Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas
In 2008, John McCain, always known as something of a centrist or moderate Republican, picked the governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, as his running mate. The moment he did so, the culture war returned to American politics. Although the economy was entering a tailspin and dangers were prominent around the world, once again we were discussing whether elites had lost touch with the common people by failing to appreciate religion and dismissing people's concerns with morality.

The Palin selection raised a larger question: Did we ever have a culture war in the first place? In this book, Irene Taviss Thomson offers an original and important new way of answering that question. Whether or not a culture war indeed existed out there in Middle America, just about everyone who wrote on the topic agreed that elites themselves were sharply divided between liberal and conservative views of the world. And, the argument went, the raging culture war was especially apparent in the media, whatever was happening in small-town America.

 Rather than simply assuming the truth of this proposition, Thomson looks at the media—specifically, opinion magazines. Her research challenges the idea that our opinion leaders are engaged in an implacable war with each other. Culture has historically been defined as the common values that bind together a society. Thomson shows that this idea of culture remains very much alive. America remains a nation where agreement is more striking than disagreement. No matter how bitter and polarized our politics can seem, this truth should never be lost, and Thomson provides the evidence needed to back it up. Opinion leaders need to think about their own role in the culture war; Thomson has helped them do it.

—ALAN WOLFE