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The Never-Ending War: The Battle Over America's Self-Meaning

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It seems unfair, after such a lovely morning—and given how additionally pleasant it is for me personally to see so many old friends in this place—that I should have to talk, and that you should have to listen to me talk, about something as disagreeable as an age-old and not easily to be reconciled conflict.

My association with The Heritage Foundation is one of the chief happinesses of my life, but this is not the first time that I have been asked by my Heritage friends to be the bearer of bad news. And what I am about to discuss with you today is nothing more cheering than the ongoing war within and about American culture: the schools, the arts, the press, along with all those subsidiary things that, taken together, go by the name of the popular culture—movies, television, popular fiction, and so on.

Given the choice, I would much rather talk about America's *military* wars of the past century. For with only one exception (well, maybe two exceptions, one of them minor and inconsequential), these wars have brought great good to millions upon millions of different peoples around the globe. Think about it: Never has a nation played so benign a role in the world. (The Israelis have a joke: One Israeli says to another, "I've figured out what we need for our future well-being. Let's declare war on the United States and lose.")

The one truly glaring exception to this record, of course, is Vietnam. And we know how and why the United States failed in Vietnam: First, the war was entered into with the kind of high-school bravado that characterized the Kennedy Administration's foreign

Talking Points

- America's cultural war has been going on for about a century and a half. The clash of ideas and attitudes that made such noise in the 1960s and 1970s and has continued in recent years is no more than a particularly gaudy episode in a very old conflict.
- Many people have completely failed to understand the course of American radicalism. Until the bitter end, some form of socialism (up to and including the Communist Party) has remained a project financed by and culturally led by the privileged.
- After World War II, the power of the intellectuals expanded exponentially as the colleges and universities grew like Topsy to accommodate the returning veterans. The change in the role of the universities may have been the single most altering cultural circumstance in the country's current history.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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policy. It was continued uncertainly, though vastly expanded, by Lyndon Johnson. And finally, for Nixon, conducting the war in Vietnam became primarily a strategy for getting out of that poor beset country with at least a shred of honor.

Of course, we know why Johnson and Nixon were unable to turn Vietnam into an honorable and ultimately beneficial military undertaking: not because of what was happening in Vietnam itself but because of the hostilities back here in the United States. Indeed, Vietnam might be the only case in history in which it was the young men who were allowed to remain safely and comfortably at home who made a national cause out of the injustices they claimed to be enduring—injustices, they said, they were being made to suffer at the hands of the oppressive “system” under which it was their unhappy fate to live.

The Critical Divide

In any case, whichever side of the war one was on, by the 1970s, there was consensus all around about one thing: In the eyes of those who supported the war as well as of those who opposed it, Vietnam was understood to have uncovered a critical divide in the country. In other words, that war had been the occasion not merely for a serious disagreement over policy, but for something much deeper: deeper socially and deeper culturally.

To state the matter very crudely, the divide over the war had turned out mainly to be one between the children of privilege, a most significant number of whom spent the war years horsing around in school with drugs and protests while being praised for their moral superiority, and the children of the “ordinary” folk—people who lived, as a very popular and very ugly folk-style song of the time had it, in “ticky-tacky houses” and who, happily or not, submitted loyally to what their government demanded of them.

By now, of course, that particular social aspect of the divide has become rather clouded over. That is, the young people who had been, as they said of themselves, too sensitive and idealistic to “join the system” somehow, before too many years had gone by, found themselves all unexpectedly engaged in such sensitive and idealistic pastimes as making

money hand over fist on Wall Street. And there they have learned to live shoulder to shoulder—bonus to bonus—with boys who had not marched and protested but either had served in the war or had kept their noses to the grindstone in order to be able to make themselves a better life. Whatever these young men’s respective political loyalties had been in the dark times of Vietnam, not too many years later as culture is counted, they were to be seen standing shoulder to shoulder gazing with equal longing through the windows of some Maserati showroom.

In other words, the social distinctions once reflected in the country’s division over Vietnam were to become less and less evident beneath the flood of wealth that was unleashed in those post-war years—an economic leveling process, by the way, that has taken place with few interruptions—and only one major exception—throughout the history of the United States.

The Cultural War

Culturally, however—as distinct from economically—the story is something else entirely. When we speak about “the culture war,” which most of us—certainly most of us in this room—have been doing lately with growing frequency and concern, we are in fact speaking about a phenomenon that is more than a century old.

It is admittedly hard to calibrate cultural phenomena, by which I mean things as hard to pin down as ideas and attitudes and beliefs. Polling, bean counting, social-science research in the end actually tell us very little about such things, for they lie way beneath the realm of opinion. But it does seem to me safe to say that the old cultural antagonisms that have persisted for so long are, if anything, now intensifying. They have crept into everything, into places to which even the most profound antagonisms of the past never reached: from the question, for instance, of how to teach the ABCs to the problem of how to define marriage, to the nation’s eating habits, to its idea of what is entertaining—and that is without even mentioning the issue of religion and all the beliefs and ideas that pertain thereto.

To be sure, America’s internal battle of warring attitudes and beliefs is one in which no actual bullets are exchanged or bombs dropped, no bodies

left to fester on some far-off war-torn field. In that sense, it is not bloody like the religious wars of the past (and indeed, those of the present).

Still, it would be a mistake to imagine that wars of words and ideas, and of ways of living, have not claimed lives. They have, sometimes most cruelly. Consider as just one example that corner of the struggle that has, for something like 40 years now, been devoted to the issue of recreational drugs. The debate continues—as if there were anything to debate—and children continue to lose their lives, literally as well as figuratively. I will not even speak of the monstrosity that has been made of race and all the lives that have been claimed by it.

The first and most important thing of all for any real understanding of the nature of America's cultural war is the fact that it has been going on not merely since the period identified by the name of "Vietnam" but for about a century and a half. That clash of ideas and attitudes that made such a deal of noise in the 1960s and 1970s—and which has continued more quietly and more deeply in recent years—is in fact no more than a particularly gaudy episode in a very old conflict.

I like to say that this conflict began on July 8, 1839. Why that day in that year? Obviously, historical developments can never really be dated quite so neatly, or neatly at all, especially where such developments have to do with culture. Anyway, I am, of course, being somewhat facetious.

Still, a date is sometimes helpful in giving one perspective, and I have picked the date of July 8, 1839, because that was the day that witnessed the birth of one John Davison Rockefeller, Sr. And some time around that year, too, an already 45-year-old gentleman named Cornelius Vanderbilt was planning how he would become the owner of a certain public utility that would before long prove to be of major importance to the economic development of the United States, namely, the New York Central Railroad. I could go on and on: a list of John D. Rockefeller's and Cornelius Vanderbilt's contemporaries who were responsible for the explosive creation and expansion of American industry, for business innovation, for the newly creative exploitation of natural resources—such a list could keep us here all after-

noon, sunk in envy for these men's visions and the sheer moxie with which they converted their visions into a reality. The government of course helped, but mostly by keeping out of their way.

An Economic Miracle

The result, as we know and experience for ourselves down to this day, was a positive explosion of wealth: the private wealth of Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and their fellow adventurers, to be sure, but way beyond that, there was the wealth, the belief in self, the venturesomeness, inventiveness, openness to the new that before too long came to be characteristic of the country as a whole. Of course, they did not do it all, this band of adventurers, but they led the way and helped to give anyone who was enterprising, on however large or small a scale, the faith to take his future into his own hands.

Moreover, while these men were preparing their economic miracle, the country was going through the bitter bloodletting of the Civil War—the kind of national catastrophe from which, without their kind of faith in a future of wealth and vitality, a society might never quite recover. And in the end, the United States grew to be rich and powerful beyond the dreams of the most murderously avaricious emperor.

So now we come to the question that bears on my unhappy subject—culture: Were these men in their own time blessed, celebrated, honored for their achievement by America's thinkers and writers? Need I ask? Look in any history book; and look at the writings of the time: These men were then, and have continued to be, designated the "Robber Barons"—with no admiration, let alone gratitude, intended.

It is true that many of these men tended to revel in, and make a great and not necessarily attractive public show of, their wealth. Although, in addition to living like emperors, some of them were also, as we know, very civic-minded—throughout the land there are cities with libraries, opera houses, settlement houses, museums that are owed entirely to their largesse. And some of them (though most definitely not, I regret to say, Cornelius Vanderbilt) were also, in one way or another, charitable toward their less favored fellow citizens.

But if it is also true that the kind of generous public and patriotic spirit that is so vividly on display in this room today was rare, or even simply absent, among these men, they did set a course that would in the end, whether they willed it or not, prove to be indispensable to the country's welfare.

So—and now we come to the question of the day—were they honored, appreciated, or let us even say *forgiven* by the keepers of the country's social and intellectual authority? Need I ask? The term “Robber Barons” says it all.

The Cultural Dictators

And who, in those days, were the authorities on what might or might not be considered cultural virtue? The designated cultural authorities of a century ago were made up of a combination that will not seem so very unfamiliar to anyone in this room: the high-born of old pedigree, the elite colleges, the literary establishment, and those institutions of the press that took their cue from their presumed betters.

Of course, the country was smaller then, and, in addition, it was for a long time uncertain of its own cultural value. Astonishing as it must seem to us now, for instance, before World War II, the classics of American literature—Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Mark Twain, and company—were not taught in the literature courses of the country's best universities. Indeed, it was only after World War II that the alterations in society unleashed during that war, along with a new sense of American self-confidence, made it possible for all the former stuffy Anglophile English departments to take American literary work—and the society that produced it—seriously.

Nor before then had immigrants and their lives yet made their cultural mark. They were, at the very best, considered “colorful” and, at the very worst...Well, why go into it? The story is told about one Peter Rossi, for instance, who was to become a distinguished professor at Amherst, member of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, that when he first arrived at Harvard as an undergraduate, a number of his fellow students expressed their wonderment at how quickly and

how well he had learned to speak English: It had simply not occurred to them that an Italian born in the United States could have found his way into Harvard College.

After that first period of freewheeling industrialization, many developments in the country would both enlarge and alter the makeup of the community of America's cultural dictators. Is “dictators” too strong a word to use? I don't think so. To take just one example, name me the really prestigious newspaper in this country whose editorial policy has ever veered one millimeter off the track of elite opinion. (I know: some of you at this moment may be objecting as you think of *The Wall Street Journal*, but you should know that the *Journal's* editorial page, so long a source of political sanity to so many of us, is a kind of fluke: Members of the rest of the staff at the paper have been heard to boast of how they wipe their shoes with the editorial page each morning.)

Anyway, back to the late 19th–early 20th century: The cultural elite grew as the country grew, and expanded its range of targets. The “Robber Barons” began to share pride of place as villains and vulgarians with certain other kinds of Americans, particularly those living in the small cities of the Middle West, whose life was now being depicted in celebrated novel after celebrated novel as petty, mean, spiritually impoverished, and ultimately a kind of living death.

And so, now added to the Robber Barons among the cultural myths was a figure called Babbitt. Babbitt is both the title and the name of the hero of a novel by Sinclair Lewis, published to great acclaim in 1922. I doubt anyone reads *Babbitt* now, or anything else by Sinclair Lewis for that matter, but his figure somehow remains among the images employed by the high culture to assert the moral and intellectual poverty of everyday American life. Babbitt is a provincial Middle-Western small businessman who knows nothing about, and lives in resistant fear of, the great world beyond his own small and fatally restricted life.

Between the so-called Robber Barons and the so-called Babbitts, then, it would seem that by the 1920s, in the eyes of the country's high culture, the

only way to live attractively in this crude young land was either as the beneficiary of a trust fund or as a defiantly starving occupant of an artist's garret. I exaggerate, of course. But not by much.

Snobbery and Radicalism

Another significant feature of this relatively new high-culture snobbery was how completely it was being served and colored by political radicalism. Radical attitudes were, of course, the source of the very term "Robber Barons." How, then, would it not follow that those who had no need of, or those who felt themselves artistically above, taking part in the economic and social life of the vast majority of their fellow Americans would not find virtue in declaring themselves socialists?

Many people have not understood this and have thus been bewildered by, or have completely failed to understand, the course of American radicalism. Until the bitter end—which, come to think of it, has been far from definitively reached even now—some form of socialism (up to and including the Communist Party in its day) has remained a project both financed by and culturally led by the privileged. Except for those whose passion and/or daily occupation was to fight the Communists, few people seemed to have understood this about them. It is, after all, one of the saving blessings of this society that the overwhelming majority of people tend to go about their daily lives caring for their own families and neighborhoods and minding their own business. At the same time, this was one of the reasons, for instance, that so many people had a hard time believing in the guilt of a fine high-class guy like Alger Hiss.

This inclination to find grievous fault with the United States and to gravitate to the idea of a society governed by a powerful elite was especially to be found among the artists and intellectuals. They, after all, knew better than the common lot of their fellow citizens what would be best for some abstract entity they like to call "the people." Alas for them, they have always lacked the power to make it happen—in the United States, that is; other countries have not been so well-equipped to resist their intellectuals, from the Soviet Union all the way to Western Europe.

In any case, since the people bearing the greatest cultural power in America have never borne the responsibility of government, and are never likely to, they have been granted an uncommon amount of both freedom and authority. Still, how so many people in Hollywood and the theater and the radio and publishing and, yes, now and then even in some agencies of the United States government managed to spend years blinding themselves to the fact that in Soviet America they would be the first ones off to the gulag is something probably only their psychoanalysts could say for sure.

In the end, of course, the stench of Soviet Communism was too much for all but the most die-hard, and they found a variety of substitutes for their totalitarian heroes in a spate of movements: the anti-war movement, for instance, or the Greens or all the others whose driving purpose has been to cripple the American economy for the sake of some higher virtue.

The Growing Power of the Academy

After World War II, the power of the intellectuals expanded exponentially as the colleges and universities grew like Topsy to accommodate the returning veterans. And as both a consequence of and a gigantic boost to the newfound prominence of the professoriat, a new idea came to be American public gospel: that is, that everyone—as a matter both of justice and economic necessity—was owed the opportunity for a college education. Opportunity then quickly turned into necessity, which then turned into an even greater new accession of academic power.

This change in the role of the universities may indeed have been the single most altering cultural circumstance in the country's current history. Such a development clearly depended entirely on the vast and growing wealth of the United States. And thereon hangs the greatest irony of all, for the country was embarked on a gigantic project whose main cultural impulse was, in the end, to turn the children in its keeping against the very system that made it possible.

Fortunately, except for a noisy minority, the project has not been completely successful in realizing the cultural ambition behind it. The universi-

ties do not exclusively rule: for one reason, because some of the students are too smart; for another, and on the other hand, because many, many more of those in its keeping pay only so much attention to what is being taught as they need to earn their degrees; and finally, because many of those academic leaders who would be the worst offenders have grown fat and lazy and have basically ceased to teach.

Still, the wild expansion of the academy has been successful enough to create a serious cultural crisis. For a century and a half, it has been the case that the arbiters of culture have refused to bless the American system, both its government and its economy. That is to say, the country went one way and its privileged aristocracy and thinkers and artists went another. But that didn't used to matter so much. The country was large, and the ways of thinking were various enough and scattered enough for that divide not to be so consequential.

Now everything contrives to make us one: Thanks to the innumerable achievements of technology along with the wealth it has spread everywhere, distance no longer matters, climate no longer matters, American speech has largely been standardized, and habits of leisure and the means of entertainment are the same everywhere. And almost everyone goes to school and stays there for a long time.

Thus, without the resistance to the will to power of the country's cultural elite—the resistance that

is supplied by most people's blessed habit of tending to their own business along with the conscious resistance of the country's determined and active patriots—you—we might be, as they say, in the soup.

Conclusion: The Conservative Counterculture

And there is something else—something whose effect is very cheering: among other things, accounting for this very building in which we are meeting and for our being here together today. That is the recent determination of the likes of us, the American conservative community, to create a counterculture—it would not be good for us to forget just how very recent.

It is, I think, far, far too soon for us to celebrate our achievements. We are as yet too embattled—and, in my opinion, too caught up in the tides and turnings of electoral politics—to arrive at any judgment about the permanence of our successes.

But I remind myself, on the other hand, that there are those kids in Iraq, who are reintroducing into the public consciousness the virtues of bravery and determination and love of country so long forgotten by a people grown stale in its blessings and privileges. May their tribe increase.

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