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America's Second Civil War

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Summary of Chapter 83

"The politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries swung between extremes of nationalism and polyethnic multiculturalism. Following the Great War (1914-8), the disintegration of most of the continental empires - notably the Habsburg and Ottoman - led to a resurgence of a particularly virulent strain of the former, dressed as Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism.

The aftermath of the Second World War brought on a predictable backlash in the West against all manner of nationalism and racism. The USSR, Yugoslavia, the Czech Republic, the EU (European Union, then European Community), the Commonwealth led by the United Kingdom, and the prominent USA epitomized the eventual triumph of multiculturalism, multi-ethnic states, and, in the Western democracies, pluralism.

Africa and Asia, just emerging from a phase of brutal colonialism, were out of synch with these developments in Europe and North America and began to espouse their own brands of jingoistic patriotisms. Attempts to impose liberal-democratic, multi-cultural, tolerant, pluralistic, and multi-ethnic principles on these emergent entities was largely perceived and vehemently rejected by them as disguised neo-colonialism.

The disintegration, during the second half of the twentieth century, of the organizing principles of international affairs - most crucially Empire in the 1960s and Communism in the 1980s - led to the re-eruption of exclusionary, intolerant, and militant nationalism. The Balkan secession wars of the 1990s served as a stark reminder that historical forces and ideologies never vanish - they merely lie dormant.

Polyethnic multiculturalism came under attack elsewhere and everywhere - from Canada to Belgium. Straining to contain this worrisome throwback to its tainted history, Europeans implemented various models. In the United Kingdom, regions, such as Scotland and Northern Ireland were granted greater autonomy. The EU's "ever closer union", reified by its unfortunate draft constitution, was intermittently rejected and resented by increasingly xenophobic and alienated constituencies.

This time around, between 1980 and 2020, nationalism copulated with militant religiosity to produce particularly nasty offspring in Muslim terrorism, Christian fundamentalist (American) thuggish unilateralism, Hindu supremacy, and Jewish messianism. Scholars, such as Huntington, spoke of a "clash of civilizations".

Ironically, the much-heralded conflict took place not between the USA and its enemies without - but within the United States, in a second and devastating Civil War.

Americans long mistook the institutional stability of their political system, guaranteed by the Constitution, for a national consensus. They actually believed that the former guarantees the latter - that institutional firmness and durability ARE the national consensus. The reverse, as we know, is true: it takes a national consensus to yield stable institutions. No social structure - no matter how venerable and veteran - can resist the winds of change in public sentiment.

In hindsight, the watershed obtained during the Bush-Cheney presidency (2001-2009). The social and political concord frayed and then disintegrated with each successive blow: the war in Iraq (2003-7), the botched evacuation and rescue efforts in the wake of hurricane Katrina (2005), the failed assassination attempt on the President's life (2006), the further restrictions placed on civil and human rights in Patriot Acts III and IV (2008), and, finally, the nuclear terrorist attack on Houston in the closing days of this divisive reign.

From there, it went only downhill.

As opposed to the first Civil War (1860-5), the Second Civil War (2021-26) was fought within communities and across state boundaries. It was not territorial and classic - but total and guerilla-like. It cut across the country's geography and pitted one ideological camp against another.

It may be too soon to objectively analyze and evaluate this gargantuan conflict. It was preceded by a decade of violent demonstrations, home-grown urban terrorism, and numerous skirmishes involving the National Guard and even, in violation of the Constitution, the armed forces.

Some historians cast the whole period as a battle of the religious vs. the secular. It clearly was not. By 2021, most Americans professed to being deeply religious, in one manner or fashion. No one seriously disputed the importance of the Church - but many insisted on its separation from the state.

Hence the protracted (and heated) confrontation between pro-life and pro-choice advocates when Wade vs. Roe was overturned by a politicized and weakened Supreme Court in 2007. Hence the drawn out (and violent) debates about the teaching of evolution theory in schools or the use of embryonic stem cells in medical research.

Nor was the Civil War fought between isolationists and interventionists. An ever more brazen brand of post-September 11 global terrorism and a growing dependence on international trade inexorably drove most Americans to accept their new role as an Empire. They actually learned to enjoy it, both emotionally and economically.

Thus, even erstwhile Jacksonian isolationists reluctantly acquiesced in their country's foreign exploits. But they insisted on blatant unilateralism and the projection of American might merely and only to protect American interests. They abhorred the missionary ideology of the neo-conservatives. Spreading values, such as democracy, should better be left to NGOs and charities - they thundered.

The Civil War was not about the preservation of East Coast liberalism, as some self-serving scholars would have it. America was never less racist and homophobic than in the years immediately preceding the conflagration. The debate, again, revolved around institutions. Should changing mores be enshrined in legislation and case law? Should the national ethos itself be rewritten? Should the very definition and quiddity of being an American (white, male, straight) be revisited?

Neo-Marxist chroniclers attribute the causes of the Second Civil War to the

growing disparities of wealth between the haves and the have nots. Presidents Bush and Cheney surely reversed L.B. Johnson's Great Society. They and their successors erased the numerous entitlements and aid programs that many of the economically disenfranchised came to depend upon and to regard as a birth right and as a cornerstone of the social contract.

Turning the clock back on affirmative action and food stamps, for instance, indeed provoked widespread violence. But such outbursts can hardly be construed to have been the precursors of the gigantic flame that consumed the USA a few years hence.

Finally, the Civil War was not about free trade (beneficial to the service and manufacturing based economies of some states) versus protectionism (helpful to the agricultural belts and bowls of the hinterland and to the recovering Gulf Coast). America's economy was far too dependent on the outside world to reverse course. Its national debt was being financed by Asians, its products were being sold all over, its commodities and foods were coming from Africa and Latin America. The USA was in hock to a globalized and merciless economy. Protectionism was campaign posturing - not a cogent and coherent trade policy.

So, what were the roots and causes of the Second Civil War?

None of the above in isolation - and all of the above in confluence. For decades, the citizenry's trust in a packed and rigged Supreme Court declined. Politicians came to be regarded as a detached and heartless plutocracy. Americans felt orphaned, cheated, and robbed. The national consensus - the implicit agreement that together is better than alone - has thus evaporated. The outcome was the shots and explosions that rocked the United States (and the world in tow) on January 20, 2021."