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The Making of a Consensual Majority: Political Discourse and Electoral Politics in the 1980's

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The Making of a Consensual Majority: Political Discourse and Electoral Politics in the 1980's

Abstract
The economic and political reforms begun in the United States during the 1930s and expanded during the 1960s and early 1970s represented a significant change in the relationship between government and citizens, shifting the boundary between public and private spheres of influence. Much of this expanded government was harnessed to benefit previously powerless groups, often in ways that violated the tenets of classical liberal democracy and free market capitalism. To some degree, this expansion of the state was accompanied by a parallel shift in the terms of public discourse (consider, for example, the imagery contained in a phrase like 'The Great Society'). In general, however, essentially socialist policies were justified using the rhetoric of liberalism: political reforms were defended in terms of individual rights, and economic reforms in terms of equal opportunity. Indeed, some have argued that the reforms of the 1930s and the 1960s were designed to prevent a more conscious and comprehensive embrace of democratic socialism.

The creation of a limited welfare state led to tangible gains for America's politically and economically disadvantaged classes. However, the failure openly to address the relationship among the often competing values of democracy, capitalism and socialism, coupled with the incremental, piecemeal nature of the reforms themselves, resulted in a double bind. Grafted on to essentially unchanged political and economic institutions, processes and values, the reforms were incapable of producing the 'Great Society' that was promised. By the late 1970s these limits were clear. Against the backdrop of 'stagflation', political and economic justice could no longer be sold as costless. No longer assured of the expanding economic pie that helped mask both the limits and the costs of many federal programmes, America needed to confront its half century ménage à trois with democratic capitalism and democratic socialism. However, the failure to develop a coherent justification for the socialist reforms of the past 50 years meant there was no 'public language' with which directly to defend them, let alone to advocate for more comprehensive change.

Comments
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An American Half-century

Postwar Culture and Politics in the USA

Edited by Michael Klein

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## Contents

### Contributors

**Introduction: The Roads Not Taken**  
*Michael Klein*

1. The Cold War and the Culture of Resistance  
*Norman Markowitz*  
*10*

2. So that the Dead may not be Killed Again:  
Mailer, Doctorow and the Poetics of a Persecuting Society  
*Richard Godden*  
*30*

3. 1968: The Two Cultures  
*Todd Gitlin*  
*59*

4. The World Turned Upside Down:  
The Alternative Press and Visionary Politics in the US  
in the 1960s  
*Jackie DiSalvo*  
*69*

5. The Meaning of the 1960s  
*Abbie Hoffman*  
*82*

6. Students, Capital and the Multiversity:  
Radical Challenges to the Dominant Pattern of American Higher  
Education from Berkeley to Livingston  
*Michael Klein*  
*86*

7. The Deep Immortal Wish': Radicalism and Modern  
American Poetry  
*Jeffrey Walsh*  
*117*

8. Side Saddle on the Golden Calf: Moments of Utopia in  
American Pop Music and Pop Music Culture  
*John Storey*  
*141*

9. What Feminism has said about Motherhood  
*Ann Snitow*  
*157*
AN AMERICAN HALF-CENTURY

10. Black Women: Constructing the Revolutionary Subject 172
   bell hooks

11. Malcolm X and the Crisis in Black America 192
   Manning Marable

12. Beyond the American Dream: Film and the Experience of Defeat 206
   Michael Klein

13. The Making of a Consensual Majority:
    Political Discourse and Electoral Politics in the 1980s 232
    Michael X. Delli Carpini

14. US Television and the Gulf Conflict 274
    Gene Michaud

15. The 1990s and Beyond: After the Gulf 285
    Noam Chomsky interviewed by Michael Klein

Index 291

Michael X. Delli Carpini

The economic and political reforms begun in the United States during the 1930s and expanded during the 1960s and early 1970s represented a significant change in the relationship between government and citizens, shifting the boundary between public and private spheres of influence. Much of this expanded government was harnessed to benefit previously powerless groups, often in ways that violated the tenets of classical liberal democracy and free market capitalism. To some degree, this expansion of the state was accompanied by a parallel shift in the terms of public discourse (consider, for example, the imagery contained in a phrase like 'The Great Society'). In general, however, essentially socialist policies were justified using the rhetoric of liberalism: political reforms were defended in terms of individual rights, and economic reforms in terms of equal opportunity. Indeed, some have argued that the reforms of the 1930s and the 1960s were designed to prevent a more conscious and comprehensive embrace of democratic socialism.2

The creation of a limited welfare state led to tangible gains for America's politically and economically disadvantaged classes. However, the failure openly to address the relationship among the often competing values of democracy, capitalism and socialism, coupled with the incremental, piecemeal nature of the reforms themselves, resulted in a double bind. Grafted on to essentially unchanged political and economic institutions, processes and values, the reforms were incapable of producing the 'Great Society' that was promised. By the late 1970s these limits were clear. Against the backdrop of 'stagflation', political and economic justice could no longer be sold as costless. No longer assured of the expanding economic pie that helped mask both the limits and the costs of many federal programmes, America needed to confront its half century ménage à trois with democratic capitalism and democratic socialism. However, the failure to develop a coherent justification for the socialist reforms of the past 50 years meant there was no 'public language' with which directly to defend them, let alone to advocate for more comprehensive change.
It was in this context that the elections of 1980, 1984 and 1988 took place. While political observers rightly lament the lack of substance in the American campaign process, an examination of these three presidential elections reveals a wealth of information that is, ironically, more useful today than it was during the campaigns themselves. Contained within the rhetoric and polis spots are arguments and images that address, even if as parable, the major issues of the last half of the twentieth century. In essence these elections served as a series of referenda on the 'Old Left' politics of the 1930s and the 'New Left' politics of the 1960s and early 1970s.

For the reasons noted above, however, these referenda took place within a narrow ideological space that greatly handicapped attempts to defend the legacy of America's domesticated version of democratic socialism. For both the truly disadvantaged and the truly advantaged, these elections were firmly tied to material interests, a fact that is generally reflected in their voting behaviour during the 1980s. However, for working- and lower-middle-class citizens, teetering between the haves and the have nots, 'self interest properly understood' is arrived at less easily. It is in appealing to this segment of the US electorate that the absence of a language with which adequately to present and defend a progressive agenda was most sorely felt.

Thus, when America addressed issues of race, class, gender, militarism and, ultimately, ideology in the 1980s, it was the right that set the terms of political discourse. Rather than presenting a coherent alternative to the vision of the past, present, and future conjured up by the Republicans, Democrats, for the most part, accepted these terms. And given that the political right and left in America are defined by the rhetoric of these two parties, the impact of this concession was to shrink 'the sphere of legitimate controversy', while at the same time shifting the political centre to the right. That this should happen at an historical moment when the American left needed to expand public discourse on these issues has consequences that go well beyond which party controlled the presidency during the 1980s.

The Democratic victory in 1992 would seem to mark a shift of momentum back to a more progressive political agenda. In some important ways this is true. However, this shift in fortunes took place within a public sphere that had been dramatically altered by twelve years of conservative rhetoric. Viewed relative to the elections of 1980, 1984 and 1988, the election of 1992 represents a victory for the left in America. Viewed from a broader perspective, however, the victory rings more hollow. The late 1980s and early 1990s offered a unique opportunity to redefine the terms of political discourse in the United States. While it would be overly pessimistic to say that this opportunity has been lost, the
1992 election is at best a small step forward after three very large steps back.

In this chapter I explore the ways race, class, gender, foreign policy and ideology were defined during the 1980s. In doing so I try to connect that rhetoric to the voting behaviour of the American public and to the tangible gains and losses made by different segments of that public. My argument is that by controlling the terms of discourse, Republicans were able to construct a consensual majority, and thus to turn back many – though not all – of the gains made over the prior several decades. This conservative victory resulted in part from conditions specific to the 1980s, but ultimately represent the limits to political reforms that do not consciously address the underlying tension between the ideologies of liberal capitalism and economic democracy.

**Jesse Jackson, Willie Horton and Race in America**

Racial inequality has been an issue in American politics since a Dutch merchant sold a Virginia tobacco farmer 'twenty negars' in 1619. Despite this constancy, issues of race have only periodically affixed themselves to the national political agenda. The late 1950s and early 1960s constituted such a period. The combination of an organized civil rights movement and a spontaneous revolt in the nation’s inner cities led the courts, Congress and the Executive Branch to address issues of segregation, as well as of political and economic inequities between whites and blacks.

While the government’s response might legitimately be described as too little too late, real gains were made. Between 1965 and 1975 the black infant mortality rate declined from 40.3 to 24.2 deaths per 1000 births. Declines in the percentage of blacks living in substandard or overcrowded housing, begun in the 1940s, accelerated through the 1960s. The percentage of blacks living below the poverty line declined from 55 per cent in 1959 to 33 per cent in 1970. The median family income of blacks, 55 per cent that of white families in 1955, rose slightly to 60 per cent by 1971. In 1960, the average black 25 to 29 year old had completed 2.4 years less education than his or her white counterpart; by 1970 the difference had shrunk to 0.5 years. By 1970, 1977 of the 2702 school districts in the South had been desegregated. The percentage of Southern blacks registered to vote nearly tripled from 1955 to 1968, with black turnout following a similar if less dramatic increase. Largely as a result of these changes (and other federally mandated changes in state electoral laws), the number of blacks elected to government more than tripled during the 1960s and 1970s.

None of the statistics presented above suggests that America had
A CONSENSUAL MAJORITY

successfully dealt with its _de jure_ or _de facto_ racial problems in the 1960s and 1970s. Blacks remained significantly less well off economically and politically, and were discriminated against in a variety of ways. As the beginning of a national effort to address racial inequality, this period held great promise. In retrospect, however, these improvements represent not a still-rising tide, but a highwater mark. For all the measures presented above, blacks are either no better off today, or are worse off, than they were 15 years ago. An 18-year-old black male in 1993 is more likely to be in jail than in college.

What accounts for this backslide? The declining economy of the late 1970s and early 1980s certainly led to a more fiscally conservative mind-set, yet this does not explain the exclusion of most blacks from the economic recovery of the last three-quarters of the 1980s. An alternative explanation is found in the attitude among much of white middle America that enough had been done to 'level the playing field'. In its most extreme form, this view often devolved into a belief that blacks had become politically and economically advantaged _vis-a-vis_ whites. This is not an inevitable conclusion for whites to have drawn, however. Public opinion data suggests that whites hold mixed, often contradictory views concerning race and civil rights in America. The dominance of conservative, even racist beliefs in the 1980s resulted in part from the ability of the Republican Party to exploit these beliefs, especially among whites most directly threatened by the economic and political gains made by blacks. This, coupled with the failure of mainstream proponents of civil rights to defend past reforms, led to a gradual shifting of public discourse on race during the 1980s. And with it came a shift in electoral support.

White electoral support for the Democratic Party's social agenda has always been tenuous: since Franklin Roosevelt, only one president has received a majority of the white vote in presidential elections. Significantly, however, this one president was Lyndon Johnson, a relatively vocal proponent of civil rights reforms in the 1960s. In the political environment of the 1960s, the Democratic Party's stand on race was in the mainstream. By the 1980s, however, this was no longer the case. In the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections, only slightly more than one in three whites voted Democratic. This 'white flight' meant that blacks, once a pivotal group in the Democratic Party's presidential coalition, were no longer able to swing elections. In turn, issues of race were even less likely than usual to become part of the national agenda. Indeed, one of the legacies of Ronald Reagan was to make issues of race a political liability.

In one of the most effective examples of 1980s 'newspeak' Reagan and his campaign strategists succeeded in defining groups that argued
organized on the basis of race (as well as of class, gender and sexual preference) as 'special interests'. As a result, in the 1980 and 1984 presidential campaigns, race was very much a non-issue. The few attempts made by Democrats to challenge this (for example, when President Carter questioned the motives behind Reagan's launching his 1980 campaign in the deep South) backfired under charges of 'reverse discrimination'. Significantly, the most widely covered racial issue in the 1980 presidential campaign was an anti-semitic remark made by Jesse Jackson during the primaries.

This return of race to the realm of invisible politics characterized the Reagan years. Of course, when prominent elites (for example, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz) were caught making racial slurs, they were publicly punished. But rather than demonstrating the depth of racial stereotypes, these incidents (and public reaction to them) were interpreted as evidence that the United States was beyond the era of racial politics. The term 'discrimination' itself lost its unstated prepositional phrase 'of blacks by whites', and instead came to mean any discrimination. This, in turn, often meant the 'discrimination' of racial quotas, special hiring practices and other attempts to redress over 350 years of racial inequity. Of course, racial issues continued to be addressed periodically, most often in response to particularly brutal examples of racism, which, not coincidentally, were on the rise in the 1980s. As often as not, however, when racial issues emerged, they were presented by political elites and in the mainstream media as aberrations, or as the last vestiges of an outmoded attitude. The only open discussion of structural racism to occur during the Reagan years focused not on domestic politics, but on South African apartheid.

By the late 1980s, the combination of black economic distress and increasing racial conflict forced race back on to the national agenda. The context of this renewed attention was very different than in the 1950s and 1960s, however. As Carey McWilliams notes, by the 1980s 'legal segregation [was] a hazy memory, and ... in the media ... and hence in the view of most Americans – race [was] visible largely in relation to crime and the sleazier forms of interest group politics.'

Even news stories about white racism subtly devolved into stories about black racism. For example, in the late 1980s racial inequality, racially motivated attacks on blacks, and allegations of police brutality led local grassroots groups to organize several visible, often confrontational demonstrations in New York City. In ways reminiscent of media coverage of the anti-war movement of the 1960s, the central story soon shifted from racial inequality to the more flamboyant, inflammatory behaviour of some black grassroots leaders. In the end, the motives and tactics of a few black leaders were used to discredit what was a very
diverse black movement with a host of legitimate grievances.

It was in this context that the 1988 presidential campaign took place. Race was no longer invisible, but neither was it a major component of either party's political rhetoric. Instead, it served as a thinly veiled subtext to other political and social issues. The Democratic Party's (and so liberal America's) constrained discourse on race is best exemplified by the rise and fall of Jesse Jackson's primary campaign. Jackson finished second in the primaries, garnering 29 per cent of the vote to Michael Dukakis's 43 per cent. Nonetheless, the only group that supported Jackson over Dukakis were blacks, who cast 92 per cent of their votes for him. In contrast, only 12 per cent of white primary voters cast their ballots for Jackson. This racial split was not lost on the media, who continually covered Jackson as a candidate who could not win the Democratic nomination; a candidate who at best 'spoke' for blacks and at worst might be a liability for whomever did get the nomination. This split was also not lost on Dukakis, who subtly played up the racial issue by calling himself 'the inevitable' Democratic nominee. Both the decision not to choose Jackson as Dukakis's running mate, and to keep Jackson relatively invisible during the general election, further illustrates how race had become a liability for Democrats in the 1980s.

While race was a liability for the Democrats, it was an issue to be exploited by the Republicans. And exploit it they did. Bush spoke in the code words of racial discrimination, as had Republican candidates since Barry Goldwater, railing against crime, drugs and the liberal agenda. The skillful use of television images left no doubt about what the real issue was, however. In the infamous 'Willie Horton' campaign spot, viewers were shown a picture of a glaring black man who, while on prison furlough, had raped a white woman. Playing on the same racist stereotypes that fuelled groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch society, this campaign ad served as the lens through which campaign spots about crime and drugs were viewed, and with which seemingly neutral statements about these issues were decoded. It is not that the racist (as well as the factually misleading) elements of this ad were missed by the Democrats or the news media, both of whom cried foul. Nor was it that the public was inundated with the ad — it was only shown regionally and for a few weeks of the campaign. To the contrary, the effectiveness of the ad came from its notoriety. By campaign's end, 60 per cent of the American public knew about the Willy Horton ad and the controversy surrounding it. The ad's power was in its ability to raise and define the issue of race (and so elicit racist sentiments) without Bush having to do so. And on election day white America voted for Bush 60 per cent to 40 per cent, while black America voted for Dukakis 86 per cent to 12 per cent.
The primary and general elections of 1988 proved to be accurate signposts for the direction racial politics would take in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Blacks continued to make some largely symbolic inroads in electoral politics, with Jesse Jackson winning the new House seat representing the District of Columbia, David Dinkins winning the mayoral race in New York City, and Douglas Wilder winning the governorship in Virginia. All three won by taking a majority of the black vote while losing a majority of the white vote, however. And all three, along with other black leaders of mainly urban areas, were given the helms of sinking ships, as the financial neglect of the 1980s took its toll. This, in turn, added to the perception that blacks, once elected, were unable to govern effectively. The vigour with which federal officials and the media publicly tried Marion Barry for his abuse of the public trust in the District of Columbia, especially in comparison to the relatively low profile given the corrupt behaviour of white Congressmen and Senators in the much more significant savings and loan scandal, exemplified the extent to which race continued to colour the way in which seemingly non-racial issues were interpreted.

The state of non-white America outside the electoral arena has been even less ambiguous. At this writing, poverty continues to plague people of colour at three to four times the rate it affects whites. Approximately half the black and Mexican-American female-headed households in the United States live in poverty, as do almost three-quarters of female-headed Puerto Rican families. Unemployment among blacks is four times that of whites, and as many as half of young black males are unable to find work. Poverty, unemployment and the resultant violent crime are especially concentrated in the inner cities of the United States, and so disproportionately fall on the shoulders of blacks and Hispanics. Deteriorating social services, especially in urban areas, has meant a rise in a variety of health problems: AIDS is significantly more common among blacks than whites, and in some inner cities nineteenth-century diseases like tuberculosis have approached epidemic proportions. The abuse of drugs like alcohol, heroin and crack, common if deadly means of escape for the poor and destitute, also disproportionately afflict blacks.

While the economic plight of blacks has reached crisis proportions, federal, state and local aid that indirectly benefits blacks continued to shrink during the Bush administration. Large, older cities were especially hard hit by this decline, lacking the resources to make up this lost revenue through increases in personal taxes, and being held hostage by companies that threatened to move if corporate taxes increased. Any attempt to address problems of racial inequality directly came under increasing attack from the White House. Under the rallying cries of
A CONSENSUAL MAJORITY

'reverse discrimination' and 'quotas', George Bush vetoed a 1990 civil rights bill designed to assure nondiscriminatory hiring practices. And the Education Department's Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, in a classic example of the new meaning of discrimination, ruled that scholarships designed to recruit minorities to college violated the Civil Rights Act prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race.

Lacking the language to defend government policy that is designed to give preferential treatment to blacks, and unwilling to pay the political price necessary to create this language, the Democratic Party contributed to the shrinking public discourse on race. For example, when reintroducing the civil rights legislation vetoed by Bush, Democrats downplayed its racial significance, calling it a 'women's rights bill'. And, in an effort to distance themselves from the bogey of 'quotas', Democrats added language to the bill that explicitly banned the use of quotas, and took to calling the legislation an 'anti-quota bill'. As a result, rather than stimulating an open dialogue on race in the United States, the debate over this legislation devolved into a public shouting match over which party was more opposed to quotas.

Of course the great irony is that 'quotas' — in the worst sense of the word — continued to be used, though in increasingly cynical ways. This was dramatically illustrated by the nomination and eventual confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court seat vacated by the great champion of civil rights, Thurgood Marshall. Simply by nominating a black to replace Marshall, President Bush paralysed many Democrats into supporting Thomas, despite his less than stellar judicial record and his public stands against affirmative action, abortion and a number of other policies that had been part of the Democratic agenda during the 1960s and 1970s. While Thomas's nomination was in doubt, and while it drew tremendous public attention, it was revelations of improper personal behaviour, not larger issues of constitutional law, that fuelled this debate. Again we see the price paid by Democrats for not having fully established the logic and ethic of these civil — and economic — rights policies.

As government rhetoric closed off discussion of race in America, street-level race relations have continued to deteriorate. Cities are characterized by both de facto segregation and racial confrontation, and bias-related incidents continue to rise. Similar patterns in race relations are found on college and university campuses. With structural racism effectively defined out of the white political agenda, issues such as drug abuse and violent crime have become laden with racial subtexts. The increasingly hardline approach to these social problems, in which treatment and rehabilitation have given way to harsher penalties and more prisons, is at least partially motivated by white
backlash. From the prosecution of teenage blacks, charged with raping a white, female investment banker in New York City, to the prosecution of the black rap group, Two Live Crew, for sexually explicit lyrics, punishment of young black males has become a symbolic spectator sport in contemporary America.

Many blacks, in an attempt to force their grievances on to the political agenda, have turned to more provocative leaders, rhetoric and action. Others, seeing little hope for consistent help from white dominated institutions, have opted for an increasingly separatist strategy. However, seen through the lenses of the mainstream media, and couched in the language of liberal democracy, these approaches simply confirm white America's suspicions that blacks in America are misguided.

One final example illustrates the economic and political plight of blacks during the early 1990s, and the extent to which, more than two decades after the publication of the Kerner Report, the United States remains 'two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal'. In the midst of historic bailouts of the savings and loan and banking industries, the black-owned 'Freedom Bank' of Harlem was allowed to go out of business in 1990 without any federal assistance to the bank or its depositors beyond what was stipulated by the Federal Depositors Insurance Corporation. The federal government's decision was a financial one. If savings and loans in (white) Texas, or banks in (white) Connecticut fail, it could cause a panic that would spread throughout (white) America. The failure of the (black) Freedom Bank would cause no such run on money. In short, black America in 1990 was sufficiently separate and unequal that its financial problems would have no affect on white America.

Bluebloods, Bluecollars, and the Construction of Class

America's 'war on poverty', declared by Lyndon Johnson in 1964, was never very hard fought - by 1968 Johnson had turned his back on the recommendations of the Kerner commission, feeling they were too critical of his efforts to date. By 1968 he was also very much preoccupied by a war of different sorts in Vietnam. Nonetheless, the 1960s and 1970s did show a tangible effort to address problems of poverty in the USA. Between 1960 and 1979, the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line declined from over 18 per cent to under 7 per cent. Programmes such as Aid of Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, Medicare and Medicaid also improved the condition of America's poorest citizens. The percentage of poor people who had never visited a doctor declined from 19 per cent in 1963 to 8 per cent in
1970. The infant mortality rate among the poor fell by 33 per cent (the rate of decline was even greater for poor blacks). The percentage of Americans living in substandard housing fell from 35 per cent in 1950 to 8 per cent in 1976. Participants in programmes such as the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) had lower levels of unemployment and earned higher wages than their untrained brothers and sisters. Poor children who participated in project Head Start were 60 per cent less likely to be assigned to special education classes, 45 per cent less likely to be held back a grade, and scored several points higher on standardized IQ tests than their classmates who did not participate in the programme.

These modest inroads among the truly disadvantaged do not, of course, indicate anything like economic equality in the United States. Income distribution remained largely unaltered during this period, with the richest 20 per cent of America's wage-earners controlling between 41 per cent and 44 per cent of the nation's yearly income, while the poorest 20 per cent consistently brought home only 5 per cent of that gross income. Nonetheless, some indications of a changing distribution of wealth existed. Perhaps most significantly, the percentage of wealth controlled by America's richest half per cent declined from 25 per cent in 1965 to 14 per cent in 1976 - the lowest per cent recorded in the twentieth century.

The election of Ronald Reagan marked a decided turn in America's approach to the rich and poor. Running unabashedly against the 'welfare state', Reagan couched his class arguments in the language of populism, the work ethic and the trickle-down theory of the distribution of wealth. Throughout the Reagan era critics charged that national economic and social policy was a thinly veiled effort to aid the rich at the expense of the less well off. However, in the rhetorical environment of the 1980s these arguments were unconvincing and fell, for the most part, on deaf ears. Nonetheless, the evidence bears them out with unrelenting consistency.

In 1980, the average salary for CEOs in the United States was 25 times what an average blue-collar worker earned - hardly evidence of economic equality. By 1990, however, this ratio had jumped to almost 100 to 1. Between 1980 and 1988 the number of millionaires, decamillionaires and centimillionaires in the United States tripled, while the number of billionaires went from under ten to over 50. Between 1977 and 1988 only the richest 20 per cent of American families had incomes that increased in constant dollar terms. Over this period the average income of 80 per cent of American families declined in real terms by over US$1,000, while the income of the wealthiest 10 per cent increased by US$16,913 (the increase for the richest 1 per cent was a staggering
US$134,513 a year). By the mid-1980s the richest half per cent of America saw their share of the national wealth jump back up to 27 per cent - the greatest percentage since 1939. And while the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. During the 1980s the overall poverty rate in the United States returned to where it was prior to the War on Poverty, while record numbers of the elderly, women and children entered the ranks of the poor.

'Where a person's treasure is', said Congressman William Gray, quoting from scripture, 'there you'll find his heart.' The 1988 campaign, pitting the blueblood lines of George Herbert Walker Bush against Michael Dukakis's immigrant, blue-collar past, served both symbolically and in real terms as a referendum on the Reagan philosophy, unmasked from the disarming, bumbling style of 'the great communicator'. It was also another referendum on the now modified New Deal/Great Society politics of the Democratic Party. The class element in this campaign went beyond bloodlines. Bush’s embrace of Reaganomics, his emphasis on voluntarism (characterized by his theme of 'a thousand points of light'), his pledge of no new taxes, and his support for a cut in the capital gains tax, all clearly presented his vision of America to America. And Dukakis’s platform and rhetoric, while interspersed with the language of managerial efficiency, and while toned down in response to Bush's successful attacks on 'liberalism' (discussed below), was still very much in line with the New Deal/Great Society rhetoric that defined the Democratic coalition.

Significantly, in this referendum the Republican Party did less well than it had in the 1984 presidential race, with Bush drawing 54 per cent of the two party vote (compared to 59 per cent for Reagan in 1984) and Dukakis drawing 46 per cent (compared to Mondale’s 41 per cent). Nonetheless, this election, even more than the 1980 or 1984 elections, clearly demonstrated the split between rich and poor in the United States. A list of the only demographic groups to give a majority of its support to Dukakis reads like a litany of America's politically, socially, and/or economically disadvantaged: blacks (86 per cent), Hispanics (69 per cent), those earning under US$10,000 a year (64 per cent), Jews (64 per cent), the unemployed (62 per cent), residents of large cities (58 per cent), unmarried women (57 per cent), union households (57 per cent), those without a high school diploma (56 per cent), those earning between US$10,000 and US$19,999 a year (53 per cent), teachers and students (52 per cent), and blue-collar workers (51 per cent). At the same time, Bush's strongest support came from white fundamentalists (81 per cent) or white protestants more generally (66 per cent), Southern whites (67 per cent), those earning over US$40,000 a year (62 per cent), married men (60 per cent), professionals and managers (59 per cent),...
A CONSENSUAL MAJORITY

cent), those between 45 and 59 years old (57 per cent), and those with some college or a college degree (57 per cent).

These statistics suggest that those with easily identified class interests—those groups who most clearly won or lost economically during the Reagan years—voted those interests in the 1988 presidential election. But what about the not insignificant proportion of the voting public whose interests were more ambiguous? As noted above, the real income of fully 80 per cent of American families declined during the ten years prior to 1988. For many of these voters, who they voted for depended in large part on how they defined themselves and how they defined the clientele of the Democratic and the Republican parties. And here again the limited terms of political discourse advantaged the Republicans. The penchant for all but the poorest and richest Americans to consider themselves 'middle class' is not new, but the perception of this middle-class existence changed significantly in the 1980s. The norm was no longer defined by the blue-collar row houses of the 1930s and 1940s, nor even by the modest suburban tracts of the 1950s and 1960s. The 'imperial middle', as defined since the late 1970s, has had a decidedly upper-middle-class character. It is not that most Americans actually live this upper-middle-class existence, nor even that most of them believe that they do. Instead it is that the vast majority of Americans identify with this lifestyle, aspire to it, and believe (perhaps fantasize is the more appropriate word) that it is within their reach or the reach of their children.

This distorted self-identification has implications for political rhetoric, and for how this rhetoric is received. Again the range of discourse is constrained as appeals not aimed at the imperial middle are viewed with suspicion. However, the misidentification of most people with the upper middle class means that the objective interests of most Americans are not addressed. Policies that most directly advantage the wealthiest 10 or 20 per cent of the population are successfully packaged as benefiting the 'average' American. At the same time, policies that are far more likely to improve the lot of real middle Americans (let alone those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder) are rejected out of hand. Nowhere is this clearer than in the 1980s debate over taxation. The evidence clearly establishes that income tax cuts have disproportionately benefited the wealthiest segments of America, while increases in 'flat' taxes (gasoline, alcohol and tobacco taxes, sales taxes and lotteries) disproportionately fall on the shoulders of the lower middle class and below. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of 'no new taxes' won the day for both Ronald Reagan and George Bush throughout the 1980s. Indeed, Walter Mondale's acknowledgment that he would raise taxes if elected president in 1984 was
viewed as political suicide within the limited confines of political discourse in the 1980s.

The implications of the 'upscale' of middle America's self-image were especially apparent in the 1988 presidential campaign. In many ways the election was similar to most that have occurred since the New Deal. The election hinged on which party could most successfully appeal to middle America. On the one hand, Michael Dukakis had to convince the American public that George Bush and the Republicans were representatives of the rich, and so not in touch with the needs of middle America. Bush, on the other hand, had to convince them that Dukakis and the Democrats were the party of the 'deserving poor' and other marginal groups, and so out of touch with the needs of middle America. Where a majority of Americans would align themselves if they 'properly understood' their self-interest is an open question, but the illusion of the imperial middle made this issue moot: in a choice between Michael Dukakis's and George Bush's images of middle America, the latter rung more true in the discourse of the 1980s.

The four years of the Bush administration clearly demonstrated which class interests were served by his election. Significant in both symbolic and real terms, his Secretaries of State, Treasury, and Commerce were 'graduates of the best private schools, second- or third-generation multimillionaires with a collective net worth of about $250 million'. While agreeing to a modestly regressive tax increase, President Bush continued to hold the line against progressive income tax reform. Unable – for political and economic reasons – to raise corporate or income taxes, state governments continued to shift the tax burden to those least able to bear it through regressive measures like sales tax, gas tax, lotteries, and so forth. While unable to convince Congress, Bush continued to lobby for a cut in the capital gains tax. Federal aid to social programmes, the cities, education and so forth continued to decline relative to inflation, while almost inconceivable amounts of money were allocated to bail out the savings and loan and banking industries. And while a deep recession hit all sectors of the US economy, those who never recovered from the recession of 1982 were driven even deeper into poverty and despair. As Kevin Phillips notes,

... the America Bush truly represented was that of old multigenerational wealth – of trust funds, third-generation summer cottages on Fischer's Island and grandfathers with Dillon Read or Brown Brothers Harriman – which accepted the economic policy of the Reagan era despite its distaste for its arriviste values ... The Republicans had evolved from 'cloth coat' Middle Americanism under Richard Nixon to aggressive new-money capitalism under Ronald Reagan and finally to the old-money, Episcopal establishment under George Herbert Walker Bush.
In the midst of this continued dismantling of the welfare state and the steady rise in poverty, attitudes continued to harden regarding crime and drug use. Entering the 1990s, the United States led the industrial world in the percentage of its population that was in jail. Punishment rather than rehabilitation has become the goal of criminal justice. Talk of root causes for poverty and crime are more likely to mean genetic than social, and references to the 'deserving' poor hearken back to the social darwinism and draconian policies of the nineteenth century. In this constrained ideological space, liberal defences of the welfare state take on a hollow, unrealistic ring.

Gender Politics, Gender Economics, and the New Traditionalism

As with blacks and the poor, the struggles for women's political, economic, and social liberation are closely intertwined. In the colonial era, the right to participate in politics was tied to the ownership of property. Since few women legally controlled the wealth they helped produce, formal political participation — either through voting or holding public office — was rare. Nonetheless, since women did occasionally hold title to land (most often through inheritance or through the death of husbands) political participation by women was not unheard of prior to the formation of the United States. Ironically, the revolution for independence in 1776 set in motion the loss of even those limited political rights. The constitution of the United States left it to the states to determine who was eligible to vote. Property restrictions were maintained in most states, but these restrictions were at first reduced, and by the 1830s, essentially eliminated. With the loss of this de facto barrier to the vast majority of women, the states faced the issue of women's suffrage directly. Their response was explicitly to limit the franchise to males. Despite an active role by women in the abolitionist movement and a vocal suffragette movement in the late nineteenth century, not until 1920 were women granted the right to vote throughout the United States.

Of course the winning of this formal right was only one step in the larger emancipation of women. Key to this emancipation was the ability to gain control of their labour. While women had always worked, their work was tied to the household — working the family farm, giving birth and raising children, doing domestic chores, and so forth. As such, women's experience with and authority in the 'public' realm was limited. In addition, the equating of public with political, a central tenet of liberal democracy, further discounted the civic worth of women. Initially, the ability of women to escape the confines of
home resulted from larger social forces – most often war. Just prior to the Second World War, about 25 per cent of women worked outside the home. During the war, 6 million women took jobs for the first time. And, despite successful efforts to force women out of the workplace after the war, in 1950 34 per cent of women were still working outside the home. 21

The 1960s and 1970s were critical, if only partially successful, decades for the women's movement. Between 1960 and 1980 the per cent of women working outside the home rose from 38 per cent to 52 per cent, the largest increase in any 20-year period in US history. During this period, female voter turnout (relative to men) continued to rise, with women accounting for over half the votes cast in a presidential election for the first time in 1980. Only 35 per cent of those graduating from college in 1960 were women, but by 1971 this had increased to 42 per cent, and by the early 1980s more women than men were graduating from college. The number of single women increased in the 1960s and 1970s. Birth rates, which had risen dramatically after the Second World War, began to decline in the late 1950s, and remained low throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This latter trend was aided when, in 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the birth control pill.

Increasingly freed from the home, women took active leadership roles in a number of the civil rights and New Left organizations that formed in the 1960s. In addition, the number of grassroots and government organizations devoted exclusively to women increased. In 1964, aware that women needed to be organized as women if they were going to have their agenda addressed by the political system, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed. And while the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, established by President Kennedy, ultimately concluded that an equal rights amendment was not necessary, it did draw national attention to 'problems of discrimination in employment, unequal pay, lack of social services such as childcare, and continuing legal inequality'. 22 In 1963 Kennedy issued a presidential order requiring that civil service hires be made 'without regard to sex'. In that same year Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, which required private employers to provide equal pay for the same work. 23

By the 1970s, the women's movement was the dominant social movement in the United States. Having had their agenda and their participation marginalized in many of the male-dominated New Left organizations, the feminist movement struck off on its own. As the movement grew, its agenda expanded. While entrance of women into the public world remained a goal, feminists also came to argue that
the personal was political. Increasingly, the women's movement saw and developed the links between feminism and issues such as class, race, sexual preference and militarism. The result was a much more heterogeneous, less middle-class movement.

As in the 1960s, the movement could point to tangible, if limited, results. In 1972 Congress passed Title IX of the Higher Education Act, which prohibited sexual discrimination in any education programme receiving federal aid. The enforcement capacity and jurisdiction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was expanded. And the tax codes were changed to allow working parents to deduct childcare costs. In 1973 the women's movement won what is arguably its greatest victory when the Supreme Court handed down its abortion decision in Roe vs. Wade.

As with both race and class, these victories constituted only the beginnings of a move towards a just society. Throughout this period, women continued to earn only 60 per cent of what men did, largely because women remained disproportionately in less valued and less well-paid jobs. The Equal Rights Amendment, passed by Congress in 1972, fell several states short of ratification. While the number of women elected to local office increased, their representation in Congress remained a paltry 4 per cent. The ability to work outside the home often came in addition to maintaining primary responsibilities for raising the family, doing the housework, and so forth. The vast majority of single-parent households were headed by women, adding to the financial and psychological burdens of working women. In a workplace and society unprepared to address these issues, women in general and women heads of households in particular made up a disproportionate segment of the poor.

At best, the 1980s represented a holding period for the feminist movement. While women continued to vote, attend college and work outside the home at relatively high rates, few tangible gains were achieved in the workplace or the political arena. The election of Ronald Reagan, supported as he was by the fundamentalist New Right, signalled a shift away from the feminist agenda of the 1960s and 1970s. The new conservative social agenda, claiming to be pro-family, pro-life and pro-traditional values, was a thinly veiled attempt to turn back the clock on gains made by women. Women continued to win symbolic victories such as the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the Supreme Court and the vice presidential nomination of Geraldine Ferraro, but the substantive battles in the workplace, the voting booths, the courts and in Congress were being lost with greater frequency. Court decisions regarding Title IX, and Congressional limitations on federal funding for abortion, limited the
scope of gains made in the 1970s. Legitimate concern over issues of child abuse, drop-out rates, teenage pregnancy and juvenile crime were twisted in subtle and not so subtle ways so as to be blamed on the changes wrought by the women's movement. The term feminism itself began to take on a negative connotation, even among those who supported its goals. Women's organizations were put increasingly on the defensive, having to devote time and resources to the maintenance of gains already made rather than to the pursuit of new ones. The few new initiatives developed during the 1980s, such as comparable worth, were met with great scepticism and resulted in only marginal, local success.

Women themselves, never as homogeneous a political block as other disadvantaged groups, were torn by the Reagan counter-revolution. Nonetheless, in general women were less likely to support the conservative agenda or to vote for Ronald Reagan. In 1980, for example, 47 per cent of women voted for Reagan, compared to 55 per cent of men. In 1984 the percentage of women supporting Reagan had increased to 57 per cent, though this was still less than the 61 per cent of men who did. Unmarried and/or working women were a good deal less likely to vote for Reagan than married women and/or women who worked at home. Women were also less supportive than men of many of the conservative social and economic programmes of the Reagan administration. To the extent that any group supported the New Left agenda during the 1980s, it was women.

George Bush's personal attitudes about women were on record as early as 1984, when he announced, prior to his debate with Geraldine Ferraro, that he was going to 'kick a little ass'. In the 1988 campaign, while distancing himself somewhat from the populist far right, he opposed abortion and favoured the overturning of Roe vs. Wade. As much as through policy stands and campaign rhetoric, however, the 'new traditionalism' evident in the late 1980s could be seen through the popularity of Barbara Bush. In many ways she was the consummate pre-1960s woman: a housewife who devoted herself to her children and to her husband's career. There was little need for George Bush to articulate his view of women or of their roles in society. His view and his party's view (which had removed support for an equal rights amendment from its national platform in the 1980s) was expressed best and most accurately through the image of his wife. Indeed, in a campaign process lacking the language or means openly to discuss core issues such as the role of women, public comparisons between the 'liberated' Kitty Dukakis and the 'old-fashioned' Barbara Bush served as surrogates for public debate.

Michael Dukakis, fearing a conservative backlash, downplayed his
pro-choice, pro-women stands. In this muted public discourse, in which the logic and ethic of women's liberation went largely undefended, the American public chose George (and Barbara) Bush, 53 per cent to 47 per cent. More significantly, of the 20 per cent of the electorate (as measured in exit polls) who considered abortion one of the most important issues of the election, 63 per cent voted for Bush. As a group, women were less supportive of Bush (50 per cent) than were men (57 per cent). Unmarried women, especially likely to be adversely affected by the new traditionalism, supported Dukakis by a 57 per cent to 42 per cent margin. It is difficult to know what difference a more forceful defence of women's liberation might have made to the Dukakis campaign – a case could be made that the differences between the two candidates and parties were clear by election day. Nonetheless, evidence of the potential of the gender gap can be seen by looking at early support for the two candidates. In May of 1988, when Dukakis was more aggressively advocating women's issues, males were split evenly between Bush and Dukakis in public opinion polls. Women, however, supported Dukakis 53 per cent to 35.

Once again the 1988 campaign proved an accurate marker of what was to come. Executive orders banned the use of US foreign aid (both directly to individual countries and through contributions to UN organizations) for information about, or the performance of, abortions. In the Webster case, the Supreme Court chipped away significantly at the foundations of Roe vs. Wade. Throughout the 1980s Congress had prohibited the use of federal funds for abortions, but in the 1991 Rust case, the Supreme Court upheld the executive order preventing counsellors at federally funded family planning clinics from even mentioning abortion as an option for dealing with a pregnancy. Significantly, George Bush's appointee to the Supreme Court, David Souter, was the critical vote in that decision. Bolstered by these decisions and by the president's vocal support, anti-abortion groups increased their activities, and numerous state legislators introduced increasingly conservative abortion legislation. Despite the mobilization of numerous pro-choice groups against this reactionary movement, such limiting legislation has passed in several states. The ruling in 'Planned Parenthood vs. Casey' (1992) suggests that this Republican-appointed Court is willing to stop short of overturning Roe vs. Wade, but it also reinforced the right of states to legislate restrictions that did not impose 'undue burdens' on the women seeking abortions. In addition, the timing of this decision – during a presidential election year – and the slim majority on which the decision rests, make it difficult to know what the long-term plans of this Court actually are. Regardless of the ultimate outcome, however, the mere fact of this
debate demonstrates the extent to which the gains of the 1960s and 1970s were under attack in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Though in a different way, the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court was as significant for women as for blacks. His stands on abortion and affirmative action were serious threats to a number of gains made by women during the 1970s. And the televised, often torturous hearings regarding Anita Hill's accusations of sexual harassment drew unprecedented public attention to this usually ignored problem. The public discourse generated by those hearings, and the visible evidence of the price paid by women (and blacks) for their underrepresentation in government, played a major role in mobilizing women in the 1992 elections. As such it serves as a hopeful reminder of the public's ability to respond politically and communally to perceived injustices. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that immediately following the hearings, majorities of men and women, blacks and whites, supported Thomas over Hill. And, in the end, Clarence Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court.

Setbacks for women have come in other arenas as well. The continued rise in poverty, the cutbacks in already limited social spending, the general downturn in the economy – all disproportionately affected women. The domestic violence and crime that inevitably increases in hard economic times also fell most heavily on women. And, as US and international industry attempts to subvert and sidestep union contracts and government regulation, the most tedious, dangerous and low-paying work continues to be shipped out to the Third World, where, again, women are most likely to be exploited.

Flags, Tanks and a Kinder, Gentler Nation

US public opinion concerning foreign affairs generally and military intervention more specifically has always been a curious mix of isolationism and jingoism. In general, Americans oppose the use of troops abroad, but this tendency, with few exceptions, is easily overwhelmed by appeals to patriotism, self-interest and the horrific nature of the enemy. Whether that enemy is 'godless communism', 'a tin-pot dictator' or 'Hitler incarnate', this villainization allows the strategic, ideological and economic reasons for intervention to be viewed as moral ones. This mentality is especially easy to evoke when the enemy is culturally, religiously and ethnically different from the white, European, Christian, middle-class elite that still defines America's increasingly inaccurate self-image.

As the only conflict in US history to be opposed by a majority of Americans while troops were engaged in combat, the Vietnam War
stands out as a notable, if only partial, exception to this pattern. That public opinion turned against the war in 1968 is clear. Between November 1967 and February 1968 those believing the US was making progress in the war dropped from 51 per cent to 32. By late March 1968 President Johnson’s approval rating had fallen to 26 per cent, a 13 point drop in less than five months. By April 1968, a majority of Americans opposed the war for the first time. Public agreement that the United States had made a mistake in sending troops into Vietnam went from 39 per cent in late 1967 to 52 per cent in early 1969. This unprecedented loss of support resulted from a variety of factors: genuine concern about the war’s morality; growing horror at the human cost of war as portrayed on television; a sense that the war was either unwinnable or would be too costly in American lives and money to win; and a desire to end the increasing tension at home.

The Vietnam era profoundly influenced the ways in which the general public, political leaders and military people think about war. As with many of the changes that occurred as a result of the 1960s, however, little open, constructive dialogue took place. Indeed, so complex, intense and ambiguous were the feelings resulting from America’s defeat, that immediate public reaction was to repress, rather than reflect on, the experiences and lessons of Vietnam. The result was a political vacuum, interspersed with disconnected, often contradictory beliefs, attitudes and opinions, concerning the role of force in foreign relations.

The first serious attempt to fill this vacuum was made during the Carter administration. Building more off the public’s weariness than its active support, Carter implemented many of the foreign policies advocated by the New Left. Covert action and limited warfare were no longer the central tools for achieving US goals abroad. The US developed a relatively coherent human rights policy, which was integrated into its larger foreign policy. Defence spending declined, as did the sale of armaments to foreign nations. The US also allowed nations and regions greater autonomy in settling their own internal disputes, and attempted to integrate its foreign policies into a global, international framework.

The Vietnam era provided the left with a rare opportunity to shift public discourse on foreign policy. Even this modest shift was short-lived, however. The ‘stagflation’ of the late 1970s (created in part by OPEC’s oil embargo), the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, were quickly interpreted by both Democratic and Republican leaders as the failure of Carter’s well-intentioned but naive approach to foreign affairs.

The failure of the left fully to exploit the opportunity provided by the
Vietnam era allowed the right to regain control of the political agenda. This shifting discourse could be seen in the cultural politics of the 1980s. The brief reign of the 'anti-hero' – the 1960s' and early 1970s' somewhat nihilistic response to the Vietnam era – ended, replaced by a growing machismo. The Vietnam 'revenge' film, exemplified by the series of Rambo movies, became popular. Movies like Top Gun, little more than multi-million-dollar advertisements for the armed services, fuelled a growing infatuation with the military. The victory of the US hockey team over the Soviets in the 1980 winter Olympics was covered like a surrogate military victory over this arch-enemy, while the 1984 Olympics, set appropriately in Los Angeles, became one long, colourful commercial for America. The increasingly reactionary approach to domestic politics (discussed above) dovetailed nicely with this new 'macho' mentality.

Ronald Reagan, his image crafted more by his movies than his political past, was a key to translating this cultural and social conservatism into public policy. His patriotic 'get tough' attitude proved the perfect panacea for a nation unable to accept a changing world order. During Reagan's tenure, military spending increased dramatically, as did the willingness to use it. Indeed, the eight years between America's final withdrawal from Vietnam and Reagan's stationing of Marines in Beirut increasingly seem a mere respite from 40 years of US military intervention in Third World nations.

The deployment of US troops in Lebanon proved a misguided flexing of muscle that resulted in the largest loss of US troops since Vietnam. Such a disaster could easily have been interpreted as evidence of the limits of military solutions to international problems. However, within days of the attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut, US troops invaded Grenada, silencing critics as Democrats and Republicans 'rallied round the flag'. Presented with photographs and news copy orchestrated by the military, and given little reason to question the necessity, legality or morality of the invasion, Americans applauded this long-sought military victory.

Reagan next set his sights on Nicaragua. Unlike Grenada, however, the administration faced substantial Congressional and public opposition to direct military intervention. This opposition provides an important example of both the ambiguous, malleable nature of the public's newfound militarism, and the difficulty in translating specific points of resistance into a more general critique of military intervention with a more coherent oppositional ideology. Numerous grassroots organizations in the United States opposed intervention in Central America, and were able, within limits, to get this message to the general public and to members of Congress. While many of these groups had fairly sophisticated critiques of the situation, and saw the struggles in Nicaragua (and
A CONSENSUAL MAJORITY

El Salvador) as part of a larger set of issues, it was seldom on these ideological grounds that the case was made to the American public. For strategic reasons, it was assumed that neither the general public nor a majority of Congresspeople would oppose the administration’s Nicaraguan policy on broad, philosophic grounds. In essence, the lack of a language with which to debate such issues (as well as the lack of public arenas in which to debate them in any serious way) meant that the argument would have to be made on a more visceral, case-specific basis. In the case of Nicaragua, this symbolic ‘hook’ was Vietnam.

By and large this strategy was successful. Despite concerted efforts by the Reagan administration to convince them otherwise, the American public saw this fight as too similar to Vietnam: the vague, ideological justifications for intervention; the domestic nature of the dispute between the Sandinistas and the Contras; the gradual escalation of US involvement; the jungle terrain; the likelihood of a protracted engagement.

Given an environment in which ‘legitimate’ spokespersons provided alternatives to intervention in ways that struck a responsive chord, the public was capable of opposing the use of military force abroad. Absent a more comprehensive, informed and reasoned logic, however, there was little likelihood that the public’s specific opposition to the use of US force in Nicaragua would lead to a rethinking of other aspects of foreign policy. The Reagan administration quickly (and correctly) concluded that, while the public would support quick, decisive military excursions, it still suffered from ‘the Vietnam syndrome’. In the short run, US military objectives in Nicaragua (and elsewhere) would require the use of surrogate troops and, ultimately, covert actions. The United States could arm the Contras, the Afghanistan rebels, the El Salvadoran death squads and the like, and could provide military advisers and technical assistance to them, but the US public, much to the dismay of political and military leaders, was still gun shy. Direct military action would have to be limited to relatively defenceless opponents and/or to quick strikes (e.g. the bombing of Libya).

The Irancontra affair resulted, in part, from the administration’s failure to mobilize public support for US military intervention in Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{28} The resulting scandal did some damage to the Reagan presidency. It also provided an opportunity for rethinking the rightward lurch of US foreign policy. However, the absence of investigative reporting in the mainstream press, the relative lack of public outrage, the momentary hero-status of Oliver North, the aborted criminal cases, and the lack of direct fallout for either Ronald Reagan or George Bush, instead signalled a general resignation as to the inevitability of such actions, setting the stage for an even more aggressive foreign policy.
As with the other policy areas discussed in this essay, the 1988 election provides ample evidence for this atavism. George Bush, while only a few years older than Michael Dukakis, was, unlike Dukakis, old enough to have served in the Second World War. His worldview was very much shaped by that experience, and by the Cold War mentality that dominated the following four decades. He was a former director of the CIA. He was clearly involved at some level in the covert operations surrounding the Irancontra dealings. During his campaign he appealed to the lowest forms of blind patriotism with his visits to flag factories and his attack on Dukakis's veto of a 'pledge of allegiance' bill in Massachusetts. He also played up his military past, using film footage of his rescue-at-sea during the Second World War in his television campaign.

Dukakis, though running on a much less militarist platform, quickly tried to out-macho Bush. In the process, he not only lost credibility with the voters, but he unwittingly helped shrink the already narrow range of discourse on foreign policy. His visit to a military base, where he rode about in a tank, backfired so badly that film footage of his joy ride was used in Bush commercials. Dukakis also fed the growing jingoism by playing on American fears of foreign (especially Arab and Asian) ownership of US businesses and property, and by constantly alluding to Bush's cosy relationship with Manuel Noriega. Even the media's fascination with Bush's 'wimpiness' and Dukakis's diminutive physical stature fuelled the growing machismo in America.

Particularly revealing was the controversy surrounding Dan Quayle's avoidance of combat in Vietnam by enlisting in the Indiana National Guard. Quayle was the first 'Vietnam generation' politician to be nominated for so visible an office. As such, it marked an important stage in America's public reconsideration of that era. That the central controversy raised by his nomination was his failure to fight, strongly indicates the extent to which public discourse over the war in Vietnam had been captured by the right. This shift is also seen in the negative publicity generated by the 'allegations' that Kitty Dukakis participated in anti-war protests during the early 1970s.

In the end, the campaigns of both Michael Dukakis and George Bush addressed foreign policy and defence issues in a way that legitimized the hardline approach of the 1980s. I am not, of course, arguing that the 1988 campaign presented the American public with an open, informative debate on foreign policy and defence issues. It did, however, symbolically address these issues in ways that established George Bush's hardline credentials. And this message was not missed by the public. Within this constrained dialogue, George Bush and the Republicans were at a decided advantage. 'National defence' was the second most frequent issue mentioned by voters in the 1988 election, when asked in exit polls
to explain their vote. And of those that mentioned this issue, an astounding 84 per cent voted for Bush.

A Second World War fighter pilot who once headed the CIA, and who was fighting to live down the reputation of being a wimp, is a dangerous combination for a commander-in-chief. Not surprisingly, it wasn’t long before US soldiers were back fighting in the Third World. The invasion of Panama represented a new phase in the return to limited warfare that had begun during the Reagan administration. The enemy was slightly more formidable and the legitimacy of the action less clear (there was, for example, no ‘invitation’ from neighbouring countries, as there had been in the Grenada invasion). Again, however, the invasion was met with strong support from the American public. Unlike Reagan’s failure to mobilize support against Nicaragua, Bush successfully built a consensus for the use of American troops. Throughout the 1988 campaign, and, even more so during the first months of 1989, the Bush administration painted Manuel Noriega as a drug-selling, mad, ruthless dictator. Using the combination of tight media controls and relatively quick military action that had been so successful in Grenada, popular opinion was rallied around the new president’s use of force. The invasion of Panama was less ‘clean’ than Grenada’s had been – the fighting lasted longer, there were more civilian casualties, Noriega proved somewhat more difficult to capture than had been expected, and almost four years after the invasion, thousands of US troops remain in Panama. Nonetheless, the invasion was an unqualified political success.

Despite the use of force in Panama, events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union raised hopes that the major source of international tension over the last 40 years was waning. The way in which these events were interpreted is instructive. The rapid collapse of ‘hardline’ Communist regimes could have generated several public dialogues: Was the Soviet Union the military and economic threat the American public was led to believe over the past 35 years? What were the successes and failures of this particular variant of Communism, and might there be lessons that would be instructive not only for the East, but for the West as well?

Of course, the world events of 1989 and 1990 were actually interpreted in the United States through the myopic lenses fashioned during the 1980s. The ‘collapse of Communism’ simply reinforced the ‘triumph of capitalism’. Complex events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were treated as simple and homogeneous, while at the same time no connections were drawn between events there and those in Africa, South and Central America, or the United States. Strikes in Soviet coal mines were covered widely in the US press, put forth as evidence of their struggle for ‘freedom’, while striking coal miners in Kentucky and West
Virginia went largely unnoticed and, when covered, were presented as emblematic of the failed strategy of unions in the United States. The defeats of Communists in elections in Eastern Europe were extensively covered, while the successes of socialists in South American elections were ignored. The opportunity for the United States to participate constructively in both an international and domestic dialogue was lost.

In the end, rather than diminishing the probability of US military action, the breakup of the Eastern bloc actually increased it. The use of military force was becoming the only way in which the administration could assert its will overseas and divert public attention from the increasing number of seemingly intractable problems at home. The political and economic upheaval in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China led to great uncertainty concerning the future balance of world power, adding to the administration's sense of urgency in controlling those events. However, economic pressure, once America's alternative to military force, was increasingly ineffective as Japan, a united Germany and a restructured European Community presented formidable economic and political rivals. In addition, despite the Soviet Union's own problems, Mikhail Gorbachev had become the dominant political leader on the international scene, shaping world opinion in ways usually reserved for US presidents. Finally, the 'end of the Cold War' also meant that a very large American military (and the sizeable weapons industry that had built up around it) was looking for new ways to earn its keep. For a short while the administration continued to focus on Latin America, this time using the military to take the war on drugs overseas. This policy failed to garner the kind of public support generated by the invasions of Grenada and Panama, however, and also lacked the international visibility necessary to thrust the United States back into the centre of international politics. The Panama invasion had demonstrated the value of creating an identifiable villain so as to build and maintain public support for the use of military force. In August of 1990, Saddam Hussein, the 'new Hitler', provided George Bush with just such a villain.

While it is clear that Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was a serious violation of international law, it is also clear that, from the start, George Bush's strategy was aimed at the use of military force. The US made little effort to find a diplomatic solution to the rising tensions between Iraq and Kuwait in the first half of 1990. Once Iraq invaded Kuwait, however, the administration set off on an intransigent policy seemingly designed to prevent negotiation from working. International efforts on the part of the US were all focused exclusively on putting together, through economic and political incentives and threats, a coalition to legitimize the use of force. Efforts by others to reach a negotiated
solution were ignored or sabotaged by the US, though the appearance of negotiation was kept up. The day after Congressional elections took place in November, Bush escalated the commitment of troops, shifting the US military from a defensive posture to an offensive one. At the same time, rhetoric shifted from the defence of Saudi Arabia to the liberation of Kuwait. Additional references were made to protecting American interests and 'the American way of life'. After giving sanctions less than half the six months it was originally estimated it would take for them to have a serious impact on Iraq, the administration began to push aggressively for a military solution. Iraq, at several points, appeared willing to pull out of all but a few disputed areas of Kuwait, if it could be done in a way that would 'save face' for Hussein and the Iraqi people. But George Bush, in true John Wayne (or Ronald Reagan?) style, responded that Hussein 'doesn't need any face -- he needs to get out of Kuwait'. Efforts on the part of the Iraqis, Jordanians, Palestinians and Soviets to tie a retreat from Kuwait to a conference addressing larger issues of stability, national boundaries and militarism in the Middle East were rebuffed by the US. In late November the US, again using its economic and political influence, was able to orchestrate a UN resolution authorizing the use of 'any means necessary' to force Iraq out of Kuwait after 15 January 1991. On Saturday, 12 January, after only two days of debate, both Houses of Congress narrowly passed resolutions concurring with the UN resolution. One day after the 15 January deadline, the US, along with its allies, began the aerial bombardment of Iraq and Kuwait. After six weeks of unimaginably intense bombing, and several days of 'mopping up' with ground troops, the Iraqis were forced out of Kuwait.

The march from the rhetoric of the 1980 presidential campaign, to the military buildup of the early 1980s, to the invasions of progressively larger and more distant nations (Grenada, Panama and Iraq) seems to have provided the American public with ample information about the Republican Party's vision of 'the new world order'. And the nearly unanimous support given to each of these invasions, coupled with the Republican presidential victories in 1980, 1984 and 1988, suggests that a substantial majority of the public approved of this vision. Nonetheless, the limited nature of public discourse during the 1980s and early 1990s begs the question of how citizens would have reacted if given the opportunity to consider a range of alternatives. The ability of the administration to manage public opinion successfully was especially clear during the Gulf War. The military, led by soldiers who were field commanders, fighter pilots and the like in Vietnam, were aware that a gradual buildup of troops and a slow escalation in fighting would erode public support for the war. The massive initial concentration of troops
in Saudi Arabia and the unparalleled use of force against the Iraqis was the direct result of this 'reading' of Vietnam. Decisions as to what targets to bomb, when and how to deploy ground troops, how best to limit US and civilian casualties, whether or not to institute a draft, and so forth, were based as much on how it would play on the evening news as on its military value. Similarly, the careful censorship of media reports, the use of a pool arrangement in which journalists were escorted to designated sites, the barrage of carefully edited film footage of (supposedly) successful airstrikes, the regular briefings by military and administration spokespersons, and the constant reprimands to the media about any reports that did not tow the administration line, were all aimed at winning the battle for the hearts and minds of the American public by limiting the possibility of alternative interpretations of events.33

The administration was also remarkably effective at shaping the public's collective memory of the Vietnam War and the anti-war protests, thereby helping to assure support for the Gulf War. A key component of this manufactured consensus was establishing the myth that the war in Vietnam was lost because the military was forced to fight 'with one arm tied behind its back'. Of course, while Vietnam was a limited war, this simplification flies in the face of a ten-year war in which 50,000 Americans and countless more North and South Vietnamese died, hundreds of thousands of people were maimed, North Vietnamese cities were carpet bombed, entire villages in both North and South Vietnam were destroyed, acres of forest defoliated, and billions of dollars spent. Absent a forceful articulation of these facts, however, and given a decade of subtle and not so subtle recreations of the Vietnam era, the administration's revisionist interpretation became accepted history.

Similarly, the administration was able to caricature the Vietnam War protests as the acts of a few marginal and unpatriotic individuals whose influence was blown out of proportion by the media. In addition, the target of these protests, according to this revisionist history, was the GI himself. Again, absent a strong refutation, half truths become whole ones. While the anti-war movement of the early 1960s did represent a minority of the population, it was consistently portrayed in a negative light by the mainstream press. Not until middle America turned against the war in large numbers were protestors presented as legitimate34 In addition, while some returning GIs were mistreated by some anti-war protestors, these incidents were exceptions. Protestors opposed the policy, the administration and (for the most sophisticated protestors) the system that produced the war. The soldiers fighting the war were viewed as victims, not villains. Indeed, many protestors were vets and/or
the parents, siblings, friends and lovers of those serving in the war. Nonetheless, the successful portrayal of those who opposed the Vietnam War as unpatriotic was one of the great strategic victories of the right. In doing so, it robbed those who were potential opponents to the Gulf War of their strongest role model, and intimidated both protestors and the media into a much narrower range of discourse.

The success of the Gulf War, like the wisdom of the decision to go to war itself, is as much a matter of interpretation as of fact. Certainly the relative ease with which the Iraqis were defeated and their apparent inability to use either chemical or nuclear weapons should raise doubts about the need for such a massive use of force. And the staggering financial cost of the war, the loss of as many as 200,000 Iraqi lives, the incredible destruction in Kuwait and Iraq, the further dislocation of the Kurds, the environmental disaster in the Gulf, the repression of the pro-democracy movements in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and finally, the continued rule of Saddam Hussein, provide credible reasons for questioning the logic and ethic of the Gulf War. For these critical interpretations to take hold, however, they must be articulated by spokespeople with access to the mainstream media, and as with so many of the issues discussed here, the Democrats have been unwilling to play this role.

Card-carrying ACLU Members and the L-word

The 1930s and 1960s, for all their reformist tendencies, did modestly expand political discourse in the United States by rethinking the role of government, and by putting issues of class, race, sex and militarism on the political agenda. Perhaps the most significant, lasting achievement of the Reagan-Bush era has been to force many aspects of these issues out of the mainstream by redefining what Daniel Hallin calls the spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy and deviance. While the shrinking of acceptable political discourse is evident in each of the specific examples discussed above, first Reagan and then Bush made more general attacks on liberalism, and on the role of government in American society.

For Reagan, the rhetorical enemy was Washington. Under the rubric of new federalism, he attacked national government as too big, too distant and too inefficient to address people's needs. State and local governments, he argued, were much better suited to this job. Part of this argument required establishing (falsely) that the federal programmes of the 1960s and 1970s were unmitigated failures, that the federal government was attempting to do too much and trying to solve problems simply by 'throwing money' at them. Of course, there is another interpretation of these programmes. Even programmes that worked were
underfunded, and declines in their success paralleled cuts in funding relative to the size of the problem. In addition, the vast majority of the federal bureaucracy was not located in Washington, but instead was located in local, state and regional offices around the country. Finally, most of the growth in bureaucracy that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s was not federal, but state and local. Nonetheless, absent a vocal defence of past policies, and a reasoned debate on the strengths and weaknesses of national, state and local government, Reagan was able to convince much of America that the problems of race, poverty and so forth could only be solved through a combination of trickle-down economics and state and local action.

While he attacked the role of national government, Reagan also successfully shifted the ideological spectrum significantly to the right. The New Left agenda was never firmly entrenched in the mainstream, and so was a relatively easy target for Reagan's not inconsiderable rhetorical skills. This agenda was blamed for many of the political, economic and moral problems facing the United States. In its stead Reagan offered a New Right social agenda, advocating the preservation of the traditional family, prayer in schools, banning abortion, etc. This is not to suggest that these New Right issues were accepted by a large portion of the public, but rather that they became issues of serious debate against which the centre and left were defined.

This redefinition of the political arena continued in the 1988 campaign. By labelling Michael Dukakis a 'card-carrying member of the ACLU', Bush was doing more than stating fact – he was defining the ACLU as outside the realm of legitimate debate. Even the phrase 'card-carrying' was designed to evoke the spectre of 'card-carrying communists' first raised during the McCarthy witchhunts of the 1950s. But now the articulated bogey was not communists but members of an established, mainstream civil rights group. Of course groups like the ACLU were targets in the 1950s as well, but only under the guise of a search for communists. Now the ACLU itself was being painted as illegitimate.

A similar dynamic is found in the phrase 'a George McGovern Liberal', commonly used by Bush to describe Dukakis during the 1988 campaign. In 1972 McGovern had represented the mainstream wing of the New Left – the part that was willing to work within the electoral system and the liberal democratic rules of the game. Despite his crushing defeat, much of his agenda was taken up by the Democratic Party throughout the 1970s. Now his image was being used to evoke the radicalism of the 1960s. In the use of this phrase, Bush not only redefined the New Left, painting its moderate representative as deviantly radical, but also redefined Dukakis by presenting his quite mainstream
views as far more liberal than they actually were. In short, by shrinking the range of liberal, let alone leftist ideas deemed appropriate for public discourse, Bush further shifted the political consensus to the right, while also constraining the sphere of legitimate controversy. The extent to which discourse had become constrained in the United States is perhaps best exemplified by Bush's frequent and derogatory reference to the 'L-word' during the 1988 campaign. Not only was the label 'liberal' now enough to connote deviance, but the word itself had become, somewhat mockingly, literally unspeakable.

It was this confined public space that made Bush's stands on race, class, taxes, sex, foreign affairs and the like so effective. Reagan's rhetoric shifted the domain of domestic politics from national to state government, while Bush's rhetoric shifted it from government itself to the voluntary action of citizens. By narrowly defining the political agenda and the range of acceptable political solutions, Bush forced Dukakis, and so the Democratic Party more generally, either to out-conservative Bush, to admit to views that were perceived as radically deviant, or to remain silent. Of course Dukakis could have challenged Bush's re-creation of the past, but for a variety of reasons (a concern that Bush was correct in his assessment of the public mindset; the fact that neither he nor the Democratic Party was strongly progressive; the fact that the left had little choice but to support him) he did not opt for this strategy until very late in the campaign.

The ability of Reagan and Bush to redefine the terms of political discourse did more than simply win elections. By agreeing to these terms, the Democrats essentially closed off serious debate on a host of economic and social problems for what constituted a 12-year moratorium. A generation of young Americans now perceive Jimmy Carter as a softhearted liberal who failed precisely because he was liberal, and George McGovern as a radical leftist. Questions of how government should act have given way to debates over whether government should act at all.

None of this is to suggest that concerns over race, gender roles, the environment, education, poverty and the like have disappeared. Few mainstream politicians on the left or the right would publicly deny the right to equal political and economic opportunity. Few would deny the importance of education, or of preserving the environment. Few would deny the need to help the poor and destitute. But it is precisely the casual consensus on these issues that neutralizes their political relevance. What is increasingly excised from public discourse is the connection between these values and concrete, collective political action. What is lost is the sense that government has anything but the most tangential role in assuring they are achieved. The result is often a
bizarre mix of rhetoric and action, in which candidates from both parties run as Democrats and govern as Republicans. George Bush was able to declare himself both the 'environmental' and the 'education' president, while advocating policies that further limited the ability of government to address either issue. David Dinkins won the mayoral race in New York by running on a progressive agenda, yet, for reasons largely beyond his control, slashed social programmes while increasing the size of the police force. When, as a result, blacks, women, the poor and other disadvantaged segments of American society fail to achieve the levels of success now deemed their right, the implicit conclusion drawn is that they must lack the 'right stuff'.

The Election of 1992: One Step Forward?

In November of 1992, for the first time in 16 years, the American public elected a Democrat to be President of the United States. This election marks an undeniable shift in the trends discussed above. While there is much one can point to in the 1992 campaign as evidence of a return to the progressive politics of the 1960s and 1970s, it would be a mistake to draw such parallels without carefully considering the context in which this election took place. Did Bill Clinton and the Democrats win by accepting the terms of discourse as set by the Republicans over the past twelve years, or by changing those terms? Will the Democrats govern by honouring the limits of liberal democracy or by redefining them? The evidence from the campaign, the election, and the early days of the new administration is mixed.

For the first time in US history, a black woman was elected to the Senate in 1992. The number of blacks in the House increased from 25 to a record 38, including the first blacks since Reconstruction to be elected from five southern states (significantly, all but one of these black officeholders were Democrats). And the election of Bill Clinton to the presidency should mark a decided improvement in the style and substance of the politics of race in the United States. Certainly in much of his rhetoric, Clinton has shown a great sensitivity to the plight of black America. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the 1992 campaign and election points out the extent to which the politics of the last twelve years has constrained public discourse and thus lowered the expectations of the left.

Much as in the campaigns of the 1980s, race was essentially a non-issue in 1992. Jesse Jackson, the only national Democrat to address issues of race in 1984 and 1988, did not run for the presidential nomination in 1992, and was effectively muted during the general election for fear that he would alienate the moderate white voters that
Democrats were hoping to lure back to the party. Indeed, the fact that Jackson played only a marginal role during the Democratic convention was viewed by political pundits as evidence of Clinton’s strength. The most visible black Democrat during 1992 was Ron Brown, the party’s national chairperson, and a person with more corporate than civil rights connections. While Clinton occasionally wooed black voters, he was equally likely to use such opportunities to alleviate white fears about his views. This tactic was clearly behind his public lambasting of the little known rap singer Sister Souljah while speaking before the NAACP.

The low visibility of race as a campaign issue is especially troubling given the context in which the campaign took place. Recall that during the primary season the city of Los Angeles erupted in the most violent and sustained racial uprising since the mid-1960s. Though triggered by a 'not-guilty' verdict for the policemen accused of — and videotaped while — beating a black motorist, the root causes were clearly broader grievances concerning racial injustices. While the beating, the verdict and the subsequent turmoil received a great deal of media coverage, its impact on campaign discourse was minimal and short-lived. Tellingly, most candidates and officeholders downplayed the issue out of fear of ‘politicizing’ the event! Overall, Clinton’s comments about Sister Souljah, Ross Perot’s reference to blacks as 'you people', and the controversy over black singer Ice-T’s song ‘Cop Killer’ received greater attention in the campaign than the LA uprising and its social, economic and political roots.

Thus, while the 1992 election may be evidence of a repudiation of the more extreme elements of racial backlash, it does not appear to be much more than this. Continuing recent trends, Clinton received only 39 per cent of the white vote, while garnering 82 per cent of the black vote. In this context, it seems likely that he will be able (or willing) to mobilize the kind of sustained public support necessary to redress the grievances of the last twelve years, let alone the last 350.

Similarly mixed signals were sent by the Democrats regarding issues of class. As the sign in his campaign headquarters — which read, ‘the economy, stupid’ — made clear, Clinton won the 1992 presidential election by focusing on the longest and deepest recession in a decade. When asked for the one or two issues that most influenced their choice for president, 43 per cent of voters said the state of the economy, while another 21 per cent said the deficit and 20 per cent said the high cost of health care. No other issue was mentioned by over 15 per cent of the voting public. And more than twice as many voters who mentioned the economy and jobs voted for Clinton (53 per cent) as for Bush (24 per cent) or Perot (23 per cent). The advantage for Clinton among those who mentioned health care (67 per cent, versus 19 per cent for Bush
and 14 per cent for Perot) was even more dramatic. Perhaps most significantly, Clinton won pluralities among most of those middle- and working-class groups who, in recent years, had voted Republican.

But it would be a mistake to see this vote as a reconstruction of the New Deal or Great Society coalitions. American voters have always 'voted their pocketbooks', and a faltering economy can make the most popular president look bad. To be sure George Bush suffered from what appeared to be a lack of compassion and from the sense that he lacked a domestic agenda. His inability to respond convincingly to a citizen's question regarding how he had personally suffered from the recent economic decline - asked during the second presidential debate - came to symbolize these tragic flaws. Nonetheless, the 1992 Democrats were no vanguard for the oppressed. While playing up his humble roots, Clinton ran campaign ads that called welfare 'a second chance - not a way of life'. While promising to tax the rich, he also promised to cut the taxes of the 'middle class'. And the substance behind his call for 'structural change' was a plan to revitalize the nation's economic infrastructure and to develop a corporate-government partnership modelled on Japan. It is little wonder that a Fortune 500 executive remarked shortly after the Democratic convention that 'big business has no trouble with the idea of a Clinton presidency'. And as one participant in Clinton's post-election 'economic summit' concluded, 'Liberals are going to get projects. Conservatives are going to get the economy.' A look at Clinton's key cabinet appointments seems to bare this observation out: the chairman of a large Wall Street brokerage house as his White House economic adviser; a moderate Senator and business advocate as Treasury Secretary; a congressional budget-cutter as head of OMB; and a Fortune 500 CEO as his chief of staff. Vice President Al Gore's dissolution of his predecessor's 'Council on Economic Competitiveness' (a government-business partnership aimed at further deregulating industry) is an encouraging sign. Yet early indications are that cutting the federal deficit will take precedence over stimulating jobs. And while the appointment of Hillary Clinton to head the task force looking into health care is promising, most other indications are that reforms in health care will be modest at best. George Bush may be remembered as the Herbert Hoover of the 1990s, but there is, as of yet, little indication that Bill Clinton will be the next FDR.

The elections of 1992 provide many reasons for optimism regarding gender issues in the United States. The Republicans' attempts to shift attention away from the economy by focusing on the decay of the traditional family backfired badly - Dan Quayle proved no match for Murphy Brown regarding the issue of single parenthood. Mobilized by the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill controversy, more women ran for public
office in 1992 than ever before in US history. None of the three women running for governorships won, but 21 of the 34 female candidates for other state-wide executive offices did, including all 4 who ran for state attorney general, 4 of the 7 who ran for lieutenant governor, 3 of the 5 who ran for state treasurer, and 2 of the 5 who ran for secretary of state. In addition, a record number of state legislative seats were won by women. While these victories add only incrementally to women's totals, a little more than 20 per cent of all state-wide elected offices and a little less than 20 per cent of all state legislative seats are now held by women. When the 147-member Washington State Legislature convened in 1993, nearly 40 per cent of the legislators were women — the highest percentage in the country and the closest to the elusive 50 per cent mark ever achieved by a state congress.

Women candidates fared well for national office as well. In the Senate four of the eleven women candidates were elected, with Lynn Yeakel losing a very close race to incumbent Arlen Specter, one of the principal 'villains' in the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy. In the process, several firsts were achieved. There will now be a record six women in the Senate. As noted above, Carol Moseley Braun will be the first African-American woman elected to the Senate. And California will be the first state in which both US Senators are women — Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. Of the record 106 women running for the House, 47 of them won, including 24 non-incumbents. This brings the percentage of women in the new House to nearly 11 per cent — also a record. Not surprisingly, 5 of 6 women Senators and 35 of the 47 Congresswomen are Democrats. All of the newly elected female members of Congress also support abortion rights. Significantly, the new Senate Judiciary Committee now includes two women.

The presidential race also provided glimmers of hope regarding the status of women. The election of Bill Clinton seems to assure that new nominees to the Supreme Court will be supportive of the right to an abortion. The executive 'gag' order preventing federally funded counsellors from giving information regarding abortions has already been rescinded, and President Clinton has signed additional executive orders decoupling foreign aid from the issue of abortion and allowing the use of fetal tissue in medical research. At this writing Clinton also seems committed to making the 'abortion pill' RU486 available in the United States, to ending the kind of sexual harassment in the military exemplified by the infamous 'Tailhook' incident, and, in a different kind of gender issue, to ending the ban on homosexuals in the military. And Hillary Clinton — now Hillary Rodham Clinton — promises to be a very different role model than Barbara Bush, and will undoubtedly play a significant role in a variety of substantive policy decisions.
Again, however, it would be a mistake to read too much into these encouraging signs. With 6 per cent of the Senate, with 11 per cent of the House, even with 20 per cent of state legislatures and executive offices, it is still underrepresentation. Electoral success also varies dramatically by state – for example, only 4 per cent of Kentucky’s 1993 state legislature will be women. And only 3 of the 24 women who won a seat in the House actually defeated incumbents. More significantly, the national campaign was remarkably devoid of gender issues. Issues of abortion, sexual harassment, pay equity, childcare, while raised at meetings with individual groups and leaders, were avoided in both the debates and in the media campaigns of both parties. Only 13 per cent of voters selected abortion as one of the most important reasons they voted as they did, and of these, 54 per cent voted for George Bush. And despite the inability of the Republicans to make ‘family values’ a campaign issue, 68 per cent of voters said they thought government should promote traditional values rather than promote tolerance for non-traditional views. Finally, consider the generally negative reaction to Hillary Clinton’s remark that she was ‘no Tammy Wynette standing by her man’, and her tongue-in-cheek suggestion that she could have ‘stayed home and baked cookies’ rather than become a lawyer and political activist. More to the point, consider the Democratic Party’s reaction to this flack – Ms Clinton was given a new, more feminine hairstyle, given a less visible role, and entered a contest for the best cookie recipe. Ironically, but significantly, at the 1992 conventions it was Barbara Bush, not Hillary Clinton, who gave a primetime address.

The new administration’s approach to foreign policy is especially unclear. Bill Clinton initially opposed the use of military force in the Gulf. In addition, as a student he was opposed to the Vietnam War and avoided the draft. Admittedly, the details in both cases were complicated, and were not unambiguous examples of taking the moral high ground. Nonetheless, they offered the Democrats, in the context of the 1992 campaign, the opportunity to rebut the Republican worldview which had dominated foreign policy for the prior twelve years. To be sure, the fact that Americans rejected George Bush’s efforts to use Clinton’s past against him is encouraging. But the Democrats’ defence of the past was that these issues didn’t matter any more: the Cold War is over, the turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s caused us all to do things that might not be justifiable, and so on. In essence they conceded the historical record to the Republicans, and thus the way in which Vietnam War, the Cold War, the Gulf War, and so on are used rhetorically and strategically in the future.

Certainly a Clinton administration promises to be less militaristic than the past three have been, and the nature of the times helps assure that defence spending will consume a smaller part of the national budget. However, the Democrats failure to articulate a strong, new vision of the
post-Cold War world during the campaign appears to have hurt them already. By sending US troops to Somalia and ordering several bombing raids of Iraq, George Bush may have done more to shape the new administration's foreign policy during the two and a half months between the election and the inauguration than Clinton himself had. Having spent the campaign either avoiding foreign policy issues or assuring the public that he, too, can be tough, the new president seems destined to use foreign policy as the test of his manhood.

In the end, the attempt by Republicans to paint Bill Clinton as just another liberal Democrat failed in 1992, but it failed in part because Bill Clinton is not a liberal. As one of the leading spokespersons for moving the Democratic Party to a more centrist position, Clinton's nomination and victory is testimony as much to the strength of the Republican Party over the past twelve years as to the resurgence of the Democrats. True, the extreme right-wing rhetoric of the Republican convention was a miscalculation. But it, too, serves to show how the range of discourse in America has shifted rightward. Clearly the ideological gap between Patrick Buchanan and Bill Clinton is a large one, but what of the gap between George Bush and Bill Clinton? Between Bill Clinton and Jesse Jackson? The measure of these ideological distances remains unclear.

This is not to suggest all is lost for the left in America. A significant portion of Clinton's braintrust has roots in the New Left politics of the 1960s, and both Clinton and Al Gore have articulated several issue stands that are consistent with that agenda. In addition, Clinton's constant calls for change and his populist, occasionally communist rhetoric is open to interpretations that are more radical than intended. But in the end, Clinton won by exploiting people's desires for something different rather than by informing those desires. He is the first president to emerge out of the 'sixties generation', but like many from that generation, he was more an observer than a participant – he held the culture and politics of the day to his lips, but did not inhale them. How this clearly curious observer of that era will react to his new found power is unclear. Perhaps it will be his chance to represent the ideals he skirted but never embraced. Or perhaps what we have seen is what we will get – a politician skilled at the art of compromise, but who, in the end, knows which way the wind blows.

One Step Forward, One Step Back?
The Limits of American Political Discourse

In his 1992 State of the Union address, as he had in his prior two, and in his inaugural address in 1989, George Bush pressed his theme of voluntarism, arguing that government is limited in what it can do
to solve America's domestic problems. In a sense, it was the very act of saying this that made it so. Twelve years of essentially unanswered attacks on progressive government have firmly established the notion that, as Ronald Reagan proclaimed in his 1980 inaugural address, 'Government is not the solution to America's problems - Government is the problem.'

The notion that 'government is the problem' is deeply rooted in America's political tradition. 'At the heart of American politics', writes James Marone, 'lies a dread and yearning. The dread is notorious. Americans fear public power as a threat to liberty.' The yearning to which Marone alludes 'is an alternative faith in direct, communal democracy'. However, even this 'democratic wish' is not an endorsement of government. To the contrary, it is based on the notion that 'the people would, somehow, put aside their government and rule themselves directly'.

The gains made by blacks, the working class, the poor and women during the 1930s and the 1960s were achieved by coupling America's yearning for democracy with the notion that government could be an instrument of the people rather than an enemy of them. This is an inherently unstable marriage in the context of America's liberal democratic traditions. Ronald Reagan - and to a lesser extent George Bush - were able to exploit this instability by making populist appeals that resonated with the public's 'yearning' for self-rule, while also reawakening their 'dread' of government. But conservative populism is no more comfortable with liberal democracy than progressive populism, and thus no more firm a foundation upon which to build.

After nearly a decade of watching the world change in dramatic ways, America's yearning for community re-emerged in 1992. Of course, without an appropriate public language or a public sphere designed to accommodate it, this yearning was expressed in odd, unsatisfactory ways. Nonetheless, it could be seen in the remarkable appeal of the multibillionaire populist Ross Perot. It could be seen in the popularity of new media formats that were more substantive than usual (for example, Perot's half hour 'info-mercials') and that allowed for more direct input from the public itself (for example, the 'talk show' format used in the second presidential debate). It could be seen in both Clinton's and Perot's constant calls for greater civic involvement. And it could be seen in all three candidate's - including twelve-year incumbent George Bush's - claims to being the 'candidate of change'. To be sure the proximate cause of this restlessness was the poor state of the economy, but to end the discussion there is to miss the point.

And yet in some crucial ways that is exactly where the Democrats
did end the discussion in the 1992 campaign. By making vague references to 'change', they raised the expectations of the American public. But by failing to engage in an open dialogue about the direction of that change - about both its costs and its promise - they have made it less likely that these expectations will be fulfilled. At times Clinton came tantalizingly close to seeing this: his use of the 'town meeting' format during the campaign and his post-election 'economic summit' demonstrate his desire to create a public sphere. And in his 1993 inaugural address, he attempted to re-establish the connection between popular democracy and progressive government with his promise to 'give this capitol back to the people to whom it belongs' and to restore 'government [as] a place for what Franklin Roosevelt called bold, persistent experimentation'. But for government to be the instrument of bold, persistent, democratic and progressive change, we must first broaden public discourse not only beyond the ideological parameters set during the past twelve years, but beyond those set by the logic of liberal democracy.

Notes and References

1. These reforms were also tied into the language and traditions of democratic action and community that exist at the margins of American culture and politics. Such appeals have always been tenuous, however, and have seldom been able to sustain mainstream social movements. In addition, they often become blurred, blending in with the more firmly established values of classical liberalism. See Russell Hanson, The Democratic Imagination (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); M.X. Delli Carpini, 'Vietnam, Ideology, and Domestic Politics', in M. Shafer (ed.), The Legacy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); and James A. Marone, The Democratic Wish (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

2. See Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Poor People's Movements (New York: Pantheon, 1977); Regulating The Poor (New York: Random House, 1971); Benjamin Ginsburg, The Consequences of Consent (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982); Thomas Ferguson, Fall of the House of Morgan (forthcoming).


7. This 'economic' argument also points out the extent to which these reforms were perceived as tangential: they were legitimate pursuits only to the extent that they were relatively costless to the rest of the population.


11. Their logic was that women’s rights were less controversial, and that, as a majority of the population, an appeal to women’s self-interest (as opposed to blacks) could be politically beneficial. At the same time, however, afraid that even this would appear too much like bowing to 'special interests', the bill's sponsors limited the legislation's effectiveness by severely restricting the amount of money women could collect for damages.

12. For example, attendance at all-black colleges and universities is on the rise, as are all-black dorms, fraternities, etc. on predominantly white campuses. More recently, blacks at several predominantly white high schools and colleges have opted for separate proms and graduation ceremonies. And public speakers advocating black separatism, such as Professor Leonard Jeffries and the Nation of Islam's Mohammed Khalid, have become common at events sponsored by black campus organizations.


16. For an interesting if anecdotal analysis of the role of popular culture in creating and maintaining this upper-middle-class self image, see Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle* (New York: Morrow Press, 1991).

18. Efforts to confront these issues through increased taxation at the state level, such as those attempted by Governor James Florio in New Jersey or Governor Lowell Weicker in Connecticut, were met with intense opposition, often by those who would, ironically, be most likely to benefit from them.


24. Prior to the 1930s there were, of course, no systematic public opinion polls, but there is no historical record to suggest that a majority of citizens opposed any of the major uses of US troops from the War for Independence to the First World War. While support for the Civil War certainly waned in the North, Lincoln's electoral victory in 1864, over challengers such as McClelland, who advocated a peaceful solution to the conflict, suggests that this opposition, even at its peak, did not constitute a majority.


28. There is growing if circumstantial evidence that the arms for hostages deal may have been cut during the 1980 presidential campaign. A growing number of former members of the Iranian government and the Carter administration have suggested that Reagan's campaign staff, led by William Casey and aided by George Bush,
agreed to provide arms to the Iranians if they agreed not to release the hostages being held in the US embassy until after the election.

29. For an excellent exploration of the inequitable coverage of political events in South America as compared to Eastern Europe, see L. Weschler, The Media's One and Only Freedom Story,' Columbia Journalism Review (April 1990), pp. 26-31.


31. Indeed, only days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, American diplomats made clear to the Iraqis that the US had no treaties with Kuwait and felt no obligation to respond should Iraq use force.

32. The fact that women were less supportive of the war than men, that a majority of blacks opposed the war, and that support generally declined when Congressional Democrats raised doubts about the use of force, all provide some evidence that the aggregate support for the Gulf War masked some ambivalence. Further evidence for this is found in a series of focus groups I conducted with Scott Keeter. In these discussions, conducted just after the hostilities ended, people initially expressed overwhelming support for the war. But when asked to talk about their views in greater depth, most acknowledged they were unconvinced the war was necessary, and they remained cynical as to the real motives for the war. Most also acknowledged that they would have preferred a peaceful solution to the conflict and suspect that such a solution might have been possible.


34. T. Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching.

35. D. Hallin, The Uncensored War.

36. J. Schwartz, America's Hidden Success.


38. Reagan's success benefited from the fact that suspicion of 'big government' runs through populist rhetoric of both the left and the right in America. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, New Left proponents and their progeny advocated for greater decentralization of government decision-making. Jimmy Carter won office in 1970 in part by running as an outsider who would make government more accessible and who would shrink the federal bureaucracy. The left's vision of a decentralized government is, of course, very different to the right's in many ways. Not the least of these differences would be a continued role for the federal government in redistributive and regulatory policies.
39. A similar tension can be seen on college and university campuses, where vague commitments to racial, cultural and sexual diversity dominate, but where those attempting to integrate such diversity into the curriculum are increasingly accused of 'brainwashing' students into 'politically correct' (i.e. nonracist, nonsexist, nonethnocentric and critical) thought.