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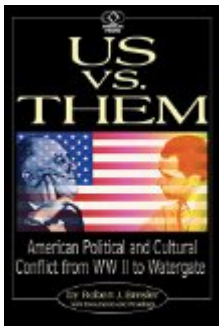

Robert J. Bresler. *Us vs. Them: American Political and Cultural Conflict from WWII to Watergate.* Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000. xii + 262 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8420-2690-1.

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Published on H-Survey (October, 2000)

Contention or Consensus? Politics and Culture since WWII

Robert Bresler presents us with an examination of the rise and fall of the "American consensus" from World War II to the end of the Watergate crisis. It may be tempting, as he notes, to view the past through the "comfortable haze" of time, for it is only through the lens of time that we can truly come to appreciate the past. Indeed, appreciation for what are often called the "Golden Years" of 1945- 1965 is clear in the renaissance of interest of the period through quiz shows such as "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" and "Jeopardy" and popular books such as Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*.

But Bresler is careful to wipe clean that lens of time, to clear up that haze. He offers a balanced, yet intriguing examination of the development, fruition, and passing of a liberal consensus. His exploration of the period takes two forms: first a balanced and engaging narrative in which he examines political, cultural, and social change in the period, and second a carefully edited collection of primary sources that delves more deeply into finely focussed aspects of the rise and fall of this consensus. His work provides a significant contribution to the study of the post-war period, although the book itself might be better unified as a coherent whole.

As proof for the profundity of political and cultural change in the period, Bresler makes a few pointed observations contrasting the beginning of this period with the end. At the most basic level, the Cold War, so formative of attitudes of the immediate post-war years, has passed into the ether of history. Change is clear also in the fact that some of the very groups most identified as outcast and separated from the political process (blacks, feminists, gays, and religious fundamentalists) are now vital players in the political arena. Politicians' private lives are no longer private (imagine FDR's peccadilloes splashed before the American public as Bill Clinton's have been). Cigar smoking political bosses have been replaced by young advisors and media consultants.

Clearly, one of the strengths of this undertaking is the author's summary of the political , cultural, and economic transformations spurred by

World War II. Key to understanding this period was the consensus that replaced contentiousness in a variety of areas: isolationists came to recognize America's place in the world; many of those who feared the New Deal as a harbinger of socialism (at worst) or overarching governmental power (at least) came to endorse a larger role of government in Americans' lives through such institutions as the GI Bill, Social Security, and agricultural subsidies. Significantly, Bresler notes that this consensus was not always supportive of American ideals of civil liberty. For instance, the "twin shocks" of 1949 (the fall of China to the Mao's Communists and the Soviet detonation of its first atomic weapon) combined with Senator Joseph McCarthy's 1950 exposi of communist influences in the national body politic, contributed to a consensual restriction of the rights of political extremists through the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950. Other factors, such as the Hollywood Ten blacklist, the public revulsion of the scandalous behavior of Ingrid Bergman (according to Senator Edwin Johnson, her "unconventional free-love conduct" was not merely "evil," it threatened the institution of marriage itself), and McCarthy's shenanigans demonstrated fissures in the political and cultural consensus (p. 24).

By the mid-1950s, Bresler notes that consensus was bolstered by a stabilized Cold War, a settlement in the Korean conflict, and the censure and disgrace of McCarthy before the American people. Both the Eisenhower White House and nervous liberal Democrats in Congress further reinforced consensus, in spite of the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision, by inertia on civil rights legislation. Considering the 1950s youth culture, Bresler effectively contrasts the dichotomous rebellious male with the sexed domesticity of women. Marlon Brando and James Dean best typified the introverted, detached American masculine youth. Elvis Presley added a further dimension of rebellion. Women, on the other hand, vacillated between sex goddesses such as Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Jane Russell, and the strong domestic figures of Katherine Hepburn and Joan Crawford. Both types, according to Betty Friedan, threatened women's development, achievement, and personal identity. Except perhaps for the domesticity of Crawford and others, these personality types provided youth an antidote to the carefully maintained consensus of American society.

Those anxious about the perceived perpetuation of the inertia of the 1950s consensus heralded Kennedy's victory in 1960 as a return to reform. Many considered Kennedy's dedication to the arts and the liberal intellectual elite as a harbinger of a radical turn to the left. In actuality, as Bresler notes, neither of these perspectives was fully accurate. While Kennedy strove to convince the left that his intellectual appointments and patronage of the arts demonstrated a fundamental shift in governmental priorities, most of the Kennedy agenda remained safely ensconced in the middle ground. Radical movement on such liberal concerns as civil rights and health care remained unrealized until after his death.

Kennedy's apparent liberalism, combined with Nixon's failure in the polls, gave rise to a new conservative movement, led by William F. Buckley. Jr. (manifested in the 1960 "Sharon Statement") and Barry Goldwater (and his ***Conscience of a Conservative***, also in 1960). This nascent conservatism found itself sidetracked by both the unrealized nature of the liberal agenda and Johnson's rise to power in the aftermath of Kennedy's death. Appearing increasingly on the fringe, Goldwater's willingness to lay an axe at the root of such beloved programs as Social Security and farm price supports lost him the presidency in 1964. Armed with a mandate born out of the rising consensus, and with a compliant 89th Congress at his back, Johnson forged ahead with perhaps the strongest liberal agenda in the twentieth century.

The consensus upon which the Great Society was built, however, proved particularly rife with

fissures. Advocates of the New Left believed the Johnson administration was catering too heavily toward traditional government-led social agendas. New Left organizations such as the Free Speech Movement, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Congress of Racial Equality all manifested an ideal of participatory democracy removed from government management. African-American leaders such as Stokeley Carmichael and Malcolm X further challenged prevailing understandings of the relationship between the government and the governed.

The consensus was also threatened on other fronts. Politically, George Wallace's challenge for the Democratic nomination and the consolidation of support behind Goldwater demonstrated increasing displeasure with the direction in which the country was travelling. Culturally, the apparent consensus of the 1960s faced challenges in the form of movies and music. Films such as ***Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*** and ***Fail Safe*** brought into question America's reliance on military technology. Bresler points out that while the decade began mostly devoid of musical challenges to the status quo, the Beatles proved "profoundly subversive" (p. 61). Bob Dylan and others built on the Fab Four's popularity to express a deeper angst about American values.

The consensus of the 1960s proved tenuous indeed. Bresler correctly claims that the Vietnam War was the event that finally ended any pretended consensus. It was "the seismic upheaval that would blow apart the consensus and place liberalism on the political defensive for the next several decades" (p. 62). Movements such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Black Panthers, life at Haight-Ashbury, and the Hippies demonstrated an increasing marginalization of the opposition to the system. The 1968 riots outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago manifested most clearly the "deep cultural divide" which was the death knell of the liberal consensus.

Bresler credits Richard Nixon with great political acumen in portraying himself as the champion of a new consensus, characterized by both cultural conservatism and economic liberalism. For instance, Nixon was able to turn public weariness of student activism into support for both his Cambodian incursions and for the National Guard troops in the Kent State shootings. He also put forward an aggressive environmental agenda while waging a war on inflation and unemployment. This political skill won for him in 1972 one of the greatest electoral victories ever.

Bresler ends his introductory narrative with an examination of the efforts, often failed in the Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, to deal with the "fractured consensus" and to capitalize on coalitions of their own making. One example of this new consensus was Reagan's union between neo-conservatives, supply-side economists, and the religious right. The lengthy debate over the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, according to Bresler, is the latest "manifestation of the depth and persistence of America's cultural divide" (p. 93)

Section I ends with an outstanding bibliographic essay, which will undoubtedly be of great help in directing interested readers to a fuller exploration of the various issues raised in the introductory essay.

Section II of the text is dedicated to a presentation of key primary sources, which Bresler intends to demonstrate the coalescence of the post-WWII consensus, its fracture, and, ultimately, its destruction. Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union address and Richard M. Nixon's 1973 denial of knowledge about the Watergate scandal serve as bookends for this documents section of the text. The former may serve as the organic act of the new consensus, while the latter tolls the passing of public faith in both the government and the liberal consensus. The document set is

clearly the heart of the text. Bresler's selections include many of the expected standards for document collections of the later twentieth century, such as the SDS Port Huron Statement and Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The strength of the collection, however, lies in the unexpected gems, including the Motion Picture Production Codes, Buckley's conservative Sharon Statement, and commencement addresses by both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Section II is larger than the introductory essay by a mere fifty pages. This relative balance is the source of one significant criticism of the text. This book would greatly benefit from a Foreword or Introduction that forges a unified whole out of the text's two constituent parts. Bresler's comprehensive narrative is a masterpiece in the examination of political, social, and cultural consensus and conflict from World War II to the Clinton impeachment proceedings. In this essay, Bresler provides an outstanding condensation of the major trends in American history since the 1940s. Part II, as noted above, is a refreshingly innovative and engaging document set which views the period from a number of unexpected perspectives. However, the linkage between these two sections seems tenuous at best. The utility of this book for undergraduate readers would greatly be enhanced by a fuller effort to establish the same sort of consensus and cohesion within the text as Bresler does through it.