

Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas

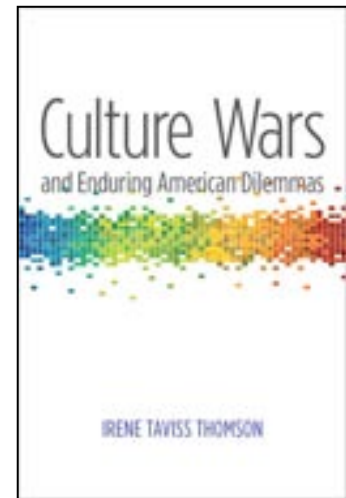
Irene Taviss Thomson

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The University of Michigan Press, 2010

Q&A with Irene Taviss Thomson, author of *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*

The idea of a culture war, or wars, has existed in America since the 1960s—an underlying ideological schism in our country that is responsible for the polarizing debates on everything from the separation of church and state, to abortion, to gay marriage, to affirmative action. Irene Taviss Thomson explores this notion by analyzing hundreds of articles addressing hot-button issues over two decades from four magazines: *National Review*, *Time*, *The New Republic*, and *The Nation*, as well as a wide array of other writings and statements from a substantial number of public intellectuals.



Here to talk with us about her new book *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* is Irene Taviss Thomson. Thomson is Professor Emeritus of Sociology, having taught in the Department of Social Sciences and History at Fairleigh Dickinson University for more than 30 years. Previously, she taught in the Department of Sociology at Harvard University.

University of Michigan Press: Most people probably envision this country as fairly divided: liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, and so on. What prompted you to come up with the idea of studying how those groups actually feel on hot-button issues?

Irene Taviss Thomson: You speak of divisions that we now take for granted. But in the not so distant past, most Americans saw their country as divided along racial, ethnic, religious, or regional lines, not ideological or partisan ones. How did we get here? In the late 1960s, as some young people began to question and rebel against traditional values, the idea arose that they constituted a “counterculture.” While mainstream Americans believed in the traditional family and sexual morality, in religion and respect for authority, in individualism and free-enterprise, adherents to the counterculture asserted their right to “make love not war,” established communes, and questioned the practices that much of middle-class America took for granted. Over time, many of the ideas of the counterculture seeped into the mainstream; others were abandoned. What remained, however, was the powerful idea that there were struggles about how to define our culture. The very idea of a “counterculture,” after all, suggests a self-consciousness about culture, about how we think and behave, what we value.

The issues raised by the counterculture came to the fore again in the 1980s and were labeled in the early 1990s as “culture wars” – first in a book of that title, written by a sociologist named James Davison Hunter. This 1991 book portrayed the United States as fundamentally divided between those who believed in absolute moral truths (the “orthodox”) and those who placed moral authority in individual judgment (the “progressives”). As Hunter saw it, the orthodox-progressive split cut across all other

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divisions; members of any particular race, social class, gender, political party or even church, might be split into orthodox and progressive wings. A year after Hunter's book was published, the idea of a culture war was popularized when conservative candidate and commentator Patrick Buchanan told the 1992 Republican National Convention that "a cultural war" was taking place; he called it "a struggle for the soul of America." The defining issues, he said, were abortion, homosexuality, school choice, and "radical feminism." In the aftermath of this speech, the idea of a "culture war" became a staple of contemporary journalism, and Republicans or conservatives were arrayed on one side against Democrats or liberals on the other.

Meanwhile, survey data did not support the idea of a culture war. Only very small numbers of Americans are consistently orthodox or progressive on issues of abortion or same-sex marriage, for example. And those who are on the same side on the abortion issue do not necessarily agree with each other on matters of school prayer or censorship of popular culture. Most Americans are centrist in their politics and are more ambivalent in their responses to cultural issues than the image of a culture war suggests. As Alan Wolfe has noted, the culture war often resides *within* the individual, as people cherish both the family and the individual freedoms that may disrupt it.

Supporters of the culture war idea acknowledge that most Americans occupy a middle ground in the culture war, but they contend that American culture is nevertheless polarized. Elites on both sides force discussion into opposing camps, eclipsing the middle. They seek to shape the way we see the world to coincide with their own understandings. The very idea of "morality," Hunter suggested, has become a "right-wing" word; progressives scoff at talk of religion and spirituality. If this is an accurate portrayal, then there really is a culture war in American society. And a society in the throes of such division will lack common standards and assumptions and face severe difficulties in arriving at public policies. It is well to remember that Hunter's next book, after *Culture Wars*, was called *Before The Shooting Begins*.

So, to answer your question at long last, I decided to test the hypothesis that there is a culture war in the United States by studying the writings of partisans about culture war issues.

UMP: How did you decide which issues to choose?

ITT: Some of the issues were very clearly part of the general understanding of a culture war; disputes over abortion, feminism, homosexuality, and the family were on everybody's list. So were matters pertaining to education, popular culture and the arts. Patrick Buchanan had mentioned "school choice," which represented the idea that parents should be able to send their children to schools whose values matched their own, should have some say over the content of the curriculum. Conflicts had arisen over multicultural education and what should be taught not only in the schools, but also in the universities. So both the so-called "canon wars" at colleges and universities, and issues of multiculturalism and sex education became part of the culture wars. Religious issues, including school prayer, teaching creationism, and separation of church and state were also seen by all as part of the culture wars.

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UMP: What method did you choose to study their attitudes, and why?

ITT: Hunter's 1991 study had focused on the materials used by culture war advocates to promote their positions – everything from sound bites on the news, to sixty-second commercials and full-page advertisements, direct mail letters, and op-ed pieces. Such material is often both extreme and superficial in its presentation. Exaggerated images are deliberately generated to persuade people to give time and money to the cause. Surely, this is not the only way to study the public culture.

It seemed clear to me that an understanding of the culture wars requires an analysis of more than just promotional literature. Popular political magazines offer a range of views written by advocates of various causes, by intellectuals and academics, journalists, and political figures. I chose four magazines that 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 moved rightward during the 1980s. In addition, I read the major books associated with culture war arguments. Between 1980 and 2000 a total of 436 articles on culture war issues appeared in the four magazines. Although the term “culture wars” wasn't in widespread use until the early 1990s, discussion of these issues began shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, when commentators began to talk of a “New Right” concerned with social issues. It was during the 1980s that anti-abortion protestors became more virulent, and Anita Bryant campaigned nationwide against laws promoting equality for homosexuals. When Reagan proposed a Constitutional Amendment to allow for school prayer in 1984, *The Nation* responded by saying he was initiating a cultural war. In analyzing this material, I sought to understand the arguments, the underlying assumptions, and the ways in which the culture warriors justified their positions.

UMP: What did you find out?

ITT: The major finding is that the culture warriors on both sides adhere to remarkably similar American cultural principles. Far from morality being a right-wing term, all sides cast their arguments in moral language. If the Right sees itself as defending “bourgeois morality” when it defends the family and attacks popular culture, the Left sees the exclusion or inequality of gays and women as immoral. If the Right attacks the immorality of television talk shows, the Left finds it “morally repulsive” that the guests are so needy of social support that they fail to see how they are being exploited. Most writers show respect for religion, even if there is uncertainty about its role in the larger society. Advocates on the Left and the Right converge in their support for religious discourse in the public sphere: a conservative argues that public figures should be allowed to say that greed and adultery are wrong as the Bible tells us and a progressive argues that religious institutions provide a space that is removed from the larger commercial society, one in which resistance to capitalism and the dominant culture might form. The idea of pluralism within one culture is unanimously endorsed; there is little to no support for the principle of multiculturalism. Both Left and Right see pluralism as providing a solution to the culture wars: the Right advocates school vouchers and decentralization, allowing for parental choice of curricula, and more competition in the culture-making arenas; the Left supports building institutions for minorities, institutions such as female-operated banks, black Baptist nursery schools, and gay men's health centers. All endorse individualism, while cautioning about its excesses (defined as selfishness). Contrary to culture war stereotypes that suggest progressives support individual licentiousness while

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the orthodox defer to larger purposes, elite opinion on both sides of the divide supports individualism and individual rights, while also favoring the greater good of the community. Each side accuses the other of attempting to squelch individualism. Both sides exhibit similar ambivalences about elites: on the one hand, praising achievement and high standards, on the other hand abhorring elitism. All praise moderation, and mock their opponents as “extremists.” In short, they draw on the shared American cultural ideals while advancing their own disparate claims.

The culture warriors use rhetoric and symbols that are so similar that sometimes one can't tell who is talking without a scorecard. Consider the following quote: “A culture that is at once moralistic, self-righteous, alienated, and in a minority will constantly be tempted to break the rules of political discourse.” Is this the complaint of a progressive about the role of Christian Fundamentalists in American politics? No. This is a description of the Left written by a well-known conservative, Robert Bork. It illustrates how the commonalities of American culture appear in the thinking of the culture warriors. American culture respects both morality and pragmatism. As a result, we're supposed to be “moral,” but not “moralistic.” We are encouraged to be individualistic, but not disengaged from the community, not “alienated.”

The second major finding is that the arguments of the culture warriors often display the same sort of nuances and ambivalences shown by the population as a whole. There is much internal disagreement. There are, for example, abortion rights supporters who nevertheless express concern about the immorality of abortion and anti-homosexuality advocates who dispute whether homosexuality is a matter of morality. Homosexual rights advocates disagree among themselves about the virtues of same-sex marriage and whether it is ultimately a radical or a conservative idea. Neither conservatives nor liberals agree among themselves on the censorship of popular culture. Then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and Senator Henry Hyde – both conservatives – agreed that the public should not be paying to support art that is offensive to them; they both attacked the National Endowment for the Arts. But whereas Gingrich thought the solution was simply to remove arts funding from the Federal budget, Hyde hoped that would not be necessary, for it would show that we couldn't agree on some reasonable approach to issues where culture and politics intersect.

UMP: What most surprised you about your conclusions?

ITT: Perhaps the most surprising finding is the degree to which the spokespersons for opposing sides in the culture wars subscribe to an overarching American culture. We are so painfully aware today of the differences in subcultures (of race, class, gender, religion), market niches, partisan and ideological divisions that we fail to remember that all of these play out within a distinctively American context. Let me give you a simple example. A conservative writer in my sample of magazine articles argued that the traditional family is in tune with what she called “the facts of human nature.” Yet she felt a need to explain that teaching children about family values does not inhibit their self-expression. Children who are trained in this way, she argued, are free to reject these values when they mature, which is why “instilling them is not oppressive.” This writer is displaying the characteristic American peculiarity of revering both individualism and traditional authority. Survey data show that Americans are

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extraordinarily devoted to both of these seemingly contradictory beliefs. Apparently, so are the elites on both sides of the culture wars.

The high degree of hostility towards the idea of multiculturalism was also somewhat surprising to me. The overwhelming majority of writers contend that multiculturalism both denies the unity within American culture and goes against our basic individualism. America is a society of individuals, not groups; and individuals can overcome their groups and cultures. Even those on the Left who are sympathetic to racial and ethnic minority groups generally seek greater economic and political power for them, not greater cultural expression.

I was surprised too at the intensity and scope of the internal debates. When someone on the Left refers to other liberals as “fascists” because they approve of “character education” in the schools, you perceive the passion in these debates. On the Right, there is contention over whether immorality in private can be more readily tolerated than immorality in public view. Are homosexual acts that are not openly acknowledged less of a threat to the common good? Or does the very idea of morality require that it be part of the common culture and endorsed by social policies?

UMP: What implications do you feel this has for elected officials and others charged with representing our views?

ITT: The appeal of “culture wars” rhetoric to politicians is obvious: suggesting that one’s opponents are a threat to our values or way of life is seen as a surefire way to mobilize voters. But in fact the various issues embedded in the culture wars have quite different histories and likely futures. And the overwhelming majority of Americans – elites and masses alike – do not subscribe to any uniform “orthodox” or “progressive” view that cuts across the diverse issues. Nor is there clear evidence that using culture wars rhetoric has produced victory. In many ways, the candidates in the 2000 Presidential election were all arrayed on the same side. Bush and Gore, and Gore’s vice-presidential nominee, Joseph Lieberman, all advocated cleaning up popular culture to restore morality and reinforce family values; all asserted the importance of faith in their lives and talked of the need to support faith-based programs. Careful analysis of the 2004 election results also shows that voters responding to culture war issues were not responsible for Bush’s victory. By the 2008 election, the economic downturn had made culture war issues much less important. But Barack Obama had sought to emphasize the unity of American culture. In his 2004 address to the Democratic National Convention, he spoke approvingly of religiosity in the Blue States and concern for civil liberties in the Red States.

Moreover, many of the “hot-button” issues are much less contentious now than they were a short while ago. Think about public attitudes towards gays in the military today as compared to the early 1990s, when the issue first entered public debate. While there may still be controversy about the merits of abstinence-only sex education, the lines of division on issues of feminism and “family values” must surely have blurred when the conservative candidate for Vice President in 2008 was a mother of five, one of whom was a pregnant teenager.

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Perhaps the most basic lesson to be learned from my study is that the so-called culture wars are not so real, so deep, or so well structured as to generate irreconcilable positions. We have tended to assume that differences we consider to be “cultural” cannot be bridged or compromised. But this is false. Most Americans view abortion, for example, not as a something that is always right or wrong, but rather as something about which “it depends.” And the elites who seek to influence opinion and shape the culture are no less sensitive to context and no more absolute in their viewpoints.

Advocates in the culture war debates have sought to influence both the public culture and the policy agenda. They seek to frame the issues in ways that support their policy positions. Yet there are numerous complexities involved, as the case of abortion illustrates. Those opposed to abortion have named themselves “pro-life.” They seek to connect abortion issues to the sanctity of human life. Their opponents, who are “pro-choice,” have sought to link abortion to privacy rights, gender equality, and separation of church and state. Public opinion surveys from the late 1970s onward have shown that the pro-life framing of the issue has gained support, while the pro-choice framing has not. Yet this has not generated an increased opposition to abortion. In the battle between morality and pragmatism, pragmatism appears to be winning.

The culture wars are embedded in a series of American cultural dilemmas (morality vs. pragmatism, individualism vs. community, populism vs. elitism, dilemmas about pluralism and the role of religion) that will never be finally resolved. They will be revisited anew as times and situations change. The political figures who truly represent Americans will seek to combine both sides of each dilemma: morality and pragmatism, individualism and the community, populism and respect for elite achievements. They will understand that there is a unity in American culture that encompasses the various subcultures within it, that the communalism of Latin American or Asian subcultures is as much a part of American culture as the individualism of the lonely American who separates himself from the group and reinvents himself.

To read more about *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* by Irene Taviss Thomson, visit the University of Michigan Press at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1571326>.

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