

# Week in Review

## To the Barricades

### The Culture Wars, Part II



The newlyweds Emily Renard, left, and Sara Graham kiss in San Francisco as members of a religious group, Repent America, express their opposition to gay marriage.

By ROBIN TONER

WASHINGTON  
**I**t became an emblematic moment: Patrick Buchanan, standing before the Republican National Convention in August 1992, bluntly declaring that there was a "religious war" and a "cultural war" under way for the soul of the country. And that "Clinton and Clinton are on the other side," with an agenda of "radical feminism," "abortion on demand" and "homosexual rights."

The cultural gulf between left and right, liberal and social conservative, secularist and fundamentalist, had rarely yawned so wide, nor has it since, some analysts say. By the late 1990's, in fact, some were declaring that the culture war was over, even if they disagreed about who won it. But culture

### From Janet Jackson to Mel Gibson to gay marriage, the issues carry an extra punch.

wars wax and wane. And in recent days, as the nation furiously debated gay marriage, Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ" and Janet Jackson's raunchy half-time show at the Super Bowl, the culture war seemed to be waxing again.

It has not reached the intensity of 1992, but scholars say these cultural divisions could be heightened by a tough, close election. The parties are increasingly polarized, and many of

their core constituents are in an uncompromising mood. The courts have been pushing the envelope on issues like gay rights, just as they did on abortion. Social and religious conservatives feel under siege, furious over what they see as judicial tyranny that is removing traditional values, one by one, from the public square.

"I have not seen any issue that mobilizes my constituency like same sex marriage, not even the abortion issue," said Dr. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. "Once you start redefining marriage, where do you stop? I'm still waiting for someone to give me that answer."

Michael Novak, a theologian at the American Enterprise Institute, said, "Many of those who are alarmed by the claim-

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given that it made him sound as if he was answering critics who wondered what he had to show for his 19-plus years in the Senate. Which, of course, he was.



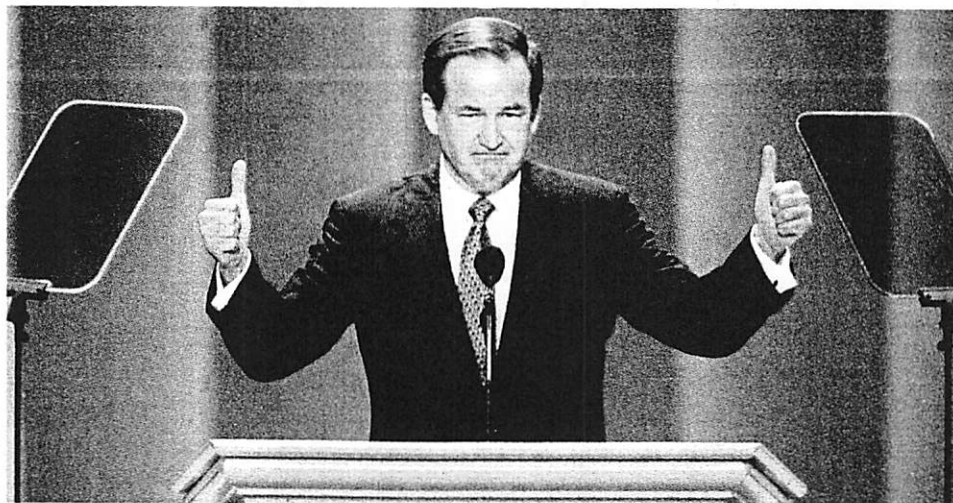
**FEB. 19** (D.C.) "We are going to repeal every benefit, every tax loophole, every reward that entices any **Benedict Arnold** company to take jobs and ship them overseas."



**FEB. 26** (CALIFORNIA, at last Thursday's debate) "I think we not only have **two Americas**... I think we've got two public school systems in this country.... It's wrong.

ces, for the same sense of "optimism and hope."  
"Cynics didn't build this country," he says. "Optimists built this country."

## The Culture Wars, Part II



Associated Press

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ing of the title of marriage by homosexuals feel the issue is being thrust upon them. They feel on the defensive. They see themselves as getting pushed around."

Gay rights advocates, for their part, see themselves as the victims of election-year grandstanding, easy targets for a president looking for a wedge issue to galvanize the voters. "It's saying, 'We think so little of you that we are willing to amend the Constitution to put you in your place,'" said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "It's hard to explain the visceral feeling."

Many Americans reside in the ambivalent middle on these issues — opposed to gay marriage, for example, but more divided on a constitutional amendment. Some Democratic strategists assert that many voters are even uncomfortable with these issues being debated in a political campaign.

"The important question is, 'Are Americans ready to wage a pitched political battle over culture?'" said Geoff Garin, a Democratic pollster who also works for the Human Rights Campaign, a gay rights group. "The answer is, no, they're not. Not anymore than they were in 1992 when Pat Buchanan called them to arms and they said, 'Hell, no.'"

But the terms of the debate are often set by the activists on both sides. As a result, candidates are now forced to take a stand on the nature of marriage, the values that unite Americans, how much change the society can or should accept. President Bush's endorsement last week of a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage pushed the issue into the presidential campaign. Senator John Kerry and his principal rival for the Democratic nomination, Senator John Edwards, declared that they opposed gay marriage, but would not amend the Constitution to ban it.

The long-simmering debate over abortion will come to the president's doorstep in April when abortion rights groups, enraged over the administration's aggressive defense of the so-called partial-birth law, are planning a

### Americans are more tolerant but are still protective of the public square.

huge march on Washington. And the future of the federal courts — especially the Supreme Court, given that the next president may be able to appoint two or three justices — is increasingly seen as another front in the culture war.

"People no longer believe the courts are evenhanded," Mr. Novak said.

The power of the gay marriage issue was reflected by a new poll by the Pew Research Center, which found that 34 percent of voters said they would not support a candidate who favors gay marriage, even if they agreed with the candidate on most other issues. By contrast, only 6 percent said they could not back a candidate who opposes gay marriage.

Still, Andrew Kohut, director of the Pew Center, argued that Americans are in the midst of a striking change in their attitudes toward homosexuality and are far more tolerant of basic rights than they were 15 years ago. But there is a backlash at the idea of gay marriage, particularly among older Americans, he said.

Many analysts note that the country has changed in other ways since the late 1980's and early 1990's, when cultural or wedge issues were in their heyday. Stan and Anna Greenberg, two Democratic pollsters, recently wrote in *The American Prospect* that "while the cultural battle lines on abortion, homosexuality and guns remain," America is "more diverse, more secular, better educated and more socially progressive" than it was in 1988.

But there are limits. Rhys H. Williams, professor of sociology at the University of Cincinnati, argues that the general tolerance of many Americans reaches those limits in the public square, when they are suddenly confronted with behavior — like gay marriages in San Francisco, or Janet Jackson at the Super Bowl — that they feel forces them to take a stand.

Robert Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University, agreed, noting that the Super Bowl is "the one place where we still all feed from the same cultural trough." A show that would hardly have shocked "the niche audience" of MTV was profoundly upsetting to the broader public, he added. The fragmentation of the mass media and its audience explains why "Sex and the City" can be so popular, he added, yet such outrage occur over the Super Bowl.

The outraged also have new tools today. The Internet has quickened the pace of protest. It helped conservatives angered by CBS's planned mini-series on Ronald Reagan spread the word rapidly. CBS executives eventually pulled the show from the network, relegating

to cable.

The political implications of a renewed culture war are complicated. Strategists in both parties said they still expect the campaign to revolve around the economy and national security. But they also expect this to be a close election in which success at turning out core supporters will be crucial. For Republicans, that means white evangelical Protestants, who as recently as 1988 divided fairly evenly along partisan lines, but are now nearly 3-to-1 Republican.

In the 2000 election, Mr. Bush carried 59 percent of the people who said they attended religious services at least once a week; former Vice President Al Gore carried 39 percent. This is a constituency to whom traditional values are important, suggesting the Bush campaign will keep hitting those themes. Still, Mr. Bush has been careful to run as a "compassionate conservative," and avoid the harshness that some analysts argued had backfired on the Republicans in 1992.

The Democrats are also wrestling with the lessons of past culture wars.

Anna Greenberg, in an interview, said Democrats are unlikely to underestimate the power of these issues, as they did in 1988, when Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee, was devastated by attacks on his patriotism, his commitment to fighting crime, his general values. But they are also aware, she said, that the Republicans could overplay their hand.

Ms. Greenberg also took the long view, saying the country was changing so fast that "it's really likely in 10 or 20 years that people won't understand what all the fuss was about." "There's a whole generation of people growing up who just don't think about these issues in the same way," she said.

Dr. Land of the Southern Baptist Convention said he, too, takes the long view of the culture war, but to a different conclusion. "We're in this for the long haul, and the people on the other side had best understand, this is not for dilettantes, not for weekend warriors. We've been at it 30 years now on abortion, and we're winning, and the other side knows we're winning."