Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas

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The Sample

The four magazines in the sample were chosen to represent the mainstream American political spectrum, from National Review on the right to The Nation on the left, with Time in the center and The New Republic in the more ambiguous position of a once clearly liberal magazine that veered rightward during the 1980s. The Nation, founded in 1865, is a venerable magazine of the Left. While newer liberal magazines such as the American Prospect and the somewhat more muckraking Mother Jones have captured progressive audiences as well, they lack the cultural heft of The Nation. National Review, founded in 1955 by William F. Buckley Jr. as the organ for conservative intellectuals, likewise has some younger competition—most notably, the Weekly Standard, founded in 1995 by neoconservatives William Kristol and Fred Barnes. Yet National Review retains its preeminence and devotes more attention to culture war issues than the newer publication does. And the Weekly Standard was, of course, unavailable during the first fifteen years of the study. Time magazine, established in 1923, has Newsweek (founded in 1933) as its principal competitor. Time was chosen because it generally has had higher circulation and greater visibility than Newsweek. Many Time covers, for example, have become cultural icons. The New Republic was founded in 1914 by well-known liberal thinkers Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann. Its more diverse and less predictably liberal editorial stances during the 1980s and 1990s made it a source of some interest and perhaps greater prominence.

Although widespread circulation of the idea that a culture war was taking place did not occur until the early 1990s, discussion of such issues began in the previous decade. Soon after Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election to the presidency, commentators began to talk about a “New Right.” During the
1980s, Anita Bryant waged a nationwide campaign against laws promoting equal rights for homosexuals, and the foes of abortion clinics became more militant. Reagan blended traditional economic conservatism with a new social conservatism that advocated, for example, a constitutional amendment to allow for school prayer. This 1984 proposal provoked *The Nation* to declare the initiation of the cultural war (Editorial 1984, 308). For all these reasons, it made sense to begin the study of political magazines in 1980 rather than 1990. Though the coverage of culture war issues increased after 1990, a nonnegligible number of articles on the subject appeared during the 1980s.

**Detailed Breakdown of Articles**

The 436 articles published between 1980 and 2000 appeared in the magazines as follows:

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>National Review</em></td>
<td>148</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Time</em></td>
<td>113</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The New Republic</em></td>
<td>86</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Nation</em></td>
<td>89</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>62</td>
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</tbody>
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The distribution of articles by topic is as follows:

- Abortion: 32
- The Arts: 40
- Canon Wars: 24
- Culture Wars Generally: 51
- Family Values Issues: 22
- Feminism Issues: 37
- Homosexuality: 62
- Multiculturalism: 38
- Multicultural Education: 27
- Popular Culture: 33
- Religious Issues: 55*
- Sex Education: 15

*24 pertain to church-state relations; 22 to internal disputes; 9 to creationism.