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## *Nixon and Trump: Bookends to the Culture Wars*

Presidents Richard Nixon and Donald Trump are bookends to the culture wars. They personify how two opportunist politicians can effectively exploit critical social issues — racism and patriarchy, among others – for personal gain.

The year 2020 will be the year that Trump may likely seek re-election as president – and will mark a half-century of the culture wars. His defeat, if not prior resignation like Nixon’s resignation in 1974, may well signal the death knell of the religious right’s culture wars.

Nixon rose to power in the wake of the tumultuous ‘60s. After signing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Pres. Lyndon Johnson warned, “we’ve lost the South for a generation.” The civil-right movement that emerged in the wake of the Supreme Court’s momentous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), a case argued by Thurgood Marshall, that legally repudiated the South’s century-old Jim Crow culture.

The adoption of the ‘64 legislation and the ‘65 Voter Rights Act intensified Southern white anger over the Democratic Party’s embrace of anti-racism reforms. Nixon, along with other Republicans, made a devil’s bargain with religious conservatives, opportunist politicians and white voters to protect traditional “white skin privilege” through racist appeals and rigged ballots. This bargain harnessed the deeply felt – and virulent — beliefs in racial identify, patriarchal authority and homophobic fears into a powerful political movement that shaped the culture wars and, a half-century later, culminated in Trump’s election.

Following Nixon's first presidential election in 1968, Kevin Phillips noted in his study, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), "white Democrats will desert their party in droves the minute it becomes a black party." And they did.

On January 20, 1973, Nixon was inaugurated to his second term as president. His landslide victory over Sen. George McGovern (D-SD) — who was labeled the candidate of "acid, amnesty, and abortion" — was driven by Pat Buchanan's "Southern strategy."

Buchanan once admitted, "What we talked about, basically, was shearing off huge segments of F.D.R.'s New Deal coalition, which L.B.J. had held together: Northern Catholic ethnics and Southern Protestant conservatives—what we called the Daley-Rizzo Democrats in the North and, frankly, the Wallace Democrats in the South." And the strategy worked, reconfiguring national politics and forging the culture wars.

Six months later, on June 25<sup>th</sup>, John Dean, Nixon's former counsel, testified before the Senate's Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities and acknowledged the president's role in covering up the White House Special Investigations Unit — aka the "Plumbers" — break in of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters in the Watergate complex. On October 20<sup>th</sup>, Nixon executed the "Saturday Night Massacre," firing the heads of the Justice Department for refusing to follow his orders; on February 6, 1974, the House initiated an impeachment investigation against the president; and, on August 9, 1974, Nixon resigned from office.

Prior to Trump's inauguration in January 2017, the culture wars were waning. Moralists still fumed over a woman's right to an abortion and conservative state legislatures passed laws restricting abortion access, targeting Planned Parenthood and seeking to end young people's access to birth control. But the fury seemed out of their sails.

Sadly, Trump's victory reinvigorated the religious right and archconservatives of every stripe, including white nationalists. His election occurred as Republicans controlled both Houses of Congress and he consolidated the right's control of state power by appointing two conservatives to the Supreme Court, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

Trump came to power playing the race card. His endless rants against Hispanic immigrants, the mass seizure and deportation of non-documented people and efforts to build the "Wall" are his 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of the Southern strategy. How far his anti-immigrant gambit goes will contribute to the outcome of the 2020 election.

His campaign slogan, "make America great again," was another play of the race card. Trump's presidency was most bitterly expressed in the desperate effort to reverse history. He appealed to a deepening disillusionment spreading through the country —

especially among aging white males — as the long-cherished belief in the “American Dream” faded.

This was the long-cherished belief in hard work, debt and white skin privilege that supposedly guaranteed the ordinary American – and, more importantly, their children – a better tomorrow. The disillusionment was expressed in the rising morbidity and mortality rates, including suicides and drug (e.g., heroine and oxy-condign) overdoses among white men 35 to 64 years. It was expressed in deepening dissatisfaction with the growing inequality, notably ongoing wage stagnation and the rising poverty rate.

The culture wars were (unofficially) launched during Nixon’s first term when, in 1972, Phyllis Schlafly, a lawyer, conservative activist and longtime associate of the John Birch Society, built a successful campaign that blocked the ratification of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. Schlafly’s campaign gained momentum following the Supreme Court’s momentous 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalizing a woman’s right to the privacy of an abortion. The Roe decision forced 46 states to liberalize their abortion laws and remains the defining issue of the culture wars.

However, while the ERA was defeated, women’s right considerably increased during the last half-century (e.g., military service, MeToo! movement) and Roe remains the law of the land. Compounding this, the culture wars’ campaign to suppress “obscenity” was undercut by a series of major Supreme Court decisions – e.g., Roth v. U.S.(1957), Jacobellis v. Ohio(1964) and Stanley v. Georgia (1969) — that refashioned the nation’s moral order and helped grow of the porn industry. Deep Throat, a porn sensation starring Linda Lovelace, premiered in 1972, launching what the New York Times dubbed “porn chic.” A host of celebrities went to see it, including Truman Capote, Jack Nicholson, Johnny Carson, Barbara Walters, Frank Sinatra and even Vice Pres. Spiro Agnew.

Since gaining power in 2017, the Trump administration has taken limited action to implement the religious right’s culture wars. This hesitancy seems due more to the fact that cultural issues are less important than political concerns (e.g., migrants, racial identity, corporate interests) than what offended conservatives a half-century ago.

In April 2018, Trump undertook the administration’s toughest stand in the culture wars when he signed an act reconciling the Senate’s Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the House’s Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA). His action was aimed at closing [Backpage.com](http://Backpage.com) that facilitated sex work, including trafficking of young people.

In addition, he backed the 20-week abortion bill, the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act, which failed in the Senate. He supported a secret memo seeking to narrow the definition of gender to “a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth.” The Times considered this “the most drastic move yet in a government wide effort to roll back recognition and protections of transgender people under federal civil rights law.”

The Trump administration, especially Vice Pres. Mike Pence, backs “conversion therapy” (i.e., “reparative therapy”), a medically rejected method of “curing” a gender non-conforming person. It also promotes anti-abortion “crisis pregnancy centers,” insidious establishments to block women from legally entitled abortions and birth-control information/materials.

The 2020 election campaign is underway. When the Democrats take control of the House in January 2019, the political spotlight will focus ever more intensely on Trump. A host of smoldering issues will be under the microscope, including Muller’s report regarding “Russia Gate,” innumerable corruption issues (e.g., the Trump foundation, Trump hotels), questionable practices by administration officials (e.g., Ryan Zinke, Scott Pruitt) and his commercial sexual relations with — and reported criminal abuse of — women. The outcome of these investigations may lead to Trump’s impeachment, resignation or defeat if he runs for reelection in 2020.

However the Trump saga plays out, the religious right’s culture wars helped propel him into office but may be coming to an end. Over the last century-and-a-half, America has been a terrain of repeated battles over moral values. These “wars” pitted secular forces pushing to modernize cultural standards, to make people’s life “freer,” against traditionalists seeking to contain unacceptable changes in American life, thus preserving established values.

Today’s culture wars are not unlike three previous eras of struggles over moral values — during the Civil War era over the utopian and “free love” movements; during the 1920s over the new woman, jazz and alcohol consumption; and during the 1950s over communism, obscenity and homosexuality. These previous “wars” passed as will this one.

Nevertheless, the war over a woman’s right to an abortion will likely persist. Moralists have given up on many of the issues that defined the initial phase of this round of the culture wars — premarital sex, women serving in the military, homosexuality and pornography, to name four issues. But the right for a woman to terminate a male-induced

fetus will remain a contested issue. The right to abort an unwanted fetus marks a critical boundary of patriarchy, thus one of the last domains of male power in an increasing de-gendered world. For the foreseeable future, the war over abortion will remain an endemic feature of American culture.

One can only hope the bookends of Nixon and Trump signal the beginning and end of the culture wars.