



## Whatever Happened to the Culture War?

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October 7, 2016

Last week's presidential debate between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump was a major media spectacle, drawing an estimated 80 million TV viewers. For all the rancor and mudslinging that passed as high-minded debate, what was most remarkable was the virtual absence of any reference to major culture war issues. Neither candidate addressed abortion, gay rights, family values and the Bible, issues that had deformed presidential debates of the past four decades.

At the debate, Trump and Clinton sparred over issues ranging from national security and the economy to their initial support for the Iraq war, inner-city crime and Pres. Obama alleged foreign birth or being a secret Muslim. The debate's high-mindedness was demonstrated in the endless series of personal attacks that went back and forth, like a bad tennis match, between the candidates. Most offensive were Trump's stream of racist comments and sexist invectives concerning Clinton's temperament and "stamina."

After the lights went out and the candidates went back to the campaign trail, one was left with a curious question: What happened to the culture war? For decades, presidential debates, let alone elections, were shaped by the reputed moral issues advanced by the Christian right. Most remarkable, all reference to abortion and gay rights were noticeably absent from the September 26<sup>th</sup> spectacle. Does the 2016 election mark the end of the Christian right's culture war? Or has it become "normalized" as an implicit, unstated positions distinguishing Democrats from Republicans, Clinton from Trump?

In 1972, Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative activist and lawyer, spearheaded a campaign to block the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Schlafly and other conservatives, infuriated by '60s political and cultural radicalism, focused their rage against the ERA. They opposed the proposed amendment for a variety of reasons: it would eliminate the male-only draft and require women to register; it would open up military combat roles to women; it would support taxpayer-funded abortions; it would legalize homosexual marriages; and it would lead to unisex bathrooms. Looking back, their objections have become the new normal.

Schlafly was further incensed in 1973 when an all-male Supreme Court issued its landmark decision, *Roe v. Wade*, that permitted "Jane Roe" to have an abortion. The Court argued that Texas' attempt to block the abortion was a violation of the plaintiff's constitutional right to privacy. The Roman Catholic Church and many fundamentalist Protestants shared Schlafly's outrage. Their collective efforts helped forge the culture war.

In '72, and parallel to the rise of the Christian right, Pres. Richard Nixon waged his successful reelection campaign against George McGovern. Nixon built his political career exploiting cultural issues. In '48, then-Rep. Nixon (R-CA) was a member of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) and first grilled Alger Hiss, the president of the Carnegie Endowment and a former senior State Department official, over his alleged communist ties. Later that year, he orchestrated a televised showdown between Whittaker Chambers and Hiss at the U.S. Capitol. His anticommunist fervor was both genuine and opportunistic, similar to his animus toward 1960s Vietnam War protesters and the counterculture. Often forgotten, Pres. Nixon was in favor of abortion rights and supported the Court's decision, but only in limited cases: "There are times when an abortion is necessary. I know that," he admitted. "When you have a black and a white or a rape."

Patrick Buchanan, a top Nixon advisor, promoted the "Southern strategy" that continues to guide the Republican party. It was a devil's bargain struck by conservative and racist politicians with white voters to protect traditional "white skin privilege" through the ballot. It fueled the shift of conservative white Southern voters from the Democratic to the Republican Party and, as applied to the North, targeted the "Silent Majority," mainly older generation, blue collar white people who were often veterans and supporters of the Vietnam War. The strategy successfully harnessed many white voters deeply felt prejudices with regard to racism, patriarchy and homophobia into a powerful political movement.

Pres. Jimmy Carter was a born-again Christian evangelical who, running in '76, got the support of Rev. Jerry Falwell and his political group, the Moral Majority. The organization prided itself as being "pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, and pro-American," the hallmarks of the growing Christian right. However, Carter's support for rescinding the tax-exempt status of Southern "segregation academies" and refusing to vehemently support a total ban on abortion led the Christian right to back Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. While Reagan championed many conservative economic and foreign policies, and was supported by the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, among others, Falwell complained that he, like Carter, did not fight enough to end abortion.

However, two art exhibits in the late-'80s ignited a cultural storm that led to a real "culture war" and a battle over federal funding for the arts. In 1987, late in Reagan's tenure, Andres Serrano's photograph, *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, was exhibited at New York's Stux Gallery and led to a storm of criticism. Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) denounced it, "This so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity"; Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) joined in the condemnation, "... he [Serrano] is not an artist, he is a jerk. . . . Let him be a jerk on his own time and with his own resources. Do not dishonor our Lord."

Two years later, during George H.W. Bush's tenure, Robert Mapplethorpe's photos, *The Perfect Moment*, were scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. However, the gallery, under pressure from its board, Congressional members and the conservative American Family Association, pressured it to refuse to exhibit the works. These incidents culminated in conservative attacks on what were identified as the "arts elite" and led Congress to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

The '92 presidential campaign was fiercely contested, especially among Republicans. Bush was challenged by former Nixon aide, Buchanan, who championed a far-right agenda, arguing for an

all-out culture war: “There is a religious war going on in our country ... it is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” In the end, Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton. However, in 1994, the Republicans gained control of Congress for the first time since 1954 and backed what was called *Contract with America*. It intoned a new conservative political values system based on “the end of government that is too big, too intrusive and too easy with the public’s money. It can be the beginning of a Congress that respects the values and shares the faith of the American family.”

Conservative Congressional efforts culminated in the House’s impeachment of Pres. Bill Clinton. Having failed in efforts to pass constitutional amendments on school prayer or abortion, the right mobilized behind Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Rep. Tom DeLay (R-TX) over Clinton’s sexual encounters with a White House intern; DeLay insisted that Clinton was unfit to be president because he lacked the correct “biblical worldview.” (Going unreported, while Clinton’s impeachment was underway, Gingrich was having an affair with a young woman on the congressional payroll.)

George W. Bush’s two terms as president can be considered the high-point of Christian right’s influence on federal policy. In the wake of 9/11, he announced “Mission Accomplished” and led the invasion of Iraq. Domestically, he pledged to extend federal funding to religious groups that provided social services, especially those promoting abstinence to young people. (Nearly all monies went to Christian groups even though conservative Jewish and Islamic organizations shared these values.) Bush fulfilled his pledge and the abstinence-only crusade was a failure.

In 2011, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that 26 percent of young women between 14 and 19 years of age were infected with at least one of the four most common sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). It estimated that 3.2 million teenage girls in America were infected with one or more of human papillomavirus (HPV), chlamydia, herpes simplex virus and/or trichomoniasis. This situation was further compounded by the fact that between 60 and 80 percent of the half million adolescent girls giving birth each year lived in poverty and came from low-income families. The ACLU reported the federal government spent more than \$700 million between 1997 and 2007 on abstinence-only programs.

It is often forgotten that in March 2003, Massachusetts’ highest court legalized same-sex marriage and that its ruling was followed by similar actions in San Francisco, Portland, OR, and New Paltz, NY. Conservative forces in Congress reacted vehemently, unsuccessfully attempting in ’04 to constitutionally ban gay marriage; voters in 13 states passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. This momentum helped Bush win reelection. When Obama was elected in ’08, Pew Research found that a majority of Americans (between 55% and 65%) opposed same-sex marriage.

During Obama presidency, the Christian right’s culture war has been stymied. As sex was increasingly integrated into the marketplace, the Christian right shifted its focus to a “death-by-a-thousand-cuts” strategy. It leveraged its declining national influence into numerous state level campaigns targeted at abortion rights as well as gay and transsexual rights. The Guttmacher Institutes reported in 2015 dozens of state legislations considered 514 measures regarding abortion and 396 sought to restrict access to abortion. Lawmakers targeted their anti-abortion efforts under such nomenclatures as “partial-birth abortions,” “informed consent,” “20-week restrictions” and “parental notification”; they required abortion providers to adhere to the

standards set for ambulatory surgical centers and to have admitting privileges at a local hospital; and they sought to close Planned Parenthood birth-control and health centers.

Federal and state courts have rejected many of these actions. Recent major Supreme Court decisions, including *U.S. v Windsor* (2013), *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) and *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016), ensure that abortion remains the law of the land and homosexuals can marry and receive other legal protections. Key governmental policy changes like gays and transsexuals in the U.S. military illustrate how the nation's cultural landscape has changed and the Christian right's campaign to restrict sexual experience and expression has eroded.

The first debate in the 2016 presidential electoral circus is over and the candidates are pressing on toward the November showdown. For four decades, the culture war was fought over such deeply divisive issues as abortion, birth control, homosexuality and teen sexuality. Those days are over. Commercial sex is a \$50 billion industry and sex between adults and age-appropriate youths is acceptable as long as it is truly consensual. While unstated, both Clinton and Trump appear to adhere to this new moral order, but in their own ways.

Trump appears to accept very different culture values than traditional culture-war Republicans like his running mate, Mike Pence, an old-style Christian conservative who would make scholars proud. For Trump, the culture war seems to have morphed into something at once more ephemeral and profound. The concept of "America First" seems to anchor both his cultural or moral concerns as well as his economic and foreign-policy positions. Trump's universe is rational: "Not only have our citizens endured domestic disaster, but they have lived through one international humiliation after another. One after another. We all remember the images of our sailors being forced to their knees by their Iranian captors at gunpoint ...." His solutions seem confused if not irrational.

As a multiple divorcee, conventional Christian values seem to have little to no meaning for Trump. (One never knows what he really believes in.) A decade-and-a-half ago, Trump supported a woman's right to an abortion but, since 2011, he's come out in opposition to *Roe* and has indicated that, if president, his likely Supreme Court appointments would reverse the landmark decision. He seems to accept gay rights while rejecting gay marriage; he also seems to accept transgender bathrooms. To a gay audience, he declared, "As your president, I will do everything in my power to protect our LGBTQ citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology."

Trump seems, in his own incoherent approach, to see the world as split between black and white, what he believes in and everything else. His domestic policies, especially involving undocumented immigrants, Muslims and economic revitalization, apparently cohere with his foreign policy prognostications, whether involving ISIS and terrorism, China and trade, and NATO and security. Sadly, his coherence is profoundly distorted. The two spheres of Trump's America First policy, domestic and international, serve only to reinforce his demagogic narcissism and the tyranny of the 1 percent.