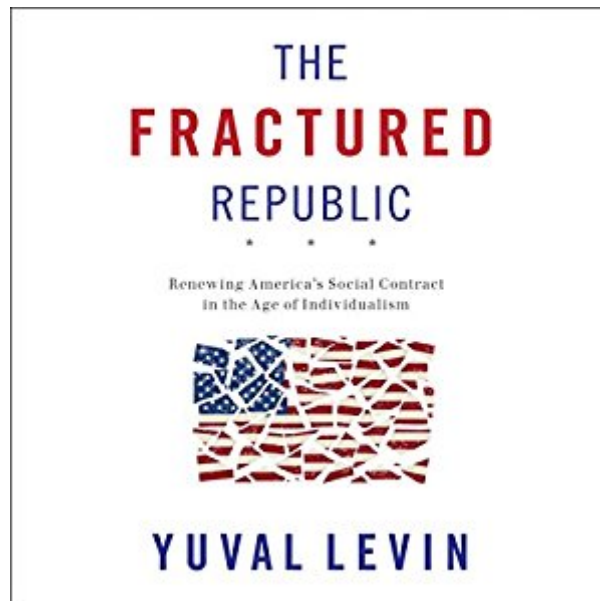


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The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract In The Age Of Individualism



Synopsis

Americans today are frustrated and anxious. Our economy is sluggish and leaves workers insecure. Income inequality, cultural divisions, and political polarization increasingly pull us apart. Our governing institutions often seem paralyzed. And our politics has failed to rise to these challenges. No wonder, then, that Americans - and the politicians who represent them - are overwhelmingly nostalgic for a better time. The left looks back to the middle of the 20th century, when unions were strong, large public programs promised to solve pressing social problems, and the movements for racial integration and sexual equality were advancing. The right looks back to the Reagan era, when deregulation and lower taxes spurred the economy, cultural traditionalism seemed resurgent, and America was confident and optimistic. Each side thinks returning to its golden age could solve America's problems. In *The Fractured Republic*, Yuval Levin argues that this politics of nostalgia is failing 21st-century Americans. Both parties are blind to how America has changed over the past half century - as the large, consolidated institutions that once dominated our economy, politics, and culture have fragmented and become smaller, more diverse, and personalized. Individualism, dynamism, and liberalization have come at the cost of dwindling solidarity, cohesion, and social order. This has left us with more choices in every realm of life but less security, stability, and national unity. Both our strengths and our weaknesses are therefore consequences of these changes. And the dysfunctions of our fragmented national life will need to be answered by the strengths of our decentralized, diverse, dynamic nation. Levin argues that this calls for a modernizing politics that avoids both radical individualism and a centralizing statism and instead revives the middle layers of society - families and communities, schools and churches, charities and associations, local governments and markets. Through them, we can achieve not a single solution to the problems of our age, but multiple and tailored answers fitted to the daunting range of challenges we face and suited to enable an American revival.

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Customer Reviews

“The Fractured Republic” is a fantastically original book. It is very optimistic, yet clear-eyed, which is a rare combination. Most optimistic books about modern politics are also simplistic. They typically consist of vague and belligerent paeans demanding the recapture of America’s past. Yuval Levin’s book, on the other hand, is the very opposite. It is precise and even-handed. And far from demanding recapture of the past, Levin explicitly rejects any such attempt. At the same time, Levin believes that we as Americans, liberal and conservative, can jointly renew our society without retreading the past, and in this age, such optimism is no small thing. Yuval Levin is a “reform conservative,” part of a loose group that includes such writers as Reihan Salam, Ross Douthat, Michael Lotus and James Bennett in “America 3.0,” and (perhaps) Rod Dreher. Reform conservatives are one of the constellation of conservative sub-groups that has emerged as the Republican pseudo-consensus of the past several decades has shattered. I would say, without knowing all that much about him, that Levin is an applied political philosopher. He edits the journal “National Affairs” and is the author of the excellent “The Great Debate,” contrasting the philosophies of Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke. He has thought very deeply on the problems facing America, and this book is the result. “The Fractured Republic” is a difficult book to summarize because its thought is densely original. But I’ll try! And reviewing this book is helped by Levin’s writing skill. Each word is measured and precisely chosen. Not a single trace of sloppy writing or sloppy thinking mars this book.

No one disputes the fact that the nation is polarized and coming apart. This is so evident especially in light of the 2016 election cycle. Likewise, no reasonable person can deny that we need to return to the order of social bonds that mitigate the effects of extreme individualism, especially the erosion of our national unity. Yuval Levin’s fascinating book, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America’s Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* does much to address these great problems and offer corresponding solutions. The book is a well-written historical analysis of what

has led to the fracturing of the nation. Thankfully, Levin does not resort to instant push-button solutions. Rather he recognizes the need to propose ways to mend and meld these fractures over the long term. What Levin describes is the battle between two conflicting yet inadequate visions of American society. Simplifying a bit, one is a conservative America that yearns for the security of moral values and social unity. The other is the progressive America that longs for the heady idealism of extreme individualism, income equality and governmental safety nets. Both visions are the two main baby boomer narratives, which also represent a clash of â€œnostalgiasâ€• where one side longs for the stable 50s and the other for the restless 60s. Levin, an avowed conservative, outlines the unique historic circumstances that gave rise to these competing visions and their nostalgias. He makes the case that all uniting factors have eroded over the last several decades. Americaâ€™s broad political consensus has broken down. The mediating institutions of family, community and faith that normally stand between the individual and the State are being â€œhollowed outâ€• and worn away.

First, let me acknowledge the articulate way Yuval Levin describes successive decades in America since World War I. There is no question that he is a skilled observer and phrasemaker. Evocative examples are offered below: â€œ[In the first half of the 20th Century]. . . powerful forces were pushing every American to become like everyone elseâ€• [I recall a wonderful example of the above statement. Washington DC radio station WAMUâ€™s â€œBig Broadcastâ€• program featured an episode of â€œFibber McGee and Mollyâ€• from the late 1940s. Fibber was chosen as â€œMr. Average Americanâ€•. At first he was incensed because he felt he was well above average. But by end of the show Fibber got turned around and was grateful being given the title of Mr. Average American.]â€œ Liberals look with nostalgia to the 60â€™s while conservatives look with nostalgia to the 80s. Both like the 50s but for different reasonsâ€•. â€œDemocrats talk about public policy as though it were always 1965 and the model of the Great Society welfare state will answer our every concern. And Republicans talk as though it were always 1981 and a repetition of the Reagan Revolution is the cure for what ails us.â€• â€œOur cultural battles . . . from stem cells to marriage, religious liberty to national identity â€œ have been fought at a fever pitch that has left all sides feeling besieged and offendedâ€•. Now let me get to my problem with Levinâ€™s book: his facile, confidently presented but questionable conclusions about solutions to our present problems of alienation. A major theme is that we must stop idealizing the past and seek moderate positions to achieve a â€œsociety of subsidiarityâ€•. He admits it will be difficult but says thatâ€™s the way to go.

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