

NANCY L. COHEN

DELIRIUM

HOW THE SEXUAL
COUNTERREVOLUTION IS
POLARIZING AMERICA

*A Groundbreaking Investigation into the Shadow
Movement that Fuels our Political Wars*



INTRODUCTION

As baseball-sized hailstones rain down on Kansas and tornadoes touch down a few hundred miles south of Washington, D.C., Republicans nearly shut down the federal government over funding for birth control. When the Obama administration announces that it will not defend the Defense of Marriage Act because the Justice Department has concluded the law is unconstitutional, Republicans vote to spend taxpayer dollars to have Congress take over the appeal. Ten days into the controversial military operation to aid the Libyan rebellion against Muammar el-Qaddafi, the House Armed Services subcommittee calls the nation's military leaders to appear at a hearing about the recent repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. The officials testify that there have been "no issues or problems" and the transition is going smoothly. Republican congressmen claim that allowing gays to serve openly in the armed forces will wreak devastation on troop morale and national security.

In the first weeks of summer, as Congressional Republicans play a game of brinksmanship with the nation's credit, wildfires sweep through Texas and 140 million Americans swelter under life-threatening heat. Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann surges into second place in the 2012 Republican presidential race. Bachmann is the founder of the House Tea Party Caucus and promises to be a voice for "constitutional conservatism" and "limited government." She has also called homosexuality "personal enslavement" and told voters she follows the biblical admonition, "Wives, be submissive to your husbands."

Bad economies are treacherous to incumbents, and just two and a half years after the advent of the Age of Obama, the Republican Party has a remarkable opportunity to make Barack Obama a one-term president. The frontrunner, Mitt Romney, has the résumé of a Republican president-to-be, but inspires little love. Sarah Palin, who evokes passionate support among many Republicans, won't say whether she'll run or not, but still attracts a crush of fans and a media swarm wherever she ventures. The unusually large field of Republican candidates includes Newt Gingrich, the former House Speaker who commanded an earlier Republican revolution against a Democratic president. It includes Herman Cain, who believes God has chosen him to be president and that gays choose to be gay. Also among the Republican candidates is a former U.S. senator, Rick Santorum, who once compared homosexuality to "man on dog" sex. On the campaign trail, he likens preschool to Fascist youth brigades and warns parents that early childhood education is a government plot to "indoctrinate your children."

The Republican establishment, concerned that Romney is not conservative enough to survive the primary and that Bachmann's extremism will alienate mainstream voters in the general election, looks to Texas Governor Rick Perry for electoral salvation. Perry's sponsorship of "a day of Christian prayer and fasting," complicates the plan. One of the rally's sponsors, after all, is leading a boycott of *Glee* because the show "glamorizes homosexual behavior." Another had been a leader of Yes on Prop 8, the referendum campaign that changed the California constitution in order to end gay marriage in the state.

Why, when the United States is mired in its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, would birth control, abortion, and the rights of gays and women top the agenda of the Republican Party? How could this obsession with sex and family matters be squared with the pledge by Tea Party Republicans that they would put Americans back to work and be true to the principles of limited government, personal liberty, and the constitution of the founding fathers?

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow wrote after the Republicans assumed control of the House following their 2010 midterm victory. "Judging by the lead-up to those elections, one could have easily concluded that the first

order of business on Republicans' agendas would be a laserlike focus on job creation and deficit reductions to the exclusion of all else. Not the case."

If the history of the sexual counterrevolution were better known, no one would have been surprised.

WELCOME TO THE sexual counterrevolution, the great untold story behind America's plunge into political delirium. To understand how we got from Barack Obama's historic victory in 2008 to the Republican resurgence just two years later, look no further.

Delirium investigates a shadow movement that has polarized our country. One of the leading forces fueling America's political wars has been the reaction against the sexual revolution and the progressive movements that emerged from it: feminism and gay rights. Here I tell the story of this shadow movement, how conflicts about sex, women's rights and women's roles, gay civil rights, and family drove Americans into irreconcilable warring camps, shattered and remade the political parties, and unhinged the nation. The sexual counterrevolution was not just a passing backlash. It was an ideologically powered, strategically organized, and well-financed political movement that persists to this day.

The sexual counterrevolution has played a leading role in determining who has won and who has lost in American politics over the last forty years. It has powerfully influenced what the winners do, or won't or can't do, once they find themselves in power. The surprising resilience of the sexual counterrevolution was one critical source of the paralyzing divisions that contributed to the Democrats' 2010 defeat. It is, as well, the subterranean force driving the race to the far right by the 2012 Republican candidates for the presidency of the United States.

WE KNOW, OF course, that the Republican Party has staked its electoral fortunes on promises to outlaw abortion, rewrite the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage, and resurrect the traditional family by legislative and judicial fiat.

We've grown so accustomed to a Republican Party consumed with gays and abortion that many Americans likely do not know it was ever any other way. In fact, in an earlier time, the highest-ranking woman in the GOP was a pro-choice feminist. Barry Goldwater, the 1964 Republican nominee, was an ultraconservative who supported women's right to abortion and thought Americans "had a constitutional right to be gay." Students for Goldwater in a Chicago high school was chaired by a young Republican named Hillary Rodham. President George W. Bush's grandfather, investment banker and Republican Senator Prescott Bush, was an active member of Planned Parenthood.

The GOP as we know it today was born in the 1970s, as ordinary conservative American women became community organizers in order to turn back the sexual revolution, feminism, and gay rights. These pioneering women, the original sexual counterrevolutionaries, launched successful political campaigns to kill the Equal Rights Amendment, federally financed child care, sex education, and gay civil rights. (Abortion, it is rather crucial to note, was not one of their early preoccupations.) In doing so, they galvanized Protestant fundamentalists to vote, created the Christian Right, and over the course of several decades, forged it into the largest, most powerful bloc of voters within the Republican Party. Over the last forty years, the GOP has been remade from within as a party of the Right, by the Right, and for the Right. But the Right had absolutely no mass popular support, no so-called base, before it followed the ladies in their crusade to stuff the genie of modern American sex back in the bottle of heterosexual marriage and the traditional nuclear family.

From the perspective of the Republican Party, the partnership with Christian Right sexual counterrevolutionaries has been a decidedly mixed blessing. Such voters have buoyed Republicans to a few big victories—not least the Republican takeover of the House in 2010. The GOP's problem is that these voters make up a small minority of the electorate, just 15 to 20 percent of potential voters in a national election. The majority of the American public rejects the sexual puritanism and religious dogmatism of the sexual counterrevolutionaries and tends to desert the Republican ticket when they sense it has, so to speak, gotten into bed with the sexual fundamentalists. Senator John McCain understands this perhaps better than anyone else. In his

first run for president, McCain denounced the preachers at the head of the Christian Right as “agents of intolerance.” Republican primary voters promptly ran McCain out of the race. In 2008, McCain took a different tack toward the base of his party. He chose as his running mate an evangelical fundamentalist who opposed gay civil rights, sex education, and abortion: Sarah Palin. He won the sexual counterrevolutionaries but lost the election by 9.5 million votes.

YET THIS IS not a tale about the Republican Party only. It turns out that the sexual counterrevolution has been a bipartisan affair.

The birth of the sexual counterrevolution in the Democratic Party coincided with the kickoff of the Democrats’ self-defeating inner civil war. When George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic nominee, lost the presidential election by a landslide, Democratic politicians and opinion leaders attributed the loss to the radicalism of McGovern’s supporters. Gays, feminists, multiculturalists, and elitist college students, they claimed, had alienated Middle America by flouting its traditional values. And unless they were stopped, the cultural elitists would destroy the Democratic Party. Each time fortune turned against the party, as it did so often in the decades following, Democratic leaders would dust off this death-by-McGovernik narrative and deploy it against their brothers and sisters in the battle for the soul of the party.

The Democratic Party’s reputation as the more progressive one is deserved, of course. Yet as we will see, many Democratic leaders have been reluctant to embrace this identity; to openly affirm their beliefs in cultural tolerance, diversity, and a live-and-let-live attitude about sex, sexuality, and personal relationships; to own the values of cultural progressivism held today by a good majority of all voters—not just self-identified Democrats. Some Democrats have hesitated to stand up for progressive values out of political calculation. They have been quick to accede to whatever compromise they have deemed expedient for victory, often with little regard to whose fundamental interests have been bartered away. Other Democrats have been consumed with a search for the Holy Grail, that sweet spot of moderation on the fabled middle ground. So, for example, supporting gay civil unions is a matter of simple justice. Gay marriage? Well, as President

Obama took to saying, his views were “evolving.” Even though only a small number of Democratic leaders have ever endorsed the agenda of the right-wing sexual counterrevolution, many others have tacitly advanced it—by evasion, passive acquiescence, or capitulation.

Were it true that turning right on the so-called hot-button issues was the way to win the hearts and votes of the American people, it would be hard to fault Democratic leaders for demanding everyone face up to the facts of majority rule. But, as we’ll see, such claims are false. The notion that Democrats lose by being culturally progressive is a fiction, a narrative born of the delirium of defeat. The Democratic Party has repeatedly snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by its propensity to overreact and misinterpret the message being sent by voters.

Delirium IS A history of our current political dysfunction. First, let me state clearly and unambiguously that *the sexual counterrevolution is not the only source or cause of how American politics came to be the way it is in our time*. Race, war, money in politics, class, and competing ideas about American identity are also main determinants of the course of politics over the last few decades. Nonetheless, the sexual counterrevolution is one of the few key dynamics driving contemporary American politics. Second, my goal has been to uncover a missing piece of our history, *Delirium* is not intended to be a comprehensive political history of the last forty years. Third, much of the evidence that convinced me of the importance of the sexual counterrevolution is statistical. Unlike most books on current politics and culture, many of my specific conclusions are based on numbers: the raw data of public opinion surveys, and the work of experts and scholars who run the data through complex statistical analyses. The reader who is interested in the technical methods used in these studies or in the experts’ debates can find citations to scholarly articles and links to publicly accessible databases on public opinion and voting behavior in the Notes section at the end of this book.

Finally, because this book covers unexplored ground, I have had the need to adapt some common political terms and to coin others. One of these is “sexual counterrevolution”—meaning the political reaction against the changes ushered in by the sexual revolution. (See

notes to this chapter for some others.) I want to particularly clarify what I mean by “fundamentalism,” especially since it’s often linked to sex, as in the term “sexual fundamentalism.” I use “fundamentalism,” lower-cased, *not* as a reference to Protestant fundamentalists, but rather as a term about a politics characterized by cultural traditionalism and an orthodox belief in the literal rules issued by some higher authority. Most of the sexual fundamentalists who appear here are indeed orthodox religious traditionalists, a group that includes some, but not all, Mormons, Catholics, Pentecostals, and Charismatics, in addition to conservative Protestants who adhere to a belief that the bible is the literal, unerring word of God. I caution strongly against reading any mention of “fundamentalism” as a blanket statement about all evangelicals, all Christians, or even all fundamentalists. Fewer than a third of Catholics and mainline Protestants, and fewer than a quarter of African American evangelicals share the political views of the sexual fundamentalists. Even among white evangelicals, about four in ten vote Democratic or do not vote at all. Indeed, a sizable minority of evangelical Christians are politically and culturally progressive.

AS I WRITE, one in six Americans can’t find enough work, and 46 million Americans, more than ever before, are living below the official poverty line. The Great Recession casts a dark shadow over the nation. I realize that in this moment it is counterintuitive, perverse even, to suggest that understanding the sexual counterrevolution is a key to solving our political and economic problems. But history does not proceed in a straight or logical line. Its path is winding and unpredictable. The Tea Party, our economic anxiety and political demoralization, even the irrational hostility some Americans harbor against our first African American president, are symptoms of our political crisis, not its cause. The wellspring of our political fever lies deeper in the American psyche; the roots of our political disorders are buried further back in time. How we got here, and why, is the story of this book.