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A Twenty-First Century Meaning for the American Civil War

A Post-Cold War Reflection

A half century ago, historian David Potter, a titan even in a generation of American historians which included C. Vann Woodward, Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, John Hope Franklin, Kenneth Stampp, and others, offered an original interpretation of the meaning of the American Civil War for the "modern" world of the mid-twentieth century.[1] In a brief essay published in 1968, Potter argued that despite all of the political calculation and miscalculation that led to disunion and civil war, the immense carnage produced by the war, and the failure of the Reconstruction era to nurture or sustain a national commitment to racial equality or even basic civil rights, the American Civil War had succeeded not only in saving the American nation and ending the enormity of slavery within its borders but also in preserving the viability of a representative democracy (with all its flaws). In doing so, Potter claimed, the American Civil War united liberalism and nationalism in a marriage unique in the history of nineteenth-century nationalist movements. Over the next 100 years, Potter maintained, this fateful union of liberalism and nationalism gave liberalism a power that it might otherwise have lacked and lent nationalism a popular legitimacy and moral sanction that it would not necessarily have enjoyed. As a result, in Potter's view, America's liberal nationalism served both the nation and the world well.[2]

Since Potter's essay appeared over fifty years ago, it has awakened the imaginations of scholars of his own and later generations. Historians have grappled with the full meaning of a war that cost the nation over 700,000 lives (from a total population of roughly 35 million) and yet also saved the Union and freed nearly four million slaves.[3] By taking a comparative perspective, by internationalizing the scope of the inquiry, Potter

provided an analysis that reached beyond the question of how the Civil War should be understood in the American master historical narrative to address an even larger question: What legacy did the American Civil War leave for the future world as a whole?

In recent years, however, Potter's arguments have received less and less scholarly attention and prompted less and less reflection. Perhaps the lapse in attention owes to the extent to which Potter's argument has grown axiomatic in the minds of many experts. Or perhaps the lapse grows from an increasing sense that Potter's conclusions no longer seem relevant. The excesses of American nationalism and the growing illiberalism of American policies have raised fresh questions about the value of the marriage of nationalism and liberalism. Nevertheless, at the distance of a half century from its publication, Potter's analysis, and the continuing relevance of his interpretation for scholars and citizens of the twenty-first century, invites reexamination. In particular, the quarter of a century since the end of the Cold War has produced dramatic changes that have reshaped American habits and values in ways that have garnered too little attention. The experience of those years has also raised fundamental questions about the current and future health of the American marriage of nationalism and liberalism. But before examining the impact of the end of the Cold War on this long, if not always happy, marriage, we must first understand how Potter explained that relationship.

The emergence of nationalism as a major ideological and cultural force dominated the nineteenth century, especially in Europe. According to Potter, nationalism, in its modern form, "scarcely existed before the French revolution," but "by the end of nineteenth century, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan had become the prototypes for modern nationality." Yet, after promising beginnings in Britain and France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, nationalism foundered for a half century after the French defeat at Waterloo. The Union triumph in the American Civil War gave it renewed vigor. Moreover, nationalism had been not so much stalled as suppressed throughout Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century, with even Britain leading one of the major efforts to subdue unwanted examples (Irish nationalism). Unification efforts in Germany and Italy had sputtered and Louis Napoleon had declared himself emperor of France in 1852. When the Union victory restored the American nation-state in 1865, it gave nationalism a much-needed boost. The triumph of the Union not only preserved the American nation, Potter concluded, but also "forged a bond between

nationalism and liberalism at a time when it appeared that the two might draw apart and move in opposite directions."[4]

In analyzing the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, Potter noted that the chief obstacles to the formation of "modern" nation-states in Europe were supranational entities such as the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires and the vast influence, including political influence, of the Roman Catholic Church. In the case of emerging European nationalist movements (in Germany, France, and Italy), these large superstructures, boasting significant military and political power, not to mention the power inherent in centuries of tradition, had to be displaced by revolutions from below – revolutions in which people had to find a common identity across local, ethnic, and linguistic barriers and then hammer out degrees of independence from larger empires and the church.[5]

By contrast, Potter maintained, the primary obstacles to nationalism and the formation of a powerful nation-state within the American Union came from conflicting and overlapping local and regional loyalties. These provincial loyalties were expressed in the numerous state's rights arguments expressed throughout the antebellum era, arguments that emanated from northern states on numerous occasions but even more consistently from southern states, where slaveholders often sought to use state sovereignty to protect slavery from presumed threats of federal intervention. Further, within individual slaveholding states, slaveholders frequently advocated the retention of political power at the local level (the county or parish), to protect the interests of slaveholders in Black belt areas from white-majority counties eager to tax slave property. Even at the local level, slaveholders zealously championed their rights as masters to govern their plantations and slaves as they saw fit with minimum interference from those living outside the Big House or beyond the plantation boundaries. To be sure, southern localism rested, as Potter noted, on support for a social order headed by an elite consisting of large landholders that often, though not always, expressed some suspicion of democracy, much as supranational obstacles to nationalism in Europe and Japan defended traditional hierarchies and related notions of social order.[6] But the fact remains that the American opposition to nationalism generally emanated from champions of localism and decentralization, while in other parts of the world imperial and other centralized powers stood in the way of emerging nation-states. Hence, the nature of the challenges facing emergent nationalism looked radically different in Europe than in the United States.

From its inception, the United States was a federal republic based on the novel concept of divided sovereignty. After detailed study of classical and modern efforts at creating lasting republics undertaken in preparation for the Convention of 1787, founder James Madison settled on the creative concept of divided sovereignty as a solution to the history of failure of popular republics.[7] The resulting United States Constitution called for popular but divided sovereignty. Sovereignty resided in the people, but that popular sovereignty was divided between the people of the states and the people of the nation. After a series of revisions of state constitutions in the 1780s and 1790s, the power of individual states was often shared with local governing units known variously as counties, parishes, districts, or townships. The primary challenge facing incipient American nationalism was to limit state and local authority to its sphere and build a shared sense of national loyalty.[8] Moreover, making a nation from the American states was as much a matter of cultivating emotional attachments as a matter of constitutional or political structure.[9] Thus nation-building in the United States had to occur from both above and below. In sum, the American nationalist project faced greater challenges from existing local and provincial loyalties than from transnational entities such as empires or Catholicism.

In Potter's account, the liberalism that married America's emerging nationalism during and after the Civil War was not an elaborate creed of political and economic ideas, such as Adam Smith's anti-mercantilist economic liberalism, or the political liberalism associated with John Locke, which emphasized property rights and representative government, though American liberalism enveloped elements of both. Rather it was the practical liberalism of a democratic republic, of Abraham Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" that could not be allowed to perish even under a crisis of disunion and a brutal civil war. It was an American experiment in a republican government based on a written constitution, popular yet divided sovereignty, and a well-defined system of checks and balances embedded within its government, and, after 1865, a liberalism infused by "a new birth of freedom" emanating from the emancipation of the nation's nearly four million slaves.[10]

Ironically, given the rhetoric of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, American-style liberalism of the Civil War era only incidentally fostered notions of a free market economy. In fact, a free market ideology never emerged as a political force until well after the Civil War. Yet market revolution upon market revolution swept across the United States at various paces in different places throughout the antebellum era.

These sequential and overlapping market revolutions were spurred by land acquisition, western expansion, canals, railroads, shipping and navigation technology, a better postal service, and even, perhaps especially, a lucrative domestic slave trade that flourished long after Congress banned the international slave trade in 1808.[11] Faith in the idea of a thriving, expanding economy with a significant market orientation certainly became embedded in the minds of many antebellum American producers and consumers, as well as its capitalists, and, as much recent literature insists with remarkable surprise, even among the slaveholding planters across the American South who were as involved in global markets as any economic actors on earth. Yet national faith in the ideas or ideals of a free market economy emerged much more slowly than the market economy itself, gaining significant traction only well after the Civil War, and arguably not until concerted efforts by pro-business groups to promote free market ideas launched well into the twentieth century.[12] During the pre-Civil War years, considerable anti-corporation sentiment coexisted with support for active government promotion of economic development (chiefly through internal improvement projects and banking practices), with the former often garnering greater public support than the latter. By the time of the Civil War, market-oriented economic activity, along with laws protecting private property and limiting corporate liability, had become the reality of daily economic life in most of the United States, but the "free market" had not yet emerged as a treasured American ideal.[13]

For much of the twentieth century, the American marriage of liberalism and nationalism appeared to be a bulwark for freedom and democracy in a threatening world. During the first half of the century Americans saw the dark side of nationalism in the Kaiser's Germany and especially in the later reactionary and murderous regimes of Nazis and Fascists. Americans stared into the abyss of the extremes produced when nationalism unleavened by liberalism falls into the wrong hands. At the same time, Americans also saw fresh fruits of the union of nationalism and liberalism in their own country. The turn-of-the-century Progressive movement, which originated as an array of local reform movements that gradually forced their way into the national arena, generated an appetite for clean politics and national legislation to address some major social questions (sanitation and education foremost among them) that, on balance, appeared to strengthen the bonds between liberalism and nationalism in the American setting. During the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, offered as a response to the worst depression in the nation's history, initiated the construction of both a national regulatory structure

and a social safety net that protected many ordinary Americans from the occasional depredations of the market economy and gave business a measure of protection as well.[14]

Moreover, by the time Potter crafted his essay in the late 1960s, the strengths of the American marriage of nationalism and liberalism seemed obvious. It was clear that American power had secured the defeat of Nazis and Fascists in Europe and the Japanese imperialists in the Pacific, and that victory appeared to ensure that liberal nationalism rather than conservative or chauvinistic nationalism would prevail, or at least could prevail, against powerful opponents with great malignancy of intent. In addition, the Allied victory in World War II provided the ideological high ground for Americans in their Cold War of ideas and ideology with the Soviets and the Chinese communists, who despite their commitment to communism derived a great deal of their support from the long-deferred fulfillment of the ambitions of Russian and Chinese nationalism. Specifically, the American marriage of nationalism and liberalism gave the United States, as the leader of the "West" (the NATO coalition), the moral and ideological high ground when judged against the brutality and repression of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union, not to mention the China of Chairman Mao and the brutal purge of the Cultural Revolution. The so-called vital center, the loose post-World War II coalition of liberals, moderates, and even some conservatives who came together on certain basic tenets of American anti-communist principles, rallied American democracy against a common and menacing enemy with appeals to liberal, democratic nationalism.[15]

At its best, such common national purpose served the nation well, sustaining popular support for both capitalist creativity and an expanding social safety net, and for the emergence of what a wary President Eisenhower called the "military-industrial complex," as well as a fledgling environmental movement. It had encouraged public investment in schools and research universities and supported a far-ranging system of community and technical colleges to enhance workforce preparedness and workplace skills in a sweeping effort to create an ever better-educated citizenry and ensure that the United States remained a leader in research and knowledge in an increasingly competitive world economy.[16]

In fact, the expanding support for American higher education during the Cold War era shaped both economic opportunity and the American university system as we know it. First, the GI Bill offered broad and affordable access to college to American veterans for the first time, and the baby boom following the GIs' return home combined with later federal

scholarship and loan programs to sustain demand for higher education and the rapid expansion of American universities, especially in the 1960s. Second, federally funded research agencies provided indirect funding for university-sponsored research through grants to faculty. In 1950, the postwar United States established the National Science Foundation, at least in part, to "secure the national defense" and funded its initial year of operations with $3.5 million. When American anxiety spiked after the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, National Science Foundation funding escalated to $40 million in 1958, and that same year the government created NASA to spearhead the space program and further expand federal funding of the nonhealth sciences. Funding for the preexisting National Institutes of Health, which stood at just under $5 million at the end of World War II, exploded to over $1 billion by 1970 (and to $16 billion by 2000) in the postwar era. Even the humanities and social sciences were affected. In a move closely related to Cold War tensions, the 1958 Education Act provided federal funding for university-based area studies centers for Africa, Asia, Latin American, and other areas where the United States perceived itself as confronting communism.[17]

Over the long term, this dramatic expansion of federal support for research, and particularly university research, spurred initially by the Cold War and its drive for technological and scientific supremacy, established the federal government as the primary funder of basic research in the nation and created and sustained the modern research university as a critical component in the struggle for world economic competitiveness (if not dominance). Such policies appeared to be crafted by and for the expanding middle class and the baby boomers of the post-World War II era. These efforts represented a determination to preserve the American economic and knowledge infrastructure as the envy of the world.

Yet the sense of common purpose and the solid anti-communist front the United States projected in the early years of the Cold War also revealed the weaknesses of the American marriage of liberalism and nationalism. Despite the rising tide of post-World War II prosperity throughout the United States, questions of social and racial justice were often pushed to the background in favor of either the Cold War arms race or the race to capitalist expansion. It also appeared that the United States could be tempted toward adventurism in those parts of the world where capitalism and free markets were not gaining favor in the avowed competition with communist ideology. The penchant of Cold War America to prop up anti-democratic and illiberal regimes internationally and oppose internal reform movements in the so-called Third World damaged the

nation's reputation in the developing world. Such American shortsightedness gave momentum to considerable and justifiable suspicion around the world that the United States sought to become (or had become) an imperial power.[18]

American imperialism would rely on the power of the nation's amassed capital, as well as its military might, to forge an economic empire, not to mention a sense of national cultural hauteur that failed to take into consideration either American excesses or the deep virtues represented by other cultures. At home, McCarthyism, the suppression of internal dissent, and the overall "domestic security" crisis of the 1950s suggested that the United States would struggle to both control Cold War anxieties and live up to its ideals at home as well as abroad. The pressure for conformity, the squashing of dissent, and the emergence of "the company man" as the ideal citizen and head of the middle-class American household gave post-World War II America an illiberal and conformist patina.[19]

Yet beneath the conformist urge, and ironically stimulated by it, lay vibrant subcultures of protest and dissent. During the 1950s and 1960s, the direct action phase of the civil rights movement produced fresh successes which ultimately toppled Jim Crow and ended formal African American disfranchisement in the American South with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These formal successes stood as tributes to the courageous grassroots activism of African American communities throughout the South, where dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of communities and churches supplied the disciplined ground troops of nonviolent protest needed to win the battles of politics and perception on behalf of the civil rights movement.[20] By the 1960s, reaction to pressure for conformity amid persistent injustice stimulated yet another anti-establishment social movement, one driven by a very nonconformist segment of the nation's youth population. Through youth protests, mostly on college campuses, many young Americans sought greater freedom of expression in a variety of areas. Through this movement, whether directed at social injustices, personal freedoms (and even indulgences), or ultimately against the deepening American involvement in Vietnam, the fear of state power emerged as a matter of generational concern in the United States.[21]

By the middle of the 1960s, these protest movements became intertwined to different degrees with the escalating domestic debate over the war in Vietnam. An increasingly active antiwar movement gained substantial popularity among the young (draft-age) population on college

campuses and within the larger intelligentsia. This movement eventually received the endorsement of the nation's best-known civil rights leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., much to the consternation of President Lyndon Johnson and his administration, which had successfully maneuvered major civil rights legislation through Congress.[22]

This antiwar protest movement highlighted the ways in which the military and economic adventurism undertaken by the United States under the cover of the Cold War tarnished the image of the world's most powerful democracy in the eyes of many Americans. Together, these protest movements, acting both independently and in combination, focused much attention on the adventurism and exploitation that the American nation, for all its professed good intentions, practiced. These movements also brought irreconcilable tension to the nation's "vital center" coalition and generated deep divisions within American society, dividing the nation to the point that many Americans feared that the nation was coming apart. It was at almost precisely at this moment in 1968 that Potter published his essay on nationalism and liberalism.

But, while deep domestic divisions persisted until the war in Vietnam ended in 1975, the fears of the nation coming apart eventually proved overblown, and few could have imagined that roughly twenty years following the publication of Potter's essay the Cold War itself would be on the verge of extinction and that the great international experiment in socialism would collapse due to its failure to provide either meaningful freedom or a decent material standard of living for most people living within its scope. Moreover, the Soviets' penchant for foreign interventionism and adventurism around the world matched that of previous imperial powers and squandered Soviet blood and treasure in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Soviet economic scarcity produced internal protests, with incidents in Boris Yeltsin's Moscow the most prominent among them. Mikhail Gorbachev's efforts to "reform" the Soviet regime through glasnost and perestroika not only proved inadequate but arguably accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet Union rather than forestalling it.[23]

The precise endpoint of the Cold War remains a matter of some debate. But many Americans' remembrance of the end of the Cold War is framed by President Ronald Reagan standing at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and demanding, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," followed by later scenes of East Berliners crossing the formerly forbidden zone to visit West Berliners under relaxed restrictions, and soon stopping to chip souvenirs off the slowly eroding wall. But no matter exactly when the Cold War ended, its conclusion marked a quiet turning point in the

history of the modern American nation. From its entry into World War I through this "fall" of the Berlin Wall, the American nation, with its blend of nationalism and liberalism, however flawed, defining its character, stood formidably against extremism in various forms. By the early 1990s, it had added outlasting brutal and authoritarian communist regimes in the Cold War to its resume of defeating Fascists across the globe in world war. Moreover, during the 1960s, the nation had at least partially redeemed the long-deferred promises of the Reconstruction era for equal citizenship and greater opportunity for African Americans, and to an extent all people regardless of race or gender.[24]

The end of the Cold War produced more than its share of celebratory triumphalism in the United States, much of it undeserved. Such triumphalism emerged with special vigor from various points on the political right eager to capture the credit for victory for their revered political icon, Ronald Reagan, and to bootstrap support for their own neoconservative international agenda. That agenda emerged from a commitment to the worldwide domination of free market capitalism, constitutional democracy, and enlightened secularism. Some observers even confused the end of the Cold War, meaningful though it was, with the end of history. Indeed, American triumphalism received perhaps its most emphatic expression in Francis Fukuyama's article (and later book), "The End of History," published in 1989. Fukuyama's work posited a near universal triumph of American values, political democracy, capitalist economics, and secular culture – all American style – around the world. The scattered remaining redoubts of localism, authoritarianism, or socialism would slowly but surely crumble when challenged by the allure of those irresistible American exports: prosperity and democracy.[25]

A skeptical conservative, Samuel Huntington, warned his bullish younger colleagues that such self-confident American universalism and exceptionalism (an older secular faith that became embattled in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate) would appear as imperialism to others around the world. Moreover, the champions of the "End of History" somehow ignored the rise of religious fundamentalism worldwide between 1970 and 2000 in reaction to modernity in all its many guises.[26] This fundamentalist movement reasserted itself with vengeance in the Islamic world after the ill-conceived twenty-first-century American war with Iraq, which proceeded despite the lack of proof that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had either a role in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center or a program close to producing nuclear weapons.

The end of the Cold War did not prove to be the "End of History." Not even the flourishing hyperbole of conservative triumphalism could obscure the fact that after the Cold War's end the old American union of nationalism and liberalism has grown frayed and maybe even strained. With the common ideological and military opponent seemingly vanquished, the purpose of the liberal nationalist fusion seemed less clear and compelling, and certainly less focused. The chief causes of the fraying ties between liberalism and nationalism appear to lie in the strong decentralizing currents unleashed when Americans no longer had to nurture unity and promote strength to face down a common enemy of global reach and roughly commensurate military power. In the weakening of centralizing forces, the end of the Cold War has been abetted by other trends that have served to strengthen decentralizing forces just as the Cold War's demise weakened centralizing ones. Among the most powerful of these decentralizing forces stand the personalization of technology, increasing economic inequality, and the growing dysfunction of intentionally polarized politics. Together, the strength of such decentralizing forces, operating in the absence of the Cold War's centralizing counterweight, has placed enormous strain on the American marriage of nationalism and liberalism.

The trend toward increased personalization of technology in recent decades is unmistakable, and the decentralizing tendencies emanating from this technological revolution came in at least two phases.[27] During the first phase, major changes in the computer and television industries expanded access to information and entertainment and eroded the centralizing influence of national oligopolies. Computing evolved from big mainframes produced by mega-firms such as IBM ("Big Blue") to personal computers, which both put computing power in the homes and offices of many Americans and allowed the emergence of newcomers such as Apple and Dell to become mega-firms, outstripping IBM in wealth, with the entire process facilitated by the emergence of a dominant software mega-provider, Microsoft. These changes distributed significant computing and communicating capacity much more broadly across the nation, democratizing information in the process and expanding communication opportunities through email. Also, in this first phase, cable television broke the grip of major networks on the viewing public and brought diversity in news and entertainment options to millions with cable access. News and entertainment channels proliferated and television viewing became a much more segmented market. Over time, viewers could even choose a cable news channel whose "slant" on the world comported well with their own.[28]

The second phase of the decentralizing movement in technology came with the rise of personal devices such as cell phones, the Palm, and the Blackberry, and emerged with a vengeance with the smartphones (especially Apple iPhones) of the twenty-first century. These smartphones placed a powerful computer, which provided access to vast knowledge as well as a sense of connection, in the hand of the user 24/7, and spawned as offspring new forms of communication discussed later in this chapter. These inventions and improvements tended to enhance personal autonomy while at the same time making people feel better connected, if only virtually, to the larger world. These inventions have decentralized knowledge and communication while simultaneously enhancing a sense of being in touch and of being on top of things, thus fulfilling the needs of both inner- and outer-directed personalities.[29]

The rise of the personal computer and related connectivity during this first phase of the technology revolution were not the only forces driving decentralization and an eroding a sense of common purpose during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The growing inequality of wealth and income in the United States since the 1970s also enhanced the sense of decentralization. Real (inflation-adjusted) wages in the United States have not increased appreciably since 1979. The incomes of average families have not increased since 2000. Between 2000 and 2011 worker output increased by 2.5 percent, but worker incomes increased by only 1 percent during the same period. At the same time, the share of total income earned by the nation's top 1 percent has increased from 11 percent in 1994 to 23 percent in 2012.[30] Taking a longer view, from 1979 through 2007, the after-tax income of households in the top 1 percent of households grew by 275 percent, compared to 65 percent for the next 19 percent of households, to just under 40 percent for the next 60 percent, and only 18 percent for the bottom fifth of households. The income of the 1 percent of highest-income households nearly tripled between 1979 and 2007, while the share received by low- and middle-income households declined.[31]

A look at the distribution of wealth is even more troubling. While the top 10 percent of American households control roughly a quarter of all income, they control just over three-quarters of all wealth, with the richest 5 percent controlling over 50 percent of the wealth. By contrast, the bottom 40 percent controls virtually no wealth and the next 40 percent only 12 percent. Such a wealth distribution may or may not mean the presence of a permanent moneyed aristocracy of unprecedented power in the United States, but it certainly suggests the emergence of an

economic order French economist Thomas Picketty labeled "patrimonial capitalism," a system centered on the power of inherited wealth, which gradually squeezes the life from the American dream of ongoing upward social mobility.[32]

It has also been easy to notice how the phenomenon of economic globalization at least appears to have enhanced inequalities in wealth and income.[33] On balance, globalization seems to have benefited better-educated, more technologically sophisticated Americans – the creative classes, high-level technology "geeks," and financial wizards – significantly. But at the same time, blue-collar Americans, with lower levels of education and fewer job skills, have faced lower or stagnant wages, the outright loss of jobs, and/or a shift to the lower-paying service sector with the decline of the proportion of manufacturing jobs in the American economy. Such polarization of gains and loss by class has divided Americans even further, produced ongoing political contretemps, and added a new dimension to centrifugal pull.[34]

Increasing inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income in the United States have also heightened disturbing class divisions in other tangible ways. A society which a half century ago sought security primarily against external threats through large nuclear arsenals and the theory of "mutually assured destruction" now seeks safety from nearby dangers, often based on both real and exaggerated concerns about random street crime, through the perquisites of wealth: gated communities, penthouse suites, private schools, and exclusive clubs of various sorts. Opportunity, especially in the form of a college education, is not so much a public good as a privilege available in proportion to how much people can afford to pay for it.[35] Political campaigns, given their dependence on fundraising for expensive yet critical media buys, have become more influenced than ever by Big Money, whose funding efforts and advertising (through Political Action Committees) now enjoy Supreme Court sanction as rights of free speech.

Taken together, the technological revolutions and growing economic inequalities have generated powerful decentralizing forces that tend to diminish the national sense of common purpose and enhance the pressures working to disrupt Potter's uniquely American marriage of nationalism and liberalism. Yet perhaps the most striking development appearing after the end of the Cold War has been the emergence of long-term political and governmental division and dysfunction which surfaced in the absence of Cold War imperatives. It was hardly a coincidence that just as the Soviet Union, the nation's chief Cold War antagonist,

disintegrated into its constituent parts, the American nation that had outlasted it spun into increasingly sharp political divides over questions related to political centralization. As the galvanizing centripetal pull of the Cold War, with its insistence on thwarting the designs of a powerful and threatening external adversary, rapidly diminished, the United States itself experienced its own, more modest, version of coming apart.[36] Differently put, once former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's vow to "bury" the United States became harmless hyperbole rather than genuine menace, the lack of a unifying outside threat, such as Soviet communism, allowed disintegration of the "vital center." That center had advocated, to varying degrees, on behalf of a balanced economy, a commitment to both the public good and private initiative, an adequate social safety net, and a sense of common national purpose. The weakening of this once "vital center" itself proved a major factor in the growing strength of decentralizing tendencies in the United States.

The gradual weakening of the political center in the United States is a complicated story, and a full examination lies well beyond the scope of this chapter, but a partial examination can illustrate the larger point about the loss of a centralizing pull. Ironically, a key to the diminished power of the center lay in the success of the democratic reform impulse of the 1960s that informed the court decision applying the "one person, one vote" principle to the drawing of Congressional and state legislative election districts. African Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities understandably pushed hard for increased representation drawn from their ranks in legislative bodies, and Democrats responded to the desire of significant portions of their base and the new demands of federal law by encouraging the drawing of majority minority districts to insure minority representation. At the same time, Republicans seized the advantage they derived from the herding of Democratic voters into overwhelmingly Democratic districts to increase Republican competitiveness in districts which had lost Democratic votes. As Republicans won more and more districts and eventually gained control of more state legislatures, they created as many safe GOP seats as possible through redistricting. The safer these Republican seats became, the more conservative the Republican candidates who could win them.

As safe seats became the rule, incumbents in both parties became far more concerned about primary challenges than about opposition in the general elections. This growing logic of safe seats, examined in mere outline form here, created more minority (and generally more liberal) representation from safe Democratic districts, more conservative winners

from safe Republican districts, and fewer competitive districts in which representation was truly decided in the general election rather than in the primary. The electoral pressures meant that popularity among the party faithful meant more than the ability to appeal to swing voters. As a result, the power of the political center at the ballot box diminished. The Democratic party grew more liberal and the Republican party more conservative, leaving centrists with fewer appealing choices.

At the presidential level, the losses suffered by avowed liberals Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis in the 1984 and 1988 elections chastened Democrats back toward the center. Bill Clinton's success with the "New Democrat" label in the 1992 and 1996 convinced the party that centrist strategies could work in presidential elections. While Clinton led chastened Democrats back to the center after Reagan-era defeats, to date there is little evidence that Barack Obama's solid presidential victories in 2008 and 2012 nudged Republicans back toward the center. Instead, the GOP responded to defeat with increasingly sharp and divisive attacks on Obama and his supporters that polarized the electorate even more dramatically. In fact, the nation's once muscular vital center is now threatened primarily by the continued, and even erratic, rightward drift of a Republican party still seeking a repeat of the success of the Reagan years. If the modern conservative political movement in the United States surfaced with Barry Goldwater's disastrous 1964 presidential defeat, it crested with Ronald Reagan's popular presidency in the 1980s. Yet in most recent election cycles, the GOP has attempted to recapture such success by lurching even further to the right.[37]

At the national level, the boundaries of the right wing's popularity have been successfully delineated and exploited by skillful Democratic politicians, such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, who appealed to common ground and understood the importance of wooing the center. But, frankly, the calculus of political success for both Clinton and Obama was narrow and required either considerable help from either third-party candidates (Ross Perot) or an aggressive mobilization of their party's base. Increasingly, the traditional pro-business wing of the Republican party struggled to retain its usual prominence within the GOP. In 2012, when the pro-business faction of the party produced a presidential nominee (Mitt Romney) who was deeply one of its own, and who also wore even a thin veneer of conservative populism uncomfortably, that nominee failed to arouse enough passion among Republican loyalists to match George W. Bush's majority of 2004, despite one exceedingly poor debate performance by the usually articulate Democratic incumbent (Obama).[38]

Even the stunning 2016 success of rhetorical flame-thrower and unbridled political and personal attacker Donald Trump in routing a covey of small-government conservative ideologues in the Republican presidential primaries, not to mention his shocking November victory in the electoral college, have arguably only moved the party further from the mainstream in its views. Trump's general election upset appears driven by narrow popular vote wins in key industrial states in which blue-collar white voters swung to Trump in unexpected numbers. But this victory did little to close the gap between the self-styled outsider candidate become president and the national mainstream, given that the losing candidate, Democrat Hillary Clinton, won the popular vote comfortably (by 2 percent and nearly four million votes) despite her strongly negative popularity ratings.

But, while hard-right conservative success at the national level has been intermittent at best since Reagan left office in 1989, the story in the states has been quite different. Nowhere has the hard-right influence grown more apparent than in Republican primaries held in safely "red" states and districts. The hard right's growing dominance there has given it enhanced influence across the larger political landscape. For example, in 2018, Republicans controlled governorships and held legislative majorities in over thirty states, giving them not only power in those states but also added leverage nationally (in the United States Senate and the Electoral College). It was an underappreciated fact that in the disputed presidential election of 2000, George W. Bush's victory hinged on carrying ten more states than Al Gore and winning the twenty electoral votes (two per state) granted to each state by the US Constitution in addition to the electoral votes allocated to each state based on its representation in Congress. Without those electoral votes, Gore would have defeated Bush regardless of the outcome in Florida. In 2016, Trump's winning effort consisted of carrying many more states than Hillary Clinton while winning many fewer popular votes than the Democratic nominee.

Since at least 1994, but especially during the final six years of the Obama presidency, gridlock has often prevailed in national politics. In the legislative branch simple majorities will no longer do. A three-fifths majority is needed to push most bills through the US Senate. In the US House, the majority caucus and its leadership control which bills even make it to the floor (a tactic employed by both parties). Continuing resolutions substitute for actual budgets and debt ceiling issues periodically threaten to shut down the government. In the executive branch, legislative achievements have given way to governing by executive order. Such inert government, disdained and routinely dismissed as intolerable during

a Cold War era characterized by urgency and the need for strength, now regularly prevails. Such political dysfunction and inaction clearly fueled the Trump candidacy in 2016, as the Republican insurgent vowed to ignore both ideological purity and political correctness in his professed determination to get things done. In fact, Trump's ego and narcissistic desire for the spotlight triggered even more dysfunction and reckless confrontation.

The reign of the politics of stalemate and the empowerment of champions of decentralization need not inevitably mean the weakening of liberal nationalism, but in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century United States, resurgent localism has been laced with significant measures of chauvinism and atavism. The polarized politics of the post-Cold War era has given new vigor and license to the expression of such ideas. But even beyond partisan politics, there can be little doubt that national confidence in the public sector, a shared understanding of common purpose, and a sense of mutual obligation to fellow citizens have all eroded with the end of the Cold War. Localism and even libertarianism threaten the 100-year-old marriage of nationalism and liberalism that David Potter so artfully explained. Our politics are not calling us back toward the center. And if not our politics, what is?

Perhaps surprisingly, but perhaps not, religion hardly exerts much cohesive pull in America today. As recent scholarship confirmed, American Christianity has long been marked by intense denominational competition with frequent schisms creating even more competition among churches for members. Differentiation of message rather than a message of common purpose drives church growth.[39] Moreover, repeated polls suggest that the twenty-first-century United States is a less overtly religious, less churchgoing society than ever in its history. Yet despite shrinking overall numbers, the range of religious affiliations with meaningful numbers of followers is larger than ever before. Within the dominant religious tradition, Christianity, there are more denominations and sects than ever but less unity and sharper internal divisions than during the middle of the twentieth century when mainline Protestantism, informed and instructed by public theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, served as something approaching a civil religion.[40] In the early twenty-first century, no matter how much social good through service emanates from churches, synagogues, mosques, shrines, temples, and other centers of worship and belief – and without question life in America would be much more callous without them – religious divisions often do as much to accelerate polarization as to promote common purpose.

Nor has American popular culture offered much help. A familiar tool of nationalism, and one often abused, a shared "national" popular culture can often and perhaps ultimately supersede the scores of folk cultures enveloped by most nation-states. During most of the Cold War years, an increasingly strong American popular culture was defined by three television networks, a handful of powerful movie studios, and a music industry dominated by a few recording labels. Moreover, television networks and movie producers had something of a preoccupation with the Cold War. For example, the immensely popular, iconic James Bond films of the 1960s and beyond emerged from the public fascination with the Cold War mindset of espionage and intrigue. The three major commercial television networks not only offered thorough coverage of the Cold War but also delivered pretty much the same news to American households every night. Anchors such as Edward R. Murrow, whose *See It Now* program unmasked Senator Joseph McCarthy's red-baiting campaign against the military, and Walter Cronkite, whose coverage of civil rights and the war in Vietnam informed riveted viewers, emerged as among the most trusted people in the nation. Such trust produced an era in which people were entitled to their own opinions but not to their own facts, at least not in public discourse. Later in the evening, the major networks delivered common entertainment at regular times to national audiences, creating shared viewing experiences across much of the nation.[41] Professional sports of the era created a new national pastime, as football, NFL-style, replaced baseball, MLB-style, as the nation's most popular sport. Often deemed shallow and distracting by the intelligentsia of the age, the vigor of a widely shared national popular culture nonetheless emerged as a key source of common identity in an increasingly diverse nation.

But as the second phase of the ongoing technological and communication revolution of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries emerged in full force, mobile personal devices and social media eventually undermined the common popular culture cultivated by Big Media and Big Entertainment to a significant degree. The personalization of entertainment, communication, and information have at the very least decentralized American popular culture if not shattered it into dozens of pieces sorted by niche markets, generational patterns, peer pressures, and, of course, income. Entertainment and information are now delivered on very personalized time schedules as "on demand" or "on your time" technologies rise to dominance. Television programming is available on laptop and tablet computers as well as ubiquitous smartphones and watched whenever and wherever by streaming viewers. The so-called millennial generation that serves as the driving edge of these trends has

even earned the label of "cord-cutters" for their aversion to any signal delivered by cable or to an immobile device. Moreover, programming is now generated by a broad variety of entities, including cable networks and video-streaming enterprises. HBO, Netflix, AMC, Amazon, and others have in recent years produced hit series such as *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *The Parent*, *House of Cards*, and *The Magnificent Mrs. Maisel*. News, and even more opinion, gushes forth 24/7 from a variety of sources, including websites and online tabloid equivalents. Vinyl albums and CDs are a thing of the past, as music, first purchased one song at a time for a while from Apple's iTunes, is now obtained from streaming services such as Pandora or Spotify through "apps."

Interpersonal communications have been revolutionized by new technology and innovative entrepreneurship. A new category of media – social media – emerged as entrepreneurs such as Mark Zuckerberg fathomed the popular appeal of giving individuals the ability to communicate with groups of friends using the internet. Facebook, with its systems of friends, posts, and likes, connected and reconnected people across distances great and small into multitudinous communities (as many in number as there are users of Facebook), where members share pictures and posts as frequently as they choose with those who have "friended" them. Businesses and other organizations now maintain Facebook pages to reach customers. Land phone lines gave way to cell phones (some estimates suggest that fewer than 40 percent of American households now maintain land lines), and the postal service and phone calls yielded to emails. Email has now been partially replaced by text messaging, and among younger Americans, by another social media tool, X (nee Twitter), and its imitators. With its own lingo of hashtags, handles, and "emojis" (symbols connoting emotions), Twitter allows brief and pithy communication through short "tweets" of 280 characters or less. Initially, the character limit per tweet was 140 characters. People follow celebrities, athletes, and even politicians as well as networks of friends or people with similar interests, as subject lines "trend" when they become popular. Connections through social media such as Facebook and Twitter have promoted the creation of virtual communities fostering a sense of connection and belonging, but they do so in a highly decentralized fashion that is entirely voluntary, carries little obligation, and remains, at the end of day, "virtual."[42]

The technology, communication, personal device, and social media marketplaces are full of competitors and personal choice in consumption prevails, but any sense of shared community beyond the choice of entertainment and information dissolves. The once shared experience of the family TV

room, stultifying and conformist as it may have been for many, is replaced by scattered viewers and readers on commuter trains, at bus stops, on walks and jogs, across tables from each other at restaurants, and, well, just about anywhere reachable by a signal. As liberating and diversity-encouraging as these trends may be, they are nonetheless powerful centrifugal forces pulling society away from a common center. They are scattering rather centering influences, highlighting the absence of a strong magnet-like pull emanating from the national core like that of the Cold War era.

In the face of such powerful decentralizing tendencies, a fervent rhetorical patriotism flourishes, especially in terms of support for the nation's all-volunteer armed services. Yet doubters wonder if such ardent patriotism disguises the decline of actual commitment to nation with loud and vehement expressions of arch-loyalty. At times, even the current rhetoric of patriotism is divisive, often chauvinistic in tone, and exclusive rather than inclusive in its scope. Make no mistake, the actual sacrifices for freedom made by those in uniform under the Stars and Stripes, though genuinely appreciated by most Americans, are often disproportionately borne by those Americans – women, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans – long excluded from full privileges of citizenship.

Given all of this, what, if anything, is left to hold the center against the tumult? Can any of the traditional mechanisms or ideals stand against the tide? Constitutional checks and balances? Genuine love of nation? Faith in shared prosperity? The ongoing affinity of newcomers to their chosen and adopted nation? Confidence in a rickety political system that is more than 200 years old to sort matters over the long term, if not in the short? Good, old-fashioned American common sense? Perhaps none of the above independently but all or some mixed together?

The answer, in this historian's view, remains in the end more a matter of faith than a subject of proof. But the long narrative of American history, which is far from a foolproof guide yet still indisputably the best guide we have, suggests that there may well be something in that Lincolnian blend of nationalism and liberalism, especially when economic opportunity, real and imagined, is folded in, that still exerts a powerful unifying pull that might effectively countervail the protean forces dividing us and tugging us apart. Above the din of inflammatory rhetoric and the dysfunction of daily politics in Washington and elsewhere, there is still much in that elusive American character that seems to hear and respond to calls to rally for the common good on occasion, to respond affirmatively when "the promise of American life," as progressive-era journalist Herbert Croly aptly labeled it a hundred years ago, appears at stake.[43]

Using the language of that century-old era, Croly's shorthand prescription for protecting that promise called for using "Hamiltonian means" to achieve "Jeffersonian ends." Twenty-first-century political commentators would translate this message as a call to use centralized public power to countervail concentrated private power to enhance freedom and opportunity for all. Such a call represents an updated reassertion of an even older American (Jacksonian-era) rallying cry that the few should never prevail at the expense of the many.[44]

Faith in the "promise of American life" may simply mean believing that, among Americans as whole, decency still exceeds meanness, a commitment to fairness still reigns over fascination with wealth and power, hope in expanding opportunity can override fears of lost security, the nation of immigrants can still welcome more immigrants, becoming better at being global is a better strategy than trying futilely to wall ourselves off from the rest of the world, or simply recognizing that people are unique but overall they are more alike than different. Summoning what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," we can "still bind up the nation's wounds" and care for each other while working together to seek justice and lasting peace in our nation and world, as our greatest president challenged us to do amid a grave crisis some 150 years ago.[45]

Reviving the "promise of America life" for the twenty-first century will nonetheless involve some hard work. It will require the recovery of a sense of common purpose – a common purpose for all Americans, including African Americans and Hispanics and Muslims and Asian and gay and transgender people and all others, not just white Americans, who are a shrinking portion of the population. It will involve helping those injured by economic globalization as well as those who are enriched by it. It will involve moving beyond the politics of stalemate. It will involve the rediscovery of the politics of compromise. It will involve an informed citizenry getting their heads out of sound bites, cell phone conversations, and social media and instead paying serious attention to issues and not just to barbed chatter and political dog-and-pony shows. It will involve calling forth the America we often see after crises and tragedies, after floods, hurricanes, and mass killings, the America we glimpsed too briefly after the 9/11 attacks in New York City, in Boston after the marathon bombing, and in South Carolina after the racist slaying of African Americans in Charleston's historic Emmanuel AME church. It will involve citizens embracing as a model the example of the biblical Good Samaritan who stopped to help the suffering stranger, who found him in need and ministered to him, who found the victim lodging and paid for

continuing care. If the nation can do these things, then, a hundred years after Herbert Croly coined the phrase, the enduring appeal of the "promise of American life," and renewed calls for its fulfillment, can surely resonate once again.

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