

Political Science 358
American Culture War
Spring 2008
Alan Wolfe

There is no precise date at which the American culture war began, but the best guess would be in 1973, when the U. S. Supreme Court decided Roe v. Wade. Women, the Court essentially ruled, had the right to control their own bodies, especially after the first trimester of a pregnancy, and no state could refuse to allow them access to abortion. In thereby choosing the importance of individual autonomy over moral prohibitions rooted in many religious beliefs, the Court's decision contributed to the mobilization of groups determined to overrule the decision or at least to limit its applicability.

Abortion is symbolic of a new set of issues that came to dominate American politics over the past three decades. Unlike the issues with which the New Deal was concerned, which were primarily economic in nature, these new issues are moral, religious and culture. They involve such questions as what is right and wrong, what obligations people to have to current and future generations, and where the line between public and private should be drawn. Besides abortion, issues involving the family, homosexuality, stem cells, religion, and race have defined the American culture war. (Others, such as immigration and multiculturalism are closely allied with them). These issues account for the increased ideological division in American politics, as well as such bitterly contested events as the elections of 2000 and 2004.

The mid-term election of 2006 and the on-going presidential election of 2008, however, have been dominated by somewhat different themes, including those of experience and change. This raises the question of whether the American culture is coming to an end, and, if it is, what will replace it.

This course is meant to introduce students to the major issues in the American culture war. We will read books that have been influential in defining these issues, as well as others that either take sides in them or attempt to provide greater clarity. Students should complete the course with a greater understanding of how contemporary American politics has taken the form it has.

There will be a mid-term and a final exam in the course. In addition, each student will be expected to take one issue in the culture war, especially one that is not discussed in the reading, and to offer an overview of how that issue has played out. This assignment will involve an oral presentation to the class.

The following are the books we will be reading and discussing:

1. Robert Bork, Slouching Toward Gomorrah
2. Andrew Sullivan, Virtually Normal

3. Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, The Case for Marriage
4. Andrew Hacker, Two Nations
5. Will Saletín, Bearing Right
6. Alan Wolfe, One Nation, After All
7. James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, Is There a Culture War?

Here are the reading assignments for the semester:

January 14, 2008: Introduction and course requirements, Bork pp. 1-225

January 28, 2008: Bork, pp, 226-343

February 4, 2008: Sullivan, whole book

February 11, 2008: Hacker, pp. 3-111.

February 18, 2008: Hacker, pp. 112-245.

February 25, 2008: Saletín, whole book

March 10, 2008: Midterm exam

March 17, 2008: Waite and Gallagher pp. 1-109.

March 24, 2008: Waite and Gallagher, pp. 110-203.

March 31, 2008: Wolfe, whole book

April 7, 2008: Student Reports

April 14, 2008: Student reports

April 28, 2007: Davison and Wolfe, whole book