applause when he rallied the party faithful with references to the heroism of Britain's elite Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment. "Around the world, three letters send a chill down the spine of the enemy: SAS," said Portillo. "And those letters spell out one clear message: don't mess with Britain!"<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, such blustery jingoism is part of the common currency of all but the most Milquetoast politicians. But Britain's defense officials and senior army officers were appalled by the Conservative party's attempt to hijack the reputation of the highly respected commando unit for political advantage. Off the record, one official raised the spectre of future political conferences in which speakers would parade to the platform in Union Jack jockey shorts in an effort to prove their patriotic machismo.<sup>3</sup> Even journalists normally sympathetic to the cause of the Conservatives seemed disgusted by what one *Times* columnist called an "unedifying and vacuous" "binge of self-indulgent flag-waving."<sup>4</sup>

English right-wingers, desperate to shake Labour's lead in the polls, may look to their American counterparts for issues, tactics, and political rhetoric, but they face distinct cultural handicaps. Most of their constituents retain an emotional reserve that—in the words of one observer—leads them to recoil from the prospect "that every speech be a religious or sexual experience."<sup>5</sup> And the speakers themselves often seemed ill at ease. Imagine, if you will, John Cleese or the late David Niven trying to put over some of Clint Eastwood's most menacing lines and I think you get my point.

When Patrick Buchanan delivered his speech at the Republican party's 1992 nominating convention in Houston, he drew a gloomy picture of America at the crossroads faced with the choice of Republican salvation or Democratic damnation. The 1992 election was more than a contest between political opponents, he warned, it was a religious and cultural war for the "soul of America." And in that struggle, Bill and Hillary Clinton were "on the other side and George Bush is on our

<sup>1</sup> The *Times* of London, October 13, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> London *Independent*, October 11, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, October 12, 1995, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> The *Times* of London, October 11, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

side.”<sup>6</sup> His closest British counterpart, John Redwood, M.P., has made a political career of hectoring single mothers on the dole. When I looked at Redwood on the platform of the Conservative party conference, however, I could only think of Flashman, the English boarding school bully of *Tom Brown’s School Days*. The fiery Buchanan had kindled a more fearsome image in 1992: Torquemada, the fifteenth-century Spanish grand inquisitor. Even making an allowance for election year hyperbole, American conservatives increasingly sound as if their deepest desire is to tighten ropes around the necks of their liberal opponents and look for the nearest tall oak tree. When English Conservatives attack their Labour and Social-Democratic rivals, they seem merely . . . well, *cross*.

Any biographer risks seeing all change through the lens of his or her subject. And so—as Richard Nixon would say—let me make this perfectly clear: Although George Wallace’s role in today’s conservative resurgence has been unduly neglected by historians, the four-time Alabama governor and four-time presidential candidate did *not* create a conservative resurgence in American politics. But Wallace, more than any other political figure of the 1960s and early 1970s, sensed the frustrations—the rage—of many American voters, made commonplace a new level of political incivility and intemperate rhetoric, and focused that anger upon a convenient set of scapegoats.

In many respects, George Wallace was a most unlikely candidate for the role of political bellwether. Few Americans had heard of him before his inauguration as governor of Alabama in January 1963, when his bellicose defense of the white South gave him his first national headlines. Then and now, most Americans—and Alabamians—remember little about his inaugural address beyond his famous line, “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!”<sup>7</sup> That amnesia has given former Governor Wallace enough maneuvering room in recent years to insist that his defense of segregation was a symbolic issue; his real struggle was to preserve states’ rights against

<sup>6</sup> Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, *Mad as Hell: Revolt at the Ballot Box, 1992* (New York, 1993), 410.

<sup>7</sup> “Original Inaugural Address of the Honorable George C. Wallace, Governor of Alabama, January 14, 1963” (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery) (hereinafter cited as ADAH). All three major networks used the “segregation forever” section of his speech in their evening broadcasts. The Associated Press, United Press International, the *New York Times*, and both major afternoon papers in Alabama either opened with the “Segregation now. . .” line or used it early in their leads. Author’s interview with Wallace’s former press secretary, Bill Jones, August 3, 1990, transcript in the Wallace Interview Files, Dan T. Carter Papers (Special Collections, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.). It is the only quotation by Wallace in John Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*. See the 16th edition (Boston, Toronto, and London, 1992), 747.

the overweening power of the federal government. As he has said on several occasions in attempting to dismiss the significance of the inaugural speech, he should have invoked “states’ rights or state responsibilities,” but he was never against black people; his oratory had nothing to do with race.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Asa E. Carter—Klan organizer, racial terrorist, and lifelong anti-Semite—wrote the 1963 inaugural address, and it was little more than a cut-and-paste compilation of sound bites from his hate magazine, the *Southerner*.<sup>9</sup> When Wallace railed against the federal government as “degenerate,” when he warned of the danger of racial “amalgamation,” when he referred to the murders of white colonials in the Belgian Congo in order to raise the specter of black savagery, he stepped over an invisible line from hyperbole into the dark hole of the bleakest demagoguery.

If that speech introduced him to the American people, his “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door” six months later made him a national celebrity. There is a particular aptness in the inclusion of that confrontation in the Tom Hanks film, *Forrest Gump*, for it had always been a theatrical performance staged for the benefit of a national television audience. The governor had his brief face-off with Assistant U.S. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, but within two hours, the federal government nationalized the Alabama National Guard, university officials enrolled Vivian Malone and Jimmy Hood, and the governor retreated to Montgomery. Leaders of both parties, the media, and national opinion makers all seemed to agree that the Stand in the Schoolhouse Door was simply one more shabby charade in a long line of presentations by southern demagogues. Wallace, predicted one usually astute reporter, would soon be “placed beside that old broken musketeer, Ross Barnett, in Dixie’s wax museum.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> James Wooten, “George Wallace: The Island of his Exile,” *Washington Post Magazine*, April 1, 1984, p. 13. As he told Howell Raines in 1979 in commenting on his inaugural address: “I made mistakes in the sense that I should have clarified my position more. I was never saying anything that reflected upon black people, and I’m very sorry that it was taken that way.” *New York Times*, January 21, 1979, p. 6-E.

<sup>9</sup> “Original Inaugural Address of the Honorable George C. Wallace,” ADAH. Although Wallace’s advisers, John Kohn and Grover Hall Jr., contributed to the inaugural address, it was unmistakably the work of Asa Carter as can be seen by examining the seven extant issues of his magazine, the *Southerner*, published in 1956 and early 1957. See especially “Musical Treatment,” *Southerner*, March 1956, p. 5; the untitled lead essays in the March and April-May 1956 issues; and his article, “Nat King Cole,” in the April-May 1956 issue, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Statement and Proclamation of Governor George C. Wallace, University of Alabama, June 11, 1963, “University of Alabama: Segregation” File, File Drawer 443, Governor George C. Wallace Papers, ADAH; and Robert G. Sherrill, “Wallace and the Future of Dixie,” *Nation*, CXCIX (October 26, 1964), 266–72 (quotation on p. 272).

In the week following his television performance, however, over 100,000 congratulatory telegrams and letters flooded the office of the Alabama governor. Over half came from outside the South, and 95 percent supported him.<sup>11</sup> George Wallace, the national political figure, was born.

Wallace instinctively understood the lesson that the so-called political spin doctors would soon grasp: in the world of television and politics—and they were increasingly becoming the same—the powerful totality of visual and verbal impressions shaped viewers' and voters' opinions. These impressions could be molded and directed in such a way as to overwhelm earlier notions and ideas, particularly those not firmly fixed in the viewer's mind. By claiming center stage with the representative of the president of the United States and by choreographing a relatively dignified media event, the Alabama governor showed that he understood the old adage: a picture (or, in this case, a series of pictures) is worth a thousand words. The print media might chronicle the complexities of Wallace's involvement in racist politics, but 78 million viewers watching the three major networks' evening news programs saw an indignant but poised and dignified George Wallace. Critics might dismiss his stilted and pretentious restatement of states' rights, but there was none of the explicit race-baiting demagoguery that most viewers expected to hear.

In the long run, his inaugural address and the Stand in the Schoolhouse Door amounted—in the words of Montgomery newspaperman Ray Jenkins—to Wallace's "Faustian bargain."<sup>12</sup> Although the Barbour County politician gained the passionate and devoted support of besieged white southerners and of the most alienated elements of society, his early embrace of the dying institution of legal segregation relegated him to the fringes of American political respectability.

But what a periphery it was.

Like most successful politicians, Wallace was the beneficiary of events beyond his control. As African Americans pushed against the walls of the ghettos of the urban North, as the race riots of the long, hot summers of the mid-1960s exploded, as the nation stumbled into an inconclusive land war in Vietnam and antiwar demonstrators took to the streets, most Americans recoiled. George Wallace looked out upon the disordered political landscape of the 1960s and sensed that millions of Americans felt betrayed. Few northern whites had any

<sup>11</sup> Transcript of author's interview with Bill Jones, August 3, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Ray Jenkins, Alabama Public Television Unedited Interview, 1985 (transcript prepared by author) (William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa).

sympathy for the most brutal forms of repression practiced by whites in the Deep South or for legal segregation. But a substantial percentage of the American electorate despised the civil rights agitators and antiwar demonstrators as symptoms of a fundamental decline in the traditional cultural compass of God, family, and country—a decline reflected in rising crime rates, legalization of abortion, the rise in out-of-wedlock pregnancies, the increase in divorce rates, the Supreme Court's decision against school prayer, and the proliferation of "obscene" literature and films.

As early as 1964 Wallace drew the support of a third to nearly a half of the Democratic voters in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland with his angry attacks on (and distortions of) the Kennedy-Johnson Civil Rights Act. Over the next two presidential campaigns he single-handedly set the rhetorical agenda. In his 1968 third-party campaign against Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, Wallace's broadsides against civil rights agitators, urban rioters, street-corner muggers, Supreme Court justices, and government bureaucrats made it possible for him to come within an eyelash of throwing the election into the House of Representatives. In 1972, playing variations on his earlier themes, he made opposition to racial busing the defining issue of the primary season and forced a frustrated Richard Nixon to engage in a desperate, undignified game of political catch-up.

The Alabama politician was hardly alone in his message. What was different was the peculiar intensity of his language. George Wallace was one of the last grand masters of the kind of foot-stomping public speaking that characterized American politics—particularly southern American politics—in the age before television. Thousands of stump speeches, from county fair grounds to Kiwanis Clubs, had given him an unerring sense of what would "play." He was, in the vocabulary of the students of rhetoric, the perfect "mimetic orator," probing his audiences' fears and passions and articulating those emotions in a language and style they could understand.<sup>13</sup> On flickering television screens and in giant political rallies, in speeches as much religious exorcism as political argument, he offered frightened and insecure millions a chance to strike back—if only rhetorically—at the enemy.

On paper his speeches are stunningly disconnected and even incoherent, but the printed page cannot reveal his ability to tap directly into the deepest frustrations and fears of that 20 to 25 percent of Americans drawn to his message. Gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson expe-

<sup>13</sup> For an insightful discussion of the nature of Wallace's rhetoric see Lawrence Dean Fadeley's "George Wallace: Agitator Rhetorician. A Rhetorical Criticism of George Corley Wallace's 1968 Presidential Campaign" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974).



rienced that power when he wandered into a 1972 Wallace rally in Milwaukee's Serb Hall. Five minutes into his speech, said Thompson, the audience was standing; the air, electric. Halfway through, the audience of Polish Americans was on its feet, cheering every line, laughing, shouting, exhilarated by the furious energy of Wallace's snarling attacks against hippies, civil rights agitators, welfare recipients, atheists, beatniks, antiwar protesters, communists, and street thugs who had "turned to rape and murder 'cause they didn't get enough broccoli when they were little boys." To a jaded Thompson, the performance was awe-inspiring, a political "Janis Joplin concert." There was a sense, Thompson said, "that the bastard had somehow levitated himself and was hovering over us."<sup>14</sup>

Wallace was particularly effective in exposing the hollow core of the Democratic party, which had disintegrated into little more than a political clearing house for rewarding constituent interest groups. Reaching back to the language of his nineteenth-century Populist forebears, he celebrated the "producers" of American society: the "beauticians, the truck drivers, the office workers, the policeman and the small businessmen," who had formed the heart of the Democratic party, "the bulk of its strength and vitality." Instead of the New York bankers and moneyed interests feared by his nineteenth-century counterparts, Wallace warned of the danger to the American soul posed by the "so-called intelligentsia," the "intellectual snobs who don't know the difference between smut and great literature," the "hypocrites who send your kids half-way across town while they have their chauffeur drop their children off at private schools," the "briefcase-carrying bureaucrats" who "can't even park their bicycles straight."<sup>15</sup> The issues might shift from state to state and from region to region, but—whether he talked about busing, taxes, or prayer in the schools—George Wallace drove home to his audience the great divide between the common people (at least the common white people) and the hypocritical "elites"—whether cultural or political.

The basic bond between the governor and his audience was the ethos of the locker room, of a man's world free from the constraints of women and their weaknesses. For rage was, after all, still a male prerogative in the 1960s. Journalists of the time marveled at his ability to transcend his southern roots by appealing to working-class voters out-

<sup>14</sup> Milwaukee *Sentinel*, March 31, 1972 (first quotation); and Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (San Francisco, 1973), 156.

<sup>15</sup> Quotations are from Wallace's Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times*, March 1, 1972, and from the standard stump speech he repeated in the Florida campaign as reported in *Birmingham Post-Herald* and *Montgomery Advertiser* in February and early March of 1972.

side the region. What they seldom observed, however, were the particular contours of that appeal. Wallace as the pugnacious southern bad boy overwhelmingly drew his support from young white men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. As late as three weeks before the election of 1968 he outdrew Humphrey *and* Nixon in that segment of the voting population.<sup>16</sup>

On the eve of that contest, Richard Strout, columnist for the *New Republic*, sat in an upper balcony of Madison Square Garden and watched George Wallace ignite the murderous rage of a screaming crowd of ten thousand, mostly working-class white men from New York and New Jersey. "We don't have any . . . [riots] down here" in Alabama, Wallace shouted as he weaved and bobbed across the stage, his right fist clenched, his left jabbing out and down as if he were in the midst of one of his youthful bantamweight Golden Gloves bouts. "They start a riot down here, first one of 'em to pick up a brick gets a bullet in the brain, that's all. And then you walk over to the next one and say, 'All right, pick up a brick. We just want to see you pick up one of them bricks, now!'"<sup>17</sup>

For more than forty years, Strout had reported on the American political scene under the byline "T.R.B. from Washington," but nothing had prepared him for this. "There is menace in the blood shout of the crowd," he wrote to his readers. "You feel you have known this all somewhere . . . ." Never again would he read about Berlin in the 1930s, he said, without remembering the wild explosion of irrationality he had witnessed in Madison Square Garden on that warm October night.<sup>18</sup>

If those who mobbed Wallace at his rallies or cheered his television performances were thrilled at having found a champion, far more Americans felt uneasy at the conflict that he inspired. There were many crosscurrents at work, wrote journalist Pete Hamill as he probed the public's mood during the election campaign of 1968, but the dominant one was desperate nostalgia. Americans—poor, working class, middle class, and rich—looked back to a year like 1910, said Hamill, himself a son of the post-World War II working class. His parents and his parents' friends longed for a time "when there were harvests in the fall and feasts in the spring, when kids went swimming in the old swimming hole and played baseball and football and respected God, Flag and Country. Most of all they want to return to a time in America

<sup>16</sup> *Gallup Opinion Index*, June 1972, Report No. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Crass, *The Wallace Factor* (New York, 1976), 14–15 (quotations) and 20; *New York Post*, October 25, 1968; and *New York Times*, October 25, 1968, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> "T.R.B. from Washington," *New Republic*, November 9, 1968, p. 4.

when you lived in the same house all of your life and knew everybody you would ever care to know on the street where you were born.”<sup>19</sup>

American voters—even many of the Wallace voters—wanted a return to a time of safety and stability, not the prospect of unending violence and conflict. George Wallace was the first politician to sense and then to exploit the changes that Americans came to know by many names: white backlash, the silent majority, the alienated voters, but—beyond a generalized hostility toward the federal government—he had little to offer in terms of policies or solutions. In the end, the Alabama governor’s crude language and his fiery personality limited him to the role of redneck poltergeist. Even as he neared the limits of his political popularity, however, he had helped to expand the boundaries of rhetoric: he had made acceptable the politics of rage.

Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, in quite different ways, understood this tug of war between the politics of anger and the politics of nostalgia, but it was no accident that Ronald Reagan, a veteran of America’s nostalgia machine—the movies—understood how to exploit Americans’ ongoing fears even as he offered the reassuring promise of stability in a time of cultural disintegration and chaos. In the course of his political career, Reagan’s speeches mirrored the worst excesses of the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s and 1960s. Once in office, he whipped up those anticommunist fears in order to fund a massive increase in military expenditures and to sustain a brutal and illegal covert war in Central America. Domestically, he never met a tax concession for the rich that he did not like, or a civil rights bill that he did. He scolded the poor for their dependency upon a bloated federal welfare system, then supported a rescue plan that laddled out hundreds of billions of dollars to savings and loan companies destroyed by the reckless speculation of their well-heeled managers. His massive tax cuts for upper-income voters propelled the nation into temporary boom times and threatened long-term bankruptcy.

Yet Reagan hardly fit the profile of an enraged politician. He had embraced an American ethos that has historically resisted such pessimistic angst. America was a new land, a nation set upon a hill with neither the burdensome memories of a failed past nor the need for facing difficult choices. In his years as governor of California, in his three presidential campaigns, and in his eight years in the White House, Ronald Reagan showed that he could use coded language with the best of them when he scolded welfare queens and condemned bus-ing and affirmative action. But even when he lashed out against the

<sup>19</sup> Hamill, “Wallace,” *Ramparts*, VII (October 26, 1968), 47.

liberals, he always sounded avuncular, reluctantly raising his voice because he saw no alternative.<sup>20</sup> He was essentially the Dr. Pangloss of American politics, a sunny personality who preferred inspirational anecdotes that concluded on an “up” note. Thus, when asked to talk about segregation or race relations, he had an endless variety of uplifting stories—most borrowed from Hollywood movies—that he effortlessly transposed into actual historical anecdotes.<sup>21</sup>

It was no accident, wrote Reagan’s biographer Garry Wills, that Reagan had defeated Jimmy Carter. An intellectual disciple of Reinhold Niebuhr, Carter saw in Reagan’s mindless optimism the ultimate form of hubris. At its heart, the science of governing was a willingness to engage in a perpetual struggle to control man’s sinful nature, a struggle with no fade-out to happy endings, only the satisfaction of holding back the darkness.

If Carter accepted the doctrine of the fall, Ronald Reagan lived by the myth of the market. Private vices would become public good through the ministrations of Adam Smith’s invisible hand. “Individual greeds add up to general gain,” explained Wills, so long as the nation is spared the stifling hand of government. “The Market thus produces a happy outcome from endless miseries . . . .”<sup>22</sup> Missing in this equation was any awareness of the corrosive power of modern capitalism, of how the pervasive forces of consumerism overwhelmed traditional values by manufacturing and then exploiting desire with unattainable promises of instant gratification.

In any case, the promised rising tide of prosperity did not lift all boats; the market did not produce a happy outcome from endless miseries. Between 1947 and 1965 the purchasing power of middle-income and lower-middle-income voters had climbed 40 percent, an average of more than 2 percent per year. That steady ascension slowed after 1965 as a combination of inflation and sharp hikes in payroll and income taxes led to a stagnation in real wages for the average worker. Family income remained stable and even rose through the 1960s, but primarily because of the movement of women into the workforce. Families were working harder in order to stay in place.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Despite Reagan’s identification with the use of the “Welfare Queen” stories, these were actually more characteristic of his 1976 primary campaign against Gerald Ford than his 1980 and 1984 presidential campaigns. *New York Times*, February 15, 1976, p. 51; and *Washington Post*, January 28, 1976, p. A-2.

<sup>21</sup> Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987), 165.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 384

<sup>23</sup> The literature on income, poverty, and the impact of governmental tax structure and transfer programs is complex and often contradictory. Perhaps the most useful information I have found lies in Edward C. Budd, ed., *Inequality and Poverty* (New York, 1967); Sheldon H. Danziger and Kent E. Portney, eds., *The Distributional Impacts of Public Policies* (New York, 1988);

By the end of the mid-1990s, none but the most unreconstructed optimists could gainsay the changes that had taken place. Between the 1970s and the mid-1990s, the median wage earner in the United States saw his or her income decline 5 percent in real dollars after adjustments for inflation; during the same years, the top 5 percent saw their income increase nearly 30 percent. The top 1 percent fared even better—their earnings rose 78 percent.<sup>24</sup> International economists have noted a similar trend in much of the western industrial world, particularly in Great Britain. But the shifts elsewhere measured far less than those in the United States, which had long prided itself on being an egalitarian society.<sup>25</sup> As the twentieth century drew toward a close, this country was well on its way to becoming one of “the most economically stratified of industrial nations” in the developed world. In 1995 the top 20 percent of American households received 55 percent of *after-tax* income; the top 1 percent of Americans controlled nearly 40 percent of the nation’s wealth, an imbalance in income and resources not seen since the 1930s. And the trend of increasing inequality continued even as productivity and business profits soared through the early 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

One particularly striking side effect of these changes was the increase in poverty for America’s children. In 1995 the “Luxembourg Income Study” completed a comprehensive survey comparing child welfare among the fourteen most advanced European industrial democracies (plus the United States, Australia, Israel, and Canada). America’s children ranked sixteenth, just ahead of Israel’s and Ireland’s. Had the research design included such in-kind benefits as childcare services and free health care, the welfare of American children would have ranked at the bottom.<sup>27</sup>

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Robert Haveman, *Starting Even: An Equal Opportunity Program to Combat the Nation’s New Poverty* (New York and other cities, 1988); Edgar K. Browning, *Redistribution and the Welfare System* (Washington, D.C., 1975); Andrew F. Brimmer, “Inflation and Income Distribution in the United States,” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, LIII (February 1971), 37–48; S. M. Miller, “Sharing the Burden of Change,” in Louise Kapp Howe, comp., *The White Majority: Between Poverty and Affluence* (New York, 1970), 279–93.

<sup>24</sup> John Cassidy, “Who Killed the Middle Class?” *New Yorker*, October 16, 1995, pp. 113–24, esp. p. 114. Ironically, Kevin Phillips, one of the most influential Republican strategists of the 1960s and 1970s, became the most unsparing critic of the economic consequences of the Republican revolution in his book, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> Gary Burtless, Richard Freeman and Robert Solow, *Widening Earnings Inequality* (Washington, 1994); Steve Nickell and Brian Bell, “The Collapse in Demand for the Unskilled,” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, XI (Spring 1995). For evidence of the accelerating pay divide between rich and poor in Great Britain, see the highlights of that government’s 1995 *New Earnings Survey* published in the *Times* of London, September 29, 1995, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, April 17, 1995, pp. A1 and D4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, August 14, 1995, p. A9.

Liberals, like U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich, insisted that the solution was to be found in a substantial expansion of job training programs and the maintenance—not the neglect—of the safety net in order to protect the most vulnerable members of society.<sup>28</sup> Conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic countered with a quite different argument: this was a transitional era best endured by holding fast (and accelerating) the Thatcher-Reagan policies of deregulation, the privatization of public services, the enactment of lower tax rates, the dramatic reduction of government expenditures, and the continuing limitation of trade union power.<sup>29</sup> There *was* more childhood poverty in the United States, acknowledged conservative economist Douglas J. Besharov of the American Economic Institute. But the efforts of European countries to maintain their social security systems eroded incentives for people to work and would, in the long run, lead to lower overall economic growth. In any case, argued Besharov, the real reason there were so many poor children in the United States was because of the high number of childbearing immigrants and unwed mothers.<sup>30</sup>

This decline in the American economy reinforced a growing middle-class hostility toward the welfare state (as it applies to the inner-city poor). In a brilliant essay published in the *Atlantic* in July 1992, political analyst William Schneider pointed out the links between the nation's increasingly conservative temperament and the emergence of a politically dominant suburban America. Suburbanization, argued Schneider, inevitably reinforced the "privatization of American life and culture." Middle- and upper-income suburbanites were able to escape the increasingly unruly public spaces of decaying central cities by creating a "secure and controlled environment" in malls and private automobiles (as opposed to public transportation). The advent of cable television and video rentals even insured private entertainment space within their homes.<sup>31</sup>

Suburbanites, isolated from the expensive and frustrating demands of the growing urban underclass, could control their own local government, and they could buy good schools and safe streets (or at least better schools and safer streets than the inner city.) "Big" government—the federal government—spent *their* hard-earned taxes for programs that (most suburbanites had concluded) were wasteful and inefficient and did nothing to help them.

<sup>28</sup> Cassidy, "Who Killed the Middle Class?" pp. 123–24.

<sup>29</sup> The *Times* of London, October 5, 1995, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> New York *Times*, August 14, 1995, p. A9.

<sup>31</sup> Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic*, CCLXX (July 1992), 33–44 (quotations on p. 37).

However, even when the poor were effectively triaged from national priorities, an aging population and a more slowly rising level of tax revenues forced politicians to face an unpleasant dilemma: cut expenditures or raise taxes. But how? When a reporter asked the late Willie Sutton why he robbed banks, the ex-con replied with unassailable logic: "Because that's where the money is." In the 1970s and 1980s, the only way to find money—that is, to achieve significant savings—would have been to cut those social welfare programs most sacred to the middle class: Social Security and Medicare. Not surprisingly, these programs remained untouchable—at least in an election campaign. But Democratic and Republican politicians alike also learned that to propose raising taxes was political suicide—Walter Mondale proved that in 1984 and George Bush relearned the same lesson in 1992 after he backed down on his 1988 "read-my-lips" vow of no new taxes.

When Bill Clinton campaigned for president in 1992, Republicans pointed out that his promise to maintain the nation's welfare safety net, cut taxes for the middle class, and balance the budget amounted to a kind of economic glossolalia. If so, the criticism amounted to little more than the pot calling the kettle black. What could one make of the economics of a "Contract with America" that had promised wealthy and upper-middle-class voters a 50 percent cut in the capital gains tax; older Americans, a repeal of the 1993 tax increases on Social Security and an increase in the Social Security earnings limits; and middle-class families, a five-hundred-dollar-per-child tax credit, a repeal of the federal income tax "marriage penalty," and additional tax credits for caring for elderly dependents? All this—and a balanced budget to boot—was to be accomplished alongside increases in defense expenditures and without cuts in Social Security and Medicare.<sup>32</sup>

In any case, by the mid-1990s, all but the most ideologically committed economists were gradually coming to a chilling consensus. Underlying structural forces—the internationalization of trade, increased immigration of unskilled labor, the decline of trade unions, and technological changes—have been the key factors in shifting income to the wealthy and the upper middle class while weakening the economic well-being of working-class and lower-middle-class Americans, creating a growing underclass, and plunging millions of children into

<sup>32</sup> The only suggestions of substantially increased expenditures were in the area of national defense where Republican House leaders demanded construction of an updated version of Ronald Reagan's "star-wars" missile defense system and warned that "significant increases in defense funding may be necessary in the future . . ." See "'Contract With America': House GOP Offers Descriptions of Bills to Enact Contract," *Congressional Quarterly*, November 19, 1994, pp. 3366–3379; *New York Times*, December 9, 1994; and Michael Kramer, "Newt's Believe It or Not," *Time*, December 19, 1994, p. 44.

poverty. Policies proposed by liberals or conservatives could play an important role in minimizing or intensifying the suffering of low income Americans; such policies could even nudge the distribution of wealth in one direction or the other. But no magic wand could restore America—or Western Europe—to universally rising incomes and widespread economic security.<sup>33</sup>

Unwilling to listen to the dwindling handful of politicians who spoke of unpleasant choices, Americans willingly turned to the more satisfying task of exorcising demons. For politicians, it was a dilemma not unlike that facing George Wallace in 1962. “I started off talking about schools and highways and prisons and taxes—and I couldn’t make them listen,” he confided to an old supporter. “Then I began talking about niggers—and they stomped the floor.”<sup>34</sup>

Although working- and middle-class Americans in the 1960s periodically expressed uneasiness over inflation and the failure of wages to keep pace with the cost of living, widespread economic insecurity and declining incomes were not characteristic of the decade. It was primarily a sense of cultural and social dislocation—and out-and-out racism—that furnished the fuel for George Wallace’s angry rhetoric. By the end of the 1980s economic decline reinforced this siege mentality and offered new opportunities for political demagoguery.

Only a week before the 1994 congressional elections, Newt Gingrich, the acknowledged political commander-in-chief of the emerging Republican majority, privately told a group of pro-GOP lobbyists that his campaign strategy was to depict “Clinton Democrats as ‘the enemy of normal Americans’ and as proponents of Stalinist measures.”<sup>35</sup> Just thirty-six hours before election day, Gingrich referred to the tragic incident in South Carolina in which a young mother—ostensibly a devout, born-again Christian—had drowned her two children. Her action “vividly reminds every American how sick their society is getting and how much we have to have change.” And the “only way you get change is to vote Republican.”<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, Gingrich had worked to convince frustrated

<sup>33</sup> Cassidy, “Who Killed the Middle Class?” 121. Even when observers agree that these factors have threatened the well-being of America’s working and middle classes, they do not agree on solutions. Robert Reich, author of *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-Century Capitalism* (New York, 1991), 196–221, insists that there is no escape from the arena of international trade; he proposes massive upgrading of job skills for those Americans most jeopardized by competition from low-wage international competition. Edward N. Luttwak (*The Endangered American Dream* [New York, 1993], 153–81) supports much more nationalistic policies.

<sup>34</sup> “Report from Benjamin Muse, February 6, 1964,” Leadership Reports, 1959–1964, Southern Regional Council Records (Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center).

<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, November 10, 1994, B-3.



members of his party that their only hope for political victory was to reshape the traditional give-and-take of American politics into a “batleground” between godly Republicans and the “secular anti-religious view of the left” that shaped the Democratic party.<sup>37</sup> In the spring of 1988 he told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter that Democrats were not simply politically misguided: “These people are sick.”<sup>38</sup> As one of his Republican colleagues said with a combination of admiration and apprehension, Gingrich had come to believe that the politics of *perception* was everything. What really happened did not matter to Gingrich, said Michael Johnson, a member of the staff of the Republican congressional leadership; the House Republican leader passionately believed that “if you can describe it your way, *you* define it.”<sup>39</sup>

And what was this world of perception? “He means to create a Manichaeian scheme in domestic politics as severe and confrontational as the struggle with Soviet Communism at the height of the Cold War,” concluded *New Yorker* journalist and essayist David Remnick. And in that scheme there would be “no mercy for the ‘other side’ or for anyone else.”<sup>40</sup>

The shift in the tone of political rhetoric mirrored that in the larger culture. Through the 1960s and 1970s, America’s media—mainstream and tabloid—found that it could capture the attention of readers and viewers only by increasing the level of hyperbole, sensationalism, and cynicism until—in one critic’s words—“even an issue of *Good Housekeeping* practically foams at the mouth.”<sup>41</sup> In such a “culture of aggression,” the press often seemed less “liberal” or “conservative” than intent on savaging more moderate or “compromising” individuals while deferring to “tough guys” like Oliver North and Newt Gingrich. In fact, George Wallace would probably come across as a mealy-mouthed moderate when juxtaposed against today’s right-wing-radical talk show hosts. Admittedly, much of the vitriol is *rhetoric*. There is a long tradition of campaign hyperbole, usually set aside on the day af-

<sup>36</sup> Atlanta *Journal-Constitution*, November 7, 1994, p. A19.

<sup>37</sup> New York *Times*, November 16, 1994. Even in the glow of victory, he could not resist one last jab. President Clinton and his wife were “counter-culture at Yale” and they remained so, he told reporters. “They really are left-wing elitists . . .” New York *Times* November 10, 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in the Los Angeles *Times*, August 25, 1991, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> Connie Bruck, “Profile: The Politics of Perception,” *New Yorker*, LXXI (October 9, 1995), 59.

<sup>40</sup> David Remnick, “Lost in Space,” *New Yorker*, LXX (December 5, 1994), 86. That same invective could (and was) applied against “moderate” conservatives who deviated from the orthodoxies of the new right, as Colin Powell and Sheila Burke (Republican Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole’s chief-of-staff) discovered. New York *Times*, November 2, 1995; Jason DeParle, “Sheila Burke is the Militant Feminist Commie Peacenik Who’s Telling Bob Dole What to Think,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 12, 1995, pp. 32–38, 90, 100, 102, 104–5.

<sup>41</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Read All About It,” *New Yorker*, LXX (December 12, 1994), 93.

ter the election with a smile and a tight-lipped message of congratulation from the loser and a generous acknowledgement of good intentions from the winner. If it is useful to point out that some of these merchants of paranoia and hatred may be playacting, it is also important to note that many of their listeners are not.

Ask the people of Oklahoma City.

Thus, the harangues of a George Wallace rally, spruced up and vetted by a team of pollsters and political marketing experts, have become the common currency of American political rhetoric. George Bush had his attack dogs—Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes. Having watched the dismemberment of Michael Dukakis in 1988, Bill Clinton responded by hiring take-no-prisoners political strategist James Carville for the 1992 campaign. (Gearing up for 1996, he has gone even further, bringing on board Henry Sheinkopf, a consultant who once explained—presumably without flinching—that, in politics, “terror tends to work because it is so easy to make people hate.”)<sup>42</sup>

But liberals, operating in the increasingly conservative political climate of the 1970s and 1980s, have generally come off second best against their conservative opponents. The success of liberal pressure groups in sinking the nomination of Robert Bork to the United States Supreme Court by exaggerating and misrepresenting his views was a rare exception to the rule. Compromisers, particularly liberal compromisers like Clinton, operate from a distinct disadvantage. However much they might try to depict their opponents as heartless plutocrats intent on throwing widows and orphans into the streets, their demons seldom match those of the radical right.

By the early 1990s few politicians had been more successful than Gingrich at manufacturing a variety of bogeymen: homosexual extremists, artists who drew dirty pictures while receiving their monthly government checks, drug dealers, gun control freaks, tree-hugging terrorists from the Environmental Protection Agency, advocates of socialized medicine, feminazis, college professors crazed on the crack cocaine of political correctness, abortionists, Democratic members of Congress, pedophiles, and assorted do-gooder government bureaucrats. All had been consigned by Gingrich to the outer reaches of hell.

Defenders of the new conservatism—Republicans and Democrats—insisted that the elimination of welfare as a federal entitlement was designed to break the cycle of dependency and to restore individual “initiative and dignity” to clients of a morally bankrupt welfare state. Newt Gingrich brushed aside suggestions that the GOP’s hostile-

<sup>42</sup> The Sunday *Times* of London, October 22, 1995, p. 21.

ity to federal welfare was “racist.” And on one level he was certainly correct. Concerns about the dangers of dependency, moral outrage, and economic frustrations have all played a critical role in demonizing welfare mothers. The hostility of taxpayers toward welfare recipients is far more complicated than a dressed-up version of the old southern demagogue’s cry of “Nigger, Nigger, Nigger.” The 1995 presidential draft campaign for former General Colin Powell—the first black American to serve as chief of the armed forces—reflects the changed nature of issues of race in American politics.

But surely it was no coincidence that the welfare issue resonated most powerfully during the 1994 political ad wars (or that the second most emotional issue was a growing anger over furnishing public assistance to predominantly Hispanic aliens).<sup>43</sup> Although whites, by a narrow margin, still constituted the majority of those individuals on the nation’s welfare rolls, almost every American knew that, statistically, African Americans were far more likely to end up “on welfare.” Almost every American knew that, statistically, the rate of illegitimacy and welfare dependency was higher in the African American community than among whites. As one longtime student of welfare reform observed, opponents of federal welfare were exploiting the anger of middle-class taxpayers who believed that their tax dollars were going to the undeserving poor, particularly “young women, without education, who are long-term dependents and whose dependency is passed on from generation to generation.” The unspoken subtext of this outlook was the belief that “these women are inner-city substance-abusing blacks spawning a criminal class.”<sup>44</sup> In the 1994 off-year elections, welfare reform proved to be the emotional equivalent of George Bush’s 1988 Willie Horton ads. For a critical minority of swing voters the issue sat squarely in the middle of a changed dialogue on the respective roles played by nature and nurture in shaping the politics of race in American.

For much of the past century, American liberals tended to emphasize the environmental factors that shaped antisocial behavior, while conservatives resisted the notion that “immoral” choices and antisocial behavior flowed only from economic deprivation. Since the 1930s—certainly since the 1960s—the argument has been over the balance between individual responsibility and the obligation of a soci-

<sup>43</sup> Besides proposing reductions in public assistance to poor Americans and to aliens (including those legally in the United States) the only other proposals for substantial cuts came in promises to eliminate the “social spending” from the Clinton administration’s 1994 crime bill, a term Republican lawmakers had repeatedly used to characterize crime prevention and rehabilitation programs.

<sup>44</sup> *New York Times*, November 16, 1994, A19.

ety to furnish *opportunities* for those who begin life handicapped by social, economic, and cultural disadvantages. Just two weeks before the smashing Republican victory of 1994, however, the New York *Times Magazine* heralded the publication of a controversial new book, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray.<sup>45</sup> Ten years earlier Murray had previewed his ideas in *Losing Ground*, a study of national welfare policy (or “social policy,” as he preferred to call it.) Funded by the Manhattan Institute, one of the new conservative think tanks that sprang up in the Reagan years, the book reflected the conventional wisdom of Republican conservatism in the 1980s: to wit, Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty had been more successful at wasting the taxpayers’ money than at ending poverty. In an argument that went well beyond talk of “reforming” the safety net, Murray indicted the very notion of government welfare. Welfare programs inevitably rewarded the “least law-abiding,” the “least capable,” and the “least responsible” among the poor, he argued. The result (for Murray, at least) was clear: government assistance of any kind—even for the working or “deserving” poor—encouraged socially undesirable activities by America’s underclass. Strapping young men refused to take responsibility for their offspring or to accept “entry-level” jobs, and teenage girls had illegitimate babies in order to collect welfare checks. The only hope for a declining America was to scrap the “entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working-aged persons, including AFDC, Medicaid, Food Stamps, Unemployment Insurance, Worker’s Compensation, subsidized housing, disability insurance, and the rest.”<sup>46</sup>

In some respects, the most intriguing aspect of *Losing Ground* lay in the issue Murray confronted only indirectly: the high proportion of African Americans among the emerging dependent class.<sup>47</sup> With the publication of *The Bell Curve*, the issue of race—which had surfaced in national politics with George Wallace’s forays North—had come full circle. Murray’s new coauthor, Richard Herrnstein, had devoted much of his professional career to arguing that twentieth-century liberal ideologues had conspired to conceal the uncomfortable reality that genetically inherent I.Q. limited the capabilities of some racial (and ethnic) groups. To put it more bluntly, a racial hierarchy of intelligence existed with East Asians and Ashkenazi Jews at the top, most

<sup>45</sup> Published in New York by the Free Press in 1994.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York, 1984), 227–29 (quotations on pp. 227–28) and 236.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

American “whites” just below, Hispanics further down the scale, and blacks at the absolute bottom. His argument was not racist in the traditional sense: not *all* blacks were inferior to all whites. In fact, Herrnstein concluded that low intelligence doomed about 10 percent of whites to failure. But people of color constituted the real threat to American society.<sup>48</sup>

Herrnstein’s research gave Murray the arguments he needed in order to close the logical gap in his twenty-year vendetta against the welfare state. To help the poor or disadvantaged was a fool’s errand. Under the iron hand of genetic determinism, the intelligent would rise to the top in the new meritocracy created by the information revolution, while the intellectually stunted would retreat into squalor, criminality, and the feverish reproduction of illegitimate, low-I.Q. offspring.

Although the two authors halfheartedly suggested that there might yet remain “A Place for Everyone” in American society, they bleakly predicted the “Coming of the Custodial State” in which the cognitively privileged middle and upper classes would ultimately create a “high tech and more lavish version of the Indian reservation” to contain and control a rapidly breeding criminal underclass.<sup>49</sup>

In 1963, before he mastered the use of coded language, George Wallace bluntly expressed his view that blacks were *inherently* lazy, lacking in intelligence, sexually promiscuous, and prone to commit the most “atrocious acts of [in]humanity, such as rape, assault and murder.”<sup>50</sup> Today, cruder forms of racism remain the province of marginal white supremacy groups such as the Aryan Nation and of African American demagogues like Louis Farrakhan, whose fulminations against Jewish “bloodsuckers” and “white devils” seem designed to prove that bigotry is an equal opportunity employer.<sup>51</sup> But even though Herrnstein and Murray’s sober, even regretful, tone seemed to distance their conclusions from Wallace’s vulgar racism, at its core—despite the elaborate statistical tables, footnotes, and appendices—*The Bell Curve* was simply the latest version of a centuries-old argument justifying white supremacy and black subordination.

<sup>48</sup> Herrnstein and Murray argued that a decline in the “self-selection” process meant that the earlier generation of immigrants (“brave, hard-working, imaginative, self-starting—and probably smart”) had been replaced by sluggards for whom “immigrating to America can be . . . a much easier option than staying where he is.” The only hope of remedying this, they suggested, was to discourage low-I.Q. immigrants (such as Hispanics and Haitians) and to encourage those from high-I.Q. gene pools such as Asians. *Bell Curve*, 360 and 549.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>50</sup> Art Wallace to George Wallace, August 13, 1963; George Wallace to Art Wallace, September 13, 1963, “Segregation File,” Drawer 399, Wallace Papers.

<sup>51</sup> The *Times* of London, October 15, 1995, p. 20, Sec. 3, p. 14; October 16, 1995, p. 10.

In a reflection of the changed political climate the book not only climbed to the top of the best seller list but received respectful reviews from mainstream publications.<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Cowley writing in *Newsweek* concluded that *The Bell Curve* was based upon work that was “overwhelmingly mainstream.” Intelligence, he said in quoting one researcher, was primarily a matter of genetics; so long as the environment was “adequate,” it had little or no impact on the achievement level of individuals.<sup>53</sup>

If the ideas expressed by Herrnstein and Murray have edged their way into public debate, overt scientific racism remains on the fringes of respectable opinion. Neoconservatives are more comfortable emphasizing the inferiority of black “culture.” In his new book, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*, Dinesh D’Souza describes a pattern of behavior among black Americans that parallels nineteenth- and twentieth-century stereotypes about shiftless, violent, and oversexed “darkies.” Unlike Herrnstein and Murray, D’Souza does not believe that this deeply flawed black culture is genetic; it is instead a *willful* pathology of depravity and antisocial behavior.<sup>54</sup> Thus the grim statistical future of young black men—twice as likely to be unemployed, eight times as likely to die of homicide, and ten times as likely to be in prison, on parole, or on probation as their white counterparts—is proof of a culture of irresponsibility rather than a crisis of victimization.<sup>55</sup>

D’Souza’s uncritical idealization of the dominant “white” society and his caricature of black culture as a pathology of antisocial behavior leads him to ignore the enormous range of differences among African Americans and among whites in much the same way that nineteenth-century scientific racists glossed over wide variations with-

<sup>52</sup> The *New York Times* science reporter in a generally respectful, and generally favorable, review of *The Bell Curve* seemed to endorse the author’s main point by suggesting that America’s survival depended upon the acceptance of low I.Q. as a “disease” which should be “treated” through genetic manipulation and/or an embrace of eugenics as a national policy. Browne, “What Is Intelligence and Who Has It?” *New York Times Book Review*, October 16, 1994, pp. 3, 41, 45. The response to *The Bell Curve*, it should be noted, did not precisely follow traditional “liberal-conservative” fault lines. Along with the expected attacks from such liberal stalwarts, the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, the *Progressive*, and the *New York Review of Books*, there was a blistering review from the *Wall Street Journal*. Clearly, however, the once unthinkable had become part of the public debate over race and politics.

<sup>53</sup> Cowley, “Testing the Science of Intelligence,” *Newsweek*, October 24, 1994, pp. 56–60. In one respect, Cowley was right. No longer gun-shy over the linkage of racism and genetic determinism, a growing number of geneticists are laying increasing emphasis upon nature over nurture. For a thoughtful analysis of the social and political implications of such findings, see Lawrence Wright’s summary of research into the nature of identical twins, “Double Mystery,” *New Yorker*, LXXI (August 7, 1995), 44–62.

<sup>54</sup> Published in New York and other cities by the Free Press in 1995.

<sup>55</sup> The *Times* of London, October 15, 1995, p. 20.

in so-called racial groups. By replacing crude notions of genetic inferiority with equally crude generalizations about cultural degradation, however, he has created a distinction without a difference. In the words of historian George M. Fredrickson, such “cultural essentialism” becomes the functional equivalent of earlier forms of racism.<sup>56</sup>

Even when a thoughtful “liberal” writer like Fox Butterfield turns his hand to the problems of antisocial violence in the black community—as he has done in his recent study, *All God’s Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence*—his study can easily be interpreted as evidence that this black “culture of violence” and social irresponsibility is so deeply ingrained and resistant to alteration that it might as well be genetically determined.<sup>57</sup>

Deep shifts in political opinion do not turn on a single issue. Busing and the political liabilities of affirmative action were not the only reasons conservatives advanced toward a political majority during the Reagan years. Willie Horton ads did not sink Michael Dukakis’s bid for the presidency in 1988, and the singling out of welfare recipients as scapegoats for the intractable problems of crime and social disorder are only part of the story of the landslide Republican victory of 1994. Looking backward over three decades, however, we can see how the continuing subliminal manipulation of racial issues reflected fundamental shifts in public rhetoric about race within the context of a more general debasement of the culture of American politics.

When Polish writer Ryszard Kapuściński traveled through the Soviet Empire during its last days from 1989 through 1991, he witnessed on every hand the human cost of social upheaval. As the peoples of Moscow’s unraveling imperium saw the disintegration of the guideposts of their world—the Communist party, the state security apparatus, the crude but reassuring cradle-to-grave welfare system—they desperately looked for some shelter that would protect them against the storms of change. “In the face of encircling afflictions and threats of reality,” he said, they remembered a “past which seems a lost paradise.”<sup>58</sup>

But this retreat came at great cost, for the driving forces of this flight into nostalgia were the three horsemen of nationalism, racism, and religious fundamentalism. As Kapuściński listened to these clamorous voices, he concluded that those afflicted with these “plagues” were beyond reason. In their eyes there burned a “sacred pyre that

<sup>56</sup> George M. Fredrickson, “Demonizing the American Dilemma,” *New York Review of Books*, XLII (October 19, 1995), 16.

<sup>57</sup> Published in New York by Alfred A. Knopf in 1995.

<sup>58</sup> Kapuściński, *Imperium*, translated by Klara Glowczewska (New York, 1994), 371.

awaits only its sacrificial victims." Such men and women had no appreciation for "the fact that human destiny is uncertain and fragile." Above all, they were free of the anxiety that comes from asking the question: "Am I right?" Their world was simple and reassuring: "on one side we, the good people, on the other they, our enemies."<sup>59</sup>

The most articulate architects of the new conservative majority, by creating a bipolar universe of good and evil, right and wrong, place impossible demands on the political system and inevitably invite higher levels of voter frustration. In the past, American conservatives have rightly scolded liberals for their exaggerated belief in what the state could accomplish in shaping the lives of its citizens. But, having achieved a congressional majority, the new right now demands that the state be used to alter behavior in precisely those arenas of American life that are most private and resistant to governmental direction: spirituality and sexuality.

The United States in 1994 was not the Soviet Union; at most, Newt Gingrich seems to have envisioned a forced exile that would allow aging Democratic hippies to count their beads and reflect upon their countercultural follies. The neoconservatives who had mastered the political arts of mobilizing moral outrage seemed far more interested in transforming that anger into GOP votes than in building funeral pyres for their opponents. After all, there were many conservative Republicans who were enthusiastic about low taxes and a shrunken government but hostile to the idea of the government reaching its long arm into the nation's bedrooms.

And for a growing number of voters, the underlying response to events seems to be a profound disengagement from political participation. In his 1992 book, *We the People*, reporter William Greider suggested that voters had already concluded that election campaigns, "like television commercials," were far more a matter of entertainment than a matter of deep commitment. The emotional images on the screen gave voters an "imagined moment of aroused feeling—a transient emotional bond with those who will hold power, a chance to identify with certain idealized qualities, but not an opportunity to connect with real governing power." Greider's observation may explain why younger voters, even more sophisticated and jaded than their elders, are dropping off the voting rolls in growing numbers—a decline that has been taking place on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Greider, *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (New York and other cities, 1992), 278 and 437n4; and London *Independent*, September 24, 1995, sec. 3, p. 3.



The politics of rage invite instability as well as cynicism. For, despite election year promises, the welfare state will not wither away, and the public insistence on government-mandated “moral values” and “individual empowerment” through the “free enterprise system” will never restore a lost Eden. And so the electorate may be off in search of Oz, chasing will-of-the-wisp candidates like Ross Perot who offer little more than slogans and the promise of voter “empowerment” through the global village of television town meetings. Or they will turn to other, far more dangerous demagogues.

Much has changed in southern and American politics in the years since 1958 when George Wallace promised his close friends that he would “never be outniggered again.” Wallace himself quickly learned to adapt with the times. Over the next fifteen years, he showed how a politician—by using language that was not explicitly racial but unmistakable in its symbolic intent—could have the best of both worlds. He could reap the benefits of some of the most reprehensible attitudes in our culture while innocently proclaiming the purest of motives. Racism—though it continued as a constant subtext in American politics over the next three decades—does not wear the rhetorical garments of earlier generations.

But surely the bleaker moments in the history of our own region, as well as our nation, should serve as a warning that any attempt to build solidarity and purposefulness by demonizing and scapegoating the powerless strikes at the very fabric of a Democratic culture traditionally based upon toleration, inclusiveness, and consensus. And ultimately it will be self-defeating.