



# COMING APART

*The State of White America, 1960–2010*



CHARLES MURRAY



*Human Accomplishment*

*What It Means to Be a Libertarian*

*The Bell Curve*

*Losing Ground*

*Real Education*

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# Coming Apart

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The State of  
White America  
1960-2010

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To Catherine,  
my touchstone

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# Contents

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*Cover*  
*Other Books by This Author*  
*Title Page*  
*Copyright*  
*Dedication*

*Prologue: November 21, 1963*

## **Part I**

### **The Formation of a New Upper Class**

1. Our Kind of People
2. The Foundations of the New Upper Class
3. A New Kind of Segregation
4. How Thick Is Your Bubble?
5. The Bright Side of the New Upper Class

## **Part II**

### **The Formation of a New Lower Class**

6. The Founding Virtues
7. Belmont and Fishtown
8. Marriage
9. Industriousness
10. Honesty
11. Religiosity
12. The Real Fishtown
13. The Size of the New Lower Class

## **Part III**

### **Why It Matters**

14. The Selective Collapse of American Community
15. The Founding Virtues and the Stuff of Life
16. One Nation, Divisible
17. Alternative Futures

*Acknowledgments*

*Appendix A: Data Sources and Presentation*

*Supplemental Material for the Segregation Chapter*

*Supplemental Material for the Chapter on Belmont and Fishtown*

*Supplemental Material for the Marriage Chapter*

*Supplemental Material for the Honesty Chapter*

~~*Supplemental Material for the American Community Chapter*~~

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*Supplemental Material for the Chapter About the Founding Virtues and the Stuff of Life*

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### November 21, 1963

IN RETROSPECT, a single day often comes to demarcate the transition between eras. Never mind that the Continental Congress voted to declare the colonies' independence on July second and that the document probably wasn't signed until August. The Fourth of July, the day the text of the Declaration of Independence was adopted, will forever be the symbolic first day of the new nation. In the twentieth century, December 7, 1941, became the symbolic end of America that held the world at arm's length and the beginning of America the superpower. November 22, 1963, became the symbolic first day of what would be known as the Sixties and of the cultural transformation that wound its course through the subsequent decades. The symbolic last day of the culture that preceded it was November 21, 1963.

IT WAS A THURSDAY. New York City saw a trace of rain that day, with a high of fifty-six, ending several days' run of late-autumn sunshine. As dusk fell at CBS headquarters at 485 Madison Avenue, Walter Cronkite was in the anchor chair for *The CBS Evening News*. Just a year and half into his job, Cronkite was not yet the nation's Uncle Walter. He wasn't even the nation's leading anchorman. His ratings had lagged behind those of Huntley and Brinkley on NBC from the beginning, and the shift in September from a fifteen-minute program to a half-hour program had done nothing to close the gap.

There wasn't much news to spice up the broadcast this evening. The day had produced one good human-interest story: Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz, had died in his sleep in the federal prison in Springfield, Missouri, that morning. But otherwise, the news was humdrum. The Senate Armed Services Committee had approved President Kennedy's nomination of Paul Nitze to be secretary of the navy. House minority leader Charles Halleck held a press conference in which he said that he did not see how the president's civil rights bill could get to the floor of the House before the Christmas recess—no surprise, given the many ways in which the all-powerful Rules Committee, dominated by southern Democrats, could delay the process. On Wall Street, the Dow industrials had dropped more than 9 points, or more than 1 percent of the Dow's opening 742. Nobody was especially worried, however. The October figures for housing starts and durable goods had just come out, providing more evidence that the economy was on the upswing.

CBS might have been number two in evening news, but it was number one in prime-time programming. The Nielsen ratings that week placed eight CBS programs in the top ten, led by *The Beverly Hillbillies* with a rating of 34.9, meaning that 34.9 percent of all American homes with a television set were watching it. Since 93 percent of American homes had a television set by 1963, the upshot was that the same program was being watched in almost a third of all the homes in the United States. Those same staggering numbers went deep into the lineup. All of the top thirty-one shows had ratings of at least 20. By way of comparison, the number one show in the 2009–10 season, *American Idol*, considered to be a gigantic hit, had a rating of 9.1.<sup>1</sup>



The explanation for the ratings of 1963 is simple: There wasn't much choice. Most major cities had only four channels (CBS, NBC, ABC, and a nonprofit station of some sort) at most. People in some markets had access to just one channel—the monopoly in Austin, Texas, where the lone station was owned by Lady Bird Johnson, was the most notorious example.

The limited choices in television viewing were just one example of something that would come as a surprise to a child of the twenty-first century transported back to 1963: the lack of all sorts of variety, and a simplicity that now seems almost quaint.

Popular music consisted of a single Top 40 list, with rock, country, folk, and a fair number of Fifties-style ballads lumped together. No separate stations specializing in different genres except for country music stations in a few parts of the nation. Except in university towns and the very largest cities, bookstores were small and scarce, usually carrying only a few hundred titles. No Amazon. If you didn't see a movie during the week or two it was showing in your town, you would probably never see it. No DVDs. With television, you either saw a show the night it played or waited until it was repeated once during the summer. No TiVo.

People drove cars made in the United States. Foreign cars from Europe were expensive and rare. Cars from Japan had just been introduced in 1963, but had not been greeted with enthusiasm—"made in Japan" was synonymous with products that were cheap and shoddy. You might see an occasional sports car on the road—Ford's Thunderbird or Chevrolet Corvette—but the vast majority of customers chose among sedans, convertibles, and station wagons made by General Motors, Ford, or Chrysler.

The typical American city of 1963 had appallingly little choice in things to eat. In a large city, you would be able to find a few restaurants serving Americanized Chinese food, a few Italian restaurants serving spaghetti and pizza, and a few restaurants with a French name, which probably meant that they had French onion soup on the menu. But if you were looking for a nice little Szechuan dish or linguine with pesto or sautéed foie gras, forget it. A Thai curry? The first Thai restaurant in the entire nation wouldn't open for another eight years. Sushi? Raw fish? Are you kidding?

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ON THIS THURSDAY, November 21, television's prime-time lineup included *The Flintstones*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *My Three Sons*, *Perry Mason*, and *The Perry Como Show*, but it was the fourteenth-rated show, *Dr. Kildare*, that made *Time* magazine's recommended viewing. The story that week involved a pregnant unmarried teen who had gotten an abortion. She was psychologically shattered by the experience that even Dr. Kildare couldn't help. He had to refer her to a psychiatrist in another CBS program, *The Eleventh Hour*, for an episode that would air a week later.

She shouldn't have gotten pregnant in the first place, of course. Getting pregnant without being married was wrong, and if a girl did get pregnant then she and the boyfriend who had gotten her in that fix were supposed to get married. If she didn't get married, she should put the baby up for adoption. These were conventional views shared across the political spectrum. As of 1963, Americans continued to obey those norms with remarkable consistency. The percentage of births to single women, known as "the illegitimacy ratio," had been rising worrisomely among Negroes (the only respectful word for referring to African Americans in 1963). But among whites, the illegitimacy ratio was only 3 percent, about where it had been throughout the century.

Marriage was nearly universal and divorce was rare across all races. In the 1963 Current Population Survey, a divorced person headed just 3.5 percent of American households, with another 1.6 percent headed by a separated person. Nor did it make much difference how much education a person had—the marriage percentages for college grads and high school dropouts were about the same.

Not only were Americans almost always married, mothers normally stayed at home to raise their children. More than 80 percent of married women with young children were not working outside the home in 1963.<sup>2</sup> When Americans watched *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (it was still going strong in 1963, at twenty-sixth place in the ratings), they were looking at a family structure that the vast majority of them recognized from their own experience, whether they were white or black and whether they were working class, middle class, or rich.

An irony of *Ozzie and Harriet* was that the real Harriet Nelson was herself a working mother (she was a show-business veteran who played herself on the show). Another irony: it wasn't clear that Ozzie did work—or at least the show never disclosed what Ozzie did for living. But he had to be doing something. Rich or poor, it was not socially respectable to be an adult, male, and idle. And so it was that 98 percent of civilian men in their thirties and forties reported to government interviewers that they were in the labor force, either working or seeking work. The numbers had looked like that ever since the government had begun asking the question.

Whether television was portraying loving traditional families or pointing with alarm to the perils of breaking the code, television was a team player. It was taken for granted that television programs were supposed to validate the standards that were commonly accepted as part of “the American way of life”—a phrase that was still in common use in 1963.

The film industry chafed under that obligation more than the television networks did, but it mostly went along. Few relics of a half century ago seem more antiquated than the constraints under which filmmakers operated. If filmmakers in 1963 wanted the approval of the Production Code of the Motion Picture Association of America, which almost all of them still did, the dialogue could not include any profanity stronger than *hell* or *damn*, and there had better be good dramatic justification even for them. Characters couldn't take the name of the Lord in vain, or ridicule religion, or use any form of obscenity—meaning just about anything related to the sex act. Actors couldn't be seen naked or even near naked, nor could they dance in a way that bore any resemblance to a sexual action. The plot couldn't present sex outside marriage as attractive or justified. Homosexuality was to be presented as perversion. Abortion? “The subject of abortion shall be discouraged, shall never be more than suggested, and when referred to shall be condemned,” said the code.<sup>3</sup>

There had been pushes against the Production Code before November 1963. Movies like *Elmer Gantry* and *Lolita* had managed to get code approval despite forbidden themes, and a few pictures had been released without approval, notably *Man with the Golden Arm*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, and *Some Like It Hot*. A British production that made every sort of licentiousness look like fun, *Tom Jones*, had opened in October. But the top-grossing American-made movie of 1963—*How the West Was Won*, *Cleopatra*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *The Great Escape*, *Charade*—still fit squarely within the moral world prescribed by the Production Code.

Freedom of expression in literature was still a live issue. A federal court decision in 195

had enjoined the Post Office from confiscating copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic Cancer*, and *Fanny Hill* sent through the mails, but many state laws were still on the books. Just a week earlier, a court in Manhattan had heard a case testing a New York State law that prohibited selling any book that “exploits, is devoted to, or is made up of descriptions of illicit sex or sexual immorality.” Did *Fanny Hill* fall into that category? Without a doubt, said the three-judge panel. It was well written, the court acknowledged, but “filth, even wrapped in the finest packaging, is still filth.”<sup>4</sup>

Part of the reason for these widely shared values lay in the religiosity of America in 1963. A Gallup poll taken in October asked as two of its background questions the interviewee's religious preference and whether he or she had attended church in the last seven days (note the wording in 1963—“church,” not “church or synagogue” or “worship service”). Only 10 percent of respondents said they did *not* have a religious preference, and half said they had attended a worship service in the last seven days. These answers showed almost no variation across classes. Poor or rich, high school dropout or college graduate, the percentages of Americans who said they were religious believers and had recently attended a worship service were close to identical.<sup>5</sup>

Hollywood had especially elaborate restrictions on the way that criminal activity could be portrayed, amounting to a stipulation that movies must always show that crime doesn't pay. But to most Americans, that didn't seem odd. By 1963, crime had been low for many years. In large swaths of America, doors were routinely left unlocked, children were allowed to move around the neighborhood unsupervised, and, except in the toughest neighborhoods of the largest cities, it seldom occurred to someone walking alone at night to worry about muggers.

The nation's prisons held only a fraction of the inmates they would hold by 2010, but clearance rates for crimes and the probability of prison time if convicted for a felony were both high. And so we have this paradox compared to later years: Crime was low and few people had ever been in prison, even in low-income neighborhoods, but most of the people in those neighborhoods who regularly committed crimes ended up in jail. People weren't being naive to believe that crime didn't pay. By and large, it really didn't.

As for illegal drugs, we cannot put hard numbers to the prevalence of use—surveys on drug use wouldn't begin until the late 1970s—but there certainly wasn't much happening that attracted the attention of the police. In 1963, there were just 18 arrests for drug abuse violations per 100,000 Americans, compared to 1,284 per 100,000 for drunkenness.<sup>6</sup> As of 1963, people drank like fish and smoked like chimneys, but illegal drugs were rare and exotic.

America still had plenty of problems on November 21, 1963. The greatest of all, the one that had been eating at the vitals of the American body politic ever since the founders couldn't bring themselves to condemn slavery in the Declaration of Independence, was the status of African Americans. In 1963, the South was still such a thoroughly segregated society that whether the segregation was *de jure* or *de facto* didn't make much practical difference. In the North, the laws supporting segregation were gone, but neighborhoods and schools in urban areas were segregated in practice. The racial differences in income, education, and occupations were all huge. The civil rights movement was the biggest domestic issue of the early 1960s, and it was underwritten by a moral outrage that had begun among blacks b

was rapidly raising the consciousness of white America as well.

The status of American women in 1963 had not yet led to a movement, but there was much to be outraged about. Almost as many girls as boys had enrolled in college in the spring of 1963, but thereafter the discrepancies grew. That same year, there were 1.4 male college graduates for every female, two master's degrees awarded to males for every one that went to a female, and eight PhDs that went to males for every one that went to a female. Worse than that were the expectations. Teaching and nursing were still two of the only occupations in which women received equal treatment and opportunity, and the women who did enter male-dominated professions could expect to put up with a level of sexual harassment that would prompt large summary damage awards in the 2000s. The vast majority of men took for granted that women were expected to get married, cook the meals, keep the house clean, raise the children, and cater to the husband. Women who didn't were oddballs.

Pollution was a dreadful problem in many urban areas. The smog in Los Angeles was often a visible miasma hanging over the city, and less visible pollution was just as dangerously present in the nation's lakes and rivers.

And there was the problem that within a year would become a focal point of national domestic policy: poverty. The official poverty line didn't exist yet—it was in the process of being invented by the economist Mollie Orshansky and her colleagues at the Social Security Administration—but when that definition of poverty was retrospectively calculated for 1963, it would be determined that almost 20 percent of the American people were below the poverty line. And yet poverty was still on the periphery of the policy agenda. The reason was more complicated than obtuseness or indifference, and it goes to the strategic optimism that still prevailed in 1963: Poverty had been dropping so rapidly for so many years that Americans thought things were going well. Economists have since reconstructed earlier poverty rates using decennial census data, and determined that 41 percent of Americans were still below the poverty line in 1949.<sup>7</sup> A drop from 41 percent to under 20 percent in just fourteen years was a phenomenal achievement. No one knew those numbers yet, but the reality of the progress they represent helps explain why the average American wasn't exercised about poverty in 1963. Things had been getting better economically in ways that were evident in everyday life.

That kind of progress also helps explain why, if you took polling data at face value, America didn't have a lower class or an upper class in 1963. In the responses to a Gallup poll taken that fall, 95 percent of the respondents said they were working class (50 percent) or middle class (45 percent). A great many poor people were refusing to identify themselves as lower class, and a great many affluent people were refusing to identify themselves as upper class. Those refusals reflected a national conceit that had prevailed from the beginning of the nation: America didn't have classes, or, to the extent that it did, Americans should act as if it didn't.

AS WALTER CRONKITE ended the broadcast on November 21 with his newly coined sign-off, "That's the way it is," he had no way of knowing that he was within hours of a career-changing event. The grainy videotape of the special bulletins, with Cronkite's ashen face and his carefully dispassionate voice saying that the news was official, the president was dead, and the vice president fiddling with his glasses, trying to hide that he was blinking away tears, would become the

iconic image of how the nation got the news.

Nor could he, nor any of his audience, have had any way of knowing how much America was about to change, in everything—its politics, economy, technology, high culture, popular culture, and civic culture.

The assassination was to some degree a cause of that change. On November 21, 1963, Kennedy was not an unusually popular president. The image of JFK's presidency as Camelot came later, through Theodore White's interview of Jackie Kennedy a few weeks after the assassination. In the weeks just before the assassination, Gallup put his job approval rating at 58 percent—not bad, but hardly spectacular in that unpolarized era—and the *New York Times* number one nonfiction best seller was Victor Lasky's highly critical *J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth*. Apart from his only average political clout when he died, Kennedy was disinclined by temperament and beliefs to push for radical change. Then an accident of history brought a master legislator to the White House at a time when national grief and self-recrimination hobbled his political opposition. It is surely impossible that anything resembling the legislative juggernaut that Lyndon Johnson commanded would have happened if Kennedy had been in the Oval Office. No one knows how Vietnam would have played out if Kennedy had lived, but it could hardly have been worse than the trauma that Johnson's policies produced.

In other ways, the assassination provides a marker coinciding with changes that were going to happen anyway. Many of the landmark reforms of the 1960s were produced by Supreme Court decisions, not the president or Congress, and the activist supermajority on that court was already established. Seven of the judges sitting on the court when Kennedy died were there throughout the next six years of historic decisions.

A sexual revolution of some sort was inevitable by November 21, 1963. The first oral contraceptive pill had gone on the market in 1960 and its use was spreading rapidly. Of course sexual mores would be profoundly changed when, for the first time in human history, women had a convenient and reliable way to ensure that they could have sex without getting pregnant, even on the spur of the moment and with no cooperation from the man.

A revolution of some sort in the fortunes of African Americans was inevitable. The civil rights movement had been intensifying for a decade and had reached its moral apogee with the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, which filled the Mall with a quarter of a million people and concluded with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The precise shape of the legislation and regulatory regime to implement the revolution were probably different under Johnson than they would have been under Kennedy, but momentum for major change in 1963 was already too great to stop.

Something resembling the War on Poverty would probably have been proposed in 1964, no matter what. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* had appeared in the spring of 1962, proclaiming that 40 to 50 million Americans were living in poverty, and that their poverty was structural—it would not be cured by economic growth. Kennedy had read the book, or at least some laudatory reviews of it, and ordered the staff work that would later be used by Johnson in formulating his War on Poverty. How many programs Kennedy could have actually passed is another question, but Harrington's thesis was already being taken up by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and would have become part of the policy debate even without the assassination.

Other movements that would have sweeping impact on American society were already

nascent in 1963. Early in the year, Betty Friedan had published *The Feminine Mystique*, seen now as the opening salvo of the feminist movement. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* had appeared in 1962 and become a *New York Times* best seller, setting off public interest that would lead to the environmental movement. Ralph Nader had written his first attack on the auto industry in the *Nation*, and two years later would found the consumer advocacy movement with *Unsafe at Any Speed*.

The cultural landscape of the Sixties was already taking shape in 1963. Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," and "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright"—all theme songs for what we think of as the Sixties—had been released six months before Kennedy died. In November 1963, the Beatles had played for the queen, were the hottest group in England, and were planning their first U.S. tour.

And history had already swallowed the demographic pig. The leading cohorts of the baby boomers were in their teens by November 21, 1963, and, for better or worse, they were going to be who they were going to be. No one understood at the time what a big difference it could make if one age group of a population is abnormally large. Everyone was about to find out.

THIS BOOK IS about an evolution in American society that has taken place since November 22, 1963, leading to the formation of classes that are different in kind and in their degree of separation from anything that the nation has ever known. I will argue that the divergence into these separate classes, if it continues, will end what has made America America.

To forestall misinterpretation, let me spell out what this book does *not* argue.

First, I do not argue that America was ever a classless society. From the beginning, rich and poor have usually lived in different parts of town, gone to different churches, and had somewhat different manners and mores. It is not the existence of classes that is new, but the emergence of classes that diverge on core behaviors and values—classes that barely recognize their underlying American kinship.

Second, I do not make a case for America's decline as a world power. The economic dynamics that have produced the class society I deplore have, paradoxically, fostered the blossoming of America's human capital. Those dynamics will increase, not diminish, our competitiveness on the world stage in the years ahead. Nor do I forecast decline in America's military and diplomatic supremacy.

But the American project was not about maximizing national wealth nor international dominance. The American project—a phrase you will see again in the chapters to come—consists of the continuing effort, begun with the founding, to demonstrate that human beings can be left free as individuals and families to live their lives as they see fit, coming together voluntarily to solve their joint problems. The polity based on that idea led to a civic culture that was seen as exceptional by all the world. That culture was so widely shared among Americans that it amounted to a civil religion. To be an American was to be different from other nationalities, in ways that Americans treasured. That culture is unraveling.

I focus on what happened, not why. I discuss some of the whys, but most of them involve forces that cannot be changed. My primary goal is to induce recognition of the ways in which America is coming apart at the seams—not seams of race or ethnicity, but of class.

That brings me to the subtitle of this book and its curious specification of white American

For decades now, trends in American life have been presented in terms of race and ethnicity, with non-Latino whites (hereafter, just *whites*) serving as the reference point—the black poverty rate compared to the white poverty rate, the percentage of Latinos who go to college compared to the percentage of whites who go to college, and so on. There's nothing wrong with that. I have written books filled with such comparisons. But this strategy has distracted our attention from the way that the reference point itself is changing.

And so this book uses evidence based overwhelmingly on whites in the description of the new upper class in [part 1](#) and based exclusively on whites in the description of the new lower class in [part 2](#). My message: Don't kid yourselves that we are looking at stresses that can be remedied by attacking the legacy of racism or by restricting immigration. The trends I describe exist independently of ethnic heritage. In the penultimate chapter, I broaden the picture to include everyone.

As with all books on policy, this one will eventually discuss how we might change course. But discussing solutions is secondary to this book, just as understanding causes is secondary. The important thing is to look unblinkingly at the nature of the problem.

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**Part 1**

**The Formation of a New Upper Class**



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PART 1 IS about the emergence of a new American upper class that is qualitatively different from any that the country has ever known.

Harvard economist Robert Reich was the first to put a name to an evolving new class of workers in his 1991 book, *The Work of Nations*, calling them “symbolic analysts.”<sup>1</sup> Reich surveyed the changing job market and divided jobs into three categories: routine production services, in-person services, and symbol-analytic services. In Reich’s formulation, the new class of symbolic analysts consisted of managers, engineers, attorneys, scientists, professors, executives, journalists, consultants, and other “mind workers” whose work consists of processing information. He observed that the new economy was ideally suited to their talents and rewarded them accordingly.

In 1994, in *The Bell Curve*, the late Richard J. Herrnstein and I discussed the driving forces behind this phenomenon, the increasing segregation of the American university system by cognitive ability and the increasing value of brainpower in the marketplace.<sup>2</sup> We labeled the new class “the cognitive elite.”

In 2000, David Brooks brought an anthropologist’s eye and a wickedly funny pen to his description of the new upper class in *Bobos in Paradise*. *Bobos* is short for “bourgeois bohemians.” Traditionally, Brooks wrote, it had been easy to distinguish the bourgeoisie from the bohemians. “The bourgeoisie were the square, practical ones. They defended tradition and middle-class values. They worked for corporations and went to church. Meanwhile, the bohemians were the free spirits who flouted convention.” But by the 1990s, everything had gotten mixed up. “It was now impossible to tell an espresso-sipping artist from a cappuccino-gulping banker,”<sup>3</sup> Brooks wrote. Bobos belonged to what Brooks labeled “the educated class.”

In 2002, Richard Florida, a professor of public policy at George Mason University, identified “the creative class,” telling his readers, “If you are a scientist or engineer, an architect or designer, a writer, artist, or musician, or if you use your creativity as a key factor in your work in business, education, health care, law or some other profession, you are a member.”<sup>4</sup> He celebrated the changes in the workplace, lifestyle, and social capital that accompanied the ascendancy of the creative class.

Reich, Brooks, Florida, and Herrnstein and I were all describing the changing nature of the people in the managerial and professional occupations of the upper-middle class. When I use the term *new upper class*, I am not referring to all of them, but to a small subset: the people who run the nation’s economic, political, and cultural institutions. In practice, this means a fuzzy set in which individuals may or may not be in the upper class, depending on how broadly you want to set the operational definition.

## The Narrow Elite

At the top are those who have risen to jobs that directly affect the nation's culture, economy, and politics. Some of them wield political power, others wield economic power, and still others wield the power of the media. I will call this subset the *narrow elite*. The narrow elite includes the lawyers and judges who shape constitutional jurisprudence, the people who decide how the news will be covered on national news programs, and the journalists and columnists whose bylines are found in the leading print media and on the Internet. It includes the top executives in the nation's largest corporations, financial institutions, foundations, and nonprofit organizations. It includes the producers, directors, and writers who create the nation's films and television dramas, the most influential scholars in the nation's elite universities and research institutes, and senior government administrators and politicians.

The narrow elite numbers fewer than a hundred thousand people, and perhaps only ten thousand or so. If this seems too small, think about the numbers for specific components of the narrow elite.

With regard to opinion media, for example, go to political websites that maintain a list of links to all the columnists on their respective sides of the political spectrum, make sure you've got a full representation of columnists from Left to Right, and add them up. Make a list of the influential talk show hosts from Left to Right. It is impossible to make the number of genuinely influential opinion writers and talkers larger than a few hundred. The top few dozen have much more influence than those below them.

With regard to constitutional jurisprudence, count up the judges on the circuit courts of appeals and the Supreme Court, and estimate the number of attorneys who argue cases before them. The influential actors cannot be made to number more than the low thousands, with the number of key figures no more than a few hundred. When it comes to formulating and passing legislation, the number of key actors at the federal level does not even consist of everyone in the House and Senate. A few dozen of them are far more influential than everyone else. In the corporate and financial worlds, the CEOs and financial heavy hitters whose actions affect the national economy are limited to the very largest and most strategically placed institutions. And so it goes throughout the narrow elite. The number of influential players is surprisingly small even for a country as sprawling and decentralized as the United States.

### **The Broad Elite**

Construed more broadly, the new upper class includes those who are both successful and influential within a city or region: the owners and top executives of the most important local businesses and corporations; the people who run the local television stations and newspapers; the most successful lawyers and physicians; the most prominent faculty if the city has an important university; and the most powerful city officials.

The number of people who belong under the broad definition of the new upper class is a judgment call. At one extreme, we might choose to limit the definition to the top 1 percent of people working in managerial and professional occupations. There is an argument to be made for such a stringent restriction. In the military, flag officers—generals or admirals—constitute only about 0.4 percent of all military officers. In the

executive branch of the federal government, positions reserved for the Senior Executive Service plus presidential appointments amount to about 1.3 percent of the civilian equivalent of military officers (GS-7 or higher). It could be argued that these include the vast majority of people who could be deemed “highly successful” in the military and the executive branch of government.

But 1 percent is perhaps too stringent. If we restrict the new upper class to the top 1 percent in the private sector, we’re going to have nothing but chief executives of major companies, the most senior partners in the very largest and most influential law firms, and so on. There’s also money to consider. If I were to limit the broad elite to the top 1 percent of those working in management and the professions, the mean family income of the new upper class as of 2009 would have been \$517,700.

A plausible middle ground is the most successful 5 percent of the people working in the professions and managerial positions. In the military, the top 5.5 percent of officers in 2006 consisted of those with the rank of colonel or above.<sup>5</sup> The Senior Executive Service, presidential appointees, plus the GS-15s constituted the top 6.6 percent of employees with a GS-7 grade or higher. In the world of business, 5.1 percent of all people classified as working in managerial positions were chief executives. Not all chief executives qualify for the new upper class and, in large corporations, senior executives just below the CEO do qualify, but saying that the most successful 5 percent of businesspeople belong in the new upper class would seem to be reasonable.

These considerations lead me to conclude that using the top 5 percent lets in just about everyone who is unequivocally part of the new upper class, plus a large number of those who are successful but borderline. I hereby operationally define the new upper class as the most successful 5 percent of adults ages 25 and older who are working in managerial positions, in the professions (medicine, the law, engineering and architecture, the sciences, and university faculty), and in content-production jobs in the media.<sup>6</sup> As of 2010, about 23 percent of all employed persons ages 25 or older were in these occupations, which means about 1,427,000 persons constituted the top 5 percent.<sup>7</sup> Since 69 percent of adults in these occupations who were ages 25 and older were married in 2010, about 2.4 million adults were in new-upper-class families as heads of household or spouse.<sup>8</sup>

## **What’s New About the New Upper Class**

Every society more complex than bands of hunter-gatherers has had an upper class and, within that upper class, an elite who ran the key institutions. The United States has been no exception. But things are different now than they were half a century ago. America’s new upper class is new because its members have something in common beyond the simple fact of their success.

Insofar as Americans in the past used the phrase “upper class” at all, it usually connoted the old-money rich of the Northeast United States. The closest parallel to what I am calling the new upper class used to be known as The Establishment. But The Establishment, too, was identified with the Northeast, and its role was associated with a few great corporate entities (predominantly the oil, steel, and railroad giants), the staid

financial world (it was still staid when people talked about The Establishment), and political influence discreetly exerted in paneled rooms behind closed doors. Insofar as members of The Establishment served in government, they were to be found primarily in senior posts in the Treasury Department, the State Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency. The Establishment had little to do with the film industry, television, journalism, high technology, rough-and-tumble entrepreneurialism, or rough-and-tumble politics.

As of 1960, the people who had risen to the top had little in common except their success. The world in which David Rockefeller, the biggest name in The Establishment, grew up could not have been more different from the world of the Jewish immigrants and sons of immigrants who built Hollywood and pioneered radio and television broadcasting. The men who were the leaders at CBS News in 1960 included the son of a farmer from Polecat Creek, North Carolina (Edward R. Murrow), the son of a Kansas City dentist (Walter Cronkite) who dropped out of college to become a newspaper reporter, and a Rhodes Scholar (Charles Collingwood).

Dwight Eisenhower's initial cabinet was called "nine millionaires and a plumber." But only two of them had been born into affluent families. The others included two sons of farmers, the son of a bank cashier, the son of a teacher, the daughter of the only lawyer in a tiny Texas town, and the son of parents so poor that he had to drop out of high school to help support them.

The Kennedy administration's early nickname was "Harvard on the Potomac," but his cabinet was no more elite than Eisenhower's had been. Attorney General Robert Kennedy was rich and Harvard-educated, and Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon was a full-fledged member of The Establishment, but the others consisted of three sons of small farmers (a tenant farmer, in one case), and the sons of a sales manager of a shoe company, the owner of a struggling menswear store, an immigrant factory worker, and an immigrant who made his living peddling produce.<sup>9</sup> A narrow elite existed in 1960 as in 2010, but it was not a group that had broadly shared backgrounds, tastes, preferences, or culture. They were powerful people, not a class.

Americans still rise to power from humble origins. Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader as I write, was born to a miner and a laundress in Searchlight, Nevada, and grew up in poverty. John Boehner, the Speaker of the House, was one of twelve children born to the owner of a working-class bar, and took seven years to finish college while he worked to pay for it. Hilda Solis, President Obama's secretary of labor, was born to immigrant parents who met in citizenship class and worked on factory floors all their lives. It still happens. But along with the continuing individual American success stories is a growing majority of the people who run the institutions of America who do share tastes, preferences, and culture. They increasingly constitute a class.

They are also increasingly isolated. The new isolation involves spatial, economic, educational, cultural, and, to some degree, political isolation. This growing isolation has been accompanied by growing ignorance about the country over which they have so much power.

Such are the propositions to be argued in part 1.

## Our Kind of People

*In which is described the emergence of a new and distinctive culture among a highly influential segment of American society.*

ON SEPTEMBER 29, 1987, ABC premiered an hour-long dramatic series with the cryptic title *thirtysomething*. The opening scene is set in a bar. Not a *Cheers* bar, where Cliff the mailman perches on a bar stool alongside Norm the accountant and Frasier the psychiatrist, but an airy room, perhaps attached to a restaurant, with sunlight streaming through paned windows onto off-white walls.

The room is crowded with an upscale clientele gathered for drinks after work, nattily uniformed servers moving among them. Two women in their late twenties or early thirties wearing tailored business outfits are seated at a table. A vase with a minimalist arrangement of irises and forsythia is visible in the background. On the table in front of the women are their drinks—both of them wine, served in classic long-stemmed glasses. Nary a peanut or pretzel is in sight. One of the women is talking about a man she has started dating. He is attractive, funny, good in bed, she says, but there's a problem: He wears polyester shirts. "Am I allowed to have a relationship with someone who wears polyester shirts?" she asks.

She is Hope Murdoch, the female protagonist. She ends up marrying the man who wore the polyester shirts, who is sartorially correct by the time we see him. Hope went to Princeton. She is a writer who put a promising career on hold when she had a baby. He is Michael Steadman, one of two partners in a fledgling advertising agency in Philadelphia. He went to the University of Pennsylvania (the Ivy League one). Hope and Michael live with their seven-month-old daughter in an apartment with high ceilings, old-fashioned woodwork, and etched glass windows. Grad-school-like bookcases are untidily crammed with books. An Art Deco poster is on the wall. A Native American blanket is draped over the top of the sofa.

In the remaining forty-five minutes, we get dialogue that includes a reference to left brain/right brain differences and an exchange about evolutionary sexual selection that begins "You've got a bunch of Australopithecines out on the savanna, right?" The Steadmans buy a \$278 baby stroller (1987 dollars). Michael shops for new backpacking gear at a high-end outdoors store, probably REI. No one wears suits at the office. Michael's best friend is a professor at Haverford. Hope breast-feeds her baby in a fashionable restaurant. Hope can't find a babysitter. Three of the four candidates she interviews are too stupid to be left with her child and the other is too Teutonic. Hope refuses to spend a night away from the baby ("I have to be available to her all the time"). Michael drives a car so cool that I couldn't identify the make. All this, in just the first episode.

The culture depicted in *thirtysomething* had no precedent, with its characters who were educated at elite schools, who discussed intellectually esoteric subjects, and whose sex lives were emotionally complicated and therefore needed to be talked about. The male leads in *thirtysomething* were on their way up through flair and creativity, not by being organizational men. The female leads were conflicted about motherhood and yet obsessively devoted to

being state-of-the-art moms. The characters all possessed a sensibility that shuddered equally at Fords and Cadillacs, ranch homes in the suburbs and ponderous mansions, Budweiser and Chivas Regal.

In the years to come, America would get other glimpses of this culture in *Mad About You*, *Ally McBeal*, *Frasier*, and *The West Wing*, among others, but no show ever focused with the same laser intensity on the culture that *thirtysomething* depicted—understandably, because the people who live in that culture do not make up much of the audience for network television series, and those who are the core demographic for network television series are not particularly fond of the culture that *thirtysomething* portrayed. It was the emerging culture of the new upper class.

Let us once again return to November 21, 1963, and try to find its counterpart.

## The Baseline

### The World of the Upper-Middle Class

Two conditions have to be met before a subculture can spring up within a mainstream culture. First, a sufficient number of people have to possess a distinctive set of tastes and preferences. Second, they have to be able to get together and form a critical mass large enough to shape the local scene. The Amish have managed to do it by achieving local dominance in selected rural areas. In 1963, other kinds of subcultures also existed in parts of the country. Then as now, America's major cities had distinctive urban styles, and so did regions such as Southern California, the Midwest, and the South. But in 1963 there was still no critical mass of the people who would later be called symbolic analysts, the educated class, the creative class, or the cognitive elite.

In the first place, not enough people had college educations to form a critical mass of people with the distinctive tastes and preferences fostered by advanced education. In the American adult population as a whole, just 8 percent had college degrees. Even in neighborhoods filled with managers and professionals, people with college degrees were a minority—just 32 percent of people in those jobs had college degrees in 1963. Only a dozen census tracts in the entire nation had adult populations in which more than 50 percent of the adults had college degrees, and all of them were on or near college campuses.<sup>1</sup>

In the second place, *affluence* in 1963 meant enough money to afford a somewhat higher standard of living than other people, not a markedly different lifestyle. In 1963, the median family income of people working in managerial occupations and the professions was only about \$62,000 (2010 dollars, as are all dollar figures from now on). Fewer than 8 percent of American families in 1963 had incomes of \$100,000 or more, and fewer than 1 percent had incomes of \$200,000 or more.

This compressed income distribution was reflected in the residential landscape. In 1963, great mansions were something most Americans saw in the movies, not in person. Only the richest suburbs of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles had entire neighborhoods consisting of mansions. The nature of the change since then can be seen by driving around suburban neighborhoods where the affluent of the 1960s lived, such as Chevy Chase, Maryland; Belmont, Massachusetts; or Shaker Heights, Ohio. Most of the housing stock remaining from

that era looks nothing like the 15,000- and 20,000-square-foot homes built in affluent suburb over the last few decades. No reproductions of French châteaux. No tennis courts. No three-story cathedral ceilings. Nor were the prices astronomically higher than the prices of middle-class homes. The average price of all new homes built in 1963 was \$129,000.<sup>2</sup> The average price of homes in Chevy Chase offered for sale in the classified ads of the *Washington Post* on the Sunday preceding November 21, 1963, was \$272,000, and the most expensive was \$567,000. To put it another way, you could live in a typical house in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the nation for about twice the average cost of all houses built that year nationwide.

There was a difference between the houses of the upper-middle class and of those who were merely in the middle class. An upper-middle-class home might have four bedrooms instead of two or three, two bathrooms and a powder room instead of one bathroom, and two floors instead of one. It might have a two-car garage, maybe a rec room for the kids and a study for Dad. But it seldom bore any resemblance to a mansion. For an example of elite housing in 1963, download an episode of *Mad Men* that shows the Drapers' suburban home—that's the kind of house that the creative director of a major New York advertising agency might well have lived in.

The members of the upper-middle-class elite did not have many options for distinguishing themselves by the cars they drove. You could find a few Mercedeses and Jaguars in major cities, but even there they were a pain to keep up, because it was so hard to get spare parts and find a mechanic who could service them. Another factor was at work, too: Executives and professionals in 1963, especially outside New York and Los Angeles, were self-conscious about being seen as show-offs. Many people in the upper-middle class who could have afforded them didn't drive Cadillacs because they were too ostentatious.

Another reason that the lifestyle of the upper-middle class was not dramatically different from that of the middle class was that people who were not wealthy could get access to the top of the line for a lot less in 1963 than in 2010, in the same way that you could live in Chevy Chase for not that much more than you would pay for a house anywhere else. It seems paradoxical from the perspective of 2010. Day-to-day life wasn't cheaper then than it is now. In Washington newspaper advertisements for November 1963, gas was cheaper, at the equivalent of \$2.16 per gallon, but a dozen eggs were \$3.92, a gallon of milk \$3.49, chicken \$2.06 a pound, and a sirloin steak \$6.80 a pound. The best-selling 1963 Chevy Impala cost about \$26,600. At Blum's restaurant in San Francisco, not an expensive restaurant, you paid \$12.46 for the hot turkey sandwich, \$13.17 for the chef's salad, and \$5.34 for the hot fudge sundae.<sup>3</sup> Pearson's liquor store in Washington, DC, had started a wine sale two days earlier advertising its everyday wines at prices from about \$6 to \$12. All of these prices would have looked familiar, in some cases a little expensive, to a consumer in 2010.

But the most expensive wasn't necessarily out of reach of the middle class. In 1963, one of the most expensive restaurants in Washington was the newly opened Sans Souci, just a block from the White House and a great favorite of the Kennedy administration. The *Washington Post's* restaurant critic had a meal of endive salad, poached turbot, chocolate mousse, and coffee for a total of \$44.91. The image of a luxury car to Americans in 1963 was a Cadillac. Its most expensive model, the Eldorado Biarritz, listed at \$47,000. That same Pearson advertisement selling *vin ordinaire* for \$6 to \$12 offered all the first-growth Bordeaux from

the legendary 1959 vintage for about \$50 a bottle (yes, I'm still using 2010 dollars).

And so there just wasn't that much difference between the lifestyle of a highly influential attorney or senior executive of a corporation and people who were several rungs down the ladder. Upper-middle-class men in 1963 drank Jack Daniel's instead of Jim Beam in the highballs and drove Buicks (or perhaps Cadillacs) instead of Chevys. Their suits cost more but they were all off the rack, and they all looked the same anyway. Their wives had more dress clothes and jewelry than wives in the rest of America, and their hairdressers were more expensive. But just about the only thing that amounted to a major day-to-day lifestyle difference between the upper-middle class and the rest of America was the country club, with its golf course, tennis court, and swimming pool that were closed to the hoi polloi. On the other hand, there were lots of municipal golf courses, tennis courts, and swimming pools, too.

The supreme emblem of wealth in 2010 didn't even exist in 1963. The first private jet, the Learjet Model 23, wouldn't be delivered for another year. Private and corporate planes consisted mostly of Cessnas and Beechcrafts, small and cramped. Only a few hundred large private planes existed, and they were all propeller-driven. The owners of even the poshest of them had to recognize that an economy seat on a commercial DC-8 or Boeing 707 provided a smoother, quieter, and much faster ride.

## The World of the Rich

Still, a private plane is a major difference in lifestyle, even if it is not a jet, and private planes did exist in 1963. Shall we look for a distinct upper-class culture among the wealthy?

In 1963, *millionaire* was synonymous with not just the affluent but the wealthy. A million dollars was serious money even by today's standards, equivalent to about \$7.2 million in 2010 dollars. But there were so few millionaires—fewer than 80,000, amounting to two tenths of 1 percent of American families.<sup>4</sup> The authentically wealthy in 1963 comprised a microscopic fraction of the population.

Some portion of that small number had no distinct preferences and tastes because they had made their money themselves after growing up in middle-class or working-class families. They hadn't gone to college at all, or they had attended the nearest state college. They might live in duplexes on Park Avenue or mansions on Nob Hill, but they were the nouveaux riches. Some acted like the stereotype of the nouveaux riches. Others continued to identify with their roots and lived well but not ostentatiously.

The subset of old-money millionaires did have something resembling a distinct culture. Besides living in a few select neighborhoods, they were concentrated in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. They summered or wintered in a few select places such as Bar Harbor, Newport, and Palm Beach. They sent their children to a select set of prep schools and then to the Ivy League or the Seven Sisters. Within their enclaves, old-money America formed a distinct social group.

But besides being a tiny group numerically, there was another reason that they did not form an upper-class culture that made any difference to the rest of the nation. Those who hadn't made the money themselves weren't especially able or influential. Ernest Hemingway was right in his supposed exchange with F. Scott Fitzgerald.<sup>5</sup> In 1963, the main difference between the old-money rich and everybody else was mainly that they had more money.



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