Reclaiming the Center: The Case for a Ceasefire in America's Culture War

By Marjorie Smith

Partisan news sources of all political stripes would have us believe that there's a war raging on in American society. Increasingly prevalent is the notion that America is in the grips of what some despairing analysts (and gleeful news anchors) have labeled a "Culture War"- the ultimate expression of our increasingly polarized political life, in which the two competing viewpoints stay in their own yards, only seeking out media sources that validate their existing ideals, and lobbing attacks across the fence at the enemy camp.

The Culture War mentality has become so pervasive that battle jargon is an accepted part of our everyday news cycle, to the point that most Americans are not phased when the controversies and policies under discussion are immediately framed as being part of, not just a broader ideological debate between two opposing parties, but an all-out war. Journalists, politicians, and policy pushers from every sphere of influence are guilty of this polarization fear mongering. They present a political landscape in which reasoned speech geared towards compromise is exhausted. To the consumer of American news media, it seems only bitter conflict remains between the two competing factions of the Culture War.

Recent studies affirm that the state of Culture War did not arise naturally from ideological divides in the U.S.—it is a product of our media and political environment. The hyper-defensive rhetoric of Culture War, which pits the public against each other based on their differing value narratives, serves as useful fodder during contentious elections and policy disputes; a distortion often utilized by the vocal minorities hanging on to the fringe of the American left and right. Left unchallenged, however, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that seeps into American political consciousness at every level, and blurs the line between healthy partisan sparring and harmful discord within our democracy. The commonly accepted notion is that, by and large, Americans hold views

that follow one of two prevailing ideologies: "the culturally orthodox, who hold a traditional, religious, absolutist view of morality, and the culturally progressive, who hold a modern, secular, relativistic view of morality.[1]" This is more broadly and simply summed up as the competing narratives of Conservative and Liberal Progressive ideology. What the American public observes as a trend of mounting tension between political camps in the U.S., made worse by consistent media caricatures of who populates the left and right sides of the aisle, lead many to believe that the scope of cultural division in America is great enough to warrant the diagnosis of Culture War. This misconception persists despite the many data-supported assurances that we remain, overwhelmingly, a politically centrist nation. In fact, a 2014 Pew Poll affirms that a healthy thirty-nine percent of Americans view themselves as centrists, and the majority of partisan Americans still occupy a position in the center-left or center-right of the spectrum of American politics.[2]

The reality of America's centrism is overshadowed by the sensationalized rhetoric of Culture War that has become commonplace. This distortion is propagated by the media we consume, which frames events and narratives to fuel ideological hostilities- to the point where both sides truly believe that their values, ideals, and very way of life

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is under attack, as though coexistence or balance is not an option. All day long updates from the front lines of the Culture War float by on social media and network news feeds: the War on Business, the War on Women, the War on Christmas, the War on the Middle Class, and so on. When MSNBC discusses the 2016 GOP race as a "relaunch" of the "culture wars," and Fox News laments that Christians may have "lost the culture war," they're indulging in this sensationalized narrative.[34] While there are most certainly identifiable and competing moral narratives in the United States, media outlets overstate this in their constant invoking of Culture War. They take for granted the idea that all Conservatives and Liberals sit on polar opposite ends of every issue, cohesive in their worldviews and what informs them, ramped up for a fight and not looking for a moderate balance--despite the data that says otherwise.

The result of this sensationalism is a mindset that is detrimental to honest discourse and bipartisan policymaking. In wartime, our traditional respect for the marketplace of ideas, and the necessity of weighing a multitude of perspectives to achieve balanced political outcomes, is abandoned in order to deal with the immediate threat to our values posed by the cultural opposition. 27% of Democrats now perceive Republicans as a "threat to the well-being of the country," while 36% of Republicans fear the Democratic Party will be our undoing. [5]The acceptance of the Culture War may liven up the news cycle and fire the public up online, but it is ultimately harmful for democracy. The rigid, moral narratives we sub-

scribe to about what each group represents cause a knee-jerk disdain for the opposing side- which naturally disinclines us to consider aspects of their viewpoint. The consequences for policy-making are clear: the average "consistent liberal" believes that Obama should be "meeting congressional Republicans only one-third of the way," while "consistent conservatives" on average believe that "congressional Republicans should get 66% of what they want, while Obama should get just 34% of what he wants.[6]" It is worth emphasizing that this concerning break with a commitment to bipartisan decision-making is reflective of those sitting in the strongly partisan camps, and not the middle. Even so, these levels of political hostility are informed by Culture War, and are perpetuated in part by its continued place in our national conversation.

An article published in Stanford Social Innovation Review by Andrew J. Hoffman, Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan, takes the examination of this issue a step further. Hoffman suggests that when it comes to wedge issues like climate change, loyalty to partisan allegiances often prevent people from examining data objectively. There have been significant fluctuations of Americans' belief in climate change in just the last decade; it was found that "the percentage of Conservatives and Republicans who believe that the effects of global warming have already begun declined from roughly 50 percent in 2001 to about 30 percent in 2010, while the corresponding percentage for liberals and Democrats increased from roughly 60 percent in 2001 to about 70 percent in 2010." The Culture

War mentality is cited as the reason why the "scientific consensus" on the issue is being ignored, and why party alignment can reliably predict an individual's stance on an issue as vital as the environment.[7] Hoffman concludes that productive discussions on how to tackle climate change are often stalled by the Culture War and its shaping of political attitudes, which can have very real consequences for public opinion, and ultimately for public policy.

The issue of climate change, he maintains, remains in question despite broad scientific rulings because it "provokes a violent debate among cultural communities on one side who perceive their values to be threatened by change, and cultural communities on the other side who perceive their values to be threatened by the status quo." In other words, strongly partisan Conservatives and Liberals are too busy trying to defend their respective moral grounds to have a reasonable exchange. To begin to tackle the pressing issue of climate change as a nation, Hoffman believes that the only way to see beyond the "ideological filters" that define the discourse on environmental issues is to engage the "majority in the middle.[8]"

As far as how we arrived at this point, tracing the Culture War back to its origin reveals a pivotal shift in the nature of American political consciousness that began our decline into hyper defensive rhetoric. Following a period of depolarization after World War II, the importance of partisan identities and the role they play in predicting voting behavior was observed to reach "its highest level in at least 50 years" in the mid-nineties.[9] It was at this time that the "polarization narra-

tive" became central to political discourse. Emphasis on wedge issues like abortion, gay marriage, and climate change, which had been steadily moving into the forefront of the national conversation since the 1970's, highlighted the sharper contrast between the moral values of Conservatives and Liberals, and culminated in the nineties with the expression of deep polarization anxieties. [10] Politicians and pundits, making the logical leap that the upswing of partisan polarization also reflected mass cultural polarization, began sounding the drums of Culture War. This came to life visually in the form of the now iconic red and blue map of the United States, unveiled by network news stations in the early 2000s to provide a more stirring visual for election tracking. This image, neatly dividing the nation along regional, cultural lines has grown to represent our understanding of the political landscape of the U.S. completely; an oversimplification that we take for granted when we speak of red and blue states as though their populations are uniform, clustered around the same space of the far left or right of the spectrum. [11]

Though the familiar narrative of escalating political tension is seldom questioned by the American public, recent studies cast doubt on the assumed connection between partisan polarization and Culture War. The categorization of Americans as centrists, grouped between the center-left and center-right of the political spectrum, still holds true.[12] Additionally, a 2008 study published in the Annual Review of Political Science attributes the widespread fears of mass polarization to the phenomenon of "party sorting" that has

taken place in American politics in recent decades. Party sorting is the "increased correlation between policy views and party identification," which also correlates with the rise of "elite polarization" along party lines. The researchers maintain that, although the effect of elite and party polarization has been the drawing of more distinct partisan lines on the issues, and the shrinking of the moderate base on both sides of the lawmaking aisle, the American public on the whole has not followed suit.[13]

Meanwhile, despite the continued vitality of the American political center, claims of Culture War keep cropping up. Media outlets either decry the breakdown of American solidarity, or choose sides. It's not difficult to see why the American public is feeling pessimistic about political gridlock when publications like *The Atlantic* beg the question of "Are Liberals Losing the Culture Wars?" as though the validity of the Culture War itself bears no consideration.[14] In reality, mass polarization has not occurred to an extent that comes close to warranting such a diagnosis; press accounts of crippling ideological divides among the general public are revealed, on closer inspection, to be more alarmist than fact-informed.[15] 2014 Pew Poll data affirms that, for the most part, it's the already strongly partisan camps that are experiencing more drastic levels of polarization-- with ninety-two percent of Republicans polling as "more conservative than the median Democrat," and ninety-four percent of Democrats polling as "more liberal than the median Republican." The middle, however, is still in favor of balanced policy outcomes. The same Pew Poll re-

ports that the "majority [of Americans] do not have uniformly conservative or liberal views. Most do not see either party as a threat to the nation. And more believe their representatives in government should meet halfway to resolve contentious disputes rather than hold out for more of what they want.[16]"

The claim that polarization has directly given rise to the Culture War is also challenged, as the study maintained that "the worldviews of Americans, like their sociocultural characteristics, turn out on close inspection to imply less about political polarization than is often assumed.[17]" In other words, the link between polarization and cultural disparities is weaker than Culture War mongers would have the American public believe. While the rhetoric declaring the onset of a culture war arose naturally out of polarization concerns, the question of to what degree political polarization is on the rise has minimal bearing on the legitimacy of the Culture War, because Culture War is the way we collectively engage in political discourse- it's a matter of choice. The doomsayers perpetuating this narrative are offering a grim diagnosis while ignoring the cure; diffusing the hysteria over political hostilities by looking to the center, instead of the disproportionately represented views of the vocal minorities.

The epidemic of political hostility is shown to be greatly exaggerated in one sense, and a legitimate concern in another. On one hand, it can be fairly said that the Culture War is more a product of political manipulation and media sensationalism, in reaction to concerns about growing polarization, than it is true reflection of the scope of the cul-

tural gap between most people who identify as either a Conservative or a Liberal in America. On the other hand, the widespread belief in the Culture War has indeed fueled hostilities between opposing parties to the point where it defines discourse. The only hope for a truce is to debunk the exaggerated cultural gap by engaging in meaningful exchange.

It is true, we are a nation divided. There are regional, ideological, cultural separations. While this naturally lends itself to political tussling, it is important to remember that in a democracy as diverse as ours, there is nothing inherently wrong with being divided. A healthy democracy is a living thing, messy and even volatile at times. We are locked in the same state of ideological sparring that has existed, in varying forms, since the founding of our nation. It is not the existence of opposing parties, or even the possibility of rising polarization, that threatens the health of our democracy, but rather the notion that we are at war. War must not to be accepted as the standard state of affairs in our political discourse; wars represent the frustration of productive discourse, as they are what nations resort to when diplomacy fails. In war, one party aims to defeat the other, weaken them to the point of irrelevancy. Democracy is about group consensus, the constant struggle between multitudes of perspectives for policy outcomes-- but in the context of a Culture War, opposing sides actually try to silence each other. The waging of Culture War is not a natural byproduct of polarization- it is a choice we make every day that we accept an extreme representation of ourselves as valid.

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4   Starnes, Todd. "Have Christians Lost the Culture War? | Fox News." Fox News. February 20, 2014. Accessed October 28, 2015.

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14   Ball, Molly. "Are Liberals Losing the Culture Wars?" The Atlantic. Nov 4. 2015. Accessed November 10, 2015.

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16   "Political Polarization in the American Public." People-press.org.

17   Fiorina, Morris P., and Samuel J. Abrams. "Political polarization in the American public."