

*Is America Breaking Apart?* by John A. Hall and Charles Lindholm

reviewed by [Rhys H Williams](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

The short answer to the question posed by the title of this insightful and persuasive book is no. John A. Hall, a political sociologist at McGill University, and Charles Lindholm, a cultural anthropologist at Boston University, respond to the current spate of literature bemoaning America's decline—books that decry our politics as hopelessly divisive, claim that the country is ungovernable, and argue that our social divisions are fatally fracturing our society. While Hall and Lindholm do not ignore the social, economic and political problems that affect our national life, they present a brief for the country's political stability.

Claims that America is breaking apart—that our country is engaged in dangerous "culture wars"—come from both the political left and right and cite a variety of sources for our problems. For example, neoconservatives worry that the trend toward "multiculturalism" is undermining our sense of collective national identity. Others, often known as "communitarians," claim that a surfeit of "rights talk" has eroded our sense of communal responsibility. Meanwhile, left-of-center critics are concerned that our retreat into "life-style enclaves" of like-minded people has exacerbated our society's class, racial, gender and generational segregation.

Hall and Lindholm do not denounce these concerns. Indeed, they consider social harmony a fragile accomplishment. But their careful and nuanced analysis both of the centripetal and the centrifugal forces in our history and current politics and culture leads them to the clear-eyed conclusion that while the U.S. is far from ideal or perfect, it is even further from dissolution.

The first of the book's two parts traces the historical development of America's institutional infrastructure. Political stability was far from preordained, the authors claim; rather, it was won through some specific political decisions made by our leaders, and by the violent repression of alternative visions of how the nation might be structured. As examples of the former, Hall and Lindholm review crucial historical developments such as the crafting of the Constitution; the formation of an effective federal government that coexisted with a relatively decentralized dispersion of political power; and western expansion, particularly through the Louisiana Purchase.

This expansion allowed the country to put off certain decisions (such as what to do about slavery) until the nation was firmly established, and undermined the type of ethnic territorialism that has recently ravaged Central and Eastern Europe.

As examples of the suppression of social alternatives, the authors cite the removal and often genocidal warfare against Native Americans; the forcible unification of the country into a single economic system through the Civil War; a shared racism that helped unify a variety of European-based ethnic groups; and the violent repression of socialist and workers movements during industrialization. One of Hall and Lindholm's strengths is that, unlike so many of today's social critics, they do not assume that political and social stability is an unequivocal moral good. Though they do not question its advantages for economic prosperity, neither do they equate stability with justice.

The book's second part examines the forces in American culture that, through emphasizing homogeneity, have pushed the country toward stability. This is treacherous conceptual territory, as what constitutes "American culture" is a matter of great dispute. It is hard to pin down and difficult to assess exactly how culture functions in social life. The tendency is to fall into more or less sweeping statements about the "central values" or "core beliefs" that characterize a nation. But how can one characterize with any semblance of precision a nation made up of as many different immigrant groups, ethnicities, religions and geographic regions as the United States?

Hall and Lindholm meet that challenge in part by focusing on the internal tensions, contradictions and ambiguities in American culture. They do identify several central values such as antiauthoritarianism, egalitarianism and individualism that they claim are widely shared by Americans of all social strata. But they simultaneously claim that American culture is marked by a "pragmatic modular approach to reality." They mean that Americans are less concerned with theory than with practice, less devoted to ideology than to pragmatic problem-solving. Further, a "modular" approach to reasoning allows Americans to "mix and match" the ideas and values they do find in the culture to fit their particular situations.

Thus, all Americans may share the values of equality or individualism, but different groups and individuals give different meaning to these concepts. In sum, Hall and Lindholm argue for the idea of a shared American culture, but they make that argument by noting that much of what we share is our pragmatic, ambiguous and

situational application of our values and ideals.

Complementing their understanding of the ambiguous nature of American values is an often unarticulated attribution of sacredness to American society. The assumption that a society has sacred qualities puts a premium on maintaining "community" and leads to worries that social harmony is fragile. Hall and Lindholm worry about the American conception of society as the voluntary aggregation of self-interested individuals—a conception that endangers sociability and cooperation. I agree with the authors about this strain of American thought; however, I think they pay too little attention to the religious roots of American history, culture and immigration. For many Americans, the idea of the sacred nature of society involves a quite specific vision of the "good society" and of how humans should relate to the divine.

The concern about the fragility of our nation specifically and about community generally makes Americans value civil relations in public, and assume that social relations are built primarily on affection and good will. Extremism, zealotry, public confrontation and interest-based politics all fly in the face of those assumptions and make Americans profoundly uneasy. Americans also cling to the vaguely articulated hope that politics can be an arena without compromise, hierarchical power relations, confrontation and expressions of self-interest—an ideal of which the real world of political action always falls short.

The result of these assumptions is that American culture pushes Americans toward maintaining at least the public appearance of homogeneity. Thus, we have a nation of individualists all concerned about getting along and being nice to each other in public. This accent on homogeneity, combined with our cultural style of informal egalitarianism, allows us to mask the reality of severe inequalities arising from unequal access to economic and political institutions. It militates against true social justice, the authors argue, but it does indeed help maintain societal stability. Recognizing this, they title one chapter "Two Cheers for Homogeneity."

I hope that this persuasive book will find the wide, nonacademic audience for which it is written, though there is so much packed into its pages that some of it may take more than one reading. The authors manage the difficult task of being both brief and nuanced. Though they do not give enough direct attention to religion, and though they themselves sometimes fall into sweeping generalizations about what "Americans" think, feel or assume, the book is an important corrective to the sensationalist literature that contributes to the problems it supposedly decries.

Though Hall and Lindholm do not pretend that our nation is above reproach or beyond social conflict, they convincingly demonstrate that it is not about to break apart.