

Introduction

Holy War by Other Means

September 11 seemed to change the face of American politics. It made many Americans feel that regardless of differences of party, ideology, ethnicity, race, or gender, they were united *as* Americans. Post-9/11 unity seemed so moving because pre-9/11 partisanship had felt so petty, ugly, and intense.

How quickly that moment passed.¹ By December 1, 2003, *Time* magazine captured the change in its cover story entitled, “Our Polarizing President: Why do Americans either adore Bush or loathe him—and what does it mean for 2004?”

By September 2004, the meaning was clear. The thousandth U.S. soldier had died in Iraq and peace was not on the horizon. Fears of an imminent nuclear threat from North Korea increased. The economy still was not producing enough jobs to keep up with increases in population, inequality was widening, and the percentage of Americans losing their health care each year was increasing. Instead of these, the issue that dominated the convention-laden summer of 2004 was the actions of navy lieutenant John Kerry on a “swiftboat” in a Vietnam river over thirty-five years ago. Incredibly, medals he won under fire became the venue for a renewed Republican attack on the purported military and moral weakness of Democrats. Meanwhile, without a hint of irony, some Democrats attacked Bush for finding a way to avoid combat in a war many of them loathed, and themselves avoided, at the time.

Why attack Kerry for his war record (and later repudiation of the war) and Bush for his choice to avoid combat? Why, indeed, did Kerry need to bring up his war record in the first place, and would the attacks have really been less likely had he not brought it up? Instead of tit-for-tat retribution, we think these occurrences are emblematic of the use and abuse

of personal character as strategic moves in a complex and sophisticated game of political chess. It is a game that too often works because of the distinctive, if not unique, way in which personal character and characteristics become surrogates for policy disputes and even leadership contests in American politics, and why many in the public can be successfully enrolled in such contests.

To attack an opponent's policies as being wrong-headed, of course, is the stuff of democratic politics. Why is it, however, that we often see the opponents' character as germane to the moral bona fides of the political and policy agendas they advance? Might not a bad man and a good woman agree on the same platform? Might not a bad woman be a better political leader than a good man?

In the case of Kerry and Bush, the political motivations were clear. Kerry was attractive to Democrats precisely because he was decorated in Vietnam and therefore able, it was thought, to withstand the "weak on defense" attacks sure to come from Republicans. Kerry's effort at self-sanctification was partly an effort to inoculate himself from demonizing attacks on his "liberal" voting record. Bush was attacked on his National Guard Service in order to raise questions in the public's mind, not only of privilege, but more importantly, as to whether he really had the character of leadership necessary in the trying times of our post-9/11 world. Each move in this character battle was attuned to the Republican effort to deploy its "strong on the military" trump card, and the Democratic effort to win a draw on that hand and move the game to the domestic agenda.

Cathy Young, a thoughtful and provocative conservative columnist for the *Boston Globe*, reminds us that tendencies toward demonization have been bipartisan. We differ with her in our belief that it matters which party or person initiates particular rounds of illicit attacks and, more importantly, the kind of attack is also important. To demonize someone as stupid, however harsh, for example, is not equivalent to demonizing someone as un-American. All demonization is not equal.

Nevertheless, her larger point has much merit and it was reflected during the "debate" over President Clinton's character and impeachment. Some right-wing media, for example, suggested that Clinton had engineered the murder of presidential counsel Vincent Foster.² George Will, a respected columnist and commentator on ABC TV, called the Clintons "vulgarians." He also went so far as to imply that they were both a cause and symptom of a general demoralization of public life. Mocking European puzzlement at the Clinton impeachment, he wrote:

Grow up, Americans. It is immature to judge politicians by other than quantifiable public consequences, such as the growth of GDP. Your quaint, ridiculous political sensibility, reflecting residual puritanism, prevents mature acceptance of this fallen world's naughtiness.

To which, this riposte is apposite: Europe's political sensibility, sometimes called "realism" and accurately called the de-moralization of politics (politics in which the only important questions are, Do the trains run on time? Do the autobahns get built?), has been no impediment to the emergence of Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco and Hitler. So spare us your tutorials on political sophistication.³

Will's implication is that allowing Clinton to go unpunished could lead us, just as "realism" had led Europeans, down a slippery slope toward all manner of political evil. However he doesn't offer any proof that alleged Clinton-style vulgarism had anything to do with the past political evil he identifies in Europe. Nor does he recall the fact during the late 1930s and early 1940s, a time he would likely regard as one of a higher moral quality than our own, it took a direct attack at Pearl Harbor to galvanize our nation behind the anti-fascist cause. For his part, *Los Angeles Times* writer Robert Scheer defended Clinton, not by addressing the substantive deficiencies in Will's logic, but by responding in kind by attacking Will as a hypocrite for having himself divorced the mother of his three children.⁴

The competition among talk shows prompted many of them to devote virtually every show for a year to charges and countercharges, leading up to and through Clinton's impeachment, ratcheting up the rhetoric. Judgments about Clinton colored partisanship in other important events, most notably Desert Fox, the December 1998 bombing campaign against Iraq, and even the spring 1999 war in Serbia.

Meanwhile, the planning for 9/11 was underway.

Laced throughout these controversies was a set of interrelated themes and assumptions concerning the nature of the relationship between personal and political life, between private character and public service. The most profound and we think most dangerous commentary to emerge was the implication that there is a determinate relationship between personal character as registered through private activities and beliefs, and the moral quality of one's political agenda.⁵

As we will see, there is an important conceptual distinction between demonization and appropriate and very strong criticism, although that line cannot simply be determined by abstract definitions. Deciding where

that line is and when one has crossed it is itself a deeply moral and political decision.

When demonization does occur it is especially harmful because it obscures policy and leadership differences *and* similarities between political opponents, and may reinforce existing racial, ethnic, gender, and other stereotypes. But rather than simply lament demonization in politics, it is important to understand why it is prominent and what can be done about it. Demonization is both a consequence and a contributor to political polarization in America today, and for that reason it merits a more focused and broadly based analysis than it has received.

Defining Demonization

To demonize, the dictionary tells us, is “to convert into a demon,” or “to infuse the principles or fury of a demon into” someone, or to turn “persons into or as if into a demon.” Demons are “evil or malignant spirits,” for example, a devil, or a “very cruel, depraved, or wicked person.”⁶ In this book, we do not use the verb “to demonize” in this more classical descriptive sense of denoting how someone becomes demonic, but to describe and hold responsible those who cast the aspersion of being demonic on others too easily and without proper cause. In this we are close to how the term is used in ordinary language.

To demonize is to use language or other symbols in ways that meet two requirements. First, to strongly imply or directly suggest that others have very bad, immoral, or evil qualities, and often that they are capable of quite immoral deeds; or to directly suggest that they have done reprehensible deeds. Second, to do so without sufficient evidence, inquiry, justification, or consideration of the consequences. It is our contention that demonization, as here defined, weakens our ability to deliberate in the most interesting and creative ways for the purpose of improving the quality of our lives.⁷

The idea of being demonic has origins in older beliefs about the world of spirits, particularly of evil spirits. In the modern world, we think it makes sense also to use demonization to denote the illicit attribution of extreme forms of abnormality and deviance to others. In this sense, to demonize may be to “abnormalize” some individual or group. Sometimes demonic as evil and demonic as depraved come together, as, for example, in extreme homophobic beliefs in which gays are thought at once to be

both abnormal and possessed by the devil, in need of therapy and conversion. In fact, attributing deviance to others has some of the power it does because it trades on older fears of evil spirits. This is unsurprising because before the advent of modern psychology, this was one way in which what we today call deviance was understood. In some quarters, particularly on the religious right, it still is.

Accusing others of demonizing is a strong charge. We recognize that when *we* ourselves claim that certain writers or political leaders are engaging in demonization, we open ourselves to the charge of demonizing them. Claims against us, just as the claims we make about others, are each subject to evaluation. Proving one is engaging in demonization is not simple, however—in the first place because determining whether someone is actually moving down the road of attributing evil or depravity to others is not always self-evident. Second, determining whether the charge of evil or depravity is reasonable is perhaps even more contestable. The fact that demonization often involves a blending of tactical, strategic, personal, and moral motives makes evaluation of one's own role or the roles of others in it quite difficult to assess, and most difficult during periods of escalating rhetoric.

Demonization as we use the term is a *sustained* and *illicit* effort whose purpose is to thoroughly stigmatize individuals, types of persons, or groups whether for political or other advantage, righteous belief, or both. We sharply contrast it with knee-jerk attacks against, reflective criticism of, or even extremely harsh censure of positions or persons one has come to abhor. Appropriate moral censure is distinguished from demonization by the care given to the charge as well as by the truth of the claim. We can always press ourselves and others to ask, if not always succeed in fairly answering, whether we or they put in the effort to avoid the temptation of demonization.

To illustrate how some of these complexities involving demonization play themselves out in political life, let's go back briefly to the first Gulf War. There is no doubt that when President George H. W. Bush called Saddam Hussein "another Hitler" in 1990, his point was to paint him as "evil" in order to strengthen the president's political hand in using military force against the Iraqi dictator. Recalling the actual history of this period, however, how are we to think about Bush's claim? During most of the 1980s Hussein was a quiet ally of the Reagan-Bush administration, instigating and then fighting a brutal war against Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, then believed to be our most serious (noncommunist) foe. It was

during this period that Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons both against Iranians and “his own people” (a charge made quite often by George W. Bush to build support for the second Gulf War), the Kurds in northern Iraq. It took Hussein’s invasion of the oil-rich sheikhdom of Kuwait, however, for him to become the moral equivalent of perhaps the most reviled person in history. If Bush was essentially right about Hussein’s lack of regard for human life in 1990, and we think he was, would we be demonizing Bush if we were to claim that it was hypocritical and wrong, perhaps immoral or evil of him to have supported Hussein in the 1980s when he did in fact use “weapons of mass destruction,” that is, chemical weapons? Could someone reasonably reply that, compared to Khomeini, Hussein was the lesser of two evils, therefore our characterization of Bush Sr.’s support for Hussein as evil amounts to demonizing Bush? How could we adjudicate whether this reply or our charge is reasonable? Could all reasonable people, even all honest brokers, agree?

This example suggests why simple definitions alone will not solve the problem. Deciding whether someone is engaging in demonization is itself an irreducibly political question. The best we can do is know as clearly as possible what we mean by demonization, and understand those demonizing tendencies most characteristic of ourselves as individuals, as groups, and as a political culture. And then we must do our level best to resist the temptation to demonize even as we engage in vigorous, even vituperative, political contestation, even over the question of who is demonizing whom.

Types of Demonization

There are three fundamental types of demonizing “strategies.” In one, the target is an easily identifiable “group” of people, whether a nation, race, ethnicity, political affinity, gender, or associational activity. In the second the target is an individual, although the real objective is often much broader. In the third, the target is a policy, agenda, or political philosophy. The borderline between the three is permeable and the links between them are profound. For example, attacking an individual’s character most resonates when the group that individual represents (or is seen to represent) is stereotyped as having similar group character flaws and the policy that person proposes is purported to reproduce such flaws. In this way, attacks on individuals or policies often become surrogates for at-

tacks on groups, which, if made explicitly, for example direct racist attacks, would have political costs.

Political demonization, therefore, is best understood as a complex mosaic of interrelated mindsets, each of which is related to and often reinforces the other, but none of which is simply reducible to any one seminal component. There is, however, one constant. Demonization relies upon imputation of moral or spiritual failure, or deviance, or extreme incompetence (that is, moral failure for having illicitly assumed leadership). Thus, whether leveled against another culture, group, or individual, it always has a characterological component.

Today this is even true when the allegations are launched against foreign cultures that at one time could have simply been branded with racist stereotypes based upon purported natural characteristics. Even with today's fear of radical Muslim terrorism, public denunciation of Muslims will focus on the kind of people Muslim teachings produce rather than on the intrinsic "nature" of Muslims and Arabs. The issue, at least in respectable public discourse, becomes one of sociology and character, not one of intrinsic or genetic ethnic or racial characteristics. There is always the danger, of course, that these older stereotypes lurk in the background.

Group demonization includes defining the enemies of one's own nation in such a way as to ratchet up national chauvinism. In its most obvious form this occurs in run-ups to wars, whether secular or religious, and is nurtured, perhaps even necessary, in the execution of an actual war. President Bush's articulation of an "axis of evil" is one example, but the history of threat and warfare is replete with others. Recall, for example, Ayatollah Khomeini's characterization back in 1979 of America as "the Great Satan." Always important, this type of labeling deserves especially close attention today because of the real threat of terrorists, and their possible acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction. This confluence creates simultaneous pressures toward exaggeration of foreign threats and marginalization of domestic leaders who resist such rhetoric, and toward temptation to demonize both foreign and domestic foes.

Demonizing foreigners has a domestic analog informed by traditional ethnocentricity and racism. It treats minority groups of different ethnic, racial, religious, and/or cultural origins as not merely a burden on the nation's resources, but as a deviation from the nation's character and an intrinsic source of the nation's problems. It scapegoats them. America's immigrant and racial history makes this kind of demonization an important one to keep in mind.

In today's more ethnically and racially tolerant political climate, overt domestic racial or ethnic demonization is at the fringe. Yet similar objectives can be achieved in other ways. Perhaps the most recognizable example is the way in which "welfare" was increasingly used as a "racially coded" term going back over three decades, most notably through Ronald Reagan's fable about a "welfare queen" who drove a "welfare Cadillac," which became political folklore. Demonizing welfare recipients was effective because of America's racial history, its denouement of disproportionate numbers of African Americans on welfare, and the racist and stereotypical traits imputed to African Americans such as laziness and low intelligence that, in turn, allegedly forced "hard-working" people to pay unfairly high taxes to support "them."

Individual political leaders may be demonized for their alleged bad character; the result of such demonization may simply be to discredit them or to serve the broader political objective of defeating their party in an election. Sometimes the effects, even the goals, are broader yet. The attacks on a leader's private behavior, for example, can be a proxy for a larger social cause in which the political agenda of one's opponents is reduced to and equated with, and thereby condemned by, charges about the personal character and private behavior of the leader. For many on the right, Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky was most important because it was emblematic of the moral depravity and relativism that they believe has infected liberalism since the 1960s. This depravity could be as easily discerned in liberal policies as in the man, they believed—from affirmative action to welfare to gays in the military.

Demonization of this type flows in both directions. Thus, liberals accuse conservatives of the racist policy of victimizing blacks by cutting off welfare in spite of our racist history, and conservatives return the accusation of racism, blaming liberals for supporting a welfare state that creates a sick mentality of victimization. This conservative charge is worth considering. Policies such as welfare can easily be demonized because they inadequately address problems of historical magnitude, and therefore may seem to reproduce them or create insidious new ones. Thus African Americans may allegedly become dependent on welfare and, in the post-civil rights era, disempowered from making use of the full equal opportunity now claimed to be afforded them. Welfare, not racism, becomes the problem. Yet it remains the case that different social policies can create undesirable characterological traits in people. Therefore, raising ques-

tions about the consequences of public policy for character is a necessary part of serious political discourse.

Taken together, these three types of demonization are distinct yet often interwoven, and each can build upon the other. Policy agendas are treated as contemptible and simultaneously caricatured as “foreign” manifestations of a particular ethnic, socioeconomic, or racial group and/or flowing from the character of a particular leader. The whole process often culminates in and is reinforced by a process of condemning policy agendas through examination of the life—including the private life—of the political leader. That leader is seen as a symbol of a certain socioeconomic, racial, or “foreign” demographic type and a certain political perspective, and all are condemned through reference to the individual’s private life or purported character.

When all types of demonization come together, particular policy agendas are thoroughly stigmatized and effective contestation and productive debate become almost impossible. At worst, an agenda is seen as unspeakably evil, fostered by a socioeconomic class or racial/ethnic group seen as the origins of the polity’s most important problems and promoted by a leader whose despicable private behavior is typical of those to whom he appeals. The leader’s purported depravity becomes emblematic of the values inherent in the policy agenda in question, as well as the type of person produced by its socialization process.

It is still the case, however, that whether demonization is occurring cannot usually be discerned simply by the content of the charge. Nor is all demonization intentional. To evaluate whether demonization is occurring therefore requires analysis of the care with which particular charges are constructed, the subcurrents on which they are based and designed to appeal to, and sometimes the motivation of the actors. And of course, in the end, what counts is the relationship between the accuracy of the charge—often enough, criticism is true—and the quality of the case the critic has made to herself or himself before actually making the charge.

Demonization is a process from which neither the left nor right is immune. Blaming economic extremes on wealthy individuals who are deemed inherently greedy or “malefactors of great wealth” is hardly more useful for understanding inequality than attributing the high school dropout rate to modern teenagers who are deemed willfully or inherently lustful and indolent. In each case, little effort is expended to define key

concepts or specify just how the behavior of the “accused” is radically different from that of others. Neither do accusers, even when correct in their judgments about bad behavior, generally demonstrate that those found “guilty” have consistent patterns or histories of acting in these defined ways. Nor do they often explore conditions that might provide partial exculpation, or make a serious effort to see if there are extrinsic factors that may have induced the bad behavior in the first place. Why hordes of businessmen suddenly become inordinately greedy or packs of teenagers scandalously lustful is hardly self-evident and rarely explained in such jeremiads. Instead of regarding such problems as teenage pregnancy, poverty, or even greed as dilemmas rooted in the complex interplay of institutional practices, reigning moral codes, and wide-ranging human attributes, we treat these as proof of the inherent depravity of selected citizens. Those thus stigmatized readily return the favor.

We conclude that analyses that blame widespread social problems on the individual character of leaders or large numbers of people or the character of groups, while not to be ruled out by fiat, are often quite suspect. Seldom are they useful guides to comprehensive political action. Character is without question important, and people surely do make choices in their lives, but they do so as members of groups that may have different cultural expectations, experience inequitable political opportunities, and may be in dissimilar economic circumstances.

Attention to such details will certainly elicit charges of moral relativism by those who seek simple solutions and who have an interest, whether personal or political, in having an enemy to blame. Such moral postures, however, make both understanding *and* proper moral judgment impossible. Examining the political and cultural reasons of why we focus inordinate time and thought on the politics of collective or individual character is therefore itself an important endeavor.

Fundamental Ethical and Political Assumptions

Every society needs common standards that citizens can both fashion and embrace in a relatively consensual way. In a world where tradition and organic hierarchy have broken down, citizens still need the coordination and sense of security that standards set. Participation in their development and implementation is essential if these standards are to have legit-

imate claim to our allegiance. But much in human experience leads us to suspect any group, even a majority, that proclaims to have final and all-encompassing standards. The task is to build a community that respects both its own standards and the rights of its members to pursue their own individual course. For it is through such pursuit that we learn not just about individuals, but also about the moral purchase of the standards themselves.

A commitment to community based upon shared precepts and to individuality in which precepts may be imperfectly shared requires that we remain open to how we negotiate the terms of our compact. Accepted codes of appropriate behavior, however, are hard under the best of circumstances to criticize, because they can easily be used to impute that the critic is not just mistaken, but deviant or worse. Contrary to some political writers and thinkers, therefore, we also suggest that political rhetoric that alienates some people and which can do harm may emanate from the political center—where it is hardest to observe. There can exist a kind of centrist fundamentalism, reminiscent of what Cornell University political theorist Theodore Lowi once called the “politics of dead center,” an ossified consensus defined and elaborated by contemporary coalitions of power and interest. If you fall outside the bounds of such reasonableness, be careful. Moreover, those who appear to the center as “extreme” are the ones most often accused of demonization. The answer then advanced by the center to solve the problem of demonization is a return to the center, which it accomplishes in part by employing a style of rhetoric that itself demonizes the “extremes.”

Let’s take two brief examples of steps in this direction from the work of journalists we respect and with whom we quite often agree. E. J. Dionne claims that “Americans hate politics” because activists in each party, more “extreme” than average party members, distort politics by moving it away from where the average American really is on key issues. Be that as it may, is it far-fetched to think that the center may from time to time be sitting out fundamentally important moral debates engaged by the partisans? *New York Times* correspondent Tom Friedman’s work can yield to a similar temptation with a rhetorical style sometimes suggesting that, on the one hand, you could irrationally do this, and on the other you could irrationally do that, so why not do it in the only rational (and moral) way, that is to say, my way. Consider, for example, his support for the Geneva Accords, an agreement hammered out by nongovernmental

Israelis and Palestinians and presented to the public in October 2003. It is an agreement that we also strongly support as a way to resolve the conflict through compromise. Friedman strongly praises the Israeli negotiator Yossi Beilin as a “fanatical moderate—as committed to his moderation as the extremists are to their extremism.”⁸ Undoubtedly, Friedman is partly responding to the often mindless violence rather than simply the intransigence of each side. Yet does he advance his case (our case) or deepen the rift by attacking not only terrorists but also by demonizing what could turn out to be principled, nonviolent positions held by “extremists” on each side of the center that he and we stake out on this issue?

Dionne and Friedman’s style of argumentation in these instances is very alluring, and most of us succumb to it. The temptation to cast one’s own position as the only reasonable one is also hardly reserved for the political center. It traverses the entire political spectrum, built as it is into modern political discourse.

The premise of our overall approach to demonization is that the paradoxical need for both community and individuality commits us to democratic politics as an ever-present necessity. We contrast our views with those who suggest that ideological distortion, which we suggest includes demonization, is best combated by framing one set of “neutral,” rational, or commonsense assumptions to which all reasonable citizens can agree and from which discussion and debate needs to proceed.⁹ Our fundamental commitment in this work is to political practice and discourse that actively seek to minimize demonization as part of their project. Demonization-free discourse is an ideal that will never and perhaps can never be achieved. Yet political discourse free of demonization is a worthy and obtainable objective.

Most of life must be lived in common. Living in a modern productive community, while fostering space for individual differences, requires a notion both of responsible agency and rationality, and one of openness to people, ideas, and codes more or less foreign to us. It requires, in other words, a capacity both for control and for surprise. Reasoned discourse itself is facilitated when we acknowledge we all work from worldviews that we can neither put aside nor fully prove; each limit we are brave enough to admit should inspire humility in our attitude toward others and in our own certainty about ourselves.

Assuming a complex, protean, and yet social world never fully expressive of our purposes, we suspect that the need for both individuality and common purposes will never end. Difficulties between these needs will re-

main and have to be negotiated within a regime that respects and protects individual rights by people who also have a sense of social responsibility.

Our fundamental commitment here is this. Anything does not go. Some beliefs and actions are simply wrong. Precisely for these reasons it is incumbent upon us to shoulder responsibility to better understand why we think and feel the way we do, and why we are drawn to certain styles of political commentary or particular political agendas. A desire for such understanding commits us to know ourselves more fully, yet with less certainty, to be more rather than less open. Easy demonization of others precludes precisely these qualities.

We know it is desirable and think it is possible in democratic politics to step outside of narrow bounds in the ways we frame identity and social purposes, and thereby make the effort to tame demonization. One step in this direction is to understand the distinctive and contemporary ways our western heritage, often believing itself free of superstition, nevertheless disciplines its inhabitants to singular purposes. At the same time, this tradition also prepares us for self-conscious reflection and analysis, and tolerance. This two-sided theme is a major subtext of the thesis we argue throughout the book and the proposals we present in conclusion.

We draw critically upon several seemingly disparate strains of thought. Some cultures, such as a number of Native American nations, adopted attitudes toward difference that have important points of contact for what we are suggesting. Nineteenth-century American thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman celebrated the natural and social worlds not primarily as sources of final harmony and truth but as purveyors of surprise. Reinhold Niebuhr and other theologians have tended to regard sin not as a licentious individual act but as reflective of the pretense that our values and purposes can represent or contain all of life. Liberal political thinkers such as George Kateb stress tolerance, political equality, and individualism. Conservatives such as Robert Nozick stress accountability, responsibility, and liberty. Critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno and poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault emphasize different ways in which Enlightenment notions of rationality or even science can create regimes of power, which marginalize. Yet the very idea of being self-conscious of belief systems and their enabling and constraining features is itself indebted to modernity's break with traditional culture and its effort to know the world more fully. Each of these schemes has in different ways influenced us, although some more than others.

Regardless of origins or precursors, any argument suggesting as best those worldviews that advocate a critical stance even toward the fundamentalist verity of their own standards is often denounced. Openness to the possibility of limits and injustices of received truth is often portrayed as undermining moral foundations. We challenge this perspective.

Resisting the lure of fixed and fully encompassing moral and political truths puts us in a better, not worse, position to ground our thought and action. It allows us to know more fully why we think certain courses of action are wrong, and thereby test our judgments and act more confidently as to our motives when we believe a course of action to be right. In our view, truth is not relative. Neither, however, is it a gift easily given, graciously received.

Our meta-ethical perspective, like any fundamental perspective, is not fully proven, nor is it simply chosen like a new car. It is elicited in us through awareness of the elements of anxiety we detect in fundamentalist postures, especially when they are our own, and the harms they do. It is also derived from the faith we confess to having in the human ability to find delight, fulfillment, and moral generation in discovering things that are new.

Rather than enter into a fuller defense of our position in philosophical terms, in this work we point to its advantages for democratic theory and political practices.¹⁰ We hope that our discussion of contemporary issues and rhetoric exposes some characteristic yet underlying anxieties that we have as contemporary Americans, which make us more receptive than we need be to demonizing political strategies.

The narrative we elaborate encourages and is encouraged by political participation that is at once broad, plural, and deeply self-reflective. In our belief that deeper understanding, and therefore deeper participation, can point us away from a politics of demonization, we show our hopefulness. One effect of demonizing rhetoric is to create a constricted political agenda in which debates and arguments about how best to improve quality of life, both material and moral, are marched outside. The chapters in this book examine some reasons the scope of debate too often becomes constricted in this way, the consequences for American democracy, and what needs to be done to reshape political discourse. The 2004 election notwithstanding, our bet is that many Americans are ready—perhaps even hunger—for higher-quality debate and can be sufficiently tolerant to participate respectfully.

Overview

In Part I we outline the key elements of the problem of demonization in politics. In chapter 1, we review the background of demonization in America and some recent distinctive trends. In chapter 2 we elaborate a particularly modern and American form of demonization we call the “politics of moral personae,” in which the character of leaders becomes enmeshed with policies, constituencies, and philosophies. In chapter 3 we examine the origins of one particularly salient form of that politics. We call it “America’s moral paradox,” our simultaneous economic and cultural need to be pulled simultaneously in puritanical and hedonistic directions, and suggest its consequences for political demonization, American-style. In chapter 4 we examine the depth and nature of the political and cultural divisions in America, and who is most harmed by them.

In Part II we examine aspects of important cultural and military wars in which we are now engaged. In chapter 5 we analyze the idea of the enemy, and how enemies come to be constructed. In chapter 6 we discuss terrorism and the meaning of evil, and what our response has been and should be to each. In chapter 7 we directly relate the terror and culture wars to each other, and address issues of fundamentalist responses among politically active citizens and some intellectuals. In chapter 8 we analyze how the culture war plays itself out over the environment, and how environmentalists can better position themselves to achieve reforms.

Finally, in our conclusion, we develop a perspective and set of proposals to foster a more generous democratic polity—one thereby better positioned to mitigate tendencies toward demonization. We suggest a specific program to advance the goal of “democracy without demons” based upon a renewed democratic covenant that includes five essential commitments.

Democracy will never thoroughly free itself of demons. Perhaps that is an impossible goal or one that would produce other harms. Our democracy, however, can be freer from demonization than it now is. If it were, we would be freer, too.