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Last of the Culture Warriors

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By Peter Beinart

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Why has America turned on Sarah Palin? Obviously, her wobbly television interviews haven't helped. Nor have the drip, drip of scandals from Alaska, which have tarnished her reformist image. But Palin's problems run deeper, and they say something fundamental about the political age being born. Palin's brand is culture war, and in America today culture war no longer sells. The struggle that began in the 1960s -- which put questions of racial, sexual and religious identity at the forefront of American politics -- may be ending. Palin is the end of the line.

This won't be the first time a culture war has come to a close. In the 1920s, battles over evolution, immigration, prohibition and the resurgent [Ku Klux Klan](#) dominated election after election. And those issues played into that era's version of the red-blue divide, pitting newly arrived, saloon-frequenting, big-city Catholics against old-stock, teetotaling, small-town Protestants. In 1924, the [Democratic convention](#) split so bitterly over prohibition and the Klan that it took more than 100 ballots to nominate a candidate for president.

Then, in the 1930s, the culture war died. A big reason was the Depression, which put questions of economic survival front and center. In the 1920s boom economy, politicians were largely free to focus on identity politics. By [Franklin Roosevelt](#)'s election in 1932, that was a luxury America's leaders could no longer afford.

The other thing that killed the '20s culture war was generational change. Over time, Catholics and other immigrants left their ghettos and began to assimilate. The cutoff of mass immigration in 1924 ushered in an era of cultural consolidation in which the differences among white Americans came to matter less and less. When Democrats nominated a Catholic, [Al Smith](#), for president in 1928, he lost in a landslide. But by 1960, when they nominated [John F. Kennedy](#), he grabbed a far larger share of the Protestant vote, and won.

Something similar is happening today. Our era's culture war also began in prosperity. It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the high point of America's postwar boom, that African Americans took to the streets in vast numbers to demand equal rights. And it was in the early 1960s, as a result of the vast increase in postwar college enrollment, that students began challenging the conformity of American life. In 1962, the Port Huron Statement spoke of a generation "bred in at least modest comfort." It was those middle-class baby boomers who sparked the movements for women's rights and gay rights and the

rise in blue-state secularism, all of which helped touch off this era's culture war.

The relationship between prosperity and cultural conflict isn't exact, of course, but it is significant that during this era's culture war we've gone a quarter-century without a serious recession. Economic issues have mattered in presidential elections, of course, but not until today have we faced an economic crisis so grave that it made cultural questions seem downright trivial. In 2000, in the wake of an economic boom and a sex scandal that led to a president's impeachment, 22 percent of Americans told exit pollsters that "moral values" were their biggest concern, compared with only 19 percent who cited the economy.

Today, according to a recent [Newsweek](#) poll, the economy is up to 44 percent and "issues like abortion, guns and same-sex marriage" down to only 6 percent. It's no coincidence that Palin's popularity has plummeted as the financial crisis has taken center stage. From her championing of small-town America to her efforts to link [Barack Obama](#) to former domestic terrorist [Bill Ayers](#), Palin is treading a path well-worn by Republicans in recent decades. She's depicting the campaign as a struggle between the culturally familiar and the culturally threatening, the culturally traditional and the culturally exotic. But Obama has dismissed those attacks as irrelevant, and the public, focused nervously on the economic collapse, has largely tuned them out.

Palin's attacks are also failing because of generational change. The long-running, internecine baby boomer cultural feud just isn't that relevant to Americans who came of age after the civil rights, gay rights and feminist revolutions. Even many younger evangelicals are broadening their agendas beyond abortion, stem cells, school prayer and gay marriage. And just as younger Protestants found JFK less threatening than their parents had found Al Smith, younger whites -- even in bright-red states -- don't view the prospect of a black president with great alarm.

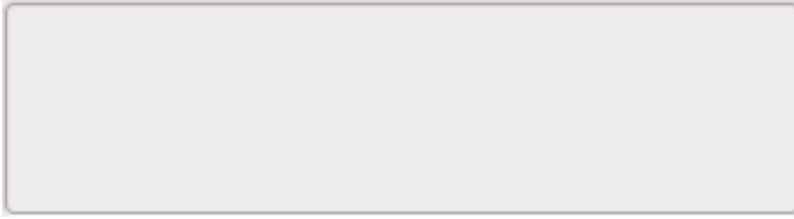
The economic challenges of the coming era are complicated, fascinating and terrifying, while the cultural battles of the 1960s feel increasingly stale. If [John McCain](#) loses tomorrow, the [GOP](#) will probably choose someone like [Mitt Romney](#) or Louisiana Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) to lead it back from the wilderness, someone who -- although socially conservative -- speaks fluently about the nation's economic plight and doesn't try to substitute identity for policy. Although she seems like a fresh face, [Sarah Palin](#) actually represents the end of an era. She may be the last culture warrior on a national ticket for a very long time.

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