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(eds.)

The United States as a Divided Nation

Past and Present



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EDITION

Introduction: Writing about a Divided Country

You know, black-white, rich-poor, North-South, odd-even... there may not be anything anymore that outpaces the hatred the Right feels for the Left, or the tonnage of disrespect the Left feels for the Right.

“Evidence of Things Not Seen,” *The West Wing*, April 23, 2003

“United we stand – divided we fall.”

Aesop
John Dickinson
Tupac Shakur
Anonymous

October 16, 2013. In the spring of this year, earlier legislation in the U.S. Congress triggered *sequestration* – sweeping automatic cuts in federal spending reaching billions of dollars. At the end of September, politicians’ unwillingness to compromise on the national budget shut down the U.S. government for the first time since 1996. Now closed to visiting tourists, a long-time symbol of American patriotic values, the Statue of Liberty soon became an emblem of gridlock in government. Yet there was worse to come. The U.S. legislative and executive branches were staring down another deadline – this one for raising the country’s debt ceiling or defaulting as a government. Adding to the newspaper coverage of the effects of the shutdown, the leadership of the World Bank now called on U.S. politicians to find a resolution to the bitter partisan standoff. Allies as well as enemies were watching the U.S. in disbelief – how can the world’s most powerful country become so paralyzed with internal strife?

Tonight the two-week long tense standoff ended after both houses of Congress finally voted to raise the debt ceiling and resume funding the federal government through early 2014. While the immediate crisis was resolved and a global financial shock was averted, it remains to be seen if the U.S. government merely ‘kicked the can down the road’ just to face another such crisis in a few months’ time, or if there will emerge some kind of permanent solution or realignment of political forces for effective governance.

What are the real implications of such a situation? Our book subscribes to the notion that the ‘gridlock’ in Congress and the divisions in U.S. society run deeper than the popular discourse of media talking heads, politicians’ talking

points, or a convenient way for ordinary citizens to blame their problems on ‘crooked politicians’. As co-editors of *The U.S. as a Divided Nation – Past and Present*, we contend that here is a reality ripe for analysis in the polarized American economic, cultural, social and political landscape. Our book investigates the origins, nature, and extent of such fissures, and the possibilities to bridge them, in temporary compromises or in a new consensus for a new age.

The U.S. as a Divided Nation – Past and Present explores the continuing relevance and shifting meanings of the “E Pluribus Unum” motto of the U.S. presidential seal. Our main question is: Is the U.S. as a country still capable of finding common ground and effective policy responses in the 21st century, or are the various dividing lines within U.S. society actually becoming too deep and wide to bridge, with potentially grave consequences for American social, political as well as economic development?

This question is highly relevant primarily for two reasons. First, in the international context the U.S. political system is coming under increasing scrutiny as a model to be emulated or rejected. While the presidential motto aims at unity, the U.S. constitutional system purposefully created institutional divisions in order to safeguard individual freedoms as well as basic human rights. The electoral system based on a simple majority also fosters divisions, as candidates are forced into one-on-one, winner-take-all campaigns, where those who voted for the losing side do not get any representation at all. That said, the divisions and disagreements that are resolved through deliberation and argument can in fact make the whole system both smarter and more robust. For example, taken as a whole, the two party system in the U.S. is very stable despite the internal rivalry, since people’s dissatisfaction can be channeled into voting for the opposition party instead of attempts to overthrow the whole political system.

At the same time, the divisions within the U.S. politics can become so great that they threaten effective governance or even paralyze the political system. This is more likely to happen in times of diminished external threats, as these tend to mitigate existing divisions. The danger is that if the U.S. is seriously enfeebled by internal divisions, this fact will embolden proponents of authoritarian control around the globe, who can use this as an example of the weaknesses inherent in pluralistic systems, which are by definition divisive. This sort of criticism proved very effective over time in the Weimar Republic in Germany. Nowadays, Chinese successes delivered by a one-party state are being contrasted with the sluggish growth and quibbling government of the United States. As was the case during the Cold War, authoritarian rule may be tolerated by many with the excuse that such internal divisions are potentially too great to be managed democratically. This argument can gain a purchase in authoritarian regimes when even our own open democratic societies become paralyzed by internal divisions.

Second, our research question is relevant with respect to debates about the continued existence of the kind of unifying core values and principles within U.S. society which have the capacity to bridge existing differences, especially in times of crisis. Opinion polls taken over the last 20 years suggest that Americans are usually divided over their most important issues (60 to 70% expressed this view). According to a 2012 Gallup survey, 69% of respondents believed that Americans were greatly divided over the country's values. Comparing this with a poll taken in November of 2001, when 74% of those asked thought that Americans were united over their core values, the serious difference we see suggests a post- the 9/11 rallying effect that waned over the years.¹ While divisions and disagreements can be useful in formulating new alternatives, they require a certain established framework of reference which needs to be accepted by *all* participating members. For a long time the Constitution provided such a frame of reference, but recent acrimonious debates about its interpretation generate doubts about its continued function as a unifying force. We should not forget that the United States has a traumatic collective memory of a fateful division which not even the Supreme Court could settle, and which eventually led to the American Civil War. Even though the situation is very different today, this historical episode demonstrates the destructive potential of serious divisions where compromise becomes impossible to achieve.

On the more abstract level, the quest for political unity has ancient roots and is connected with the notion that by working together, the political community can achieve much more together than its constituent members alone. Nation states and their union in Europe are examples of political entities that overcame internal divisions and became powerful actors on the international scene. On the level of private companies, political parties or community organizations, unity is likewise associated with a much desired strength. References to the potentially hostile outside world make the call for unity even more persuasive.

At the same time, unity comes at a cost. In order to achieve unity, it may be necessary to suppress dissenting voices and thus limit personal freedoms. Unity can also lead to stagnation and sterility, as fresh inputs are discarded when they are perceived as threatening an already established unity. Totalitarian as well as authoritarian forces have skillfully exploited the real or perceived need for unified leadership by conveniently positioning themselves as able and ready to provide such leadership. Clearly, there are advantages as well as dangers associated with the concept of unity.

1 Saad, Lydia. "Most in U.S. Say Americans Are Divided on Important Values." *Gallup Politics*. Web. 14 Dec. 2012.

On the same abstract level of reasoning, divisions disrupt unity and create separate camps. This process can have highly productive consequences, as it forces the separate groups to acknowledge as well as engage each other. In social and political contexts, it pushes the two sides to better develop their positions as well as argumentation. By providing alternatives, the system as a whole can generate as well as incorporate new ideas. *Yin* and *yang*, two-parent households, the two-party system of the United States as well as the two ideological blocs in the Cold War are examples of such productive divisions. Divisions are also at the root of diversity (both ethnic and intellectual), which enriches the system with internal dynamism – it is no accident that the need for a diverse student body remains the only argument acceptable at the U.S. Supreme Court for retaining affirmative action policies. However, divisions can also make the system volatile. If not balanced well, one of the opposing camps can seek to dominate the structure by marginalizing or eliminating the other(s) in order to forcefully unify the field under its own leadership. Such an approach can lead to violent conflict, as the other camps fight back – with the level of ferocity directly related to the perceived level of threat.

The first part of this book contains articles that provide a historical context and parallel case studies, as the research question is far from original, and has been explored at several critical junctures in U.S. history.² The second part of the book focuses on various important contemporary wedge issues in U.S. society such as gun rights, racial and economic inequality, the role of the state, the politics of culture, interpretations of history and collective memory, polarization in national politics, and factionalism in domestic and foreign policy. Each article explicitly addresses the main research question and provides a tentative answer within its scope of inquiry. The conclusion incorporates findings from the various chapters and provides a more abstract and comprehensive assessment of the research problem, including its wide-ranging implications.

2 Some of the recent scholarship divisions in U.S. society and their impact include G. Scott-Smith, ed., *Obama, US Politics, and Transatlantic Relations: Change or Continuity?* Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2012; Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, David Mauk, and Ole Moen, eds., *E Pluribus Unum or E Pluribus Plura? Unity and Diversity in American Culture*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011; Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, “Grand Strategy for a Divided America.” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 86 No. 4 (July/August 2007), 71–83. For an example of more popular treatments of the topic, see “Divided States of America: Notes on the Decline of a Great Nation” / “Der Amerikanische Patient: Vom Niedergang einer großen Nation.” *Der Spiegel* 45 (November 5), 2012. Web.

This publication grew out of a need in our respective countries. In spite of their historically strong Transatlantic ties, in most European societies not only the general public, but even the most educated members of the middle class, including current and future policy and opinion makers lack a comprehensive grasp of the current dynamics of U.S. politics, society, domestic and foreign policy. Even though they wield considerable influence in how their societies relate to the United States, only in cases of a major event do these people get an *ad-hoc* tutorial in the major processes, forces and factions of U.S. society, economics, and government. Even for many Americans, the kind of ‘crash course’ in any single current U.S. issue provided by experts in government or pundits in the media at best produces knowledge that is compartmentalized, or often passes with the end of the news cycle – failing to create an informed citizenry.

Our primary goal is to provide our readers – university students, professors and other middle-class intellectuals and opinion makers in Central European societies and the United States – with a panorama of the most important recent and current issues in U.S. government, society, culture, and domestic and foreign policy. Our book provides crucial conceptual tools in its case studies to grasp the complexity of the current processes, policy formation, and political and social change under way in the United States. The articles in our book will help readers to ‘peg’ their thinking about the United States as a complex society, and will serve as guides for comparatively evaluating current and future issues in their own societies. It is our hope that articles from this book will be assigned as readings in Central European university courses on the recent history and contemporary issues of U.S. government and society. We hope that this book will also serve our respective reading publics and national opinion makers as an informational and conceptual tool kit of case studies on how to understand wedge issues in complex societies like the United States.

Finally, it is important to discuss our disciplinary approaches and methodologies. As a field straddling the Humanities and the Social Sciences, American Studies has a history of bringing a variety of disciplinary methodologies to bear on the major scholarly questions of any age.³ Accordingly, our publication features articles from

3 For more on disciplinary paradigms in American Studies, see Gene Wise, “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1979, 293–337; Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture” in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, 3–22; “American Studies in Europe” in Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*.

a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Michael Rodegang Drescher and Styles Sass both aim to generate new understandings of the intersection of Literary Studies and Political Science and Theory. Within Critical Policy Studies, Radosław Rybkowski uses Discourse Analysis and Helena Schulzová focuses on developments in U.S. federal policy. In our U.S. government and law cluster, Małgorzata Zachara blends Social History and cultural criticism with Constitutional Law and Theory, Marek Jáč plumbs the depths of the history of American political thought, while Paweł Laidler brings together Law and Political Science. In their studies of U.S. popular movements, Maxim Kucer draws on Social and Political History, while Maarten Paulusse opens up Religious Studies and American Studies to mutually beneficial lines of inquiry. In the field of Popular Culture Studies, Jolanta Szymkowska-Bartyzel applies Cultural Studies and Critical Race Theory to the study of American cinema. On the Social Sciences side, Eva-Maria Kiefer takes Prospect Theory from Behavioral Economics and brings it to bear on public opinion, electoral and presidential politics, while political scientists Michael R. Wolf, J. Cherie Strachan and Daniel M. Shea conduct quantitative studies of public opinion and electoral politics. Finally, both Maria Diaconu and Kryštof Kozák study the role of collective memory – the first in shaping the U.S. public sphere, the second as an obstacle in American inter-ethnic and U.S.-Mexican relations.

New York: Basic Books, 1997, 94–133; “‘The Special American Conditions’: Marxism and American Studies” in Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*. London, New York: Verso, 2004, 169–192; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies.” Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004. In *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, March 2005, 17–57; and Caroline Levander, “The Changing Landscape of American Studies in a Global Era.” Paper presented at the *Promoting Digital Scholarship* symposium of the National Endowment for the Humanities, September 15, 2008. Web. 7 Dec. 2013.