

PART VII

Voices of the Twenty-First Century

BY THE OPENING DECADES of the twenty-first century, the collective voice of the nation's capital had become "We're good. They're bad." With some notable exceptions, Republicans and Democrats refused or failed to find common ground on most of the pressing issues of the day. Radical factions to the right of the Republicans and to the left of the Democrats were equally self-righteous. A corollary of "We're good. They're bad" was "They are the problem. We are the solution. And never the twain shall meet." Compromise became a dirty word. This partisan gridlock—an organizing theme of the seventh edition—traces its roots all the way back to the conflicts of colonial America and in the founding of our federalist republic based on a system of institutional checks and balances. Although the partisan divide has worsened in recent years, U.S. politics as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles" (Ambrose Bierce) has periodically characterized the American polity for more than two centuries.

In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama campaigned on a platform of bringing a new kind of politics to Washington: a transformational politics of hope and betterment that would reduce the self-serving impact of interest groups, engage ordinary citizens in the political process, and inspire Americans to fulfill the promise of the national motto of *E pluribus unum*—out of many, one—or the building of national community out of individual, geographical, and cultural diversity. Despite its accomplishments in health care, economic recovery, and military withdrawal from Iraq, President Obama's first term in office served to dim this vision as it became mired in partisan conflict and polarization. The president himself appeared to begin his second term in office with a gritty determination to make the best he could of a bad situation.

On the other hand, the reason why the United States has long attracted people from around the world lies less in the promises of its politicians than in the successful struggles of its citizens for greater liberty, equality, justice, and economic opportunity. To a degree, foreigners seem to have forgiven the United States for some of its historical flaws because its increasingly inclusive system of democratic government has allowed its people to progressively correct the flaws. But despite two centuries of advancement in Americans' personal wealth, cultural and scientific achievements, legal equality, and support for the disadvantaged, the turn of the twenty-first century presented the country with daunting challenges. Moreover, Americans had lost confidence in their political and economic institutions to address such pressing problems as continuing racial and sexual conflict, the struggles of people with disabilities, the unmet needs of children, high crime rates and related social pathologies, political-religious tensions, the economic stress of the working class, ecologically unsustainable life styles, citizens' inadequate access to health care, costly and dangerous foreign wars, global economic instability, discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and

people with disabilities, unaccountable leaders, and Americans' increasing political cynicism and disengagement from the democratic process. In selection 85, Catholic conservative scholar Andrew Bacevich attributes many of these problems to Americans' "crisis of profligacy," driven by their consumerism and relentless striving for more.

Although traditional liberals and conservatives have come up with few new ideas for viable solutions, the less conventional voices of the twenty-first century featured in Part VII address this wide range of issues with a combination of hope and realism: hope that betterment is possible but awareness that fulfilling it will be difficult. Historically, U.S. policymakers under pressure have periodically benefited from innovative ideas originating from outside the mainstream. The early twenty-first century may offer them such an occasion.

Feminist bell hooks (2000) addresses persistent problems of inequality, intolerance, and exclusion by arguing that a truly visionary feminism "is for everybody," including men. She links women's struggles for equality and inclusion with those of poor people, people of color, and people with unconventional sexual orientations or gender identities. The problem, she argues, is not with men per se but with patriarchy and related systems of domination such as heterosexism, racism, capitalism, and imperialism (see selection 82).

Following the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (as enhanced in 2009), beginning in 2003, Catherine Kudlick and other advocates for "the majority-minority" of people with disabilities—20 percent of all Americans—developed a cohesive political theory demanding a wide range of equal opportunities for them, by means of legally mandated "reasonable accommodations" and by the independent living movement pioneered in the 1970s by Lloyd Burton and others. These partisans of disability, many of them disabled themselves, point out that they represent a group that cuts

across all other demographic divisions and that could be joined suddenly by anyone at any time. A small but growing number of disabled public officials such as mass-transit director Claudia Folska have taken up the cause as well (see selection 83).

Brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger (see selection 87) represent a youth-rights and youth-empowerment movement that has become increasingly visible both in North America and around the world since the mid-1990s. They founded and have helped run Free the Children (FTC), nominated three times for a Nobel Peace Prize. Appreciative of the support of sympathetic adults, the Kielburgers nonetheless argue that young people can take their destinies into their own hands by educating, organizing, demonstrating, fundraising, and putting pressure on adults to provide for the basic needs of children and to end such practices as indentured servitude of child laborers, sexual trafficking of children, and unnecessary wars that kill and harm children. Although most of the world's nations have ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, child activists charge that many of these rights, such as freedom of expression and association, are regularly violated in many countries.

Ted Wachtel, president of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, is a leading scholar and practitioner of restorative justice, an originally indigenous alternative to Western adversarial justice that brings together the various parties to a crime in face-to-face conferences seeking to repair the torn fabric of community. Preliminary evidence suggests that restorative justice may reduce recidivism rates among offenders. Wachtel shows how the principles of restorative justice can be extended more generally to restorative *practices* in various realms of social life, including schools (see selection 84).

Presidential candidate Barack Obama's 2008 speech on race, "A More Perfect Union" (see selection 86), put the issue of continued

racial divisions and conflict in a historical perspective connected to such earlier thinkers as Benjamin Rush (see selection 7), Frederick Douglass (see selection 26), and Martin Luther King Jr. (see selection 61). Defying campaign advisers who warned him against giving the speech, Obama argued that race still matters in the United States but that Americans must transcend their racial differences by finding deeper common bonds.

The conservative tea party movement that developed during President Obama's first term is critical of the increasing powers of the national government to intervene in the lives of citizens. Although tea party supporters such as Rand Paul, Jim DeMint, and Ted Cruz have not developed any original political thought, they have added new voices to a long-standing form of libertarian conservatism.

In 2012, the provocative actions of the Catholic nuns of the United States attracted both criticism and intervention by Vatican officials who determined that the nuns were deviating from true Catholic principles in their positions on birth control, abortion, priestly celibacy, and the exclusion of women from the priesthood. The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (see selection 88)—whose members are all male although women are allowed to “consult”—judged that the American nuns were overly concerned with pushing an agenda of social justice to the detriment of taking strong, pro-Catholic positions in such areas as birth control and abortion. But the nuns did not back down, as reflected in the graceful but forceful 2012 presidential address of Sister Pat Farrell (see selection 88) to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

Because partisan gridlock, as well as the bureaucratic tendencies of government, had frustrated Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator William “Bill” Drayton, as had the profiteering nature of his previous corporate job, in 1980 Drayton started the

Ashoka Foundation to create a social-change-oriented alternative to for-profit business and government. Ashoka has funded hundreds of highly successful social entrepreneurs around the world, applying economic principles of supply and demand in pursuit of a different bottom line: social change for the common good. In an interview with *Forbes* magazine, Drayton (see selection 89) offers a dramatic tax-change proposal to create millions of new jobs.

Indigenous thinkers and leaders believe that traditional indigenous practices can help modern societies, including the United States, better address the crises of our times. American Indian Movement (AIM) leader, attorney, and scholar Glenn T. Morris (see selection 90) argues that the world needs to incorporate such principles as ecological harmony, community responsibility for the disadvantaged, democratic accountability, and the seventh generation principle whereby leaders must consider the effects of their decisions on the next seven generations of their people.

Connected to ecology and stewardship of the earth, President Barack Obama's 2013 speech on climate change (see selection 91) urges the government and all Americans to take bold action to slow and eventually reverse the human-caused warming of the planet. Although former vice president and Nobel Prize-winning ecologist Al Gore immediately praised the president's speech, scientists and economists of the conservative Heritage Foundation criticize Obama's proposals as too costly, unnecessary, and inferior to market-based solutions.

Issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and health care have consumed considerable public debate in the United States in the early twenty-first century. The National Coalition for LGBT Health takes on all these issues in its manifesto “Guiding Principles for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Inclusion in Health Care” (see selection 92). This coalition of more

than eighty groups wants to ensure that under the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), all LGBT individuals are equally included and that providers stop discriminating against people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Richard Blanco, a gay immigrant Latino poet, read his powerful poem “One Today” (see selection 93) at President Obama’s second inauguration, in January of 2013. In the poem, Blanco movingly describes both the struggles and the triumphs in the experiences of diverse American groups, especially those that had felt disempowered. He expresses a hope that Americans of all stripes can find common ground and become “one today” in the opportunities for betterment available in the United States of the twenty-first century.

As with previous editions of *American Political Thought*, readers are urged to use

these diverse twenty-first-century thinkers to consider and reconsider their own visions for their country in the challenging times ahead. In general, Americans are not required to participate in politics, unlike in countries like Australia, where citizens are fined if they fail to vote. But all readers should consider the danger that if they decide not to “do politics,” *then politics will be done to them*—and without their having a voice in the decisions. Political nonparticipants are thus left to cross their fingers and hope that others—the officials and the activists—will do good things for them and for the people and values they care about.

Readers might also ponder the fact that even inaction is in effect a vote by default for whatever is happening, whether it be the perpetuation of the status quo or a transformation of it in some new direction, good or bad.

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