

PATRICK BUCHANAN

The Culture War for the Soul of America (1992)

During the 1990s, the so-called culture wars enabled volatile social issues to surge to the forefront of political debate. Patrick Joseph ("Pat") Buchanan, a conservative Roman Catholic journalist, television commentator, and politician who served as a senior adviser and speechwriter to Republican presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan, grew so frustrated with the "moderate Republicanism" of George H. W. Bush that he challenged him in the Republican presidential primaries in 1992. The feisty, outspoken, and witty Buchanan ran on a platform calling for immigration restrictions and promoting social conservatism. He sharply opposed abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, and federal funding for the arts, while calling for a return of prayer in public schools. Although Buchanan garnered three million votes in the primaries, he eventually bit his tongue and endorsed Bush. In a fiery keynote address at the 1992 Republican National Convention, Buchanan attacked the Democratic nominee, Bill Clinton, and the cultural values that he and his wife, Hillary, supposedly represented. Buchanan's tirade became known as the "Culture War Speech," in which he described "a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America." To him, the culture war was a political and moral battle between liberal secularism and conservative religion.

"The Culture Wars" from Buchanan.org.

"What do you mean by culture? That's a word they used in Nazi Germany."—Mario Cuomo on *Face the Nation*, Aug. 23, 1992

Mario is not the only one to have recoiled in fear and loathing. Media who have bumbled all over Mario's locutions in class warfare found my Houston speech "divisive," "hateful," and the old standby, "racist." Carl Rowan told his co-panelists on "Inside Washington" it was the closest he had ever heard to a Nazi address. Bob Beckel thought my remarks might have been ghosted by Satan himself.

The savagery of the reaction—ongoing—underscores my point: As polarized as we have ever been, we Americans are locked in a cultural war for the soul of our country.

What is it all about? As columnist Sam Francis writes, it is about power; it is about who determines

"the norms by which we live, and by which we define and govern ourselves." Who decides what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, beautiful and ugly, healthy and sick? Whose beliefs shall form the basis of law?

At Houston, William Rusher writes, America heard "the first rumbles of a new storm...fast approaching the American political arena, [a storm] that will quickly replace the old battles over the conduct of the cold war." Indeed, the storm has already hit the coast.

The Bosnia of the cultural war is abortion.

The Republican Party, in platform and ticket, is "pro-life." I.e., we hold abortion to be the unjust killing of a pre-born child. Bill Clinton's party rejoices in *Roe v. Wade*. To the one side, the 25 million abortions in 20 years are a testament to freedom and progress; to the other, they are the

benchmark of a society literally hellbent on suicide. The conflicting positions can no more be reconciled than those of John Brown and John Calhoun.

Whose side is God on? In an angry letter to President Bush, the National Council of Churches wrote: "We need to be very clear that God belongs to no one side, for we believe all belong to God." Mr. Bush's effort to conscript Him, they wrote, is "blasphemous."

But was it blasphemous to enlist Him at Selma Bridge? Is the Creator truly neutral in the unequal struggle between his tiniest creatures and the abortionist with knife and suction pump?

To those gathered at Madison Square Garden, a man's "sexual preference" and sexual conduct, so long as it is consensual, is irrelevant to moral character. To most of us in Houston, however, it is the codification of amorality to elevate gay liaison to the same moral and legal plane as traditional marriage.

Americans are a tolerant people. But a majority believes that the sexual practices of gays, whether a result of nature or nurture, are both morally wrong and medically ruinous. Many consider this "reactionary" or "homophobic." But our beliefs are rooted in the Old and New Testament, in natural law and tradition, even in the writing of that paragon of the Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson (who felt homosexuality should be punished as severely as rape).

Thirty years ago, both sides in today's cultural war shared the belief that homosexuals, be they 2 or 10 per cent of the population, had the same constitutional rights as the rest of us, as well as a right to be let alone. We still do. Homosexuality was not an issue then. What makes it an issue now is the non-negotiable demand that this "lifestyle" be sanctioned by law, that gays be granted equal rights to marry, adopt and serve as troop leaders in the Boy Scouts.

Let me be blunt: We can't support this. To force it upon us is like forcing Christians to burn incense to the emperor.

But the cultural war is broader than two battlegrounds.

We see it in the altered calendar of holidays we are invited—nay, instructed—to celebrate. Wash-

ington's Birthday disappears into Presidents Day. States, like Arizona, that balk at declaring Martin Luther King's birthday a holiday face political censure and convention boycotts. Easter is displaced by Earth Day, Christmas becomes winter break, Columbus day is now a day to reflect on the cultural imperialism and genocidal racism of the "dead white males" who raped this continent while exterminating its noblest inhabitants.

Secularism's Holy Days of Obligation were not demanded by us; they were imposed on us. And while Gov. Cuomo may plausibly plead ignorance of the culture war, the Hard Left has always understood its criticality.

Give me the child for six years, Lenin reportedly said, quoting the Jesuits, and he will be a Marxist forever. J.V. Stalin, who was partial to Chicago gangster films, thought that if only he had control of Hollywood, he could control the world.

Too many conservatives, writes art critic James Cooper, "never read Mao Tse-tung on waging cultural war against the West. [Mao's] essays were prescribed reading for the Herbert Marcuse generation of the 1960's, who now run our cultural institutions. . . Conservatives were oblivious to the fact that. . . modern art—long ago separated from the idealism of Monet, Degas, Cezanne, and Rodin—had become the purveyor of a destructive, degenerate, ugly, pornographic, Marxist, anti-American ideology." While we were off aiding the Contras, a Fifth Column inside our own country was capturing the culture.

In wartime and postwar movies, the USA was a land worth fighting for, even dying for. But the distance from "The Sands of Iwo Jima" to "Born on the Fourth of July," from "The Song of Bernadette" to "The Last Temptation of Christ," which paints Jesus as a lustful, lying wimp, is more than four decades. Hollywood has crossed a cultural and religious divide—and left us on the other side.

In Eddie Murphy's new film, "Boomerang," every successful black has one obsession: having good sex, and lots of it. I left thinking this film could have been produced by the KKK, so thoroughly did it conform to old Klan propaganda

about blacks being little more than sexual animals. From “The Cosby Show” to “Boomerang” is straight downhill; it is to travel from what is decent to what is decadent.

A sense of shame presupposes a set of standards. In the Old America, Ingrid Bergman, carrying the child of her lover, fled the country in scandal. Today, she would probably be asked to pose naked—and nine months pregnant—on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

Today, the standards are gone. Does it make a difference? Only if you believe books and plays and films and art make a difference in men’s lives. Only if you believe ideas have consequences.

In *The End of Christendom*, the late Malcolm Muggeridge writes that Dostoyevsky, “in his astoundingly prophetic novel, *The Devils* . . . makes his character Peter Vekovinsky . . . say, ‘A generation or two of debauchery followed by a little sweet blood-letting and the turmoil will begin.’ So indeed it has.”

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” wrote poet Shelley. Does it make a difference that school kids in LA, who never heard of Robert Frost, can recite the lyrics of Ice-T and 2 Live Crew?

Where did that LA mob come from?

It came out of the public schools from which the Bible and Ten Commandments were long ago expelled. It came out of drugstores where pornography is everywhere on the magazine rack. It came out of movie theaters and away from TV sets where sex and violence are romanticized. It came out of rock concerts where rap music extols raw lust and cop-killing. It came out of churches that long ago gave themselves up to social action, and it came out of families that never existed.

When the Rodney King verdict came down, and the rage boiled with, these young men had no answer within themselves to the question: Why not? Why not loot and burn? Why not settle accounts with the Koreans? Why not lynch somebody—and get even for Rodney King?

The secularists who have captured our culture have substituted a New Age Gospel, with its governing axioms: There are no absolute values in the universe; there are no fixed and objective standards

of right and wrong. There is no God. It all begins here and it ends here. Every man lives by his own moral code. Do your own thing. Well, the mob took them at their word, and did its own thing.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to prosperity,” Washington said, “religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man seek the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness.”

Look at the works of “art” that ignited the controversy at the National Endowment. Almost all were desecrations of Christian images. Andreas Serrano submerged a crucifix in a vat of his own urine. Robert Mapplethorpe took a statue of the Virgin Mother of God and twisted it into a bloody tie rack.

Writing in an art catalog funded by NEA, an AIDS activist called Cardinal John O’Connor a “fat cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on Fifth Avenue.” That “house of walking swastikas” was St. Patrick’s Cathedral, subsequently desecrated by militants who spat consecrated hosts on the floor at Sunday Mass.

Yes, Mario, there is a connection.

The cultural war is already raging in our public schools. In history texts Benedict Arnold’s treason at West Point has been dropped. So has the story of Nathan Hale, the boy-patriot who spied on the British and went to the gallows with the defiant cry, “I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.” Elsewhere, they teach that our constitution was plagiarized from the Iroquois, that Western science was stolen from sub-Saharan Africa.

The name [George A.] Custer has been stricken from the battlefield where his unit fell. Demands are heard throughout the South that replicas of the Battle Flag of the Confederacy be removed from state flags and public buildings. The old iron Confederate soldier who stood for decades in the town square must be removed; after all, he fought in an ignoble cause.

Slavery vs. freedom, that’s all it was about, they tell us. But go up to Gettysburg and park your car behind the union center. Look across that mile-long field and visualize 15,000 men and boys form-

ing up at the tree line. See them walking across into the fire of cannon and gun, knowing they would never get back, never see home again. Nine of ten never even owned a slave. They were fighting for the things for which men have always fought: family, faith, friends, and country. For the ashes of their fathers and the temples of their Gods.

If a country forgets where it came from, how will its people know who they are? Will America one day become like that poor old man with Alzheimer's abandoned in the stadium, who did not know where he came from, or to what family he belonged? The battle over our schools is part of the war to separate parents from children, one generation from another, and all Americans from their heritage.

Our "common difficulties . . . concern, thank God, only material things," FDR said at the nadir of the Depression. Our national quarrel goes much

deeper. It is about "who we are" and "what we believe." Are we any longer "one nation under God," or has one-half of that nation already begun to secede from the other?

That, Mario, is what the cultural war is all about.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What examples did Buchanan use to claim that there was a "religious war" occurring in the United States?
2. The Republicans lost the 1992 presidential campaign against Bill Clinton, but the "cultural wars" are still being fought in the United States in the twenty-first century. What are some of the current cultural issues dominating political debate?