Barack Obama's America
White, John

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LIKE MANY AMERICANS OF A CERTAIN AGE, I have succumbed to the temptation to reach for a newspaper and examine the leading stories on my date of birth. In my case, the chronicle of choice was the New York Times, and the headlines for October 10, 1952, read, “South Korean Unit, Bayoneting Reds, Regains Key Peak”; “Work Completed on U.N. Buildings”; “Stevenson Taunts Rival for Backing McCarthy, Dirksen”; “U.S. to Give France $525,000,000 in Aid and Hints at More.” Perusing these stories draws the reader to a distant world that no longer seems pertinent. For me, the headlines reflect the fact that I am a child of the Cold War, a conflict that lasted nearly 40 years and ended as the twentieth century neared its close.

That decades-long struggle with the Soviet Union gave Americans an easy political and cultural shorthand. The world was divided in two: the “Free World” (the United States and its allies) versus those held captive behind the “Iron Curtain” (the Soviet Union and its Eastern European neighbors and later the People’s Republic of China). Depending on how the Cold War was progressing, Americans either felt good about themselves (e.g., during the Eisenhower and Kennedy regimes in the 1950s and early 1960s) or didn’t (e.g., when the Vietnam War produced a stalemate quagmire during the Johnson and Nixon regimes in the 1960s and 1970s).
Throughout the Cold War, answers to the all-important question, “What does it mean to be an American?” were easily forthcoming. Simply put, most Americans believed that communists hated individual freedom, while Americans celebrated it with ever greater fervor. As Hollywood film director Sydney Pollack observed, the Cold War “was very good fodder for drama, because you had what was perceived as a clearly virtuous position against what was seen as clearly bad.”

Because communism was viewed as being so thoroughly dastardly—in Ronald Reagan’s words, “an evil empire”—conformity of thought was not only welcome but seen as a political necessity. Arthur Larson, an undersecretary of labor during the Eisenhower administration, summarized the prevailing view: “Principles that we have always taken for granted as the air we breathe are now flatly denounced and denied over a large part of the world—the principles, for example, of the preeminence and the freedom and the sovereignty of the individual person.” Larson described the emergence of an “Authentic American Center” that was sustained by the struggle with the Soviet empire: “We are playing for keeps now, with staggering world responsibilities that we cannot escape.”

Sociologist Daniel Bell echoed Larsen’s arguments, writing that between 1930 and 1950, several intense ideological conflicts emerged as a consequence of the rise of fascism and communism abroad, the Great Depression at home, and the brutally bureaucratized murder of millions in Adolf Hitler’s concentration camps. The aftermath, Bell claimed, left the United States both politically and intellectually exhausted: “For the radical intellectual who had articulated the revolutionary impulses of the past century and a half, all this has meant an end to chiliastic hopes, to millenarianism, to apoplectic thinking—and to ideology. For ideology, which once was the road to action, has come to be a dead end.”

Without the fervor of ideology to guide them, Americans spent the 1950s engaged in the politics of personal self-improvement. Political scientist Robert Lane wrote that in their personal journeys, Americans would pat themselves on the back when they achieved a modicum of success and excoriate themselves when they suffered personal failures. Two of Lane’s respondents—one a blue-collar worker, the other a mechanic—captured these countervailing trends:

**BLUE-COLLAR WORKER:** My God, I work where I want to work. I spend my money where I want to spend it. I buy what I want to buy. I go
where I want to go. I read what I want to read. My kids go to the school that they want to go to, or where I want to send them. We bring them up in the religion we want to bring them up in. What else—what else could you have?

M E C H A N I C: I could have been better off but through my own foolishness, I’m not. What causes poverty? Foolishness. When I came out of the service, my wife had saved a few dollars and I had a few bucks. I wanted to have a good time, I’m throwing money away like water. Believe me, had I used my head right, I could have had a house. I don’t feel sorry for myself—what happened, happened, you know. Of course you pay for it.6

During the 1950s, self-improvement became coupled with an intense desire for personal security, as symbolized by a family structure dominated by wage-earning fathers and homemaker mothers. In Living History, Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote that her stay-at-home mom was “a woman in perpetual motion, making the beds, washing the dishes and putting dinner on the table precisely at six o’clock.”7 Established gender roles not only created a sense of group loyalty but were viewed as essential to the national defense. For example, one 1950 civil defense project put men in charge of firefighting, rescue work, street clearing, and rebuilding; women tended to child care, hospital work, social work, and emergency feeding.8 Still, the need for personal security was never-ending. A 1957 Ford Foundation study called for families that were “stronger emotionally and morally” to meet the dangers from abroad.9 In the authors’ eyes, family renewal meant that parents should set good examples for their children, view divorce as unthinkable, and associate with other wholesome families. Most Americans agreed. In 1950, just 90,992 divorces took place, with 54 percent of them not involving children.10

The emphasis on conformity inside the home became pervasive outside its boundaries, too. In 1956, William H. Whyte Jr. described the emergence of a new “organization man” whose social ethic stressed collaboration rather than confrontation and sublimation rather than expressions of individualism.11 This emphasis on conformity extended not only to social and political thought but even to the means of production itself. California entrepreneur Ray Kroc, for example, used the bromides of factory life to begin his McDonald’s hamburger empire. Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, William Levitt brought Ford Motor Company’s
techniques for mass-producing cars to the Long Island, New York, housing market.

In each case, the intent was clear: sell to families. And that market was immense. Clinton recalled that her mother counted 47 kids living on her square block in the Chicago suburbs. So when Kroc advertised his hamburgers as a chance to “Give Mom a Night Off”—a precursor to its more famous slogan, “You Deserve a Break Today”—millions of harried mothers agreed. And that was only the beginning. In Lakewood, California, returning GI’s and Douglas Aircraft Company workers purchased 17,500 homes in just 33 months. The bargain was irresistible: an 800-square-foot, two-bedroom home for $7,575—or $595 down and $43 a month. (A three-bedroom, 1,100-square-foot home went for $8,525.) According to architectural critic Paul Goldberger, these Levittown-style homes were much more than instant architectural wonders: “[T]hey turned the single detached single-family house from a distant dream to a real possibility for thousands of middle-class American families.” Whyte described these newly built suburbs as “the packaged villages that have become the dormitory of the new generation of organization men.”

The suburban Rhode Island neighborhood in which I grew up featured cookie-cutter houses built in 1954 by one of Levitt’s many imitators. My parents paid $12,000 for their house, a three-bedroom, one-level ranch. Only two variations were available: some with a front peak, others without. In 1957, my sister, Janet, was born. As our neighborhood grew, its residents lived up to the American penchant for inventiveness and individual expression by making major modifications to the prefabricated designs, often by adding “family rooms” (as our family did in 1964) or a second floor with more bedrooms, especially when more than the conventional two children necessitated the renovations. Amid all this construction, family togetherness remained a theme. As one 1954 advertisement for a prefabricated home read, “When Jim comes home, our family room seems to draw us closer together.”

Inside the home, family life followed conventional patterns. My parents paralleled the working dad and stay-at-home mom of the era. In fact, it was not convention so much as an adherence to a strict schedule that characterized life in many 1950s households. My mother, a devoted record keeper, codified in my baby book the routine that I was to observe (and undoubtedly did) when I was two years old:
Breakfast at 7:30 A.M.
Play outside: 10:00–noon.
Lunch: noon.
Nap: 1:00–3:00 P.M.
Play outside till 4:30 P.M.
Supper at 5:30 P.M.
Bedtime at 7:30 P.M.

The 1950s penchant for avoiding controversy and maintaining order meant that when it came to male-female roles, relatively few differences existed between my grandparents—also a homemaker woman and employed man—and my parents. The chief distinctions were that my paternal grandparents shared their rented home with my grandmother’s father, and my grandfather worked in the textile mills. My grandfather’s only son, my father, acquired a college education and eventually secured a white-collar job as an accountant. Although the movement away from a workforce that used its hands to manufacture goods to one in which productivity meant using one’s intellectual skills was gaining momentum, the status of women remained largely unchanged.

Despite the interregnum of World War II, which saw many single women enter the workforce for the first time, white women remained mostly inside the home. For many 1950s-era homemakers, leaving home was an impossibility—they did not drive. My mother, for example, did not learn to operate a car until the early 1960s. Only one family on my childhood street had a working mother, since transportation to and from work often required an automobile, especially in the suburbs, where mass transit had yet to make much of an impact. State laws also kept many women from working. During the Great Depression, more than half of the 48 states enacted statutes prohibiting employers from hiring married women. In 1937, Muriel Humphrey, wife of the future U.S. senator and vice president, took off her wedding ring (a necessary prerequisite for employment) and found a job as a bookkeeper.\textsuperscript{18} Many of these laws—and their accompanying prejudices—remained on the books long after the Great Depression ended. For example, a 1954\textit{Esquire} magazine article called working wives a “menace.”\textsuperscript{19} The reasoning was simple: “undeserving” females would get lower-paying jobs that would otherwise go to male breadwinners at much higher salaries.\textsuperscript{20}
Instead of entering the workforce, women were incessantly advised to find men and be helpmates. In a 1955 issue of Better Homes and Gardens magazine, Mrs. Dale Carnegie, wife of the famed individual motivator, told readers, “The two big steps that women must take are to help their husbands decide where they are going and use their pretty little heads to help them get there. Let’s face it, girls. That wonderful guy in your house—and in mine—is building your house, your happiness and the opportunities that will come to your children.” Carnegie added that while split-level homes were fine for the family, “There is simply no room for split-level thinking—or doing—when Mr. and Mrs. set their sights on a happy home, a host of friends, and a bright future through success in HIS job.”

Even when inflation prompted many mothers to find work during the 1960s and 1970s, their roles inside the household did not change much. For example, when my mother sought employment in 1965, she took a job at a local public school so that her working hours and vacations coincided with those of her children. But even as she worked outside the home, Mom continued the routines she established as a homemaker, including preparing the family meals and making sure the children adhered to their familiar schedules. Meanwhile, my father’s authority remained firm, and his roles as principal breadwinner and home handyman went largely unquestioned.

Religious practices also stressed conformity. In the Roman Catholic Church, masses were said in Latin, as had been the practice for centuries. Devotion to ritual was an important part of Catholic life. Part of that devotion meant going to confession. In Roman Catholicism in America, Chester Gilles offers a vivid description of the 1950s confessional experience: “[M]any Catholics would go to confession weekly, usually on Saturday afternoons in a dimly lighted church. Penitents would wait, kneeling in pews alongside a confessional box where a priest would sit for hours hearing confessions, forgiving sins, and meting out penances usually requiring the penitent to say a certain number of Hail Marys and Our Fathers.” So it was in the White household, as confession became a weekly Saturday ritual. Once, having run out of sins to confess, I made up a few, only to have the priest accuse me of lying in the confessional booth. My mother, noting the unusual length of time it took for what was normally a quick ritual, wondered what horrible sin I had committed. (I avoided her questions.) Other church rules were also faithfully followed. For example, eating meat
on Fridays was a definite no-no. Likewise, fasting before communion was lengthy: a 12-hour refrain from eating was recommended. Women were expected to cover their heads while attending mass, and attire for both sexes was always formal. The same dress code applied to the religious: priests always wore their Roman collars, while nuns were covered from head to toe in their black-and-white garments.

In enunciating these rules, the Catholic hierarchy reminded those in the pews of its command of eternal truths and saw fidelity to the church as the best means of attaining salvation. Sometimes this led to resentments among non-Catholics: in one 1952 survey, 43 percent of respondents said that Catholics tried too hard to get people to join their church, though 42 percent disagreed with that idea.\(^{23}\)

Alexis de Tocqueville once observed that while the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church astonished many Americans, “they feel a secret admiration for its discipline, and its extraordinary unity attracts them.”\(^{24}\) In this respect, Catholics and non-Catholics were far more alike than different. I can recall occasionally attending my father’s Presbyterian Church and hearing the minister give one of his hellfire-and-brimstone sermons, full of certitude about the Almighty and the failings of his earthly servants.

As the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s gathered momentum, many Americans, especially within the Roman Catholic Church, longed for the certainty of the old-time religions. Instead of the universal Latin rite, contemporary masses are said in a multitude of languages, although Pope Benedict XVI has once again made the Latin liturgy an option, delighting older Catholics, who welcomed the reappearance of the familiar ritual in many parishes. Dressing for church is increasingly less formal for both priests and laity. Even eating meat on Fridays is permissible, and the fasting time prior to receiving Holy Communion has been reduced to a mere hour. Many faithful Catholics practice birth control despite Pope Paul VI’s 1968 publication of *Humanae Vitae*, which denounced the Pill as violating the sanctity of human life. *New York Times* religion columnist Peter Steinfels maintains that the publication of *Humanae Vitae* created a Vietnam War–like credibility gap between the Catholic hierarchy and those sitting in the pews: “Theologians publicly dissented from official teaching; priests quietly or not so quietly resigned from the priesthood to marry; nuns shed not only their peculiar head-to-foot-garb but, in many cases, their traditional roles as schoolteachers and nurses, and not a few left their strife-ridden religious orders altogether.”\(^{25}\)
Not surprisingly, a conservative Catholic backlash has ensued and is increasingly vocal and attracting a loyal cadre of followers. Archbishop John J. Myers of Newark, New Jersey, says that the Second Vatican Council, which began a period of institutional reform within the church, “watered down the true teachings of Catholicism.” While Myers’s opinions have evoked strong criticism, his moral certitude draws more than a few admirers. Christine Flaherty, executive director of Lifenet, an antiabortion group, says of her bishop, “It is so uplifting to hear him, because he is teaching the truth. And the truth is like a magnet. It attracts people to it.”

Myers’s rigid interpretation of a bygone era has found significant support. For example, during the summer of 2004, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops declared that Catholics “should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles [with] awards, honors, or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.” At the Catholic University of America, a furious debate ensued after the administration banned a speaker at a film symposium, and the college president barred all politicians from appearing on the campus during the 2004 and 2008 campaigns.

The 1950s image of a nation that was both righteous and surefooted is found not only in yellowed newspapers, musty magazines, or old black-and-white photographs but on the TV Land cable channel, which reruns programs from the era. The plots of these shows vary slightly, but the families depicted are always the same. One can watch the Nelsons, Andersons, or Cleavers in Any Town, USA, and see a working dad, a homemaker mom, and the requisite two children. Divorce was unmentionable, especially since the dads represented security while the moms were perfect hostesses. In 1947, the Screen Actors Guild, led by Ronald Reagan, organized “a series of unprecedented speeches . . . to be given to civic groups around the country, emphasizing that the stars now embodied the rejuvenated family life unfolding in the suburbs.” It was said that Reagan’s repeated evocations of family values were especially “stirring.” But speeches by actors defending the family paled in comparison to the power of the televised images espousing family virtues. For example, when Ward Cleaver of television’s Leave It to Beaver asked his wife, June, what type of girl their son should marry, she responded, “Oh, some very sensible girl from a nice family . . . one with both feet on the ground, who’s a good cook, and can keep a nice house, and see that he’s happy.” At this, her husband responded, “Dear, I got the last one of those.”

Today, some observers might say that Ward Cleaver’s statement was prophetic.
Even that most famous television program from the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*, strictly adhered to conventional thinking about the sexes. Although Desi Arnaz broke the mold by becoming the first hyphenated American television star in his role as Ricky Ricardo (a decision that CBS executives resisted), the Cuban-born Arnaz told his television (and real life) spouse, Lucille Ball, in the pilot episode, “I want a wife who’s just a wife.”

Throughout the series, Lucy resisted Ricky’s demands that she stay home by devising lots of wacky ways to get into show business. Lucy eventually succumbed to conventional realities, first by getting pregnant in 1952 (a show that was viewed by 44 million Americans, more than twice the number who watched Dwight D. Eisenhower’s inauguration) and later by following audience trends and moving her television family from a small New York City apartment to a single-family home in the Connecticut suburbs.

Half a century later, television programs such as *I Love Lucy* still find appreciative audiences. David Halberstam, whose book on the 1950s is the definitive work on that decade, believed that these shows created images that were so sharp that they became objects of considerable nostalgia as the composition of families and the roles the sexes played within them changed radically in the decades that followed.

A few years into the twenty-first century, Lynn Jensen, a 33-year-old married mother with two children, expressed a widely shared longing for the stability of a bygone era: “This is going to sound silly, but I wish things were like they were when we were growing up. I wish we could go back in time. We had stable lives. Mom could stay home, and we could afford it. Life was slower. God, I’m sounding like my parents—all nostalgic for the old days. But it’s true: There wasn’t trouble then like there is today. Take my kids—they’re growing up too fast. My daughter is only five, and she knows too much.”

This longing for a lost past transcends partisanship. Brink Lindsey, a vice president for research at the Cato Institute, writes that “in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the rival ideologies of left and right are both pining for the ’50s.” “The only difference,” Lindsey concludes, “is that liberals want to work there, while conservatives want to go home there.”

Of course, not all family life in mid-twentieth-century America was idyllic. In 1953, one physician wrote that under a feminine “mask of placidity” often lay “an inwardly tense and emotionally unstable individual seething with hidden aggressiveness and resentment.” A decade later, Betty Friedan published a classic study of the daily drudgery she described...
as “a problem with no name”: “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’”36 Capturing the sentiments of the moment, The Feminine Mystique sold more than two million copies and launched Friedan as a spokesperson for the feminist movement. As futurist Alvin Toffler memorably remarked, publication of The Feminine Mystique “pulled the trigger on history.”37

In my home, the issue was not a problem with no name as much as a struggle with illness. I vividly recall my father having a severe heart attack in 1960. My mother, then a homemaker, pleaded with the local bank to allow our family to pay only the interest on the home mortgage while my father recuperated. (She was turned down.) Dad eventually went back to work, but our brush with poverty struck a powerful chord, prompting Mom to learn to drive a car and eventually to return to the workforce. My father’s numerous hospitalizations from 1960 until his death in 1977 became a subtext of life in our household, a plot very familiar to viewers of the popular television programs Ben Casey and Dr. Kildare but hardly the subject of the family sitcoms that are so frequently reaired in the half-century since they first debuted.

Even now, despite all of the horrors hidden behind the suburban Levittowns of the 1950s, Americans retain a collective longing for a past that was certain of its moral values. The first signs of nostalgia came in 1962, when the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) issued a manifesto that called on society’s elders to reaffirm society’s traditional mores: “Making values explicit is an activity that has been devalued and corrupted. . . . Unlike youth in other countries, we are used to moral leadership being exercised and moral dimensions being clarified by our elders.”38 The young members of the SDS, who became such strident critics of the Vietnam War and the Establishment they saw as its cause, charged that their parents had abandoned their role as moral authorities. Put another way, the children of the 1950s sought the clear voices heard in the fatherly television personas of Ozzie Nelson, Ward Cleaver, and Jim Anderson.
Enter the Twenty-first Century

Today, images of the prototypical 1950s-era nuclear family are quickly fading from public memory, and a new, more varied picture of the family is developing, even in my household. I married Yvonne Prevost in 1995, a late, first-time marriage for both of us. This alone was quite different from the social patterns of the post–World War II era into which we were born. In a 1947 bestseller, *The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, authors Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg described feminism as a “deep illness” and called the notion of an independent woman a “contradiction in terms.” Sociologist David Riesman notes that a woman’s failure to bear children went from being “a social disadvantage and sometimes a personal tragedy” in the nineteenth century to being a “quasi-perversion” in the 1950s. Men who remained bachelors were also demonized as being “immature,” “infantile,” “narcissistic,” “deviant,” and even “pathological.”

Given these pressures, it is not surprising that by 1959, 47 percent of brides were under 19 years of age. Women who remained unmarried flocked to colleges to find husbands. In one popular guidebook, *Win Your Man and Keep Him*, marketed to these lonely women, the authors emphasized the cultivation of good looks, personality, and cheerful subservience: “If you are more than twenty-three-years-old . . . perhaps you have begun to wonder whether Mr. Right would ever come along for you. Your chances are still good; you can increase them appreciably by taking actions which this book advocates.” Another tract offered similar advice: “A girl who reaches the middle twenties without a proposal ought to consider carefully whether she really wishes to remain single. If she does not, she should try to discover why marriage hasn’t come her way, and perhaps take steps to make herself more interesting and attractive.”

My marriage has adhered to today’s social and cultural mores in other
ways that are quite different from the patterns of a half century ago. For starters, my wife decided to keep her maiden name, thereby horrifying my 1950s-minded mother. Today, any weekly perusal of the “Weddings/Celebrations” page in the Sunday New York Times finds lots of women who have made similar decisions. Yet these pages capture not only the resolve of many women to retain their birth names but also the very different nature of family life itself. For example, on February 9, 2004, the Times reported the wedding of New Yorkers Norma Fritz and Michael O’Brien. The paper described the couple’s romance: how she heard him walking up the stairs and pacing the floor in the apartment above hers as he visited his ex-wife and their two children, Dana, aged 13, and Jack, aged 11. Fritz and O’Brien spied each other in the hallway. Phone numbers were exchanged, and the two began dating. While the story may seem reminiscent of the 1950s, the circumstances have a decidedly twenty-first-century twist. Fritz, aged 45, had concluded some five years earlier that marriage was not in her immediate future. She decided to have a baby, conceiving her son, Noah, with sperm provided by an anonymous donor. According to Fritz, “I had opportunities to get married, but I never felt like any of them was ‘the one.’” A friend, Nancy Brandwein, told the Times, “She has taken leaps and made bold decisions that others seldom would.”

When the couple began dating, O’Brien’s two children babysat Fritz’s son. According to Fritz, “Mike’s ex-wife has been very, very gracious and his kids have been amazing.” But as the romance blossomed, O’Brien, a software developer with J. P. Morgan Chase, began having doubts. The couple separated for two months. The relationship finally resumed when O’Brien knocked on the door of Fritz’s apartment and four-year-old Noah answered and asked, “Oh, you love her again?” After the wedding, the newly married couple immediately began house hunting in the suburbs.

David Brooks captures the differences between today’s wedding announcements and those of a half century ago. Sentences that would never appear in contemporary newspapers include, “She is descended from Richard Warren, who came to Brookhaven in 1664. Her husband, a descendant of Dr. Benjamin Treadwell, who settled in Old Westbury in 1767, is an alumnus of Gunnery School and a senior at Colgate University.” Or “Mrs. Williams is an alumna of Ashley Hall and Smith College. A provisional member of the Junior League of New York, she was presented to society in 1952 at the Debutante Cotillion and Christmas Ball.” Even the captions seem quaint: “Mrs. Peter J. Belton, who was Nancy Stevens.” In
The Feminine Mystique, Friedan wrote that after World War II, women—like the newly married Mrs. Peter J. Belton—“lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in the front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor.” According to Friedan, these newlyweds “gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: ‘Occupation: housewife.’”

In 2002, the wedding pages of the New York Times were revamped in a way no one could have dreamed of a half century earlier. That year, the paper’s editors decided to publish reports of same-sex commitment ceremonies. Even the name was changed from “Weddings” to “Weddings/Celebrations.” The paper’s executive editor, Howell Raines, explained, “In making this change, we acknowledge the newsworthiness of a growing and visible trend in society toward public celebrations of commitment by gay and lesbian couples—celebrations important to many of our readers, their families, and their friends.”

The first such announcement printed, tucked away in the corner of the page, heralded the marriage of Hillary Goodridge and Julie Goodridge, who had been granted permission to wed by the Massachusetts State Supreme Judicial Court. Although the decision was controversial, what is striking about the first official lesbian wedding is how typical it was compared to those of other heterosexual couples. In an interview the day before the ceremony, Julie Goodridge described herself as being consumed by details, not the history she was making: “I’m thinking about whether or not the shoes are going to look good with the suit I picked out. Is the tailor going to be done, and have we ordered enough flowers, and are we going to have fried calamari at the reception, and how much is enough?”

Much like its announcements of heterosexual weddings, the Times’s first lesbian wedding announcement emphasized the résumés, accomplishments, and romance that had brought together the two women.

HILLARY GOODRIDGE,
JULIE GOODRIDGE

Hillary Smith Goodridge and Julie Wendrich Goodridge, the lead plaintiffs in the case that led the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to extend marital rights to same-sex couples in that state, were them-
selves married on Monday in Boston. The Rev. William G. Sinkford, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, officiated at the organization’s building there.

Hillary Goodridge, formerly Hillary Ann Smith, and Julie Goodridge, formerly Julie Neil Wendrich, changed their surnames eight years ago when their daughter, Annie, was born.

Hillary Goodridge, 48, is the director of the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program, a grant-making arm of the Universalists. She graduated from Dartmouth. She is the daughter of Ann Kiernan Smith of Vero Beach, Fla., and of Ralph K. Smith Jr. of Locust Valley, N.Y., who is a partner in Snow Becker Krauss, a New York law firm.

Julie Goodridge, 46, owns NorthStar Asset Management, an investment advisory firm in Boston. She graduated from Boston University and received a master's degree in education from Harvard. She is the daughter of the late Carolyn S. Wendrich and the late Kenneth A. Wendrich, who lived in Nashville. Mr. Wendrich was the executive director of the W. O. Smith/Nashville Community Music School in Nashville; before that he was dean of the Musical Arts at Bowling Green University in Ohio.

The couple met in 1985 at a seminar at Harvard about disinvestment from South Africa.

“I had just read a book by my friend Amy Domini on socially responsible investing,” Julie Goodridge said. “At the seminar, Amy, who was speaking, introduced me to Hillary, who was dressed like a Republican stockbroker.”

Julie Goodridge added, “For two years I pursued Hillary, but she would have nothing to do with me.” She worked hard at making an impression, she said, volunteering to cook a meal in Hillary’s apartment in Somerville, Mass., in the spring of 1987, when the two were working into the night on a speech to introduce Gloria Steinem at a conference at Radcliffe.

“When she told me that all she had in her refrigerator was raw chicken and some beer, I said, ‘That’s no problem,’” Julie Goodridge remembered. “I threw it together in an aluminum baking pan. Of course it was disgusting. We went out for ice cream instead.”

A few months later, Julie Goodridge said she convinced Hillary to attend a gay pride parade with her, and their relationship finally blos-
somed. Now they live in a leafy Boston neighborhood that their friend Ms. Domini described as “fairly ordinary.”

Ms. Domini, speaking at their wedding, said, “You introduce a couple of people, you maybe encourage them a bit, and what happens? A national crisis. The fault line for the presidential election. The coming of Armageddon.”

And when the Goodridges announced their separation in 2006, that, too, seemed typical. Mary Breslauer, a spokesperson for the couple, asked for privacy: “Julie and Hillary Goodridge are amicably living apart. As always, their number one priority is raising their daughter.”

As the Goodridges’ wedding and subsequent split suggest, signs of change are all around us. In the life of the Whites/Prevosts, more changes arrived on the cusp of the new century when our daughter, Jeannette, was born. The childhood she enjoys today is quite different from the experiences of her parents half a century ago. While she is hardly of an age to go to the library and look up old newspapers, I retrieved a copy of the New York Times for her date of birth, April 14, 1997, in an effort to contrast her childhood experiences with mine. The front page headlines read, “Tiger Woods, in a Blaze, Rewrites Masters’ History”; “Pope in Sarajevo, Calls for Forgiveness”; “Women in Washington State House Lead U.S. Tide”; “Smaller Investors Keeping Faith, Despite Stock Market Tumbles.”

These stories reflect enormous transformations—among them, the nation’s increased racial diversity, the tensions between ethnic groups that have characterized post–Cold War international conflicts, the enhanced role of women in politics, and the emergence of a new, more individualized, investor class. Most of these headlines would have been unthinkable in the 1950s, thereby vindicating the wisdom of eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “Life belongs to the living, and he who lives must be prepared for changes.”

As our daughter ages—and she will most likely spend the rest of her life in the twenty-first century—the sociological trends captured on her birth date will only accelerate. For example, in the Montgomery County, Maryland, public school system she attended from grades 1 to 4, just 45 percent of the students enrolled in 2003 were white. In fact, 2003 marked the last year that a majority of the county’s graduating high school seniors were white, a stark contrast to thirty years earlier, when 90 percent of the total
student population was white. Watching high school graduates traverse various stages to receive their diplomas and knowing that many got their start in such diverse places as Kenya, El Salvador, Vietnam, and Iran, school superintendent Jerry D. Weast observed, “Sometimes you see an ‘aha’ in the crowd, the realization of what we’ve been saying all along: ‘It’s not coming. It’s here.’” Since 1991, Montgomery County schools have added 16,000 Hispanics, 12,000 blacks, and 7,000 Asians while losing 3,000 white students. In her local primary school, Jeannette was a racial minority: the student population was 38 percent Hispanic, 33 percent African American, 18 percent white, and 10 percent Asian. And that is only the beginning. Estimates show that by 2010, most residents of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region will be minorities.

Many of Jeannette’s peers are not just brown-skinned but from very different family structures. The Census Bureau has tracked the changes.

- In 1960, 88 percent of children under 18 years of age lived with a married parent. Forty years later, that figure fell to 69 percent, a decline that continues each year.
- From 1960 to 2000, the divorce rate more than doubled. Forty years ago, there was a one-in-four chance that a child would witness a parental split; today, the odds are one in two.
- In 1960, just 5.3 percent of newborns had unmarried mothers. By 2000, that figure had increased more than sixfold to 33.2 percent. Among whites, the number of single mothers expanded tenfold, from 2 percent to 27 percent, while the ratio among blacks tripled from 22 percent to 68.5 percent.
- Between 1960 and 2000, the number of single-parent families tripled from 9 percent to 27 percent of all households.
- The number of cohabitating couples grew from 439,000 in 1960 to 4.7 million in 2000. Two-thirds of those born between the years 1963 and 1974 say that their first union was a cohabitation.

Explaining these changes to children is sometimes challenging. In 2004, the Washington Post ran an article on its “Kids Post” page describing young Justin McGwire’s lesbian parents. The 10-year-old was so perplexed as to why his two moms were prohibited from marrying that he went before the Maryland state legislature to ask, “Isn’t this whole entire country
supposed to be about freedom and equality and ‘everybody’s created equal?’” When describing his family to his peers, Justin says it is “no big deal,” adding, “I’ve been over at friends’ houses who have moms and dads, and it’s no different than at my house.” Justin McGwire is just one sign of a radical transformation of the American family. In 2001, David Smith, a communications director for a national gay-rights organization, predicted, “I think the next decade is basically the decade of the gay family.”

Popular culture fully reflects the revolutions of our time. Television programs are a far cry from the married heterosexual couples with two children that dominated the 1950s and 1960s. Today, every variation of family life—from the singles who proliferated on Seinfeld to the father and son who shared an apartment on Frasier to the various couplings depicted on Friends—has been shown on network television. The 2003–4 season featured the ABC sitcom It’s All Relative, featuring a heterosexual couple in which the wife was the daughter of two upscale gay men and the husband’s family had a blue-collar background. The plots revolved around how these two families interacted with each other and their children. During the 2005–6 television season, none of the top twenty-five rated television programs depicted a happily married couple. And in 2007, the major cable networks debuted several new programs, none of which celebrated marriage: HBO’s drama series Tell Me You Love Me chronicled marital strife among several couples; VH1’s reality series Scott Baio Is 45 and . . . Single described the inability of the former Happy Days television star to enter into marriage with any number of past lovers; Showtime’s Californication depicted a man who regretted not marrying the mother of his child and decided to commence a series of unromantic hookups with several attractive young women. Instead of married couples who might serve as updated 1950s-era role models, programmers prefer dysfunctional marrieds like The Sopranos or the Henricksons on HBO’s Big Love, with its more-is-better polygamy setting.

Perhaps the most significant change is the prevalence of gay television characters. Surveying the airwaves, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson says, “It seems as if every episode of every sitcom on television now includes a gay character portrayed in a sensitive light. . . . It’s gay, gay, gay, wherever you look.” Hyperbole aside, Dobson has a point. Things have changed. Thirty years ago, homosexuality was virtually banned from the airwaves. If it was mentioned at all, it was always with a negative connotation. For example, on Marcus Welby, M.D. (1969–76), starring Robert
Young, the doctor told his gay patient to “win that fight” against his homosexual feelings. The contemporary airwaves feature several gay-oriented popular programs, including *Ellen, Will and Grace*, and the surprise 2003 summer hit, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. *Ellen*, the first network series to depict a real-life gay character playing the lead, attracted 36 million viewers for its 1997 “coming out” episode. One television critic described *Will and Grace*, with its gay/straight couple pairing, as the *I Love Lucy* of twenty-first-century programming.

The success of *Queer Eye* is especially remarkable: in its first broadcast, the program drew 1.6 million viewers on the Bravo cable network, the largest audience in that channel’s history. NBC, the parent company of Bravo, quickly decided to air the show on its main network, drawing 7 million viewers and earning second place in the time slot. In another sign of the times, *Queer Eye* had no trouble attracting first-rate sponsors, including Bausch and Lomb, Levi’s jeans, Volkswagen, and promos for the hit summer flick *Seabiscuit*. Only three NBC affiliates balked: WITN (Greenville, South Carolina) and WAGT (Augusta, Georgia) did not broadcast the program in its allotted prime-time slot, relegating it instead to 1:35 A.M. and 2:35 A.M., respectively. WCNC (Charlotte, North Carolina) did not show it at all.

Another cultural barrier was broken in 2005 when an episode of *The Simpsons*, “There’s Something about Marrying,” featured a plot wherein Marge Simpson’s sister, Patty Bouvier, came out of the closet while Homer Simpson conducted dozens of same-sex marriages after the town voted to legalize gay weddings as a means of garnering tourists. Ray Richmond, a television columnist and coeditor of *The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family*, noted that the episode represented a cultural milestone for the long-running program, which has become a billion-dollar franchise: “The issue [of gay marriage] was mainstream to some degree, but now that they’ve deigned it worthy of the show it is interwoven into the popular culture. *The Simpsons* bestows upon something a pop culture status it never had before, simply by being ripe for a joke.”

Max Mutchnick, cocreator of *Will and Grace*, explains the success of these gay-themed shows: “Television is catching up with society at large. These new gay shows are a reflection of what everyone sees now in their jobs, in their families, in their schools. The Brady Bunch never lived next door to anyone in America. Gay people do live next door.” In a 2000 Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation survey, a surprising 52 percent of re-
spondents believed that television programs and books had the “right amount” of gay themes and characters; only 37 percent answered “too many.”

We are a long way, indeed, from the days when Lucy and Ricky Ricardo slept in separate beds and avoided the word pregnancy in favor of the term expectant mother.

Institutional Change and Social Response

These societal transformations are dynamic. But change is hardly a new story in the American saga. In 1832, Tocqueville described meeting an American sailor and asking him why the ships made in his country were built to last only a short time. The man replied that “the art of navigation was making such quick progress that even the best of boats would be almost useless if it lasted more than a few years.” From this and other observations, Tocqueville concluded, “Everyman sees changes continually taking place. Some make things worse, and he understands only too well that no people and no individual, however enlightened he be, is ever infallible. Others improve his lot, and he concludes that man in general is endowed with an indefinite capacity for self improvement.” Change and the optimism that often accompanies it are key elements of the American saga.

While Tocqueville focused on technological improvements, demographic changes have become a consistent theme in the American story. From 1890 to 1930, more than 15 million people from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe came to American shores—roughly the number who emigrated to the United States from all countries from 1820 to 1890. Many of these new arrivals found work in the industrial mills. Not surprisingly, a check of the 1920 Census found that my paternal grandfather, best described as a swamp Yankee, was working as a spinner in the Rhode Island textile mills. The Industrial Revolution and the immigrant hands whose labor gave that revolution its endurance touched every household. Old-timers took notice. In 1926, Massachusetts Yankee Daniel Chauncey Brewer authored a book appropriately titled The Conquest of New England by the Immigrant.

Not surprisingly, the social and political institutions of the early twentieth century adhered to an old maxim: adapt or die. Most adapted. For example, neighborhood churches, many of them Roman Catholic, quickly assimilated the newcomers. New urban-based parishes were created, many with schools attached. According to author Peter Steinfels, the Catholic
Church also responded in a myriad of other ways to the needs of its newly arrived parishioners: “Catholic fraternal societies provided insurance while preserving ethnic cultures. Catholic reading circles and Catholic summer school programs of lectures, concerts, and dramas mirrored the nineteenth century Chautauqua Movement for cultural improvement. Catholic newspapers by the hundreds were printed in a babel of languages, often for small ethnic readerships but sometimes with national impact. Catholic publishers sprung up to serve a growing market for Bibles, prayer books, catechisms, religious novels, and pious nonfiction.”

Political parties also gave immigrants a place to turn. Party machines arose as a direct response to bosses’ desire to tie their fortunes to those of the newcomers. As Richard Croker, a one-time head of Tammany Hall, put it, “Think of what New York is and what the people of New York are. One-half are of foreign birth. . . . They do not speak our language, they do not know our laws. . . . There is no denying the service which Tammany has rendered to the Republic, there is no such organization for taking hold of the untrained, friendless man and converting him into a citizen. Who else would do it if we did not?”

Political scientist Robert D. Putnam describes how many twentieth-century institutional leaders wanted the immigrant newcomers to immerse themselves in the nation’s civic life. In 1916, L. J. Hanifan, state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia, coined the phrase social capital, explaining how he wanted his schools to enhance it:

> The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself. . . . If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors.

Hanifan’s views became commonplace. A 1920 Massachusetts conference on immigrant education held the education process responsible for ensuring “that our American institutions may endure. . . . We believe in an Americanization which has for its end the making of good American citizens by developing in the mind of everyone who inhabits American soil an appreciation of the principles and practices of good American citizenship.”
Social Change and Political Response in the 1950s

Even the less demanding and seemingly placid 1950s saw more institutional adaptations to new realities than is commonly understood. One important transformation came when returning nonwhite servicemen from World War II and Korea attempted to relocate in predominantly white neighborhoods. In 1951, Harvey Clark, a black man, tried to move into Cicero, Illinois, a largely white community. A mob of more than 4,000 whites spent four days tearing apart his apartment while police stood by and joked with them. Two years later, when the first black family moved into Chicago’s Trumbull Party public housing project, neighbors “hurled stones and tomatoes” and trashed stores that sold groceries to the new residents. Despite the unfavorable publicity, prejudices against blacks remained strong. *Life* magazine reported in 1957 that in Dearborn, Michigan, nearly 10,000 Negroes worked at the Ford Motor plant but that “not one Negro can live in Dearborn itself.”

In 1954, the Supreme Court formally ended segregated public education in its *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. That change engendered strong resistance, especially in the states most affected by the decision. In 1957, a federal court ordered nine black students admitted to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The state’s governor, Orval Faubus, resisted and summoned the National Guard to prevent the order’s enforcement, rationalizing that the Guard members were attempting “to maintain or restore the peace and good order of this community [and] not act as segregationists or integrationists.” But when mobs gathered to prevent the Little Rock Nine from entering the school, President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas Guard, noting that his constitutional duty required him to implement Supreme Court decisions. This, too, represented a change of heart. Only two months earlier, Eisenhower had announced at a news conference, “I can’t imagine any set of circumstances that would ever induce me to send federal troops . . . into any area to enforce the orders of a federal court.” Although the black students ultimately were enrolled, Faubus’s actions won him an unprecedented third term in the governor’s mansion. Forty years later, however, another former Arkansas governor, Bill Clinton, honored the Little Rock Nine with the Congressional Gold Medal. Their courageous actions had begun a profound transformation.

In 1957, Congress responded to the brewing civil rights revolution by enacting the first civil rights law since Reconstruction. Senate majority
leader Lyndon B. Johnson believed that passage of a civil rights bill was essential to the well-being of two of the nation’s most vital institutions: the Senate and the political parties that inhabited it. According to Johnson biographer Robert Caro, the Texas Democrat cajoled his colleagues, saying, “We’ve got the world looking at us here! We’ve got to make the world see that this body works!” To Republicans, Johnson pleaded, “You’re the party of Lincoln. That’s something to be proud of. You’re the image of Lincoln.” To Democrats, LBJ warned, “Our party’s always been the place that you can come to whenever there’s injustice. That’s what the Democratic Party’s for. That’s why it was born. That’s why is survives. So the poor and the downtrodden and the bended can have a place to turn. And they’re turning to us now. We can’t let them down. We’re down to nut-cutting now, and we can’t let them down.” After considerable wrangling, the bill passed by an overwhelming vote of 72 to 18.

The 1950s also saw the growth of movements outside the existing constitutional structures that were altering both the scope and direction of political conflict. In 1960, political scientist E. E. Schattschneider wrote, “We have had difficulty perceiving change because we have looked for the wrong kind of conflict (conflict within the government) and we have underestimated the extent to which the government itself as a whole has been in conflict with other power systems.” While the civil rights revolution qualified as an example of a struggle that began outside the traditional constitutional tripartite separation of federal powers, it was not the only one. In his 1961 farewell address, Dwight Eisenhower acknowledged the growth of the “military-industrial complex,” whose growing power threatened to disrupt the artful arrangements so carefully constructed by the founding fathers: “Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields. In the same fashion, the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of new electronic computers.”

During the 1950s, the family itself was also changing, despite the many societal pressures to conform. For example, the rate of teenage pregnancy peaked in 1957. Moreover, even as the nuclear family was being celebrated in the popular culture, the Cold War required more mothers to be employed in defense-related industries. The 1952 Democratic platform
contained the promise, “Since several million mothers must now be away from their children during the day, because they are engaged in defense work, facilities for adequate day care of these children should be provided and adequately financed.”

In his Farewell Address, Eisenhower observed that “it is the task of statesmanship to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces, new and old, within the principles of our democratic system.” In other words, society’s leaders must capture and control the transformations at work. A major theme of John F. Kennedy’s quest for the presidency was that Eisenhower had failed to manage conflicts sparked by societal change. Accepting the 1960 Democratic nomination, Kennedy charged that “a slippage in our intellectual and moral strength” had occurred, adding, “Seven lean years of drought and famine have withered a field of ideas.” Kennedy’s mantra, “It’s time to get this country moving again,” not only referred to a reinvigorated presidency but also called on the American polity to heed the many metamorphoses of change already at work within it.

The Scope and Intensity of Change in the Twenty-first Century

While changes in the nation’s social and cultural life are hardly new, as even the seemingly placid 1950s demonstrate, the scope and intensity of today’s transformations are impressive. Changes in the definition of the family itself, the question of what people of mixed racial heritage call themselves, and new ways religion is practiced all characterize life in the twenty-first century. For example, my wife and I own a duplex home in Fall River, Massachusetts. A few years ago, we searched for a tenant for our one-bedroom furnished apartment. Those who came were either unmarried couples—usually in their first cohabitation experience—or singles who had previously been married. Some cohabitating applicants had the encouragement of their parents. One especially memorable example was a young man who had just broken up with his girlfriend. Together they had one child, but the child’s mother had three other offspring by three different men. We had nearly ninety inquiries from persons of many different racial backgrounds, but few came from either single people who had never been married or from married couples with or without children.

In the twenty-first century, there are numerous examples of institutions that are bending—sometimes in surprising ways—to the social and cultural transformations that are taking place. One is the Christian Coalition, the
organization formerly headed by the Reverend Pat Robertson. While its current president, Roberta Combs, finds her conservative political views akin to Robertson’s, she is cut from a very different cloth. Combs believes that to survive in the twenty-first century, the Christian Coalition must seek alliances with unlikely partners. Thus, she teamed up with New York Democratic senator Charles Schumer to support antispam legislation that severely restricts the use of e-mail to distribute pornography. In another sign of apostasy, Combs met with then-Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton to discuss prescription drugs and how the elderly could be helped by federal coverage. While Clinton remains anathema to the Christian Coalition’s members, Combs believes that the group’s antipathy must give way so that the legislation they jointly seek can become law. Says Combs, “If you are going to make progress, you have to be tolerant. You have to be willing to work with Democrats. If there is legislation that affects the family, you have to work with both sides of the aisle.”

Governments are also responding to society’s changes, in some cases molding them to fit new circumstances. In 2001, the San Diego City Council saw the blurring of racial and color lines and banned the word minority from all city documents. Other state and local governments have also jettisoned antiquated rules to adapt to new social realities. In 2000, 60 percent of Alabamians voted to repeal the portion of the state’s constitution forbidding interracial marriages, making Alabama the final state to remove the official prohibition on miscegenation. In 1952, twenty-nine states prohibited interracial marriage, which was a particularly entrenched taboo. When the Supreme Court was asked to overturn these statutes following Brown v. Board of Education, it refused. As one law clerk advised a justice, “In view of the segregation cases, it would be wise judicial policy to duck this question for a time.” Thus, the Supreme Court acknowledged a binary world that divided people into black and white, although such a world never really existed in practice and was inevitably going to bend in the decades to come.

Yet for every institution that is adapting to changing times, others remain sclerotic. Chief among these is the U.S. military and its attitude toward gays. Cathleen Glover, a 1999 graduate of Miami University of Ohio, chose to attend the Defense Language Institute (DLI), the U.S. military’s premier language school, after a U.S. Army recruiter came to her home and enticed her to join. The army offered to pay for her postgraduate education, and she was told that if she studied Arabic and liked to travel, her military career would be long and rewarding.
The DLI, located at the Presidio in Monterey, California, is one of the nation’s most prestigious institutions of higher learning. Founded on the eve of World War II, when the army established a secret school to teach Japanese, the institute expanded during the Cold War, and native speakers of more than 30 languages were recruited to teach there. Russian quickly emerged as the largest program. But as U.S. security needs changed, so did the school’s offerings. For example, during the Vietnam War, more than 20,000 service personnel studied Vietnamese there. With the advent of the all-volunteer forces and the opening of most specialties to women in the 1970s, the DLI again adapted, admitting women. After September 11, officials placed a priority on teaching Arabic, which is now the DLI’s most popular language, with 832 students. Korean (743 students), Chinese (353 students), and Russian (301 students) are also studied extensively. Through the years, the institute has shown itself capable of responding to the nation’s changing security needs.

In a moment of severe stress, however, Glover penned a letter to the Monterey County Herald describing how she had been leading a double life: one on the base; the other sharing a nearby apartment with her gay partner. The torment had taken its toll, and the relationship ended, prompting Glover to write, “What if a married person in the military couldn’t tell anyone that his wife exists?” Her immediate superior, not wanting to lose yet another gay student, initially refused to acknowledge Glover’s homosexuality. But Glover was soon found to be in violation of the military’s “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. The words “HOMOSEXUAL ADMISSION” were written in large capital letters on her discharge papers.

The security risks posed by dismissing gay Arab linguists are grave. Since “Don’t ask, don’t tell” was instituted in 1993, fifty-eight Arabic linguists have been discharged from military service despite repeated warnings from various government agencies that training more Arab linguists was a national security priority. An October 2001 House Intelligence Committee report discovered that “thousands of pieces of data are never analyzed, or are analyzed ‘after the fact’ because there are too few analysts, even fewer with the necessary language skills.” A 2002 General Accounting Office study disclosed that staff shortages in Arabic and Farsi had “adversely affected agency operations and compromised U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counter-terrorism, and diplomatic efforts.” Former congressman Marty Meehan, a Massachusetts Democrat whose bill to repeal “Don’t ask, don’t tell” had 124 cosponsors in the 110th Congress, says, “At a time when our military is stretched to the limit and our...
cultural knowledge of the Middle East is dangerously deficient, I just can’t believe that kicking out able, competent Arabic linguists is making our country any safer.”

Bill Clinton’s 1993 introduction of the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was controversial. General Colin Powell, then serving as chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the president that having gays in the military would be “prejudicial to good order and discipline.” In a poll taken at the time, 48 percent of respondents opposed the policy, while 45 percent approved. But the passion lay with the opposition: only 16 percent of respondents strongly approved of lifting the ban, while 33 percent strongly disapproved. Yet Clinton insisted on the change, telling Powell that the government had spent $500 million ousting 17,000 gays from the military during the previous decade. Clinton managed to find a lonely Republican ally in Barry Goldwater, who told reporters, “You don’t need to be straight to fight and die for your country. You just need to shoot straight.” But not even the iconic Goldwater could convince his fellow Republicans to support Clinton. Even though the president ultimately prevailed, the military continued to resist, and “[m]any anti-gay officers simply ignored the new policy and worked even harder to root out homosexuals, costing the military millions of dollars that would have been far better spent making America more secure.”

The institutional rigidity of the U.S. military remains costly. According to military estimates, the cost of training each DLI graduate is $33,500, excluding room, board, and the stipend each student receives. According to the Government Accountability Office, more than 11,000 military personnel—including 800 in crucial jobs such as Glover’s—have been dismissed for being gay since 1993. Other countries have shown themselves more facile in making changes to their military policies. For example, Canada officially ended its ban on gays in the military in 1992, while Britain did so in 2000.

The Search for an “Axial Principle”

In the early days of the twenty-first century, an old slogan has taken on new meaning. During the 1960s and 1970s, a commonly heard phrase was, “The personal is political.” Advocates of women’s rights and civil rights maintained that gender and race were not merely private affairs. Politicians ultimately resolved controversies about when people should marry, have
sex, and work or stay at home with their children and about whether blacks could obtain equitable housing, attend biracial schools, or even enter polling booths. As these struggles illustrate, societal change and political conflict go hand in hand. But identifying the changes at work (and the resulting conflicts) has proven more difficult than previously imagined. Twenty-five years ago, Everett Carll Ladd Jr. wrote that the “student of American government and politics needs to know which links between the political and social spheres have the greatest influence on politics and how changes in the larger social environment are reshaping politics, molding it, and moving it in new directions. What aspects are the most consequential? We need an ‘axial principle’ that identifies the primary features of American society that together form the distinctive setting for political life.”

The search for an “axial principle” still continues, often unsuccessfully. Today’s changes have resulted in some confusion about the most elemental matter of conflict: how to label it. One reason for this muddle is the confusion that surrounds the sense of self and which identities are most important. This state of affairs is in sharp contrast to the 1960s, when race rose to the forefront, as the Kerner Commission concluded in 1968: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”

Racial identification became part of an emerging political equation: whites were whites; blacks were blacks. Even those of mixed racial heritage were forced to choose. Thus, during the nineteenth century, Virginia’s governors began the practice of identifying someone as black if he or she met the “one drop” test.

Today, there is a growing lack of racial self-definition. In the 2000 Census, Levonne Gaddy of Tucson, Arizona, checked 3 of the 19 available racial categories: white, African American, and American Indian. Said Gaddy, “When I see the word ‘race,’ I cringe, because I don’t see there is much connected to the word.” Gaddy’s lack of association with the word race would have astonished her nineteenth- and twentieth-century ancestors. Whether it be race, sex, or other controversies, conflict is both a matter of definition and of choice. As Schattschneider wrote in The Semi-Sovereign People,

Political conflict is not like an intercollegiate debate in which the opponents agree in advance on a definition of the issues. As a matter of fact, the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power: the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who determines what politics is about runs the
country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power. It follows that all conflict is confusing.123

One illustration of using outmoded conflicts in a futile attempt to understand the political dynamics at work is the role John F. Kerry’s Roman Catholicism played in the 2004 presidential election. It stands in stark contrast to the influence of Roman Catholicism played in another, long-ago contest featuring another Catholic candidate, John F. Kennedy.

Conflict and Choice: JFK and Religion in 1960

When Kennedy was contemplating whether to seek the presidency in 1960, he had one especially enthusiastic supporter: his father. Joseph P. Kennedy told his son that being a Roman Catholic would make him a powerful contender: “Just remember, this country is not a private preserve for Protestants. There’s a whole new generation out there and it’s filled with the sons and daughters of immigrants from all over the world and those people are going to be mighty proud that one of their own is running for president. And that pride will be your spur, it will give your campaign an intensity we’ve never seen in public life. Mark my words, it’s true.” Hearing this, the young Kennedy had just one question left: “Well, Dad, when do we start?”124

The elder Kennedy’s analysis proved correct, and JFK’s Roman Catholicism became a political crucible. Voters made it their conflict du jour and divided accordingly. During the Democratic primary contest in Protestant-dominated West Virginia, the response of one elderly woman to Kennedy’s candidacy was echoed by several others: “We’ve never had a Catholic president and I hope we never do. Our people built this country. If they had wanted a Catholic to be president, they would have said so in the Constitution.”125

For their part, Catholics decided to make religion a key factor in their decision making. On August 1, 1960, U.S. News and World Report stated, “There is, or can be, such a thing as a ‘Catholic vote,’ whereby a high proportion of Catholics of all ages, residences, occupations, and economic status vote for a well-known Catholic or a ticket with special Catholic appeal.”126 History supported that analysis. In 1928, New York governor Alfred E. Smith, a Democrat and the first Catholic ever to receive a major
party’s presidential nomination, lost to Republican Herbert Hoover in a landslide. Smith’s religion became the campaign’s major focus, and white southerners broke their historic Democratic Party ties to vote for Hoover, giving rise to the widespread belief that a Catholic could never become president. But Smith won overwhelming support from Catholic voters. In key Irish-Catholic wards in Boston, for example, he received 91, 71, and 60 percent of the votes, respectively. Smith campaigned in Boston before 750,000 people, a larger crowd than those drawn by aviation hero Charles Lindbergh and Pope John Paul II during their visits to the city. But the Eisenhower years saw the waning of the fervent support Catholics had previously given to the Democrats, and Eisenhower’s 1956 reelection bid captured 54 percent of the Catholic vote.

John F. Kennedy was determined to get Catholics back into the Democratic fold, and his religious identification played a crucial role in doing so. Kennedy’s rival, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, “could not dismiss from my mind the persistent thought that, in fact, Kennedy was a member of a minority religion to which the presidency had been denied throughout the history of our nation and that perhaps I, as a Protestant who had never felt the slings of discrimination, could not understand his feelings—that, in short, he had every right to speak out against even possible and potential bigotry.” Many Catholics had vivid memories of religious and ethnic discrimination and bonded with Kennedy.

During the campaign, Kennedy tried to allay voter fears about a Roman Catholic president. Accepting the Democratic nomination, he noted that his party had taken a “hazardous risk” in choosing him. He reiterated his pledge to uphold the Constitution and his oath of office, regardless of any religious pressure or obligation “that might directly or indirectly interfere with my conduct of the presidency in the national interest.” In a nationally televised speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Kennedy told voters, “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters—and the church does not speak for me. Whatever issue may come before me as President—on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling, or any other subject—I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.”
In Kennedy’s view, voters could choose from among plenty of other conflicts: “the spread of communist influence, until it now festers only ninety miles off the coast of Florida; the humiliating treatment of our president and vice president by those who no longer respect our power; the hungry children I saw in West Virginia; the old people who cannot pay their doctor’s bills; the families forced to give up their farms; an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space.” Nixon agreed. Appearing on Meet the Press, the Republican nominee said the best way to avoid having religion become a campaign issue was not to talk about it: “As far as I am concerned, I have issued orders to all of the people in my campaign not to discuss religion, not to raise it, not to allow anybody to participate in the campaign who does so on that ground, and as far as I am concerned, I will decline to discuss religion.”

But Americans stubbornly resisted the candidates’ pleas to choose other conflicts. Newspaper headlines stressed Kennedy’s Catholicism: “Democrats Hit Back on Religion” (New York Times); “Johnson Blasts ‘Haters’ Attacks on Catholics” (Washington Post); “Creed Issue Must Be Met, Bob Kennedy Says Here” (Cincinnati Enquirer); “Mrs. FDR Hits Religious Bias in Talk to Negroes” (Baltimore Sun). For its part, the National Association of Evangelicals sent a distressed letter to pastors, warning, “Public opinion is changing in favor of the church of Rome. We dare not sit idly by—voiceless and voteless.” These headlines reflected and shaped the public’s views of the candidates: 78 percent of Catholics voted for Kennedy; 63 percent of white Protestants backed Nixon. The morning after the long election night, Nixon’s daughter, Julie, awakened the exhausted candidate to ask, “Daddy, why did people vote against you because of religion?”

Three years later, the old Catholic-Protestant divide was already losing its salience. On November 13, 1963, John F. Kennedy presided over his final White House political meeting, focusing on the movement of many city dwellers—including Catholics—to the suburbs. Census Bureau director Richard M. Scammon suggested that Kennedy focus on the new suburbanites in his upcoming 1964 reelection campaign. Kennedy was fascinated by Scammon’s analysis and wanted to know at what point in their upward climb these former urban dwellers became Republicans. Scammon promised to find out, but that assignment was shelved when Kennedy was assassinated just nine days later. Kennedy understood that a new “axial principle” was forming around a set of conflicts that transcended the old
Catholic-Protestant divisions. This new conflict became fully developed (but not fully understood) when another Catholic Democrat, also from Massachusetts and also with the initials JFK, sought the presidency in 2004.

*Conflict and Choice: JFK and Religion Redux, 2004*

In 2004, the Democratic Party nominated only the third Roman Catholic in history for the presidency of the United States. But unlike 1928 and 1960, anti-Catholicism was not an issue in 2004. In the four decades since 1960, Catholics have joined white Protestants to become haves in American society. In the words of sociologist William V. D’Antonio, “Proportionately, Catholics nowadays are just as likely as Protestants to have attended and graduated from college, and even slightly more likely to enjoy above-average incomes. For example, Catholics represent 26 percent of the overall population, but 30 percent of those with incomes of $75,000 or more.”

Social advancement meant that Catholics no longer saw themselves as objects of discrimination, as evidenced by George W. Bush’s 2000 visit to Bob Jones University, the self-described “World’s Most Unusual University.” The school’s eponymous founder once likened the Pope to the biblical Antichrist. On its Web site, university officials expressed their belief that “[a]ll religion, including Catholicism, which teaches that salvation is by religious works or church dogma is false. Religion that makes the words of its leader, be he Pope or other, equal with the Word of God is false.” The campus bookstore stocked Catholic materials under the heading “Cults.” William Donohue, head of the conservative Catholic League, denounced Bush’s choice of Bob Jones University for his speech making: “He just doesn’t get it.” But, Donohue quickly added, “I don’t think he’s a bigot.”

Indeed, many Catholics hardly seemed outraged that George W. Bush used an anti-Catholic venue to rally support from southern white Protestants. In the 2000 general election, only 47 percent of Catholics backed Bush. But among observant Catholics, Bush’s support stood at 57 percent. This is a far cry from the Catholic/Democratic unity that existed in 1960. Pollster John Zogby notes that Catholic voters today “go to the polls as something else: veterans, union members, residents of the northeast, young, old. Being Catholic is not the major identifier.” Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne agrees: “The differences among us are rooted in
ideas and impulses only marginally connected to the fact that we are Catholic. For this reason, one cannot talk about a Catholic vote. One can talk, at most, about a Catholic tendency."  

In the emerging culture wars, religion has become a crucial factor. But instead of the old Catholic-Protestant split, church attendance is the new axis for the values divide. On one side are those who believe that there are absolute truths—the idea that there is an eternal sense of right and wrong. On the other are those who, in Alan Wolfe’s phrase, like their “morality writ small”—meaning that morals and values are a personal matter and not a guide for others. Church attendees are on the side of absolute truth; those who find their spirituality elsewhere like their morality writ small. Not surprisingly, frequent churchgoers understood and applauded when George W. Bush explained during a 2000 Republican candidate debate that Christ was his favorite philosopher “because he changed my heart.”

This new divide has turned the old Protestant-Catholic split on its head. In 1960, Americans wondered whether a Catholic could become president. But in 2004, many wondered if John F. Kerry was Catholic enough to serve as president. One man interviewed after leaving the 8:00 A.M. daily mass at St. Matthew’s Cathedral in Washington, D.C., said of Kerry, “It’s really character, personal integrity. And a man who does not seem committed to his faith, I don’t see why he would be committed to his ideas or, necessarily, even his country.” Billy Graham’s magazine, Christianity Today, a staunch opponent of John F. Kennedy’s candidacy in 1960, completely reversed itself in 2004. In a June editorial, the magazine opined that it is “certainly appropriate” for bishops to expect a Catholic president to submit to Vatican authority on values matters, especially abortion. Gary Bauer, a Republican presidential contender in 2000, observes, “When John F. Kennedy made his famous speech that the Vatican would not tell him what to do, evangelicals and Southern Baptists breathed a sigh of relief. But today, evangelicals and Southern Baptists are hoping that the Vatican will tell Catholic politicians what to do.”

Kerry sought to allay religiously observant people’s worries that he was inattentive to their values concerns. In fact, Kerry had long equated his religiosity with his public service: at a February 4, 1993, National Prayer Breakfast, for example, he said, “Jesus tells us that the real spiritual renewal that we need requires a faith that goes beyond even accepting the truth of His message. It requires literally a movement toward the person of Jesus, an attachment that requires us to live our lives in a manner that reflects the fullness of our faith and that allows Jesus to become for us truly a life-sav-
ing force, so that ultimately it may even be said of us that he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.’

A decade later, Kerry described himself in an autobiography, *A Call to Service*, as “a believing, practicing Catholic, married to another believing, practicing Catholic.” But during his long political career, Kerry had been reluctant to provide a strong public voice to his religious beliefs, perhaps believing, as many New Englanders do, that religion should be a private matter. National Public Radio reporter Barbara Bradley Hagerty unearthed his National Prayer Breakfast speech and played excerpts from it on the radio during Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign. In the absence of any religious dialogue from Kerry, churchgoing Catholics focused on his public record and especially on his strong support for abortion rights, including “partial-birth” abortions. Kerry’s stances caused considerable friction with Catholic hierarchy. Catholic prelates in Camden, New Jersey; St. Louis; Lincoln, Nebraska; Denver; and Colorado Springs issued statements forbidding the Democratic nominee from receiving Holy Communion in their dioceses. The Colorado Springs bishop, Michael Sheridan, went further, noting that Catholics who backed Kerry were jeopardizing their salvation by supporting a proponent of abortion rights. And Denver bishop Charles Chaput described Catholics for Kerry as “cooperating in evil.”

The 2004 election results show that Catholic identity no longer exerted a powerful hold. According to the exit polls, Kerry received a mere 47 percent of the Catholic vote, while George W. Bush (a Methodist) got 52 percent. Among white Catholics, Kerry garnered an even more dismal 43 percent to Bush’s 56 percent. And in the all-important state of Ohio, Bush won 55 percent of the Catholic vote, a shift of 172,000 votes into the Republican column, enough to give Bush the electoral votes for another term. Back in 1960, John F. Kennedy told the Southern Baptists that he dreamed of a country “where there is no Catholic vote.” Forty-four years later, Kennedy’s wish had come true.

But the lack of a Catholic vote did not signify the absence of conflict. Forty years ago, Schattschneider wrote, “The substitution of conflicts is the most devastating kind of political strategy.” In this case, the Catholic-Protestant conflict gave way to a conflict over the internalization and exposition of religious values. Those who attended church weekly gave Bush 58 percent of their votes, whereas 62 percent of those who never went to church voted for Kerry. Republicans understood the new political realities and sought to mobilize churchgoers. In Pennsylvania, for ex-
ample, the Bush-Cheney team sent an e-mail seeking to identify 1,600 “friendly congregations” where voters “might gather on a regular basis.”

A new form of conflict emerged, pitting those who believe religious values should inform public life against those who are more secular. This new axial principle gave the Bush team, as Schattschneider might have predicted, a “most devastating kind of political strategy.” A new axial principle—now fully understood by Republicans and Democrats alike—has appeared, and it is redefining twenty-first-century political conflicts.

Demography, Conflict, and the New Twenty-first Century

In 1970, Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg observed that “demography is destiny”—that is, demography helps shape future political conflicts. For them, the conflicts of the 1970s revolved around newly formed values concerns—including crime, pornography, and drug use—that bothered the white, middle-aged, middle-income, married persons with kids living at home who, Scammon and Wattenberg claimed, constituted the “real majority” of the voting public, Americans who were “un-young, un-poor, and un-black.” Demography was indeed destiny.

As the remainder of this book outlines, twenty-first-century demography will surely mold the political conflicts of our time. For young Jeannette White, the questions include:

- What conflicts will she deem to be important?
- How will demography influence her choices?
- How will institutions respond to the decisions made by her and the rest of her generation?
- How will those institutions manage the new conflicts?

Her answers (and those of her peers) undoubtedly will differ substantially from those of her parents, who, though carried by the forces of nature into the twenty-first century, remain products of the previous century. The ongoing saga of the White family is not only personal but also uniquely American.