"Once or twice in a generation—if that often—a very wise person writes a very pithy book that compresses everything that needs to be said about a given topic into the briefest of compasses. . . . *One Nation, Two Cultures* is such a book ."
—*National Review*

ONE NATION, TWO CULTURES

A Searching Examination of American Society in the Aftermath of Our Cultural Revolution

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB

ONE NATION, TWO CULTURES

Gertrude Himmelfarb

Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, JANUARY 2001

Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.
Originally published in hardcover in slightly different form in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, in 1999.

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Chapters 1, 3, and 5 are partially based on articles in *The Weekly Standard*, Sept. 9, 1996; in *Commentary*, May 1997; and in *The Public Interest*, Spring 1998.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Knopf edition as follows:
Himmelfarb, Gertrude.
One nation, two cultures / by Gertrude Himmelfarb. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-375-40455-4 (alk. paper)
1. Culture. 2. Sociology. I. Title
HM101.H49 1999
306—dc21 99-18922
CIP

Vintage ISBN: 0-375-70410-8

Book design by Dorothy S. Baker

www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Gertrude Himmelfarb

ONE NATION, TWO CULTURES

Gertrude Himmelfarb taught for many years at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, where she was named Distinguished Professor of History in 1978. Now Professor Emeritus, she lives with her husband, Irving Kristol, in Washington, D.C. Himmelfarb is a Fellow of the British Academy, the Royal Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1991 she was named the Jefferson Lecturer by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished achievement in the humanities. She has received numerous honorary degrees and awards, including the Templeton Award in 1997. Her most recent books are *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values; On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society;* and *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians.*

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The New History and the Old (1987)

Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians (1986)

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ONE NATION, TWO CULTURES

For Robyn and Charles Krauthammer

PREFACE

"Contemporary history" used to be an oxymoron. History was supposed to be set firmly in the past, recollected in tranquillity, with contemporaries safely dead, passions cooled, and documents neatly stored in archives or awaiting discovery in dusty attics. Like the fifty-year rule governing the release of some official records, courses in history departments stopped well short of the last war or two, the last king or two, certainly the last administration or two (or three or four).

Fernand Braudel, not at all traditional in other respects—one of the foremost practitioners of the *Annaliste* mode of history, which dismisses the ephemera of politics in favor of *la longue durée*, the "deeper realities" of geography, demography, and economy—wrote his monumental work on the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II while confined in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany during World War II. "All those occurrences," he later wrote, "which poured in upon us from the radio and the newspapers of our enemies, or even the news from London which our clandestine receivers gave us—I had to outdistance, reject, deny them. Down with occurrences, especially vexing ones! I had to believe that history, destiny, was written at a much more profound level."[1]

Those "vexing" occurrences included the bloody battles that eventually led to the defeat of the Nazis and the revelations of one of the most horrendous episodes in human history, the Holocaust.

Other historians, so far from trying to "outdistance, reject, deny" the momentous events of their time, have sought instead to record, analyze, and understand them. (And not only the momentous events but, as the latest genre of "cultural studies" demonstrates, the most trivial and transient ones.) Yet there are lingering traces of doubt and disquiet. Have we forfeited the "long view" that enables us to put the present in perspective? Are we inclined to overestimate the importance of experiences we have personally had and to dramatize events we may have witnessed? Are we unduly impressed by change (a golden age lost or a new world gained) rather than continuity and permanence? And do we find revolutions in every deviation or aberration?

Revolutions present a special difficulty. Historians are wary of the very word. They are even grudging in applying it to political events (was the English Revolution of 1688 a "revolution" or merely a "restoration"?), let alone to social or cultural events. And still more to social or cultural events in their own time. Yet occasionally, very occasionally, they are destined to live through real revolutions. I believe that those of us "of an age" have lived through such a revolution—a revolution in the manners, morals, and mores of society. This does not mean that it has transformed every realm of life, any more than did other revolutions worthy of the name—the industrial revolution last century or the technological revolution more recently. But it has had a profound effect upon our institutions and relationships, private and public.

It has also bequeathed to us, in this postrevolutionary period, a society fragmented and polarized, not only along the familiar lines of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, but along moral and cultural lines that cut across the others. As the

implications and consequences of the revolution work themselves out, people have responded with varying degrees of acquiescence and resistance. In their most extreme form, these differences take on the appearance of a moral divide, a "culture war." More often, they express themselves in tensions and dissensions of a lesser order. It is a tribute to the American people and the strength of our traditions and institutions that these disputes have been conducted, for the most part, with civility and sobriety.

Because I myself am leery of the idea of revolution, I have taken special pains to document this one by the hardest kind of evidence, quantified data. Fortunately, one result of this revolution is the availability of just such material. Government agencies and private foundations, research centers in and outside academia, social scientists and pollsters, professional journals, and even the daily newspapers produce a variety of statistics, surveys, analyses, polls, charts, graphs, and tables that are the envy of historians working on more remote periods of the past. I do not, to be sure, subscribe to the dictum, attributed to the British scientist Lord Kelvin, etched over a window in the Social Science building of my alma mater, the University of Chicago: "When you cannot measure, your knowledge is meager and unsatisfactory." I believe there are other sources of knowledge that are sometimes more compelling than numbers: philosophy, history, literature, tradition, religion, common sense. I am also wary of quantification when it is represented as the sole or highest form of historical evidence, particularly for periods of the past when it is sparse and highly selective, and when whatever statistics happen to exist are permitted to determine the subjects that the historian deems worthy of attention. But for the study of contemporary affairs, where such information is both plentiful and pertinent, these reservations do not hold. Statistics can be faulty and polls deceptive, and neither should be taken too literally or

precisely. But used in conjunction with other kinds of evidence ("impressionistic," "literary," or "theoretical," as quantifiers say disparagingly), they have been invaluable in establishing some hard facts and correcting some common misconceptions.

I am grateful, therefore, to those who have helped me find my way among these once unfamiliar sources: my friends Karlyn Bowman and Charles Murray, both of the American Enterprise Institute, John DiIulio of Princeton University, and James Q. Wilson of the University of California at Los Angeles, who have so generously given me of their time and formidable knowledge; my research assistant, Helen Boutrous, who has been so assiduous in retrieving articles from obscure journals and dredging up reports from the deepest entrails of the Government Printing Office and the Internet; and the many scholars who have graciously responded to my queries about subjects in their special areas of expertise. And once again, as with more than half-a-dozen of my earlier books, I have had the unfailing encouragement of my editor, a gentleman-publisher of the old school, Ashbel Green.

My greatest debt, now as always, is to my husband, Irving Kristol. That he is a constant source of intellectual stimulation goes without saying. Perhaps more relevant on this occasion is his steadfast character. It may be that I am all the more sensitive to the condition of the culture today, its volatility and infirmity, because it is in contrast to his constancy and vitality, which have sustained me and our family for these very many years.

Acclaim for Gertrude Himmelfarb's

ONE NATION, TWO CULTURES

"[A] wise book. . . . By laying out the facts of our cultural condition with such lucidity, Ms. Himmelfarb undermines the rhetorical ground of the postmodernists themselves."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

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—Charles Murray, *The Weekly Standard*

"[A] magisterial new book."

—*Booklist*

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ONE NATION, TWO CULTURES

CHAPTER I
A HISTORICAL PROLOGUE: THE "VICES OF LEVITY" AND THE "DISEASES OF DEMOCRACY"

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith described the "two different schemes or systems of morality" that prevail in all civilized societies.

> In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which the one may be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal, or, if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: the latter is commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion.

The liberal or loose system is prone to the "vices of levity"—"luxury, wanton and even disorderly mirth, the pursuit of pleasure to some degree of intemperance, the breach of chastity, at least in one of the two sexes, etc." Among the "people of fashion," these vices are treated indulgently. The "common people," on the other hand, committed to the strict or austere system, regard such vices, for themselves at any rate, with "the utmost abhorrence and detestation," because they—or at least