




# SHAME

*How America's  
Past Sins Have  
Polarized  
Our Country*



SHELBY STEELE

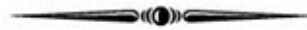
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Have Polarized Our Country*



SHELBY STEELE

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New York

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I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Rita Steele,  
whose criticisms and labors have made it a better book.

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## The Great Divide

NOT LONG AGO I was the lone conservative at a panel discussion on race and politics at the famous Aspen Institute in Colorado. The day before the panel was to take place, some of us were asked—as a way of opening what was to be a weeklong conference—to say a few words about what we wanted most for America. This was surely a summons to grandiosity, but it did trigger a thought. When my turn came I said that what I wanted most for America was an end to white guilt, or at least an ebbing of this guilt into insignificance. I then used my allotted few minutes to define white guilt as the terror of being seen as racist—a terror that has caused whites to act guiltily toward minorities even when they feel no actual guilt. My point was that this terror—and the lust it has inspired in whites to show themselves innocent of racism—has spawned a new white paternalism toward minorities since the 1960s that, among other things, has damaged the black family more profoundly than segregation ever did.

I also pleaded especially for an end to the condescension of affirmative action, only to realize halfway through my remarks that the slightly slumping woman in the front row was none other than retired Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor—the justice whose 2003 opinion in *Grutter v. Michigan* has effectively extended the life of affirmative action for another twenty-five years. But it was too late by then to take her feelings into account, so I finished on theme: the benevolent paternalism of white guilt, I said, had injured the self-esteem, if not the souls, of minorities in ways that the malevolent paternalism of white racism never had.

Post-1960s welfare policies, the proliferation of “identity politics” and group preferences, and all the grandiose social interventions of the War on Poverty and the Great Society—all this was meant to redeem the nation from its bigoted past, but paradoxically, it also invited minorities to make an identity and a politics out of grievance and inferiority. Its seductive whisper to them was that their collective grievance was their entitlement and that protest politics was the best way to cash in on that entitlement—this at the precise moment when America was at last beginning to free up minorities as individual citizens who could pursue their own happiness to the limits of their abilities. Thus, white guilt was a smothering and distracting kindness that enmeshed minorities more in the struggle for white redemption than in their own struggle to develop as individuals capable of competing with all

others.

Of course, this was a mouthful, and something close to sacrilege at the liberal-leaning Aspen Institute. I had set out only to say what I truly meant, not to be provocative or to discomfit a retired Supreme Court justice. Yet I had been provocative all the same, and I may have also discomfited Justice O'Connor—not because I intended either outcome, but simply because I had offered up what was considered to be a “conservative” analysis of race in America.

The real provocation was in the very *idea* of looking at race in America through a lens of “classic” Jeffersonian liberalism—that liberalism which sought freedom for the individual above all else. This was the liberalism that had actually given us the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. In that era, Martin Luther King Jr. was already recognizable as an American archetype precisely because he was so aligned with the central principle of this liberalism: individual freedom. I wanted to celebrate this liberalism and argue that a free society—not necessarily free of all bigotry, but certainly free of all illegal discrimination—was what America owed minorities. After that we minorities should simply be left alone. We should not be smothered, as we have been, by the new paternalistic liberalism that emerged in the mid-1960s—a guilt-driven liberalism that has imposed itself through a series of ineffective and even destructive government programs and policies. We should be left to find our own way as free men and women in this fast-paced and highly competitive society.

In many ways the minority struggle for freedom—just like white America’s long-ago struggle for freedom from British rule—has been a battle to have no oppressive or capricious power intervene between the individual and his pursuit of happiness. How, then, does it constitute progress for minorities to overcome bigotry as a limit on their freedom only to subjugate themselves to a paternalistic interventionism inspired by white guilt? There is no true freedom either way.

This was the impropriety, the lapse of good manners that made for provocation. A freedom that could not guarantee a positive outcome for blacks (America’s classic victims) was perceived as unfair. So whether I was right or wrong was irrelevant next to the unseemliness of speaking about black Americans in the light of self-help and individual responsibility—two entirely conventional values that came to be labeled “conservative” only after the 1960s, and then primarily in relation to minorities.

I am used to being in situations where mention of such “conservative” values amounts to an impropriety. On today’s political landscape, there are few people more inherently provocative, more unforeseen and unsettling, than people like myself who are designated “black conservative.” All the other permutations of racial and political identity are expected—white liberal or white conservative, Hispanic liberal or Hispanic conservative, black liberal. We know their cultural profiles: the Hispanic who is hard working, Catholic, and conservative; the upscale Connecticut white liberal; the black of almost any background who is presumed liberal simply for being black. Black conservatives confound expectation. Worse, we *seem* to put the moral authority that comes from our race’s great suffering in the service of an ideology (conservatism) that many see as a source of that suffering. By this logic, the black conservative can only be opportunistic or, worse, self-hating and sycophantic. So in a setting like the Aspen Institute, where liberalism is simple etiquette and where criticism of minorities is



verboten, the black conservative inevitably gives offense.

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AND I SAW THAT MY little “end-of-white-guilt” speech had done just that when I arrived the next day for my panel discussion on race and politics. As I stepped onto the stage, the moderator of my panel—a solicitous young black writer who kept reassuring me that he would be fair to me despite the obvious gulf between us—immediately called me into a huddle. And there I was confronted with a very agitated young white man, someone not on the panel, who implored me to give him a few minutes with the audience before the panel began so that he could respond to my remarks of the previous day. It was my call to make, and simple common sense told me to say no. Clearly this was someone who had spent the previous twenty-four hours stewing in outrage over my call for an end to white guilt. Why give a platform to such an openly declared enemy? But then I heard myself say, “Go right ahead.”

He looked startled, and then rushed to the podium as if afraid that I might change my mind. But I wouldn't have. I try to follow that ethic by which one gives wide berth to one's opposition. So I took my designated chair on the panel and listened as this jumpy young man beseeched the audience not to believe what I had said the day before. He was slight and blond, likely a graduate student, and he spoke with a kind of mimed passion that made him seem theatrical. For effect, he would occasionally look over his shoulder at me as if to shudder at an unspeakable menace. He wanted this nice and unsuspecting Aspen audience to know that I was selling false consolation by seducing them into the fiction that white guilt was now a greater problem for minorities than white racism. He wanted to reassure them that blacks were still suffering in America and that racism, discrimination, and inequality were still alive—still great barriers to black advancement.

My first reaction to people like this young man is always the same: Where were you when I needed you? I had grown up in the rigid segregation of 1950s Chicago, where my life had been entirely circumscribed by white racism. Residential segregation was nearly absolute. My elementary school triggered the first desegregation lawsuit in the North. My family was afraid to cross the threshold of any restaurant until I was almost twenty years old. The only jobs open to me in high school were as a field hand or as a yard boy. My high-school guidance counselor said flatly that manual labor would be my employment horizon. My life had to always be negotiated around my failure to be white. I knew decent white people, but these “good whites”—people who would defy the strictures of segregation—were the exception. Even the Kennedy brothers, Jack and Bobby, came only reluctantly—grudgingly at first, in Bobby's case—to the cause of civil rights.

So there had been a time when blacks needed people like this young man. But on that afternoon in Aspen we were almost fifty years removed from that time, and this young man was only pretending to the heroism of those “good whites” who, back in the civil rights era, had actually “spoken truth to power”—whites who had risked their careers, their families, their standing in their communities, and even their lives. But there was no such risk for this young man in Aspen, no jeopardy against which he

might show himself heroic. Here he was a redundancy: a man protesting racism to people for whom it was already anathema.

Still, I suspected that most people in that auditorium broadly agreed with him, even if they thought him a gatecrasher and a poseur. In fact his appearance had the feel of a ritual, as if it were somehow an expected and necessary event. And when I heard the alarm in his voice at what I'd said the day before, something occurred to me: by coming to a place like Aspen and saying the things I had said, I had—so to speak—thrown the conference slightly out of alignment. The Aspen Conference had a certain idea of itself, an identity: it wanted quality intellectual dialogue within a progressive to liberal-centrist political orientation. My remarks had pushed me off this political continuum altogether and solidly into conservative territory. After all, I had implied that post-1960s liberalism was the new enemy—and not the friend—of minorities at a conference where conventional wisdom held the opposite to be true.

So, in effect, my young nemesis had spoken out in order to bring the conference back into alignment, to enforce the boundaries of the new liberal identity. He wanted this friendly, upscale, and overwhelmingly white crowd to see me as a snake in the garden of their liberal identity, enticing them with the “apple” of an escape from white guilt. He wanted them to understand that the price they might pay for listening to someone like me could be much higher than they thought: they could lose their liberal identity itself and, along with it, the good opinion of themselves as decent and socially concerned people. I wasn't just a threat to their politics. I threatened them with a kind of moral disgrace—since their agreement with any part of my argument would open them to charges of racism. Of course, he never said it, but he wanted no serious discussion of ideas or of public policy. Arguing thoughtfully would only make me less a snake, and, above all else, he wanted to mark me as an outsider.

When he finally left the stage and took a seat in the audience, I was invited to respond. But I had no heart for it. He hadn't made a real argument, but had essentially only tried to make me an untouchable—someone from a dark realm of ideas who was at once seductive and evil. To answer him would be to argue with the rhetorical equivalent of an impression, a blur of indistinct ideas—to punch at shadows. Finally the panel moderator moved us into our discussion format. I never saw this young interloper again.

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THE FACT IS THAT this young man and I come from two very different Americas. The shorthand for these two Americas might be “liberal” and “conservative,” but this would indeed be a shorthand. These labels once signified something much less incendiary than they do today; they were opposing political orientations, but they shared a common national identity. One was conservative or liberal but within a fairly non-contentious cultural understanding of what it meant to be American. But since the 1960s, “liberal” and “conservative” have come to function almost like national identities in their own right. To be one or the other is not merely to lean left or right—toward “labor” or toward “business”—

within a common national identity; it is to belong to a different vision of America altogether, a vision that seeks to supersede the opposing vision and to establish itself as the nation's common identity. Today the Left and the Right don't work within a shared understanding of the national purpose; nor do they seek such an understanding. Rather, each seeks to win out over the other and to define the nation by its own terms.

It was all the turmoil of the 1960s—the civil rights and women's movements, Vietnam, the sexual revolution, and so on—that triggered this change by making it clear that America could not go back to being the country it had been before. It would have to reinvent itself. It would have to become a better country. Thus, the reinvention of America as a country shorn of its past sins became an unspoken, though extremely powerful, mandate in our national politics. Liberals and conservatives could no longer think of themselves simply as political rivals competing within a common and settled American identity. That identity was no longer settled—or even legitimate—because it was stigmatized in the 1960s as racist, sexist, and imperialistic. The very legitimacy of our democratic society demanded that America be reimagined in the reverse of this stigmatization.

This sea change meant that American liberals and conservatives were called upon to fill a void, articulate a new and legitimate American identity. It was no longer enough for the proponents of these perspectives merely to vie over the issues of the day. Both worldviews would now have to evolve into full-blown ideologies capable of projecting a new political and cultural vision of America. Both liberals and conservatives would have to revisit their first principles, seek philosophical coherence between their own view and contemporary events, enlist intellectuals, and engage in ongoing debate. In other words, people on both sides would have to conjure up an America unique to their own first principles and beliefs—an America that epitomized all they longed for. And it fell on both liberals and conservatives to fight for their own America, to demand that it prevail over the opposing vision of the nation—and to provide America with a new singular and unifying identity.

This is how the mandate of the 1960s to reinvent America launched the infamous “culture war” between liberalism and conservatism—a war that we Americans wage to this day with undiminished fervor. After the 1960s, the American identity became a self-conscious mission in our politics, so that liberals and conservatives had to contend with each other over identity as well as public policy. When we argue over health care or immigration or Middle East policy, it is as if two distinct Americas were arguing, each with a different idea of what it means to be an American. And these arguments are intense and often uncivil, because each side feels that its American identity is at risk from the other side. So the conflict is very much a culture war, with each side longing for “victory” over the other, and each side seeing itself as America's last and best hope.

This makes for a great irony in contemporary American life: although we have come very far in overcoming old sins, such as racism and sexism, we are in many ways more sharply divided than when those sins went largely unchallenged. The culture war drew us into a very polarizing progression in which liberalism and conservatism evolved into broad cultural identities that, in turn, sought to manifest themselves in actual territorial dominance—each hoping to ultimately become the nation's singular identity. Since the 1960s, this war has divided up our culture into what might be called “identity territories.” America's universities are now almost exclusively left-leaning; most public-

policy think tanks are right-leaning. Talk radio is conservative; National Public Radio and the major television networks are liberal. On cable television, almost every news and commentary channel is a recognizable identity territory—Fox/right; MSNBC/left; CNN/left. In the print media our two great national newspapers are the liberal *New York Times* and the conservative *Wall Street Journal* (especially in the editorial pages). The Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur Grants are left; the Bradley Prize is right. The blogosphere is notoriously divided by political stripe. And then there are “red” and “blue” states, cities, towns, and even neighborhoods. At election time, Americans can see on television a graphic of their culture war: those blue and red electoral maps that give us a virtual topography of political identity.

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TODAY, A LIBERAL OR A CONSERVATIVE can proudly identify with the image of America projected by their chosen ideology in the same way that most Americans in the 1950s proudly identified with a victorious and prosperous postwar America. In the America envisioned by both ideologies, there is no racism or sexism or imperialism to be embarrassed by. After all, ideologies project idealized images of the near-perfect America that they promise to deliver. Thus, in one’s ideological identity, one can find the innocence that is no longer possible—since the 1960s—in America’s defamed national identity.

To announce oneself as a liberal or a conservative is like announcing oneself as a Frenchman or Brit. It is virtually an announcement of tribal identity, and it means something much larger than ideology. To be a Brit is a God-given fate that is likely to stir far deeper passions than everyday political debates. Nationalism—the nationalist impulse—is passion itself; it is atavistic, beyond the reach of reason, a secular sacredness. The nationalist is expected to be intolerant of all opposition to his nation’s sovereignty, and is most often willing to defend that sovereignty with his life.

Well, when we let nationalism shape the form of our liberal or conservative identities—when we practice our ideological leaning as if it were a divine right, an atavism to be defended at all cost—then we put ourselves on a warlike footing. We feel an impunity toward our opposition, and we grant ourselves a scorched-earth license to fight back. They are not the other side of the same coin; they are a different coin altogether, a fundamentally illegitimate and alien force. And we are forgiven our bitterness and contempt for them.

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THIS WAS THE CONTEMPT that the young man at Aspen had flashed my way. He had crashed the event to defend a sovereignty, and he had felt the license to disrupt. Liberalism was his nationality, and who compromises their nationality? He had spoken from his commandeered podium like a patriot.

But, then, I had to wonder if my own ideological orientation had somehow taken the form of

nationalistic fervor. Was I a blind patriot rather than a thinking man? Was my loyalty to conservatism grounded in experience and thought, or in blood fealty to an ideology that sees itself as a sovereign nation? For me, conservatism revolves around the principles and the disciplines of freedom, and through its lens I can see the America that I have always wanted. So, yes, like my young nemesis, I could experience my ideology as a nationalism. But unlike him I wanted to discipline that impulse, to subject my ideology—and all the policies it fostered—to every sort of test of truth and effectiveness. And I was ready to modify accordingly, to disabuse myself of even long-held beliefs that didn't pan out in reality. It was exactly this loyalty to fact over ideology that had driven me away from liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s into an appreciation of conservatism's commitment to individual freedom. In other words, for me, ideology does not precede truth. Rather, truth, as best as we can know it, is always the test of ideology. I want my fervor for conservatism to be disciplined by a deep and abiding humility. Passion is one thing, but "true belief" is blindness.

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FOR THE YOUNG MAN IN ASPEN, ideological identity clearly preceded truth. He represents for me a very specific fallacy that might be called "poetic truth." Poetic license occurs when poets take a certain liberty with the conventional rules of grammar and syntax in order to achieve an effect. They break the rules in order to create a more beautiful or more powerful effect than would otherwise be possible. Adapting this idea of license and rule breaking to the realm of ideology, we might say that "poetic truth" disregards the actual truth in order to assert a larger *essential* truth that supports one's ideological position. It makes the actual truth seem secondary or irrelevant. Poetic truths defend the sovereignty of one's ideological identity by taking license with reality and fact. They work by moral intimidation rather than by reason, so that even to question them is heresy.

The young man's poetic truth was that the victimization of blacks (and other minorities) is *always* the larger truth of American life, a truth so much a part of America's fundamental character that it must always be taken as literal truth even when the facts refute it. When poetic truth is in play facts carry no weight. For him the essential truth—the truth for which he demanded moral and political accountability—was that America was an intractably racist society, maybe a little better today than in the past, but still structurally aligned against blacks and minorities. In my little end-of-white-guilt speech I had stated a hard fact: that since the 1960s, white racism had lost so much of its authority, power, and legitimacy that it was no longer, in itself, a prohibitive barrier to black advancement. Blacks have now risen to every level of American society, including the presidency. If you are black and you want to be a poet, or a doctor, or a corporate executive, or a movie star, there will surely be barriers to overcome, but white racism will be among the least of them. You will be far more likely to receive racial preferences than to suffer racial discrimination.

Those who doubt this will always point to today's long litany of racial disparities. Blacks are still behind virtually all other groups by the most important measures of social and economic well-being: educational achievement, home ownership, employment levels, academic test scores, marriage rates,

household net worth, and so on. The fact that seven out of ten black women are single, along with the fact that 70 percent of first black marriages fail (47 percent for whites), means that black women are married at roughly half the rate of white women and divorced at twice the rate. Thus it is not surprising that nearly three-quarters of all black children are born out of wedlock.

In 2008, black college students were three times more likely than whites to graduate with a grade point average below a meager 2.5—this on top of a graduation rate for blacks of only 42 percent, according to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Consequently, blacks in general have the highest college dropout rate and the lowest grade point average of any student group in America, with the arguable exception of reservation Indians. And, yes, these disparities—and many others—most certainly had their genesis in centuries of racial oppression. But post-1960s liberalism conflates the past with the present: it argues that today's racial disparities are caused by precisely the same white racism that caused them in the past—thus the poetic truth that blacks today remain stymied and victimized by white racism.

But past oppression cannot be conflated into present-day oppression. It is likely, for example, that today's racial disparities are due more to dysfunctions within the black community, and—I would argue—to liberal social policies that have encouraged us to trade more on our past victimization than to overcome the damage done by that victimization through dint of our own pride and will. One can say this stance “blames the victim” by making him responsible for the injury done him by bigotry and oppression. But there also comes a time when he must stop thinking of himself as a victim by acknowledging that—existentially—his fate is always in his own hands. One of the more pernicious corruptions of post-1960s liberalism is that it undermined the spirit of self-help and individual responsibility in precisely the people it sought to uplift.

Segregation, for all its obvious evil, at least left our fate in our own hands, which is why we—in the face of more government opposition than assistance—generated one of the most effective and articulate movements for human freedom the world has ever seen. Without any government grants, and in a society that ran the gamut from cool indifference toward us to murderous terrorism against us, we expanded the American democracy beyond the color line.

But all this was not relevant to the young man in Aspen, because it was subversive of his “poetic commitment to black victimization—and therefore to his ideological identity. So the truth—that blacks had now achieved a level of freedom comparable to that of all others—was cast as a dangerous lie. He beseeched the good people in the audience not to be confused or seduced by this actual fact—and above all else not to allow their politics to follow from such a fact. He wanted them to feel that if they accepted what was so obviously true, they would be aligning themselves with America's terrible history of racism. Only by supporting what was not true—that racism was still the greatest barrier to black advancement—could they prove themselves innocent of racism.

Poetic truth—this assertion of a broad characteristic “truth” that invalidates actual truth—is contemporary liberalism's greatest source of power. It is also liberalism's most fundamental corruption.

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WHY WOULD PEOPLE ALLOW themselves to be manipulated into disregarding self-evident truth in favor of some sweeping and largely unsupportable claim of truth? Because, I think, the great trick of modern liberalism is to link its poetic truths (false as they may be) with innocence from all the great sins of America's past—racism, sexism, imperialism, capitalist greed, and so on—and, similarly, to stain the actual truth with those selfsame sins. So, if you want to be politically correct, if you want to be seen as someone who is cleansed of America's past ugliness, you will go along with the poetic truth that racism is still a great barrier for blacks. Conversely, embracing the literal truth—that racism is no longer a serious barrier—will make you politically incorrect and will stigmatize you with that ugliness.

But poetic truth is not about truth; it's about power. It is a formula for power. Historically, freedom was always the great imperative of liberalism; poetic truth enabled liberals after the 1960s to shift that imperative from freedom to morality. A distinction must be made. During and immediately after the 1960s, racism and sexism were still more literal truth than poetic truth. As we moved through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, America morally evolved so that these old American evils became more "poetic" than literal. Yet redeeming America from these evils has become liberalism's rationale for demanding real power in the real world—the political and cultural power to create social programs, to socially engineer on a national scale, to expand welfare, to entrench group preferences in American institutions, and so on. But what happens to liberal power when America actually earns considerable redemption—when there are more women than men in the nation's medical schools, when a black can serve as the president, when public accommodations are open to anyone with the price of the ticket?

What actually happened was that liberalism turned to poetic truth when America's past sins were no longer literally true enough to support liberal policies and the liberal claim on power. The poetic truth of black victimization seeks to compensate for America's moral evolution. It tries to keep alive the justification for liberal power even as that justification has been greatly nullified by America's moral development. The poetic idea that America will always be a racist, sexist, imperialistic, and greed-driven society has rescued post-1960s liberalism from the great diminishment that should have been its fate, given the literal truth of America's remarkable (if incomplete) moral growth.

My young antagonist in Aspen was not agitated by some racial injustice. He would have only relished a bit of good old-fashioned racial injustice, since it would have justified his entire political identity. He was agitated by the implication that white America had morally evolved. It wasn't America's old evils that bothered him; he was afraid of America's moral growth. That growth threatened him with obsolescence and irrelevancy. It threatened to turn him into an embarrassment.

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BUT WHY IS THE "GREAT DIVIDE" between this young man and myself—and, far more importantly, between

liberal and conservative America—such an urgent problem for America today? One reason may be that a divide like this suggests that America has in fact become two Americas, two political cultures forever locked in a “cold war” within a single society. This implies a spiritual schism within America itself, and, following from that, the prospect of perpetual and hopeless debate—the kind of ego-driven debate in which both sides want the other side to “think like us.” There is a little of what Sigmund Freud called the “narcissism of small difference” in all this. Neighboring nations often have a far greater animus toward each other than they do toward distant nations that are more starkly opposed to their interests and values. Today, liberal and conservative Americans are often contemptuous of each other with a passion that would more logically be reserved for foreign enemies.

But the urgency of this “great divide” also has a less obvious explanation. Our national debate over foreign and domestic issues has come to be framed as much by poetic truths as by dispassionate assessments of the realities we face. Again, the poetic truth that blacks are still held back from full equality by ongoing “structural” racism carries more authority than the objective truth: that today racism is not remotely the barrier to black advancement in American life that it once was. In foreign affairs, the poetic truth that we Americans are essentially imperialistic cowboys bent on exploiting the world has more credibility than the obvious truth, which is that our wealth and power (accumulated over centuries of unprecedented innovation in a context of freedom) has often drawn us into the unwanted role of policing a turbulent world—and, it must be added, to the world’s immense benefit.

The great problem with poetic truths is that they are never self-evident in the way, for example, that racial victimization was self-evident in the era of segregation. Today the actual facts fail to support the notion that racial victimization is a prevailing truth of American life. So today, a poetic truth, like “black victimization,” or the ongoing “repression of women,” or the systematic “abuse of the environment,” must be imposed on society not by fact and reason but by some regime of political correctness—some notion of propriety and decency that coerces people into treating such claims as actual fact. If you don’t presume that America’s racism, sexism, warmongering, and environmental disregard are incontrovertible qualities of the American character, then you are obviously “incorrect” and guilty of fellow traveling with precisely those qualities.

Political correctness is the enforcement arm of poetic truth. It coerces people into suspending their own judgment on matters of racial equality, women’s rights, war, and the environment in deference to some prescribed “correct” view on these matters that will distance them from the stigma of America’s sinful past. The very point of poetic truths is to supplant the actual reality of American life with the view of America as a nation still surreptitiously devoted to its past sins. It has no other purpose than to project these sins as the essential, if not the eternal, truth of the American way of life. Then political correctness tries to bully and shame Americans—on pain of their human decency—into conformity with this ugly view of their society.

This is how America after the 1960s began to live under a hegemony of political correctness, so that we became more invested in the prescriptions of that correctness than in the true nature of the problems we faced.

The young man at Aspen demanded to speak so that he could corral people back into a prescribed correctness and away from a more open-minded approach to the complex problems that our racial



history has left us to deal with—problems that the former victims of this history will certainly bear the greatest responsibility for overcoming. The prescriptions of political correctness offered him a glib innocence of all this. He could subscribe to “diversity,” “inclusiveness,” and “social justice” and think himself solidly on the side of the good. The problem is that these prescriptions only throw fuzzi and unattainable idealisms at profound problems—problems rooted in the long centuries of dehumanization visited on minorities and women. What is “diversity” beyond a vague apologia, an amorphous expression of goodwill that offers no objective assessment whatsoever of the actual problems that minority groups face?

The point is that those poetic truths, and the notions of correctness that force them on society, prevent America from seeing itself accurately. That is their purpose. They pull down the curtain on what is actually true. If decades of government assistance have weakened the black family with dependency and dysfunction, poetic truth argues all the more fervently that blacks are victims and the whites are privileged. Poetic truths stigmatize the actual truth with the sins of America’s past so that truth itself becomes “incorrect.”

As America has become more “correct” in relation to its past, it has also become more cut off from the reality of its present. The danger here is that the nation’s innocence—its redemption from past sins—becomes linked to a kind of know-nothingism. We can’t afford to know, for example, that America’s military might—a vulgarity in the minds of many—has stabilized vast stretches of Asia and Europe since World War II, so that nations under the umbrella of our power have become prosperous trading partners today. We can’t admit today that the lives of minorities are no longer stunted by either prejudice or “white privilege.” And we can’t afford to acknowledge that the same is true for American women. Contrition and apology are “correct”; honesty is “incorrect.”

In this way, today’s great liberal-conservative divide puts correctness at odds with the kind of forthright self-examination that societies need to do in order to understand the true nature of the problems they face. Frank self-examination puts one at risk of transgressing correctness. So issues like free markets versus redistributive economics, educational reform, immigration, and global warming become battlegrounds in which correctness and the actual truth fight it out—but with most the moral leverage seemingly on the side of correctness, which has the power to shame and stigmatize all who oppose it. Correctness constitutes a power in itself, a power substantial enough to prevail easily, much of the time, over the actual truth.

Yet regimes of correctness (even the softer American variety) always stifle the human imagination and lead to cultural stagnation because they are inherently repressive. They impose an empty and often tyrannical conformity on society. One need only think of communism and socialism in postwar Europe—entire peoples policed into a socialist form of political correctness by autocrats and their henchmen. America, of course, is not Eastern Europe, but many of our institutions are being held in thrall to the idea of moral intimidation as power. Try to get a job today as an unapologetic conservative in the average American university, or in the State Department, or on public radio. The point is that even in “the land of the free,” correctness has tentacles of power that reach out and determine the life possibilities of people, opening doors to some and closing them to others. Today our political identities embroil us in a kind of unacknowledged tribalism that transgresses our

democratic principles.

In America today our great divide in many ways comes down to a feud between the repressions correctness, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other. Were correctness to prevail, its know-nothingism and repressiveness would surely lead to cultural decline. Even if freedom offers no guarantee of something better, it is at least freedom, and the possibilities are infinite.

My ambition in this book is not to offer a pat series of solutions that might heal our great divide. We all know, to the point of cliché, what the solutions are: mutual respect, empathy, flexibility, compromise, and so on. I believe that great democracies—and America can surely count itself a great democracy—come to divides like this in order to grow and to reinvent themselves in response to great challenges, both from their own history and from the contemporary world they contend with. Because our culture is so habituated to freedom—freedom is our royal endowment—we don't need revolution. We need the courage to see through to the bottom of things, to understand, and then to reinvent ourselves accordingly. Today's great divide comes from a shallowness of understanding. We don't altogether know what to do with our history, or how to position ourselves in the modern world. So everything is a squabble. Our fights are ferocious both between and within our political parties. No doubt this culture war will continue until time and struggle pile up more evidence on one side than the other. History will finally arbitrate.

The goal of this essay, therefore, is not to find solutions to the problems as much as to understand them.

## A Collision

**I**N EARLY 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary of labor, published a landmark study: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In it he wrote that blacks had come a long way toward winning their civil rights, but that further progress was now likely to be stymied by the dramatic increase in female-headed households among blacks. Moynihan's implication was clear: although plainly this family breakdown had its source in centuries of inhumane treatment, it was nevertheless now essentially a black problem. In other words, there were clear cultural patterns within the black community itself—having nothing to do with racism or discrimination in the 1960s—that would keep blacks from achieving true parity with whites.

Moynihan was immediately called a racist by much of America's intellectual establishment for “blaming the victim,” and his report quickly sank into oblivion. Worse, he became an object lesson to all social scientists, so that almost no research implying black responsibility for black problems was done for the next twenty years—this even as the problem of female-headed households proliferated to the point of generating a vast black underclass in America.

Moynihan's mistake was to put literal truth on a collision course with liberalism's poetic truth. His research had been superb, and history has shown that his conclusions were nothing less than prophetic. Since the mid-1960s when he so explicitly identified the problem, family breakdown has blossomed into arguably the single worst problem black America faces. And, just as Moynihan predicted, it spawned countless other problems in black America, including gang violence, drug abuse, low academic achievement, high dropout and unemployment rates, and high crime and incarceration rates. Moynihan's literal truth—that family breakdown would stymie black advancement even as racism and discrimination declined—is simply irrefutable today, nearly fifty years after his report.

But over all these decades, liberalism's prevailing poetic truth has been that blacks are eternal victims: their problems are always the result of some determinism, some unfairness or injustice that impinges on them like an ongoing rain out of permanently hostile skies. And in the white liberal imagination, blacks are *only* victims. Liberalism expresses its inborn racism in the way it overlooks the full human complexity of blacks—the fact that they are more than mere victims—in order to distill and harden the idea of their victimization into a currency of liberal power.

When Moynihan pointed to black family breakdown as a barrier to black progress, he was showing blacks to be more than victims. Here was a grey area, he implied, in which the problem—a rise in female-headed households—was more a legacy of past oppression than the result of ongoing oppression. It was a residue of the past; but, even if all racism and discrimination suddenly disappeared, the problem itself would still exist. And if government programs and public policy incentives were created to encourage family cohesion, it would still fall on blacks to achieve that cohesion. In other words, their victimization—past or present—would never spare them responsibility for the problem.

Moynihan did not say all this directly; his work simply took it for granted as a commonplace in human affairs that victims must live with what has happened to them, so that, despite the cosmic unfairness of it all, responsibility for struggling with weaknesses caused by their victimization ultimately falls on them. This was the realism that caused Moynihan to collide with liberalism's poetic truth.

The new liberalism that emerged in the 1960s actually coveted responsibility for black problems—or at least the illusion of responsibility—because there was so much moral and political power in the idea of delivering blacks from their tragic past. This was the font of power that enabled Lyndon Johnson to launch—in the middle of an economically prosperous decade—his Great Society and War on Poverty initiatives (the word “poverty” standing in here as code for black poverty).

The speech that offered the rationale for these outsized initiatives was delivered in 1965 at Howard University, the nation's premier black university. And this famous speech was infused with allusions to slavery and segregation, as if President Johnson knew that his mandate for a New Deal-like expansion of government would derive from his willingness to own up to these American shames. These shames were his power. “You do not,” he said, “take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.”

In the end, Moynihan's unpardonable sin was to threaten liberal power by working from the assumption that blacks could be the agents of their own fates despite all the victimization they had endured. President Johnson's speech (a speech that remains the clearest articulation ever of post-1960s liberalism) positioned the government to be the agent of black uplift. Johnson rationalized his position with the poetic truth that blacks were always and only victims. This reductionism dehumanized blacks, but it served liberal power perfectly. In claiming to uplift blacks—and thus to redeem America's shame—liberalism could claim a moral authority that translated into real political power. And this is how blacks came to be “mined” by liberalism for the power inherent in their legacy of victimization. Moynihan's truth, on the other hand, was too literal and too complex to serve liberal power. Thus his report is now famous, both for its extraordinary prescience and for the speed with which it was dispatched.

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IN THE 1960S, a certain cultural unity went out of American life. Moynihan had done his work assuming that it was still in place. He would have assumed, for example, that most people accepted—as a commonplace—that oppression might well cause certain pathologies in its victims. But by 1965 this was no longer a commonplace. Already a new liberalism was beginning to reshape the meaning of things. This liberalism rejected the whole idea that female-headed households *meant* black pathology. Instead it argued that such households only reflected a more matriarchal family system among blacks—an echo of the African past—in which boys found plenty of male role models in their extended families. Moreover, it argued that black difficulties stemmed from oppression in the present, not from pathologies bred by past oppression. Whether such claims were true or not didn't matter so much. This new liberalism was on a kind of tear, and it argued—in area after area of American life—that things did not mean what we had always thought they meant.

Liberalism came on in the 1960s as a revolution in meaning. Old narratives of meaning were being upended everywhere. Picture, for example, a beautifully coifed and white-gloved suburban housewife in the early 1960s standing next to a gleaming new Buick or Oldsmobile in the driveway of her sun-splashed California tract house, three well-scrubbed children at her side. Is this woman the perfect emblem of female fulfillment in America's postwar prosperity, or is she in fact a victim, a soul smothered by an American propriety that systemically subjugates women? Or picture an army general, rolled sleeves and dark glasses, driving through the streets of Saigon in an open jeep. Is he a heroic defender of freedom in a cold war against communist tyranny, or is he an imperialist and white supremacist bent on exploiting a Third World people? Or think of a Black Panther in the late 1960s shooting it out with the "pigs." Is he simply a thug defying legitimate authority, or does legitimacy lie with him as a man bravely confronting his oppressor?

In the 1960s, liberalism began to offer new narratives of meaning so that the members of almost every group came to have a politicized idea of themselves. And all these narratives were conceived in reaction to the great shames of America's past—racism, sexism, territorial conquest (manifest destiny), corporate greed, militarism, and so on. Before the 1960s, if blacks or women were discriminated against, or otherwise made to live as second-class citizens, the implication was that they were somehow inferior. But in the 1960s a new idea blossomed: that despite its greatness, America was guilty of profound injustice. This meant that the "inferiority" of blacks and women was not a natural law but a fabrication, a construct, conceived to justify their victimization. In other words, the meaning of "inferiority" changed from something that was the victim's fault to something that was the oppressor's fault. Inferiority was not inferiority; it was a disparity that was the measure of oppression. So the liberal narratives of the 1960s gave us a new way of comprehending America: this nation that was a beacon of freedom to the world was also a nation that had relentlessly oppressed more than half its citizens.

Through this new lens of meaning, the housewife with the white gloves was a woman made to live within a cage of subtle misogynistic repressions that reduced her to kitsch, a Norman Rockwell image of prosperity and domestic contentment. The army general was surely an unreconstructed imperialist, cruising the streets of Saigon disdainful of the yellow people he was called upon to defend. And the Black Panther shooting it out with the "pigs" was a latter-day Che Guevara, a figure

embodying the glamour of revolution as he battles the police in his beret and black leather jacket. In this new and darker conception of America, there is a broad template that stamps out two kinds of people: they are either victims of America's shames or victimizers who perpetrate those shames.

Post-1960s liberalism made this template one of its central poetic truths. It built its credibility on the assumption that America was simply given to victimizing blacks, women, gays, consumers, workers, inner-city school children, the environment, and so on. And surely America was in fact guilty of much victimization. Yet, even after America became aware of many of its habits of victimization and began to evolve away from them, this liberalism insisted that the impulse to victimize was still an essential feature of the American character.

Insistence on poetic truth is the methodology—if not the essence—of post-1960s liberalism. This liberalism is an ideology and a politics of ugly givens (America is racist; America is militaristic; America is sexist), and it seeks power in the name of overcoming these givens with little regard for whether they are actually true. Its fundamental corruption is that it demands power commensurate with the hyperbole of its poetic truths. And today—after fifty years of real moral evolution in America—these poetic truths are indeed hyperbolic.

Liberalism in the twenty-first century is, for the most part, a moral manipulation that exaggerates inequity and unfairness in American life in order to justify overreaching public policies and programs. This liberalism is, for example, not much interested in addressing discrimination case by case; rather, it assumes that all minorities and women are systemically discriminated against so that only government-enforced preferential policies for these groups—across the entire society—can bring us close to equity. In health care, for example, the poetic truth of systemic inequality means that government-mandated health care is the only way to fairness. The point is that the exaggerations of poetic truth—here the claim of a deep and permanent American inclination to inequality—redefine social equality away from equal opportunity and toward an idealism in which equality can only be engineered by the government.

This liberalism is invested in an overstatement of America's present sinfulness based on the nation's past sins. It conflates the past into the present so that the present is indistinguishable from the ugly past. And so modern liberalism is grounded in a paradox: it tries to be "progressive" and forward-looking by fixing its gaze backward. It insists that America's shameful past is the best explanation of its current social problems. It looks at the present, but it sees only the past.

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THE ADVENT OF THIS political and cultural liberalism in the 1960s plunged America into what has been called a "culture war." But it would probably be more accurate to call it a cold war. "Culture war" implies a struggle between two factions within a common culture—a struggle to reform or redefine a broad cultural commonality. But this is a "war" between two foes—today's political Right and Left—that are almost as fundamentally antithetical and irreconcilable as the Soviet Union and the United States once were. Both sides feel existentially threatened by the other, which means that their war is

not about the negotiation of a new commonality encompassing elements of both sides; rather, each side seeks total victory over the other—the ideological annihilation of the other.

In this environment, real moderation is all but impossible because, for both sides, moderation feels like ideological suicide. And in fact there is no clear middle ground between today's Right and Left. People on both sides exclaim moderation as a high virtue, but today they whistle in the dark. Where is the middle road between Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman? What would moderation between such polar opposites look like? How would the principle of government spending to stimulate the economy moderate with the principle of less government spending to stimulate the economy? When one side is traveling east and the other west, how do you trade a little east for a little west?

The young man in Aspen and I were headed in opposite directions. We were forty years removed from the 1960s—that decade in which America began to seriously move away from so many of its past sins—and there was simply no middle ground between us. What we had in common—our broad agreement that racism, sexism, military adventurism, and other forms of injustice were wrong—did nothing to assuage the absoluteness of our ideological differences.

## Hypocrisy

IT BEGAN IN HYPOCRISY.

My sport as a kid was swimming. I loved the very medium of water the first time I waded neck-deep into a creek at summer camp. Instinctively I knew how to breathe in it and move through it. I started competitive swimming at age eight, and was first-string varsity in breaststroke and individual medley as a freshman in high school.

But in my junior year I came to a little crisis of faith with swimming. It is a grueling sport. Practice every day was to find one's pain threshold and push through it. I envied my friends on the basketball team who actually played a *game*. In swimming you mortified yourself. My attention began to drift to other things, and at season's end, I did not even qualify for the state meet.

Still, I was elected team captain for the upcoming year, and I was thought to be the team's best hope for a medal at the next year's state meet. So at the sad end of my junior year, I determined—in kind of covenant with myself—that I would get refocused over the summer, and come back in the fall ready to give 110 percent.

But on the first day of the fall semester—my senior year—I ran into a teammate in the registration line. We had swum together since we'd been eight years old. I thought there would be no more than a casual hello, since we would see each other soon enough at preseason swim practice. But he was so anxious to tell me about his fabulous summer that he begged the girl behind me to cut in line. And I will never forget the innocent exhilaration with which he told me a story that I took in like a fist in the gut. He and the entire varsity team—except for me, the team's captain, best swimmer, and only black—had spent three weeks at our coach's family summerhouse on Lake Michigan. They'd had a ball, swimming all day in the lake as well as in the coach's pool, fishing, barbequing, and practical joking after dark. And then there were the girls from surrounding summerhouses. The team, he said, had bonded like never before, and everyone was coming back to school fired up and ready to give everything for our greatest season ever. It was just too bad that I'd had to work and couldn't be there.

Of course I had never been invited to the coach's summerhouse on the lake. I knew nothing about what had to have been an elaborately coordinated team excursion. Moreover, not a single teammate—many of whom I had swum with for almost a decade by then—had even hinted to me all summer long.



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