

9/11, Watershed 2001

by Richard D. Lamm

Let me attempt to describe for you the pre-September 11, 2001 America. In the last three presidential elections neither candidate got fifty percent of the vote. In the last three congressional elections neither party got fifty percent. We are a deeply and evenly divided country. Michael Barone calls it “The 49 Percent Nation.” He points out that one America is moralistic, traditional, conventional, religious, and nationalistic-minded. The second America is liberal-minded, tolerant, permissive, non-traditional, international, and secular.

One America believes in economic freedom and regulation of social conduct. The other America believes in social freedom but economic regulation. One talks about “illegal aliens”; the other refers to “undocumented workers.” One America believes in the “Nanny State” where the government provides benefits and helps even the playing field. The other America believes in the “Daddy State” which is a stern father and enforces moral conduct. One America believes in creationism, the other in Darwinism. One America thinks of abortion as murder, guns as an American way of life, and natural resources as something to be used. The second America believes abortion is a woman’s right, guns are better if controlled, and natural resources are best conserved.

One America believes that God is an American who will save us no matter how hedonistic or inefficient we become. The second America warns that no great nation has ever escaped the passage of time – that all great nations rise and all great nations fall, and reminds us that Arnold Toynbee said the autopsy of history discovers that all great nations commit suicide.

America is run by two political parties, neither of which is an honest broker of the national interest. Both

have been captured by special interests: the Republican Party by the religious right and big business; the Democratic Party by the trial lawyers, the teachers’ union, and big labor.

There are a number of newspapers. There is the *Wall Street Journal*, which is read by people who run the country. There is the *New York Times*, which is read by people who wish they ran the country. There is *The Boston Globe* which is read by people who used to run the country, *The Washington Post* by people who work for those who run the country, and the *Miami Herald* by people who run other people’s countries.

There are two opposing cultures when it comes to matters like population and immigration. One is the culture of growth where the future is an extrapolation of the past and growth can go on forever. America is a nation of endless entrepreneurship; and as the Sea Bees used to say in the Second World War, “the difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer.” The followers of this culture point out that we can now make wealth out of sand (computer chips), and they scoff at the idea of any limits in the ecosystem or of human ingenuity. They point to Malthus as a failed prophet; and they push for growth, believing that the problems of growth can be solved by more growth and that history is on their side.

The second culture in America warns that we live on a limited globe with a frail ecosystem. Adherents point out that the icecaps are melting, the rain forests are being cut down, the fisheries are being depleted, the globe is warming, and the topsoil is disappearing. This is the culture of limits that pushes for sustainability and population stabilization. They warn that ultimately the economy must fit within the ecosystem and that the world must recognize that we are pushing environmental limits.

What is the new America? The post-September 11 America is still being formed, and it is hard to judge the magnitude of the change or its permanence. The horror of September 11 is still sinking in. We know there are old words that have a new respect: words like “patriotism” and “borders” and “national pride” and “assimilation.” But the implications of this new America are inchoate.

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The country that used to have two polarized philosophies has now been shaken up. America is now a lump of clay and we have a wonderful opportunity to reshape it on such issues as immigration, language and assimilation. •