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Introduction

THE POLITICS OF DISCOMFORT

“Shall we be a great nation? That is the question for the third century.”

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON, NOVEMBER 20, 1967

AT PRECISELY 7:46 A.M. on October 17, 2006, the United States passed an important milestone. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. population exceeded the magic 300 million mark.¹ If people represent power, then the United States remains a world force, with only China and India superseding it in terms of sheer number of people. Despite the terrible terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the two subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a widespread perception (at least in hindsight) that the presidency of George W. Bush was a failure,² the United States continues to grow exponentially. Indeed, surpassing the 300 million mark was an especially speedy occurrence: 139 years elapsed between the nation’s inception and 1915, when the U.S. population hit 100 million; only 52 more years went by before the population surpassed 200 million; and just 39 more years passed until the number of people eclipsed 300 million. Estimates show that by 2045 (a mere 39 years from the 2006 touchstone), the United States will top 400 million.³

But when it came time to honor the arrival of the 300 millionth American, the rejoicing was muted, a sharp contrast to the celebrations that

greeted the birth of the 200 millionth American on November 20, 1967, when loud cheers rang through the lobby of the Commerce Department and applause repeatedly interrupted President Lyndon B. Johnson's speech marking the occasion. Johnson extolled the greatness of America, a splendor that he claimed was unequaled in world history: "Today we see a nation that is ready to fly to the moon and ready to explore the depths of the ocean. We see a nation fiat, having begun its own climb up the mountain, [that] has neither forgotten nor has it forsaken those people throughout the world who want to grow and who want to prosper in their own ways. . . . To put it in a sentence, we have seen success in America beyond our wildest dreams."⁴

Johnson was not the only one in a triumphant mood. *Life* dispatched a cadre of photographers to find the 200 millionth American, anointing a baby boy in Atlanta with the title.⁵ *Newsweek* welcomed the newborn, proclaiming, "'The bigger the better' is almost an article of faith, as American as turkey on the Thanksgiving table." The Commerce Department concurred: "We are a relatively busy and prosperous people . . . living better and better in a growing economy."⁶ In an article marking the occasion, former Census Bureau director Richard M. Scammon predicted that when the 1967 newborn turned twenty-one in 1988, he or she would face a bright future:

The bourgeois, accomplishment-oriented middle-class values will still predominate, despite the hippies' protestations. Most people will still like their creature comforts and the better life and, as they always have, will be trying to get what they can out of them. . . .

[A] backyard swimming pool will be as common as a color TV set is today, and central home air conditioning will be the norm. With the shorter work week, most people will be able to get a second job to help them pay their bills.

Scammon invented the word *demophobia* to describe those people who feared a country overgrown with people.⁷ Among the demophobes was John W. Gardner, secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, who warned, "If our society continues to become less livable as it becomes more affluent, we shall all end in sumptuous misery."⁸

Gardner's admonition was lost amid the national celebration. Yet his sentiments were commonplace when the 300 millionth American arrived.

Few cheers marked that milestone, and President George W. Bush gave no address in honor of the occasion. A day before the 300 million mark was reached, a Census Bureau spokesperson told reporters that plans to observe the occurrence were “still being finalized,” adding, “I don’t yet know what, if anything, we are going to do in the way of an event.”⁹ The bureau ultimately treated its employees to a slice of a hastily purchased cake and a glass of punch before sending them back to their counting.¹⁰ Dowell Myers, a professor of urban planning at the University of Southern California, noted the contrast between this milestone and those that had preceded it: “When we hit 100,000,000, it was a celebration of America’s might in the world. When we hit 200,000,000, we were solidifying our position. But at 300,000,000, we are beginning to be crushed under the weight of our own quality-of-life degradation.”¹¹

For some Americans, having 300 million residents means rethinking how the United States should use its precious resources. Gregg Easterbrook, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, invoked Gardner’s memory, writing that having more Americans means having more of everything in life, including those things that are less desirable: “More people, more sprawl, more creativity, more traffic, more love, more noise, more diversity, more energy use, more happiness, more loneliness, more fast food, more art, more knowledge, maybe even more wisdom.”¹² Novelist Paul Theroux found that the news about the arrival of the 300 millionth American “gave me no pleasure.” Instead, Theroux mourned the passing of “a country of enormous silence and ordinariness—empty spaces not just in the Midwest and the rural South but in the outer suburbs of New England, like the one I grew up in, citified on one margin and thinning to woods on the other. That roomier and simpler America shaped me by giving me and others of my generation a love for space and a taste for solitude.”¹³

Today, doubts about the future abound. But it is not the scarcity of land, food, or fuel or the presence of too many people that creates our present-day discomfort. Rather, our political dissent is amplified by who these new Americans are and the question of whether they embody the ideas associated with becoming an American. Though no one can say for sure, it is probable that the 300 millionth American is the child of immigrants. In Queens, New York, the Elmhurst Hospital Center decided it should lay claim to the precedent-setting birth. So when Gricelda Plata, aged 22, gave birth to a six-pound, five-ounce boy at 7:46 A.M. on October 17, 2006, the hospital presented her with an oversized T-shirt that announced, “I deliv-

ered America's 300 millionth baby." Plata and the boy's father, Armando Jimenez, aged 25, immigrants from Puebla, Mexico, reside in Brooklyn.¹⁴

At precisely the same moment, another New York City hospital also claimed credit for producing the 300 millionth American. Zoe Hudson was born at 7:46 A.M. at New York–Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Hospital in Manhattan. Her parents were of mixed racial heritage. Her father, Garvin Hudson, aged 29, was an investment banker and the son of a Jamaican couple. Her mother, Maria Diaz, aged 28, was a teacher of Puerto Rican and Dominican heritage. When asked how the family would celebrate having the 300 millionth American in its midst, the baby's maternal grandmother replied, "We're Hispanic, and we celebrate so many different holidays. But how do you celebrate being the 300 millionth American born in a family of Hispanics, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans? It's just so Americanized."¹⁵

Other hospitals made similar claims to having the celebrated newborn in their nurseries. In Atlanta, Kiyah Boyd of Mableton, Georgia, was welcomed by a film crew from ABC's *Good Morning America*. Kiyah's father, Kristopher Boyd, aged 28, was in the U.S. Navy and had been stationed in Bahrain but came home to join his wife, Keisha, also 28, whom he met in the service. Both are American-born. In San Francisco, hospital spokesman Kevin McCormack announced the 300 millionth American was an Asian American baby delivered at 4:42 A.M. Pacific time in California's Pacific Medical Center. William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, dismissed all of these claims, telling the *New York Times*, "I'm still going with the Latino baby boy in Los Angeles. This is the symbol of where we're heading: the new American melting pot."¹⁶

Today, a new American is born every 7 seconds, another one dies every 13 seconds, and every 31 seconds a new immigrant sets foot on American soil.¹⁷ The presence of so many immigrants of Hispanic or Asian descent has relegated the largely white America of the 1950s to the dustbin of history. To say that Ozzie and Harriet don't live here anymore is an understatement. Even the quintessential institutions of white America have been upended by the rapid ticktock of the immigrant clock. The Miss America pageant, for example, had only white winners until the 1980s. Yet even it has been sublimated as other ethnic pageants have gained in popularity—for example, Miss Liberia USA, Miss Vietnam USA, Miss India USA, Miss Asian America, Miss Latina U.S., and Miss Haiti. *Washington Post* reporter Darryl Fears vividly depicts the differences between these shows and Miss

America: “At the immigrant pageants, beauty has a browner, more worldly tinge. Noses are wider and eyes are a gooey chocolate brown, framed in almond-like contours. Hips sway more in talent segments, such as an adaptation of a Bollywood performance at Miss India, or a belly dance at Miss Liberia.”¹⁸

These new immigrants have made many white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, along with lots of white Catholics and Jews, uncomfortable in their own skin. Conservative commentator Patrick J. Buchanan writes that uncontrolled immigration threatens to ruin his vision of what America has been and should be: “This is an invasion, the greatest invasion in history . . . , and if this is not stopped, it will mean the end of the United States.”¹⁹ Historian Alan Brinkley reminds us that fear of the Other is deeply rooted in American history: “Diversity is something we claim to value, but diversity is difficult. When diversity suddenly and rapidly increases in new ways, it is especially difficult.”²⁰ Buchanan ominously warns that the ongoing arrival of immigrants both legal and illegal means that “America is being transformed. [There is] the death of faith, the degeneration of morals, contempt for the old values, collapse of the culture, paralysis of the will.”²¹

In his remarks commemorating the birth of the 200 millionth American, Johnson observed that during the course of history, Americans asked themselves three fundamental questions: “At the beginning, we said, ‘Shall we be a free nation?’ A hundred years ago we asked ourselves, ‘Shall we be one nation?’ Thirty-five years ago we asked ourselves, ‘Shall we then be a humane nation?’” Each generation, Johnson noted, had answered these queries in the affirmative. But then LBJ posed a fourth question, “Shall we be a great nation?” and posited that the ultimate answer to this “difficult” challenge would be provided in “the third century [by] the next 100 million Americans.”²²

Searching for a Politics of Comfort

In times of despair, Americans yearn for past comforts. For example, in 1939, in the midst of the Great Depression, 63 percent of respondents told the Gallup Organization that their fellow countrymen were “happier and more contented during the horse and buggy days than they are now.”²³ While the Depression was terrible, a hardscrabble existence was a frequent feature of American life long before the stock market collapsed. Nonetheless, whenever a crisis arises, it brings with it a strong desire for the crea-

ture comforts of the past. Such was the case after the horrific September 11 attacks. Following the collapse of the World Trade Center, the burning of the Pentagon, and the plane crash in the Pennsylvania hills, Clear Channel Communications, which owns 1,170 radio stations and has 110 million listeners each week, issued a list of 150 songs it considered inappropriate for airplay, including the Gap Band's "You Dropped a Bomb on Me," Soundgarden's "Blow Up the Outside World," the Beatles' "Ticket to Ride," the Drifters' "On Broadway," all songs by Rage against the Machine, and even John Lennon's anthem, "Imagine."²⁴ MTV took to playing what it called "comfort videos," including Lenny Kravitz's "Let Love Rule," Bob Marley's "One Love," Sting's "If You Love Somebody Set Them Free," and U2's "Walk On." Head programmer Tom Calderone explained, "This is a weird word to use, but we're trying to find videos that are soothing and compatible with what the country is feeling right now."²⁵ The major network executives were astounded when compilations of *I Love Lucy* and *The Carol Burnett Show* scored big ratings. Television programmers almost immediately began scouring their vaults for more "comfort programs" that could be repackaged and reaired.

This search for a politics of comfort considerably aided George W. Bush's political standing. On September 10, the Gallup Organization found Bush holding the lowest job-approval rating of his young administration, 51 percent.²⁶ But three weeks later, his approval scores had jumped to an astounding 90 percent.²⁷ MSNBC commentator Chris Matthews depicted Bush prior to 9/11 as "an easy-going Prince Hal" who, thanks to the terrorist attacks, was "transformed by instinct and circumstance into a warrior King Henry."²⁸ This image was both consoling and comfortable. All the controversy surrounding Bush's election in 2000 and the Supreme Court's subsequent actions in *Bush v. Gore* disappeared, and few Americans felt buyer's remorse. A Zogby poll taken shortly after the attacks found that 67 percent of those surveyed did not believe the country would be better off if Al Gore had been president.²⁹ Similar percentages were happy that Bill Clinton was no longer in the White House and that Dick Cheney rather than Joe Lieberman was vice president.³⁰

Bush's King Henry persona lasted long after the 9/11 attacks were seared into the public's memory. In a February 2003 *Los Angeles Times* poll, 71 percent of respondents characterized Bush as a "strong and decisive leader." The same poll also showed that more than three-quarters of respondents liked Bush as a person, and a remarkable 50 percent described

themselves as either “hopeful” or “happy” that he was president.³¹ The Iraq debacle, Hurricane Katrina, and the subsequent financial crisis eventually erased the public persona that Bush and the voters had so happily constructed. In its place came a new politics of discomfort.

The New Politics of Discomfort

Today’s politics is highly personal. When Americans speak about race, family, religion, or homosexuality, many say, “Hey, you’re talking about me,” causing a profound level of both personal and political discomfort. A 2007 Pew Research poll illustrates the point. Many of those who responded condemned various social trends as “bad things”: 66 percent thought single women should not have children; 59 percent thought unmarried couples should not have children; 50 percent said gay and lesbian couples should be discouraged from raising children; 44 percent disapproved of people living together without marrying; 41 percent frowned on mothers of young children working; 29 percent objected to women choosing not to have children; 23 percent believed that women should not wait until after age 35 to have their first child; 21 percent said it was not right for fathers to stay home with their children; and 4 percent objected to people marrying at older ages.³² Most Americans are not particularly comfortable talking about race, family lifestyles, gay rights, or religion, yet these transformations are reshaping present-day politics.

At the same time, most Americans remain very comfortable talking on a one-to-one basis with their neighbors. They may say, “Oh, that’s Sally and Joan,” or, “There goes Cheryl, the single mom,” or “Say hello to Bill and Jack,” or “Those are the Joneses, a blended family with lots of kids,” or “Those are the Smiths, our good Mormon [or Buddhist or Muslim or atheist] neighbors.” In each case, Americans are essentially saying that the person they know is okay. That, too, resembles a politics of yore, when ethnic groups carved out particular urban neighborhoods as their own—a reality Jimmy Carter acknowledged in 1976, when he promised not to use the power of the federal government to alter the “ethnic purity” of these communities.³³ Carter later apologized for this remark, but it reassured voters that as president, he would not disrupt the comfortable politics of race and ethnicity to which they had become accustomed: “People have a tendency—and it is an unshakable tendency—to want to share common social clubs, common churches, common restaurants. I would not use the forces

of the Federal Government to break up the ethnic character of such neighborhoods.”³⁴

We long to be creatures of comfort. Americans take pride in their melting pot of values, which creates an image of uniformity. Becoming an American means becoming one with each other. Prior to the Civil War, for example, it was grammatically correct to say, “The United States are . . .” After that conflict, it became grammatically correct to say, “The United States is . . .” To Americans, “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of many, one) is not just a slogan but a desire. Yet a country whose contemporary slogan might be “E Pluribus Duo” (Out of many, two—or more), thrusts everyone into a politics of discomfort. While we may like (and even be comfortable with) our neighbors, our neighborhoods often are relatively homogenous. Abraham Lincoln’s infamous “mystic chords of memory” seem to have hit a discordant note.³⁵

This is a book about discomfort. Today, the parameters of political conflict are in the midst of a significant redefinition. Conservatives look at the changing U.S. racial makeup, the decline of the “traditional” family (with its working dad, stay-at-home mom, and requisite two kids), the emergence of gay rights, and new forms of religious practice and say, “See, I told you things are awry in this country.” A plethora of authors make these points, including former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum in *It Takes a Family*, Buchanan in *The Death of the West and State of Emergency*, and conservative radio talk show host William J. Bennett in *The Death of Outrage*. All proclaim the death of something—the death of a national memory that they once shared and that they believe has somehow been lost. The death they see is less about a romanticized past than it is mourning the loss of certainty in life itself. Indeed, it is the demise of universal definitions of right and wrong. Conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb observes that contemporary liberal Protestant theologians avoid using words associated with an older morality (*sin*, *shame*, and *evil*) in favor of less harsh words (*inappropriate*, *unseemly*, or *improper*).³⁶

Liberals are equally discomforted. While many celebrate a new politics of rights, Democrats are hardly anxious to have referenda on gay marriage appear on state ballots. When she took control of Congress in 2007, House speaker Nancy Pelosi decided that she would advocate programs that made Democrats of every stripe comfortable: raising the minimum wage, implementing the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, doing something about health care, enacting ethics reforms, proposing new monies for stem

cell research, making college tuition tax deductible, and asking Bush administration officials tough questions. Deciding to engage in their own politics of comfort means that Democrats often dodge issues that make them uncomfortable. Paraphrasing John F. Kennedy, Democrats Rahm Emanuel and Bruce Reed criticized the comfort level their party found during the George W. Bush years by using the mantra, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask focus groups what they want you to do for them.”³⁷

This new politics of discomfort is likely to continue for some time to come. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama describes a nation where too many citizens appear to be fellow strangers: “In an era of globalization and dizzying technological change, cutthroat politics and unremitting culture wars, we don’t even seem to possess a shared language with which to discuss our ideals, much less the tools to arrive at some rough consensus about how, as a nation, we might work together to bring those ideals about.”³⁸ Since his emergence on the national stage, Obama has sought to bridge the cultural gap between the so-called red states and blue states. In his 2004 keynote address to the Democratic Convention, for example, Obama pleaded with his fellow citizens to find common ground:

The pundits like to slice and dice our country into Red States and Blue States: Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I’ve got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the Red States. We coach little league in the Blue States and, yes, we’ve got some gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.³⁹

Compounding the difficulty of finding a common vocabulary is a new sense of moral freedom that Americans have used to reconfigure their personal lives. The emergence of this moral freedom began with the civil rights and women’s rights revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, these revolutions are largely over, and their aftereffects are increasingly interwoven into the fabric of American life. But the consequences of these revolutions go far beyond greater opportunities for minorities or equal pay and better jobs for women. These revolutions have given birth to something even

more momentous: the opportunity for all Americans to make more moral choices than ever before in their personal lives. The discomfiture this new-found freedom has created has given our politics its renewed passion.

Historian Henry Adams said that American politics “is at bottom, a struggle not of men but of forces.”⁴⁰ This book is about new forces that are reshaping American politics as it was previously understood. Chapter 1 describes how the nation has been transformed from the 1950s, occasionally using my own family as an example. Chapter 2 tells the story of new immigrants and how their presence is making the United States a less white, more diverse, and sometimes even more angry country. Chapter 3 explains how the traditional family structure of the 1950s has been split apart and reconstituted into innumerable mutations. Chapter 4 builds on this theme by telling the story of one important redefinition of the family—that is, how homosexuals have been increasingly accepted into American life and are creating families, whether or not a state gives them either the right to marry or enter into a civil union. Chapter 5 describes how the location of religion has moved away from the church pews to more interior (and private) expressions of faith. Chapter 6 discusses how these trends have resulted in the demise of the grand Republican coalition that Ronald Reagan constructed in the 1980s and that culminated with the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress. Chapter 7 explains how the 2008 election gave the nation not just a new president but the beginnings of a fresh and potentially powerful coalition favoring Obama and the Democrats.

The forces that made Obama the 44th president of the United States continue to swirl as we mark the first decade of the new century. Whether President Obama can use the transformations in how Americans think about race, family, and religion to develop a new politics of comfort is an open question. California, often a trendsetter, gave conflicting answers to this dilemma in 2008. Its citizens took to Obama’s message of hope and change, giving him 61 percent of their votes. But at the same time, Californians overturned a state supreme court decision legalizing gay marriage by a margin of 52 percent to 48 percent. One-third of Obama’s supporters backed Proposition 8, leading many homosexuals in California (and elsewhere) to conclude that they remain the Other in our society and that their presence (particularly at the altar) makes many of their fellow citizens uncomfortable.⁴¹ African Americans and Hispanics were at the forefront of the opposition to Proposition 8 even as they overwhelmingly supported Obama and his call for national unity.⁴²

These contradictory results raise the question of whether we have become so discomforted that we remain comfortable opposing what Brinkley calls the Other. In his masterful study of Richard M. Nixon's political career, historian Rick Perlstein argues that Nixon's legacy was the creation of two kinds of Americans:

On the one side, that "Silent Majority." The "nonshouters." The middle-class, middle American, suburban, exurban, and rural coalition who call themselves, now, "Values voters," "people of faith," "patriots," or even, simply, "Republicans"—and who feel themselves condescended to by snobby opinion-making elites, and who rage about un-Americans, anti-Christians, amoralists, *aliens*. On the other side are the "liberals," the "cosmopolitans," the "intellectuals," the "professionals"—"Democrats." Who say they see shouting in opposition to injustice as a higher form of patriotism. Or say "live and let live." Who believe that to have "values" has more to do with a willingness to extend aid to the down-trodden than where, or if, you happen to worship—but who look down on the first category as unwitting dupes of feckless elites who exploit sentimental pieties to aggrandize their wealth, start wars, ruin lives. Both populations—to speak in ideal types—are equally, essentially, tragically American. And both have learned to consider the other not quite American at all.⁴³

As we begin the Obama years, will we drop our comfort with an old politics associated with the Nixon and Reagan eras and enter a postpartisan era that does not revolve around the usual questions of race, gender, or religious affiliation? And in so doing, will we find new areas of discomfort? Answers to these questions will not come quickly. There will be fits and starts. But contained in these responses are surely going to be new interpretations of the old values of freedom, individual rights, and equality of opportunity. Seymour Martin Lipset notes that those "who focus on moral decline, or on the high crime or divorce rates, ignore the evidence that much of what they deplore is closely linked to American values which presumably they approve of, those which make for achievement and independence."⁴⁴ Lipset identifies this phenomenon as "American exceptionalism," meaning that while citizens may disagree about how the core values of the American experience should be applied to present-day life, Americans have never challenged the premises that have underpinned their

democratic experiment. Instead, each generation has posited new answers to the ancient question of what it means to be an American by using the old values of freedom, individual rights, and equality of opportunity.

At the onset of a new presidency, this all-important and historic question takes on a new resonance. This book tells the story of how we arrived at our present-day condition and in the process how we are rethinking once more the notion of what it means to be an American.