

A Nation Divided: Conflict in US History and Politics

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It is not ironic to say that the role of conflict in history, especially in national histories, is an inherently contested one—both in public memory and in historiography. The United States is no exception. Since its early years, one of the defining features of the myth of the United States as a ‘New World’ was its being supposedly free from wars between and within its states, from religious clashes, and from class struggles, which had dominated the history of Old Europe. From the narrative of the American Revolution as a war of independence, supported by the better part of the society of the thirteen colonies, compared to the chaotic and bloody French Revolution and to the deep-rooted belief that the struggle between capital and labor would be avoided thanks to individualism, democracy and the frontier, thus, the proclaimed rejection of conflict was a pillar of American nation-building and its exceptionalism. It was, in itself, inevitably, a weapon of political and social conflict.

In June 1858, in one of his most well-known speeches, Abraham Lincoln declared: “A house divided against itself, cannot stand.” While rooted in the ideal of a harmonious society, it was also an acknowledgement of the deep fractures within the United States that were about to deflagrate. The end of the civil war would not, however, mean the end of divisions. During the following decades, the legacies and rancor of the civil war, the outbreak of the labor movement from 1877 onwards and an increasing US presence in the international arena indicated that conflict was not a tragic accident, but rather a protagonist in American history.

The third monographic issue of *USAbroad* looks at conflict in the history and politics of the United States by exploring different cases and perspectives (and through the use of a wide variety of sources). It does so, however, from the viewpoint of 2019–2020, more than a decade after the outbreak of the worldwide, US-centered economic and financial crisis, which triggered the redefinition of a multiplicity of dormant and deep-seated conflicts as well as the resurgence of a variety of social movements, characterized by peculiar dialectics with government and between themselves, such as Black Lives Matter, eventually leading up to a new white backlash. These trends are still with us during Donald Trump’s presidency, which is increasingly exasperating the dynamics of political polarization of which it is a result. The previously mentioned dynamic, and these movements, encourage us to rethink the notion of conflict and its multifaceted nature in the course of American history. The essays published in this issue span from the complex interplay between race, gender and class (implicitly) in the mid-19th century to the inspiration that the Occupy Movement drew from the radical tradition.

Serena Mocchi's *Addressing Racial Conflict in Antebellum America* analyzes the ways in which racial tensions and the Indian question were narrated, understood or 'removed' by women writers. A thorough reading of Lydia Maria Child's *The First Settlers of New-England: or Conquest of the Pequods, Narragansets and Pokanokets* (1829), and Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes in 1843* (1844), shows how literature was used by women to pick the lock of the domestic sphere and develop a voice in public discourse. At the same time, the essay reveals the limits of their humanitarian perspective regarding the Indian Question: limits which seem especially noteworthy, given the importance of the authors, Child and Fuller, in the abolitionist movement and in the early stages of American feminism.

Hamish Stirling's *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Nuclear Dilemma: Conceptualising the Cold War* brings us to the heart of the 20th Century and into the realm of debates on foreign policy. Niebuhr is best described as a theologian who became a public intellectual and a commentator on politics and foreign policy. Stirling argues, in fact, that his Christian realism can be understood as a political theology, allowing American public opinion to acknowledge the tragic nature of warfare and accept its responsible use in face of a greater evil, within the context of the Cold War. Niebuhr's views on the nuclear question appear to be more nuanced than what is often acknowledged by scholars. He elaborated a specific ethic vision of the Cold War by combining anti-communism, national interest and a concern for the future of humanity as a whole.

One of the formative moments in Niebuhr's career was his time as a pastor in Detroit, the Motor City (or Motown), which is also the stage for Olivier Maheo's essay, *Radical Motown, Radical Heritage, which is a discussion of the history of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, founded in 1969*. Even though the League's existence was quite short, Maheo discusses its relevant presence within the city's industries and its deep influence on the United Auto Workers union, which eventually motivated the League to fight for full equity for African American workers. Therefore, the essay provides not only an interesting perspective into the history of Detroit during the period following the 1967 riots and the onset of its long urban crisis, but it also offers an insight into the tensions between white workers and black militants as seen in the dialectics between Black Power and union demands.

Ronald Mendel aims to place *The Occupy Movement in the American Radical Tradition*. The occupation of Zuccotti Park in the autumn of 2011, in fact, prided itself on being the heir of a more ancient history. The article points out a few of these threads and some of their underlying contradictions as well, such as, the attack on oligarchy, populism and its tropes (exemplified by the slogan "We are the 99%"). The focus is on direct action, the shift from participatory democracy to direct democracy and, more broadly, to democracy as being both the goal of the movement and existing within the movement itself, which should be horizontal rather than hierarchical.

In the column *Bringing the History Back In* Maurizio Vaudagna closes the issue of conflict by reconstructing the contemporary history of the *Family and Nation in America*. By focusing on the shift from the acme of domesticity in the 1950s to the emergence of the so-called 'pluralist family' in the 1960s and 1970s, and to the revival of family values in the 1980s, Vaudagna addresses the changes in the connections between private and public spheres, family and nation, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of the national narration that put the white, nuclear family at its core. The nature of the family, or more specifically, as Vaudagna argues, the nature of a 'healthy' and 'national' family, is still an 'embattled terrain' during the Trump years as well.