

Americans were the closest to being united by a common culture between 1941 and 1965. The post-World War II economy produced an enormous middle class, thanks to being the only country in the world not damaged or destroyed by the war. Manufacturing of everything was flourishing, as were exports and generous support with money and values to the recovery of our former customers and new allies. The only cloud on the horizon was the Cold War and the not small concern about nuclear holocaust should the Soviets and Americans go to a shooting war. (Having a common enemy also helps to unify a population, as it did with us.)

Our two political parties had mildly differing philosophies, but were united on defense and on belief in our democratic institutions. Our long terrible history arising from Black slavery and continuing disenfranchising was being challenged and slowly addressed. The country shared three major television channels and about a dozen major newspapers whose professionalism was generally accepted. This was a period in which a young person (as I was then) could look forward to finding a good job, staying in it for one's lifetime of work, and be able to retire with a decent pension (including Social Security). This unity came to an end with the Vietnam War and the resistance to it.

From 1965 on, the elements of American unity began to unravel. The war protesters were mostly young, creating an age gulf with the rest of the population. They were largely university students, which then created a gulf with the other young men fighting in the war. The protesters also considered themselves morally superior to the rest of their fellow citizens, which caused another gulf: the "elites" vs the rest. (This same youth movement occurred simultaneously in Europe, with the same damage to those countries.)

The gulf between Democrats and Republicans began to widen. Where once the Democrats managed a big tent that contained southern segregationists and northern liberals, after the Voting Rights Act to end Black disenfranchisement, the southern Democrats switched parties and became the most conservative Republicans. The former big tent of the Republican Party which mingled strict fiscal conservatives with social liberals morphed into a party in which the far right outshouted and outvoted moderates.

The task today, with both political parties in trouble and falling to their extremes, is to find enough members with common values to create a new middle. We may even need a new political party made up of grownups instead of ideologues.

Both liberal and conservative world views have elements that have merit, and contradictions and weaknesses that must be dropped. The liberal worldview believes that all human beings are alike in their natures and aspirations and cultures. Conservatives recognize that there are some terrible cultures and that evil is not imaginary.

Liberals decry the bigotry of the past: racial and gender prejudice, bias against people who are "different" mentally, physically, genetically, economically, except for "White Men," often seen as villains. Traditional religion is considered backward and resistant to societal change, but many accept all sorts of "alternate" religions, including cults, and reject any criticism of Islam because they believe Muslims are "underdogs." They are suspicious of business, but they do believe in the ability of government to make life better.

Conservatives believe in love of country, right or wrong, despite the danger of unhealthy nationalism. They willingly serve in the military, police, and fire departments. And they believe in identity as an American, not a "citizen of the world," as do some liberals. They believe in self-reliance, even while benefitting from enlightened government programs. They believe in religion as a community value, but also are free to change religious affiliation. They believe in family and sometimes romanticized traditions and reject government "interference." They distrust modern institutions revered by the liberals: government, science, and the press, and resent liberal attacks on traditional values.

Many of these differences can be dispelled when the two sides listen to each other. Neither is altogether right nor altogether wrong. They are both American.

675 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's

Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.