

[*America's Second Civil War: Dispatches from the Political Center*, Stanley A. Renshon, Transaction, 358 pages]

Civil War, Ready or Not

By Chilton Williamson Jr.

TO COMPREHEND the burden of conceptual confusion with which Stanley Renshon's book is handicapped, only imagine a hypothetical volume appearing in, say, July 1863, under the title *The American Civil War; Or, Dispatches from the Political Center*. Since a country in the throes of civil war has, by definition, no political center, reviewers and readers alike might be perplexed regarding the identity of this locus. Washington, D.C. or Richmond, Va.? The Mason and Dixon Line? Gettysburg, Penn., where a major battle had recently been fought? The title would seem to them an oxymoron, or simply a meaningless string of words.

Renshon, in his actual book, attempts a clear definition that unfortunately fails to identify: "The political center is the Holy Grail of American politics, the Archimedean point at which North/South/East/and West, men and women, urban and suburban, left and right, race and ethnicity are in harmonious political balance." This definition, which appears to apprehend the Music of the Spheres rather than any identifiable political position, is not clarified by Renshon's further observation that, "the political center is primarily cultural." Nor is it clarified by anything else Renshon has to say on the subject, probably for the reason that Renshon does not want clarification. Of course civil war affords no political center, but that doesn't prevent prudent people of a certain type from trying to hide out at it anyway. Political labels are of no great use today, but if forced to identify Stanley Renshon one way or another, I would call him a recovering

liberal leaning toward conservatism (lower-case "c"). That is a more conservative position than many avowed "Conservatives" adhere to today. Renshon, a certified psychoanalyst, ought to be at least as honest with himself as presumably he expects his patients to be with him.

This lack of authorial candor is a pity: The Second Civil War absolutely is under way, yet Renshon's unwillingness to declare sides necessarily prevents him from grasping its essential nature and meaning. Perhaps for similar reasons, his understanding of the Civil War, which he thinks was fought to decide whether the United States could have a common future without a common culture, is flat-out wrong (but that is another story). "Now," he writes, "for the second time in its history, America faces a real question of how to maintain a stable and effective relationship between its *unum* and *pluribus*.... [T]he new danger lies in conflicts among people of different racial, cultural, and ethnic heritages, and between those who view themselves as socially, culturally, politically, and economically disadvantaged and those whom they see as privileged.... Unlike the first Civil War, the antagonists cannot take for granted, nor take refuge in, the primary institutions in their parts of the country, such as family, or religious, social, cultural, or political organizations. These are precisely the places where the conflicts are being fought." The result is, "America's unfolding basic public dilemma [has become] our increasing diversity and how we [will] handle it."

Renshon is basically sound on the immigration issue, suggesting that multicultural and ethnic diversity can easily lead to "a fragmented and dysfunctional national identity," criticizing the federal government's leniency in permitting immigrants (and others) to enjoy dual citizenship, and insisting that the paramount concern raised by mass immigration ought not to be the good of the immigrants themselves or the "needs" of the businesses that employ (some) of them, but the effect several million

immigrants arriving each year can be expected to have on our cultural and political institutions. Precisely because America is fragmented, confused, resentful, and angry to an extent unprecedented in its history, thirteen million legal immigrants accepted into the U.S., in the course of a decade and from dozens of exotic societies around the world, can only aggravate further the process of destabilization in a country that cannot make up its mind whether to expect assimilation or not. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer argued in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, published more than three decades ago, that what Michael Novak called the "unmeltable ethnics," all of them of European extraction, assimilated only imperfectly and, to that extent, resentfully to WASP America in an era in which the need for assimilation was taken for granted. (I made the same point in my book, *The Immigration Mystique: America's False Conscience*.) Stanley Renshon, by contrast, takes the more conventional position in stating that until recently, with the exception of the Civil War period, "America was able to take a coherent national culture and identity for granted." At issue today, he believes, is not whether America should have a dominant culture but rather a primary one. The prospects for even that much he appears to find increasingly dim.

Immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism are not, however, really the American dilemma itself but only pawns in what we call the cultural war, though actually it is a metaphysical engagement. Renshon notes that "primary conflicts" are less the result of disagreements on "facts" and particular policies than they are "a product of fundamentally different views of America." Here Renshon might have paused to note that one of these "different views" is a deliberate dishonest construct, amounting to a fantastical lie or lying fantasy worthy of the Prince of Lies himself. Instead, he goes on to observe, accurately, that, "At issue is whether it is possible or desirable to preserve the

strengths of a common heritage in the face of insistence from some quarters that our past has resulted in a culture worth tearing down to build over, rather than one worth keeping and building on. The basic conflict is over the viability of American culture and identity itself." But Renshon fails to add that for "American identity" we can read "Western identity," and for "Western identity," "human identity." Stanley Renshon says he got started on this project while writing a book on the Clinton presidency. Doubtless he is familiar with Mrs. Clinton's expressed ambition to "redefine what it means to be a human being in the twenty-first century." Or if he is not he should be, since the reinvention of humanity is finally what the Second Civil War is being fought over, not whether future American presidents will assume what Renshon calls a "heroic" or "reflective" role in office.

Another way of saying it is that on one side of the battle line stands the party that has adopted the restructuring of reality as its great cause and project, on the other the one that has chosen to oppose the desacralization of the universe and the dehumanization of man. Renshon himself provides plenty of statistical evidence for the nature of the division, most of it drawn from post-election data gleaned from the 2000 presidential vote and showing conclusively that Al Gore was the candidate of secularists, "intellectuals," media people, enthusiasts for gay rights, abortion, and euthanasia, environmentalists, and other deconstructionist elements; George Bush the choice of religious believers and church-goers, enemies of abortion, gay rights, and other "alternative life-styles," Middle Americans, and social conservatives generally. Terry Teachout has suggested "Democratic Nation" and "Republican Nation" as appropriate designations connoting the opposed parties. "Nation of Rebellion" and "Nation of Acceptance" better suggest the fierceness of that opposition, as well as the breadth and depth of the gulf stretching between the two forces,

which in any case are not strictly separated by party lines.

One way or another, the Second Civil War is a reality, not a journalistic metaphor, and it can only be expected to intensify in the coming years. As in every civil war, everyone will have to choose his side eventually, Renshon included. Which side he will end up on seems fairly predictable. For now, it is encouraging to know that someone who considers himself a centrist could have written this book. Given enough of him, perhaps in the crisis the Nation of Acceptance will have a chance at prevailing, after all. ■

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[Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right; Ann Coulter, Crown Publishers, 256 pages]

Breaking the Code

By Janet Scott Barlow

WITH *SLANDER: LIBERAL Lies About the American Right*, Ann Coulter has written a funny book—which is in no way to suggest she has produced an unserious book. Coulter's purpose here is to expose, document, enumerate, and analyze the many sources and forms of the Left's political lies.

Her central method in this task is to record, over and over and over again, *what liberals actually say*. And while individual examples may be hilarious (Bryant Gumbel to *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner in an interview during the 2000 presidential race: "In a macropolitical sense, do you think the Gore preoccupation with morality is a frightening turn for the party?"), the cumulative effect is deadly.

Ann Coulter has broken the code in

dealing with typical liberal tactics, which consist mainly of labeling conservatives "dangerous," "stupid," or "mean." The standard liberal technique, she writes, comes down to this: "Always advance as if under threat of attack." Coulter herself advances by aggressively rejecting the Left's labels (along with the defensiveness that can accompany being their object), then tenaciously scrutinizing the facts, the record, and the documented observations of selected liberals, Democrats, and lefties. Finally, she follows up with the one-two punch of applied logic and intellectual rigor. What Ann Coulter does in *Slander* is, in fact, hard work; and her ability to make it look easy suggests a high-energy sense of mental order.

Coulter's talents merge to perfection in a chapter exploring what she calls "the apocryphal 'religious right.'" In total, this exploration is a marvel: informative, persuasive, entertaining. Coulter's contention is that the term "Religious Right" is useless in an objective sense (the Religious Right, she points out, is not an organization, has no members, and is not, if white Christians are the measure, a predictable voting bloc), yet powerful as a negative political weapon. ("Religious Right" generally serves not as a description but as a slur.) And because liberals, especially in the media, both hate and need the Religious Right, they are forever predicting the rise of its influence and the decline of its power. The innumerable contradictions and inconsistencies Coulter unearths on this subject are both comical and outrageous.

Near the conclusion of *Slander*, Ann Coulter lists a series of conservative ideas and accomplishments that are "changing the world," among them: school vouchers, welfare reform, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and winning the Cold War. I would add one item to her list. Although I am not sure it is (yet) changing the world, conservatives also have accomplished this: In the past two decades or so, they have altered conventional wisdom—the gen-