CROSSFIRE

A VIDEO READER

MYRON C. TUMAN

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Crossfire
A Video Reader

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CREDITS

Round 1

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Crossfire

For Barry Wade

Preface

Here is a college reader for our times, one that reflects in its readings, discussion questions, and writing exercises, the lively, frank, and at times irreverent exchange that characterizes contemporary American political and cultural debate. There is no doubt that the great thinkers of the past—from Aristotle and St. Augustine to Machiavelli and Rousseau—have much to say about important contemporary issues, and that students should study their writings closely in Western civilization classes. But when it comes to getting college students quickly and fully engaged in a debate—so that they can start discussing and start writing right away—Ted Turner and the producers at Cable News Network have hit upon a better formula. Confront people with the difficult and controversial issues that people right now are trying to grapple with: Should executions be televised? Should women be allowed to serve in military combat? Should high schools distribute condoms as a means of preventing AIDS? Should doctors be allowed to assist in suicides?

As college teachers, we sometimes have a tendency to dismiss popular art, music, and, in this case, political discussion, as superficial. Yet just as the best popular music and films are capable of both entertaining and moving us, providing us with genuine insight into ourselves, so is there much for all of us to learn from taking part in these admittedly popular political debates. Here is a chance to hone our writing and thinking skills by reflecting on and responding to issues of the day, to learn how to write with greater power, not by talking about rhetoric but by engaging in it, from lesson (or, round) one, "Women at the Front." What do you think: Should women soldiers be allowed to serve in combat units and fly fighter aircraft, as General Wilma Vaught suggests in this first *Crossfire* debate? Or, as conservatives argue, are we letting a misplaced sense of equality blur a basic distinction between men and women?

With *Crossfire: A Video Reader,* students will have the chance to follow this and thirteen other such debates, first by viewing a videotape or reading the transcript of the original *Crossfire* broadcast and then reading a series of articles that follow up and expand that very debate. The goal here is to allow us all to explore many different sides of each issue, adding our own distinctive voice to the ongoing national debate. Introductions to each topic attempt to show the deeper historical context separating and connecting opponents on this issue; questions for review ask students to forego stating their own opinions in order to reconstruct the arguments of others; discussion and writing questions ask students both to state and support their position on each issue and to explore (often through narrative) a series of related issues that connect contemporary political debate to their own life histories.

Acknowledgments

This reader was originally conceived during the summer of 1992, a time when the record cool temperatures of July and August were not matched by the increasingly strident political rhetoric of presidential candidates gearing up for the fall election. Grandiose speech-making and exaggerated rhetoric are hardly new to me: I grew up in Louisiana under Earl Long, one of the founders of an American tradition that will forgive anything in politicians except their being dull. I want to thank Joe Opiela, Editor in Chief, Humanities, at Allyn and Bacon, for giving me the chance to put together a reader that embraces this lively and continuing populist political tradition. Little did he know when he first approached me that my enthusiasm for the project had more to do with ideology than technology. I also want to thank Brenda Conaway, editorial assistant at Allyn and Bacon, and Kathryn Tuman, who gamely battled the disorienting whir of high-speed microfilm readers. Finally, I want to offer special thanks to Karen Gardiner, in her capacity as chief research assistant on this project. She combined the unforgiving eye of the best copy editor, the generous spirit of the best collaborator, and the passion of the best teacher. She expended considerable energy to ensure that each of the fourteen units meets a very high standard—good enough to use in her own freshman composition class.

Contents

Preliminary 1

Left-Right:

Thinking about Contemporary Political Dialogue

Since July 1982, the Cable News Network (CNN) has been regularly broadcasting a popular, entertaining, and informative half-hour political debate called *Crossfire*. Much of the success of the program has been due to its strikingly simple and still somewhat unusual format: placing one or more guests in between co-hosts, one a conservative and the other a liberal. Viewers accustomed to watching other political discussions on television were no doubt at first thrown off stride by this format: television news reporting had long prided itself on its nonpartisan, political neutrality. Panelists on earlier shows such as NBC's *Meet the Press* were chosen to reflect different news organizations, not different political viewpoints. Television news anchors before *Crossfire* were all supposed to be like Walter Cronkite, the most famous of the television network news anchors: someone who presented the news objectively, supposedly above partisan politics. Even today, try as we may, we are not supposed to be able to discern any political bias in the people who appear nightly on regular television news broadcasts.

With *Crossfire*, two new terms and, for many Americans, foreign-sounding terms—"from the left" and "from the right"—were introduced into popular political discourse. The terms themselves date back to that most radical of political times, the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century, when the supporters of the King sat on his right in the National Assembly and the more revolutionary deputies sat on the left. To be "on the left" was to support revolutionary changes in French life, especially in reference to the prerogatives of the aristocracy; to be "on the right" meant to oppose such changes and instead to work to support the status quo. Thus,

the *left* came to be associated with liberalism and plans to restructure society (often involving redistribution of wealth) under the banners of justice, equality, and progress, and the *right*, with conservatism and attempts to maintain society and the existing system for distributing wealth under the equally high-minded banners of freedom, prosperity, and tradition.

However, as these fourteen debates from *Crossfire* indicate, just what is meant in contemporary America by *left/liberal* or *right/conservative* is anything but clear and simple. It is tempting to fall back on the notion that liberals want to change the world ("improving it" in their eyes), while conservatives want to defend current arrangements. However, on many issues it is conservatives who are the activists, fighting for change (in their eyes often "correcting" many of the changes "mistakenly" enacted in the recent past). One tempting way out of this confusion is to point to the role of government in our lives and to say that liberals want to increase government's role (to give people greater opportunities for success—that is, to foster equality) and conservatives want to limit government's role (to allow people to enjoy the fruits of their own labor—that is, to foster freedom). In this overly simplistic view of things, liberals are in favor of big government (conservatives call this the policy of "tax and spend"), while conservatives are concerned only with helping the rich get richer (liberals refer to this as "country club" politics). On a host of important social issues, including abortion, censorship, and school prayer, however, it is conservatives who seem to want a bigger or at least a more intrusive government and liberals who want to limit the power of government.

Perhaps one way out of this seeming confusion is to consider the many debates between the left and right (of which this book recounts fourteen) as a continual turf battle over just what is and is not properly a part of what can be called *public* space, that area of civic life where government can legitimately act and what is and is not a part of *private* space, that part of personal life free of governmental intrusion. In a public place, individuals are normally held accountable for their actions; they are to be judged according to the various laws, rules, and regulations that the group establishes to define correct behavior. In a private place, conversely, individuals are to be held less accountable for their actions, relatively speaking freer to act how they want (important for liberals) or conversely how they have long acted (just as important for conservatives).

Before the mid-1960s, for example, conservative thinking supported what seemed to be a basic notion of American freedom and private property—that an owner of a business such as a restaurant was free to serve or not serve anyone he or she liked. The conservative position, in essence, was that a privately owned restaurant was a private space. Therefore, the 1964 Civil Rights Act can be interpreted as redefining all restaurants and other businesses open to the public (what was called *public accommodation*) as