

Kennedy, Sheila S., *God and Country: America in Red and Blue*

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It requires little imagination to believe that the United States is a polarized nation. Divisive discourses about issues such as abortion, gun control, the definition of marriage, immigration reform, and climate change often leave little room for compromise or finding common ground. In *God and Country: America in Red and Blue*, Sheila Kennedy of Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs argues that the popular religious-secular dichotomy used to understand persistent policy conflicts obscures our ability to recognize the root of political disagreement in this country. In her detailed study of American perspectives, Kennedy outlines an alternative framework that she insists better captures the true nature of American conflict.

In part 1, Kennedy puts forth a daunting problem definition. She argues that a growing fissure exists in American politics, which has stunted meaningful civil discourse. Kennedy (p. 4) contends that our nation's "inability to engage in genuine communication is seriously threatening our ability to govern ourselves.... Left unaddressed, it will prevent the construction of a social order capable of dealing with the significant challenges that characterize contemporary American life." The central thesis advanced is that the lack of a shared American worldview is the primary driver in the polarization of American politics. She argues that our political divisions arise from two competing and fundamentally incompatible religious paradigms, which she labels the "Enlightenment" and "Puritan". Proponents of the Enlightenment paradigm tend to emphasize the importance of culture and social structure in policy outcomes. In contrast, Puritans see individual character and universal moral values as the basis for sound public policy. Kennedy's conception of religion refers to how individuals construct meaning in their lives, including social and ethical norms. Her use of religion is not synonymous with modern organized religion. She argues that even the most secular individuals in American society hold worldviews rooted in the Enlightenment or Puritan paradigms.

Kennedy argues that both worldviews flourished in early America due to the constitutional system devised by the Founding Fathers. She contends that many of the normative

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assumptions built into the United States' Constitution—largely a product of the Enlightenment paradigm—were never universally held among Americans. However, by limiting the reach of the federal government's control over state and individual rights, the system of governance established under the constitution allowed both paradigms to pursue their agendas through local governance. Kennedy claims that we have now come to a critical juncture. As the government has grown in scope, the pluralist nature of our democracy that once allowed both paradigms to thrive has created the conditions for “divisive and polarizing debate,” as each paradigm attempts to further institutionalize its value system and impose it on the other (p. 52).

The argument Kennedy advances is far from naïve. In the second part of her manuscript, she demonstrates how the Enlightenment and Puritan worldviews have evolved throughout our nation's history. She acknowledges that the two paradigms are not static, nor are they necessarily easily identifiable in contemporary politics. Kennedy explicitly argues that the two views have morphed into a plurality of differing perspectives. However, she remains steadfast in her claim that it is a fatal mistake to ignore the historical underpinnings of modern American worldviews. Her major point is that “if we look at contemporary political disputes as reflections of a division between religious and secular Americans, we will miss the real nature of these arguments” (p. 99). Secular and traditionally religious perspectives do not cleanly map onto Kennedy's Enlightenment and Puritan dichotomy, which she asserts is a more useful framework for understanding political division in America than the colloquial dichotomy of “red” (conservative; Republican Party) and “blue” (liberal; Democratic Party).

Part 3 of the book investigates how the Enlightenment and Puritan paradigms shape modern political and policy debates. Kennedy's primary argument in this section is familiar to policy scientists (p. 108):

Our paradigms dictate the frames we each employ. It is not an exaggeration to say that when worldviews clash the combatants are fighting in different wars. The anti-choice demonstrator is engaged in saving innocent lives; the pro-choice activist is fighting for separation of church and state and for women's right to self-determination. The anti-death-penalty crusader is protecting the sanctity of life; the supporter of the death penalty is protecting civilization from predators and reinforcing the morality of personal responsibility. These partisans are not engaged in a policy debate; they are arguing past, not with each other.

Kennedy explores a wide variety of case studies to justify her thesis, ranging from debates where evidence of the paradigm conflict is transparent (e.g., abortion, evolution, homosexuality, and separation of church and state), to conflicts where the Enlightenment and Puritan constructs are less intuitive (e.g., environmental policy, crime and punishment, globalization, and foreign relations).

The final section of the manuscript asks the pragmatic question “what do we do?” (p. 209). Kennedy's solution is a tall order; we need to create a new “national narrative that overlaps—that is, is at least partially consistent—with both the Puritan and Enlightenment paradigms” (p. 210). In Kennedy's view, the most promising way to develop a shared narrative is through a liberal democratic paradigm, which would strive to minimize conflict “by restraining the state from intruding too much into the realms that have been defined as private” (p. 215). Kennedy believes such a worldview can be built around five core values that strive to maximize human dignity and are at least symbolically shared between the two paradigms. These values include equality (equal treatment and fair play), tolerance (“live

and let live”), individual rights and choices (personal responsibility), rule of law (everyone is subject to the rules), and empiricism (observable evidence).

God and Country is a well-written, thought-provoking book. However, at least three aspects of the manuscript could be better developed from a policy scientist’s perspective. While Kennedy skillfully weaves together an intricate story of the history of Enlightenment and Puritan worldviews in America, her modern case studies lack empirical rigor and contextual detail. Kennedy’s purpose in the case studies is to make a convincing argument that the paradigm conflict is pervasive across a wide variety of social contexts. She is largely successful. However, the reader is left wondering if solving the paradigm conflict is actually central to finding workable alternatives to the policy problems our nation faces. Policy scientist Abraham Kaplan (1963, p. 10) argues, “there can be agreement on policy without agreement on...underlying philosophy.” Substantially more detail in the case studies would help Kennedy justify her problem definition and refute Kaplan’s insight in the context of polarized American conflict.

Second, Kennedy spends relatively little space justifying her overarching problem definition. Is America actually divided? If so, why should we be concerned from a policy perspective? I am ultimately sympathetic to Kennedy’s thesis, but it is unclear why we should expect better policy outcomes from a shared paradigm versus the current balance of power dynamics that typify contemporary polarized policy debates. As Dahl (1983, p. 43) argues, “[e]ach of the major organized forces in a country prevents the others from making changes that might seriously damage its perceived interests.” This is one way to understand securing the common interest, which differs from the type of outcome Kennedy seeks. The manuscript would have benefited from elaborating exactly what is at stake for our democracy.

Third, the alternative Kennedy promotes is to develop a shared American paradigm. In the final chapter, she asserts three strategies to help us move in this direction: civil education, reinstating and modifying the Fairness Doctrine in media, and ensuring a fair and impartial government. However, other functional alternatives must exist. For example, Kennedy’s argument that both paradigms were able to flourish in early America due to the United States’ constitutional structure suggests that in certain contexts a well designed system of governance can manage polarized policy conflict. Modifying perspectives is not the only strategy. It is unfortunate Kennedy fails to discuss alternative functional strategies, as her rich understanding of political conflict in the United States certainly offers additional wisdom to the reader.

God and Country provides important insights into the nature of American perspectives and political conflict. Kennedy’s formulation of how the assumptions underlying worldviews can have far-reaching consequences in policy is a lesson we must not forget. This book will be of particular interest to policy scientists concerned with constitutional reform and persistent policy conflict. The book will also benefit educators, particularly as a means to introduce students to the power of political myth.

References

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