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After the Culture War?: Shifts and Continuities in the Obama Era and Beyond

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*In conversation with **Joseph Gravellese**, Undergraduate Research Assistant for
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GRAVELLESE: In 2008, many spoke of Obama as a possible post-partisan figure who could transform the culture wars, if not end them entirely. Was this a realistic expectation?

DOMBRINK: I don't know. It certainly was our hope and it was Obama's expressed opinion that some of our divisions would be bridged. But I'm a sociologist, and I read all of the people who deal with how deep and broad our divisions are, and I realize that that's a difficult thing to achieve.

In the book I wrote with Daniel Hillyard in 2007, *Sin No More*, we talked about one of the crippling factors in our divisions - when Karl Rove said in 2004 that we were in the beginning of a center-right run in the U.S. That didn't sit right with a lot of people, so in a sense, looking at 2008, just four years removed from that 2004 race, we'd be skeptical that [the divisions] would be changed.

Having said that, we do have people like Governor Schwarzenegger in California, who is bigger than his party; he transforms party. But if you try to be post-partisan, all the forces within the parties are pulling you one way or the other, and it puts you in a lonely place, being in the middle. Sometimes it feels like there's not a lot of room to be a centrist - that's what Evan Bayh said when he quit the Senate. It's hard to be a centrist.

GRAVELLESE: Presumably, a lot of that has to do with the fact that even though there may be public sympathy for a centrist voice, activists in the parties are trying to pull you in one extreme or the other.

DOMBRINK: That's part of it. But do you need to be, as Joe Klein called himself, a radical centrist? Or do you just need to be somebody who's willing to cross the aisle at times? That's the difference between 'partisanship' and 'polarization' in American politics. It's the deal-making that's broken down in 2009 and 2010.

GRAVELLESE: Would you say one of the main problems is that the parties are stubborn about not giving in to the other side, even if the other side's ideas seem like they could work and help people?

DOMBRINK: Sure. If it seems like something would be a political victory for the other side, the parties won't go for it, even if it's sound policy. And this is something that happens a lot on these culture war issues.

GRAVELLESE: We've seen some culture war issues – such as Don't Ask, Don't Tell and other issues of homosexual rights – become increasingly less controversial. Which culture war issues do you see as fading in importance right now, and do you think there's a new wave of issues that are going to come up in the future?

DOMBRINK: Absolutely, you're right about gay marriage and Don't Ask Don't Tell. There will definitely be a new wave of issues.

Polarization has not exactly been a two-way street - it's been of more benefit in the last 25 years to Republicans to keep these issues alive, to poach some voters who would ordinarily be Democrats except for the social issues.

For all those of us who thought November 5, 2008 was the beginning of the end of polarization, there was still a number of people who said cooperation is traitor-like, and it's more important to drop back to refine our core.

A lot of it was within the confines of what the Republican Party would do, or what conservatives would do. And some of it really had to do with the notion of whether these core cultural issues would remain a part of the conversation. Some of these issues have emerged as part of an occasionally very nasty backlash.

This backlash is not issue-based, or at least not based on the things we're used to talking about - and it certainly has race flavored through it. Above all, though, it does have visions of what

government should be all about, and it's a coarser discussion than it was before, in a lot of ways. It's an angrier discussion. The times have given rise to anger.

GRAVELLESE: The political battles of 2009 - mostly healthcare - got nasty and divisive. In what ways did these battles over these issues fall along traditional culture war lines?

DOMBRINK: Well, a lot of this fight had to do with the fact that there aren't many conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans in the House of Representatives, by and large, thanks to redistricting and primary challenges. The Senate is a little different, but even so, it's fairly polarized.

The attempt by the President was to say that the public wants us to tackle big issues energy, the economy, healthcare. When Bill Clinton went after healthcare, it was just beginning to be an issue of public consciousness. In terms of its share of the economy, it's grown and it's projected to grow.

In 1994 the forces fighting the Clinton health care reform tried to frame this as a welfare program, and talked about benefits for those who were outside the 'mainstream' – and at that point, the idea of the common good gets a little shakier.

GRAVELLESE: A couple of years ago, you spoke at the Boisi Center's event on [Gambling and the American Moral Landscape](#). What do attitudes about gambling and casinos say about American cultural standards? How have they evolved in the last few years?

DOMBRINK: In the book of 2007, we discussed the issue of gambling, and Alan Wolfe was nice enough to invite me here to talk about it. Gambling's never been a culture war issue, but in criminology, it is traditionally considered to be a victimless crime – in the same framework as abortion and homosexuality. But over the 40 years of that concept, gambling has separated itself from the other issues by its great normalization. You can buy a lottery ticket, go to Mohegan Sun, look at the point spread in the newspaper – gambling is everywhere.

When people found out William Bennett, a conservative commentator, was a heavy gambler, people thought he was a hypocrite. At the time, I said that this incident said a lot more about gambling than it did about Bennett. I don't care what people think about William Bennett.

What was interesting to me is that he said, so I'm a gambler – it's okay. I can afford to lose, because I've got a fair amount of money. That was a moment for me where the issue had passed over a line to where people didn't feel ashamed to be compulsive gamblers anymore.

That said, the big issue in a bad economy is states trying to increase revenues. We certainly got a dose of that at the Boisi conference. There's a different issue at play though, aside from the moral and economic concerns about gambling - which is what I like to call the American Idol phenomenon

Professor Wolfe speaks about this all the time - are we going to be a country that turns out concert pianists and great artists? Is there a coarsening of American culture? So I certainly wouldn't want to see casinos on every corner, for that reason. But we've moved past a point in the last 30 years or so, where gambling is there in some form in almost every state.

GRAVELLESE: You write a lot about the 'purple' majority, as opposed to the red and blue states. Would you say that Americans are generally inclined to "live and let live," and it's just fringes that really want to control what other people say?

DOMBRINK: One of the slides in my presentation talks about abortion. It's a Pew poll from a few years ago that asks people whether abortion should be always legal, sometimes legal, sometimes illegal, or always illegal. It looks at men, women, Democrats, Republicans. What's always striking when you look at opinions on reproductive rights is how much of America is captured in a broad middle. Most Americans want abortion to be legal, but have lots of restrictions. If you ask the question in a binary sense – are you in favor of *Roe v. Wade* staying as the law of the land? - 60% will say yes. So some of it is how you ask the question.

Justice Ginsburg said that by making abortion a judicial decision, it created a certain kind of discourse that is distinct from a legislative one. Same sex marriage is a good example. The Prop 8 trial is currently going on out in California, and there are a lot of people on the gay rights side who have said that they don't want a legal challenge to get to the Supreme Court, and get these rights that way - because that creates a backlash against this movement, which is currently seeing some incremental success on a legislative level.

There's something sacrosanct about the courts in the discourse. Few issues cause as much anger with social conservatives as the supposed intrusiveness of the courts, and the undemocratic nature of courts making social policy. Some of that has to do with Roe, in particular, and some of it has to do with religion in the public square issues - so I think the courts hold a special significance.

GRAVELLESE: Regardless of what the makeup of the court actually is.

DOMBRINK: Yes, and it would take just a small change because you have Justice Kennedy, who wrote the majority opinion in *Lawrence* in 2003 and conservatives hated him for that. Then you had him writing the majority opinion in the *Carhart* decision about late term abortions in 2006, and the progressives hated him for doing that. So he's been on the spot.

People start court cases in places like South Dakota, blatantly challenging Roe in a way that you legally can't, as if to hope it will eventually get up to a court that's in their favor.

GRAVELLESE: How do you think that new breed of young, religious, globally and environmentally-minded people will transform the culture wars of the future?

DOMBRINK: Richard Flory, who works with Don Miller at USC, looked at 'the millennial generation' and religion recently. The easy answer is that these issues will always change because every generation will shape and reshape morality.

There's a difference between Catholics, mainline protestants, evangelical protestants, and young seculars. In my mind, Catholicism has always been a fairly representative religion of the views held among the general citizenry.

In Catholicism, you have a wide representation of views on these issues, and you have problems between people in the pews and people on top, and that won't go away. But I would think that – and I'm thinking in particular of Douglas Kmiec from Pepperdine Law School talking about being pro-life but pro-Obama during the election last year, because he felt Obama was the better overall candidate – people will start transcending narrow, single issues.

As for other churches, I think that with aging, evangelicals – which have been a more conservative-leaning group – will begin to look more like Catholics, in that their membership will have a wider spectrum of views on these issues.