

about new ideals of total social cooperation and trying them out on small scales. For many, these ideals fell under the rubric of a growing “communitarian” or “civic republican” movement, dedicated to reconstructing public life from the bottom up. For others, they grew out of spiritual cosmologies, from evangelical rankings of angels to New Age numberings of planetary houses. Americans everywhere were mesmerized by visions of a universal moral order that they comprehended within themselves. Meanwhile, nine of ten people agreed that “there was a time when people in this country felt they had more in common and shared more values than Americans do today.”

By the mid-1990s, pundits agreed that America was deep into a new era of lost purpose and shattered consensus. Robert Samuelson called it a “fragmenting”; *Commentary*, a “balkanization”; Thomas Byrne Edsall, an “era of bad feelings”; and William Raspberry, an “unraveling.”

Now half over, this Unraveling has darkened the quality of American life in ways no one ever predicted. Looking back, Americans can see 1984 as a threshold year when several new trends emerged that defined the era to come. At first, these items seemed no more than passing curiosities. By the mid-1990s, however, they became overwhelming and seemingly ineradicable features of American life.

In 1984, the electorate decisively endorsed an economic policy of large deficits, unchecked growth in entitlements spending, falling national savings rates, and heavy borrowing from foreigners—amid talk that this “riverboat gamble” would either cure the economy or force policy makers to reverse course. A decade later, fiscal excess had become a political way of life and sluggish productivity an economic fact of life.

In 1984, with Mario Cuomo’s “Two Americas” speech and Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground*, the public first learned that the gap between rich and poor was widening. A decade later, the gap had grown to yawning proportions, yet liberals joined conservatives in doubting that much could be done about it.

In 1984, Jesse Jackson launched the Rainbow Coalition, declaring America to be “a quilt of many patches, many pieces, many colors, various textures.” A decade later, after multiculturalism had swept the country, America seemed less a quilt than a ragrug of splitting strands.

In 1984, Americans were first noticing that the conventional family was no longer the norm and premarital teen sex no longer a rarity. A decade later, married couples with children had shrunk to only 26 percent of all households (versus 40 percent in 1970), and the share of sexually active fifteen-year-old girls had swollen to 26 percent (versus 5 percent in 1970).

In 1984, Hollywood had just invented the tech-enhanced violent action movie, and automatic weapons were still uncommon in inner cities. Ten years later, the typical child had seen ten thousand acts of TV mayhem by