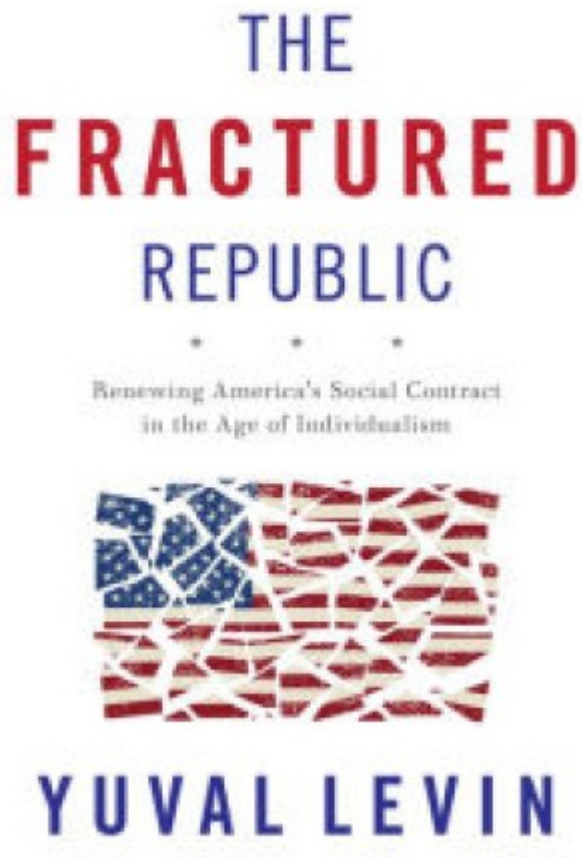
Can Americans get past the past?

Trump isn’t the only one who says things used to be better.

by Anthony B. Robinson in the October 25, 2016 issue

In Review



The Fractured Republic

By Yuval Levin
Basic Books

In this worrisome and wearisome election year, Yuval Levin offers a gracefully written, big-picture analysis of American society and politics. Levin, editor of *National Affairs* and a conservative of the David Brooks type, challenges both Democrats and Republicans, whom he views as snared in nostalgia for bygone (and not to be recovered) eras.

Progressives long for the post–World War II era of relative income equality, powerful national institutions, and a highly regulated economy. Conservatives yearn for the cultural conformity of the immediate postwar years and look to the 1980s as the political and economic model. “Our polarized parties are now exceptionally backward-looking,” writes Levin. “They are offering the public a choice of competing nostalgias, neither of which is well-suited to contending with contemporary American challenges.”

Levin’s essay is a work of political philosophy, but there is an implicit theological and moral critique in his analysis. Nostalgia-driven parties and the nation they would lead face the future with more fear than hope, more despair than faith. Levin implicates the Boomer generation, whose “self-image casts a giant shadow over our politics, and . . . means we are inclined to look backward to find our prime.” (Both presidential candidates, one might note, are Boomers.)

Readers concerned with religious institutions will find ready parallels to Levin’s core analysis in mainline Protestant congregations, many of which are haunted by a longed-for past. In their own way, evangelicals also operate from a narrative of decline and long for an imagined better time in America.

What drives this nostalgia? Here Levin provides his most helpful and distinctive contribution. Rather than seeing the post–World War II era as the norm from which we have fallen or deviated, he understands it as a unique period in American history that is not going to be repeated. Levin’s words to describe this era mostly begin with the letter “c”— cohesion, conformity, confidence, and consolidation. In response to the dual threats of the Great Depression and World War II, the nation prioritized solidarity and unity. The 1930s through the early 1960s constituted a singular era: “as our economy industrialized, the government grew more centralized, the culture became more aggregated through mass media . . . [and] national identity and unity were frequently valued above personal identity, individuality, and diversity.”

Beginning in the 1950s, this cohesion and conformity were challenged. Consolidation gave way to a diffusion of American society that has characterized the second half of the 20th century and now the 21st. Here Levin uses mostly “d” words: decentralization, diversity, dynamism, and diffusion. The postwar era that seemed for many the norm was, in Levin’s reading, “an unstable and therefore unavoidably temporary inflection point in our national life—a kind of bridge between two quite different Americas.”

In some respects, the immediate postwar era offered the best of both worlds. Liberals reveled in the regulated economy, broadly shared growth, and relative income equality. Conservatives took comfort in the greater cultural conformity. It was in this period of unique national consolidation that mainline Protestant churches enjoyed their greatest institutional success, becoming for a time America’s default religious option. It was also during this period that these religious bodies built the national structures that have now become difficult to sustain.

Diversity, choice, and diffusion now characterize American culture. Levin notes various indicators—percent of foreign-born U.S. residents, party polarization in Congress, and income share of the top 1 percent—that show a common pattern: first drawing together and then pulling apart. Levin does not judge this diffusion as simply bad or good; rather, he sees in it both gains and losses. “In liberating many individuals from oppressive social constraints, we have also estranged many from their families and unmoored them. . . . In accepting a profusion of options in every part of our lives . . . we have also unraveled the established institutions of an earlier era.”

America has responded, thus far, to its diverse and diffuse society with two extremes: excessive centralization and radical individualism. The complementarity of these two options is more pernicious than benign. Excess individualism elicits greater centralization, which in turns stirs more resistance to a perceived Big Brother. Both tend to thin the middle level of society, what some have called “civil society.” Both bleed vitality from the web of civic associations, religious institutions, family, and schools that are critical, in Levin’s view, to America’s ability to adapt to the challenges of diffusion.

Levin calls for the renewal of society’s thinned-out middle layers. To achieve this end, he advocates subsidiarity, “the entrusting of power and authority to the lowest and least centralized institutions capable of using them well.” Disperse power, Levin

advises, and build up the institutions that hold individual lives and give them meaning. While the go-to of liberals for solutions has been the federal government and the go-to for conservatives has been the unencumbered market, Levin urges empowering “a diverse array of mediating institutions.”

Levin concludes that reliance on large, centralized federal programs does not fit the way people live today. People expect choices and expect to be able to select, often via the Internet, among competitive options. Progressivism of the Bernie Sanders variety may have fit the mid-century world of consolidation but is not a good match for a highly diverse and diffuse 21st-century America. Levin imagines an evolved progressivism that moves from the ideal of public programs in a social democracy to public options in a decentralized society.

As a complement to subsidiarity Levin proposes a revival of genuine federalism, which better matches the postmodern emphasis on the local and particular. Progressives might raise a question here: What happens when local powers conspire to perpetuate injustice (as in the Jim Crow South or when, for example, local authorities are willing to look the other way in the face of environmental degradation)? Levin might respond that subsidiarity does not mean devolving power to the lowest possible level but rather to the lowest level at which it is used well.

Levin locates a more robust middle level as the arena of the soul-forming and soul-sustaining institutions that are necessary to curb hyperindividualism and the resulting isolation and social anomie. Such mediating institutions (including religious congregations) have been eroded by the binary choices of centralization and individualism. They need to be valued and protected. Levin’s third sector is inhabited by the family, meaningful work and the relations it spawns, liberal education, civic associations, and religion.

Levin’s assessment of religious congregations and communities evidences the influence of Alasdair MacIntyre. “All sides in our culture wars would be wise to focus less attention than they have been on dominating our core cultural institutions, and more on building thriving subcultures.” The idea is to accept and build on diffusion, diversity, and decentralization rather than trying to fight them. Levin urges religious bodies to put less emphasis on lost cultural norms and uniformity and more emphasis on building vibrant subcultures. If Levin is correct, denominations ought to pivot from centralization toward localism, from uniformity to diversity and experimentation.

The strength of this book—its fresh, big-picture look at where we are in American culture and political life—is also its greatest weakness. Frustratingly, Levin remains at a high-concept level. There are few examples of what subsidiarity or a new federalism looks like in action.

But the book isn’t meant to focus on particular issues. It aims to call out our contemporary bent toward nostalgia, the thralldom of both political parties to bygone eras, to see the strengths and opportunities embedded in the present.

A version of this article appears in the October 26 print edition under the title “Getting past the past.”