Shortly after the presidential election last November, a new map began making its way around the Internet, quickly achieving notoriety. The map suggested a geopolitical re-sorting of North America into two more culturally cohesive and geographically sensible nations, helpfully renamed the United States of Canada (comprising our northern neighbor and the "blue" states) and Jesusland (the "red" states).

Election Day is now some two months behind us, and the worst excesses of partisan name-calling and public hand-wringing over unbridgeable divides in American society seem largely to have passed. But as President George W. Bush prepares to deliver his fourth State of the Union address, serious questions about the unity of our culture remain: Just how many Americas will the president in fact be addressing? Are the fissures in our society changing or deepening? What binds us as Americans, and how strongly?

For this, our third annual survey of the state of the union, we asked several prominent writers and thinkers to explore splits within the United States in a number of key areas (politics, religion, economic life, culture, and the media), paying particular attention to historical context and likely future scenarios. The resulting essays stand independently, but collectively they offer several lessons about the nature and the course of divisions in the United States.

Most broadly, the idea that the nation is neatly divided into two ideologically consistent, geographically separate camps is false. Americans are divided over countless issues, but typically in ways that defy easy stereotypes. As Jonathan Rauch and P. J. O'Rourke show in their different ways, the cultural geography of the United States offers a far richer palette than just red and blue. There is enormous diversity from state to like-colored state, within each state (whatever its color), and even within superficially like-minded groups. In what we think, read, and watch; in whom we marry and how often we divorce; in what we give and buy; and in innumerable other ways, we are a maddeningly inconsistent lot, however we are labeled.

On the issues that matter most, however—those of basic values, social tolerance, and public policy—Americans appear less divided than they have been throughout much of U.S. history. As Rauch argues, today the largest divide may be not between two American cultures but between American culture, which might be best characterized as widely tolerant of its own incoherence, and American politics, which has grown ever more partisan, owing largely to electoral developments such as the rise of primaries and the gerrymandering of districts.
Nor is it only the politicians. As Hanna Rosin observes, an ideological sorting is also taking place within American religion. Whereas in the past the primary divides between worshippers were denominational—between Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics, Baptists and Lutherans—increasingly Americans of faith are coalescing across denominations into perceptible blocs, one traditionalist and relatively conservative, another modernist and relatively liberal. In the 2004 election this religious divide closely paralleled the country's political divide. And while that may not be the case in the future, the traditionalist and modernist categories appear to be hardening.

There are other signs that divides in American society may widen in the future. Deep economic and technological forces are undermining the political, cultural, and economic unity that has characterized the postwar era.

Specifically, Stephen S. Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong argue that the gradual opening of our vast service sector to foreign competition is likely to cause economic upheaval on a scale not seen since the 1800s, when the development of the steamship and the telegraph made overseas trade in most goods possible. This new economic era will bring with it tremendous opportunity, but also considerable risk—including the real possibility of downward mobility for many in the middle class.

At the same time, as William Powers explains, because of the Internet, satellite radio, and ever proliferating TV channels, the mass media are giving way to smaller outlets that in many ways resemble the noisy, combative press of the nineteenth century. This fragmentation into ever narrower cultural, ideological, and demographic niches may increase the social atomization and political fractiousness that many Americans already find so dispiriting.

But as Rauch, Powers, and O'Rourke all write, a society that is more fractious is not necessarily weaker. Debate often produces better decisions. And political contentiousness often coincides with political involvement—a point that was underlined by the presidential election. The citizens of this nation will continue to disagree with one another on a wide range of subjects—including, perhaps, the question of how much we really disagree. What could be more American?

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