

Republican Politics and Rainbow Wigs: George H. W. Bush, *The Simpsons*, and the Culture Wars of the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes a feud between George H. W. Bush and *The Simpsons* as a way to explore the growing culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. I argue that Bush challenged the family values portrayed in *The Simpsons* as a way to boost his conservative credentials during his presidential re-election campaign in 1992. Bush attacked the then-controversial show to prove himself a culture warrior and *The Simpsons* team rebutted with the episode “Two Bad Neighbors.” I use this feud to showcase changes within US conservatism as well as the idea of “family values.”

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Keywords: George H. W. Bush, *The Simpsons*, family values, culture wars, conservatism.

Política republicana y pelucas arcoíris: George H. W. Bush, *Los Simpson* y las guerras culturales de la década de 1990

RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza una disputa entre George H. W. Bush y *Los Simpson* como una forma de explorar las crecientes guerras culturales de los años ochenta y noventa. Sostengo que Bush desafió los valores familiares descritos en *Los Simpson* como una forma de impulsar sus credenciales conservadoras durante su campaña de reelección presidencial en 1992. Bush atacó el entonces controvertido programa para demostrar que es un guerrero de la cultura y el equipo de *Los Simpson* refutó con el episodio “Dos malos vecinos”. Utilizo esta disputa para mostrar los cambios dentro del conservadurismo de EE. UU., Así como la idea de “valores familiares”.

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Palabras clave: George H. W. Bush, *Los Simpson*, valores familiares, guerras culturales, conservadurismo

共和党政治与彩虹假发：乔治·赫伯特·沃克·布什、《辛普森一家》以及20世纪90年代的文化战争

摘要

本文分析了乔治·赫伯特·沃克·布什与《辛普森一家》之间的夙怨，探究20世纪80和90年代逐步增加的文化战争。我论证认为，布什通过挑战《辛普森一家》中描绘的家庭价值观，以强化其在1992年总统连任竞选期间的保守主义资格。布什抨击了这部在当时具有争议性的电视剧，以期证明自己是一个文化勇士，而《辛普森一家》则通过一集“两个坏邻居”片段予以回击。我使用双方之间的夙怨来展示美国保守主义的变革以及“家庭价值观”这一概念。

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关键词：乔治·赫伯特·沃克·布什，《辛普森一家》，家庭价值观，文化战争，保守主义

Culture wars are an important aspect of American political history. At numerous points in the country's recent past, arguments between sociocultural liberalism and conservatism over proper American values, and the presentation of those values through popular culture and media, have solidified and represented one aspect of the increasingly tribalistic nature of modern American politics. As

this polarization is becoming routinely commonplace, it is imperative to understand the purpose and process of modern American culture wars as they have major effect on how Americans imagine themselves and their fellow citizens. It is also important to complicate this notion of binary political ideology as there was, and is, disagreement and discussion among liberals and conservatives over the presentation of values in popular culture.¹

If there is such a thing as a culture war, there must also be culture battles. During the 1990s, many of these culture battles surrounded the animated comedy *The Simpsons*, which was one of the most radical and controversial shows of the decade. American perceptions of *The Simpsons* were so split along ideological lines that then-President George H. W. Bush began a feud with the show over representations of American family values. This culture battle culminated in *The Simpsons* episode titled “Two Bad Neighbors,” which lambasted Bush at personal and political levels. Instead of viewing the feud between Bush and *The Simpsons* as merely a comedic goof or as politically unimportant, it should be seen as a seminal and symbolic moment in the 1990s culture wars. The populace viewed both parties in the feud as authorities on American life and the proper American family, though they presented disparate visions of politics, society, and culture that were emblematic of the growing divide between the left and the right, and of tension within the Republican Party. As his 1992 reelection attempt became increasingly fraught, one of the ways that Bush attempted to portray himself as just as socially conservative as his presidential predecessor Ronald Reagan was by using *The Simpsons* as a foil. However, Bush severely misread the political climate and the voting public, and therefore botched his own messaging. Voters were most concerned with the country’s economic woes and

much less concerned with a perceived slackening of American family values that came through their TV screens. Bush also misinterpreted *The Simpsons* portrayal of American family values, which were not as deteriorative or delinquent as he imagined.

In an interview with *People* magazine published on October 1, 1990, First Lady Barbara Bush unconsciously began a new culture battle. The interview, which occurred during the early months of the Gulf War, discussed Barbara Bush as a wife and mother whose main goal was to take care of her family, be they her children or twelve grandchildren. Interviewer Paula Chin turned away from such controversial topics as abortion and homosexuality to focus on the centrality of family to Bush's life, and the importance of her greatest cause, universal literacy for American children. Tucked away in a paragraph describing Barbara Bush's "down-to-earth" nature was a relatively innocuous statement. In describing her television preferences, Bush stated that she did not understand the nation's fascination with *The Simpsons* and that "[It] was the dumbest thing I had ever seen . . . but it's a family thing, and I guess it's clean" (Chin 88). From a woman who ostensibly valued family more than anything else, the First Lady's comment was both compliment and curse. While no show would wish to be deemed the dumbest show, Bush gave tacit approval to the show through her evocation of family, though she never explained what about *The Simpsons* made it a "family thing."

While the publication of Barbara Bush's comment received little press, it did find its way to *The Simpsons* production team. They sent a letter to Bush under the guise of Marge Simpson, the animated matriarch of the Simpson clan. Marge Simpson wrote that she had read Bush's comments in *People*

and was “deeply hurt” by them. As she put it,

I try to teach my children Bart, Lisa, and even little Maggie, always to give somebody the benefit of the doubt and not talk badly about them, even if they’re rich. It’s hard to get them to understand this advice when the very First Lady in the country calls us not only dumb, but “the dumbest thing” she ever saw. Ma’am, if we’re the dumbest thing you ever saw, Washington must be a good deal different than what they teach me at the current events group at the church. (Young and Johnson 182-183)

The letter goes on to discuss the commonalities between the two women—one fictional, one not—by noting that “each of us [lives] our lives to serve an exceptional man,” equating Homer, the Simpson patriarch, and President George H.W. Bush (Young and Johnson 182-183). This comparison is one of many which showcase the sardonic wit of *The Simpsons* writers and production team laced within the genteel pen of Marge Simpson.²

Upon receiving the letter, Barbara Bush responded with an apology:

Dear Marge,

How kind of you to write. I’m glad you spoke your mind...I foolishly didn’t know you had one.

I am looking at a picture of you... depicted on a plastic cup... with your blue hair filled with pink birds peeking out all over. Evidently, you and your charming

family... Lisa, Homer, Bart and Maggie... are camping out. It is a nice family scene. Clearly you are setting a good example for the rest of the country.

Please forgive a loose tongue.

Warmly,

Barbara Bush

P.S. Homer looks like a handsome fella!
(*The Simpsons: Season 4 Commentary*)

Bush responded quickly, with the letter dated October 9, 1990. It is clear that she intended it to be a cute, quaint response, and *The Simpsons* production team accepted it in that same light. Producer James L. Brooks quipped that the letter was “almost gracious,” though he also later claimed that he and his wife attended a dinner with the Bushes years later and that Barbara Bush gave him a “drop-dead, withering cold look” (*The Simpsons: Season 4 Commentary*). After this exchange of letters, the feud between two of the nation’s most well-known and powerful families seemed to have abated.

The sharing of letters between the First Lady of the United States and, arguably, the First Lady of Animated Television reveals one of the most important battlefields of the cultural wars of the 1990s: the American family, and the values that the family represents. “Family values” was a constantly used phrase during the 1990s, but it was also a subjective phrase, one that held different meanings for different communities of people. When Barbara Bush stated in her *People* magazine interview that *The Simpsons* was the dumbest thing she ever saw, *The Simpsons* staff understandably interpreted this as Bush critiquing the Simpson family, including the values

portrayed by the family. In her interview and her later letter to Marge Simpson, Barbara Bush noted that the show was “a family thing” and that the Simpson family set “a good example for the rest of the country.” She understood that the show centered around a family and their activities, even if she did not seem to understand or agree with them. But at the same time, Bush made it clear that the Simpsons’ family values were not the same as the Bushes’ family values, no matter how “good” or “clean” she found the show.

“Family values” was, and is, a politically loaded phrase. As family historian Elaine Tyler May has persuasively argued, the rhetoric of “family values” was often used during times of perceived social upheaval in the face of progressive change. Conservative presidents, most notably Ronald Reagan, have called for a return to family values to boost their support from an electoral base fearful or angry about the expansion of rights to people of color, women, and folks in the LGBTQ community. In this way, returning to family values is a push to recapture the normative family structure of a Protestant, middle-class mother and father who stick to their prescribed gender roles, children who follow their authority, and who all live together in white-picket-fence suburbia. Problematically, the vast majority of families never organized and did not act in accordance with this normative model. The conservative evocation of “family values” was of an imagined past and does not reflect the lived experience of almost all American families. Still, the call to family values was a powerful rhetorical tool used to challenge policy and family portrayals that did not align with conservative principles.³

The critique of Simpson family values was one of the first indications that the show would be controversial after it premiered on FOX Network on December 17, 1989. The net-

work itself was only three years old, having begun on October 9, 1986, and executives used raunchier, more adult-oriented comedies such as *Married with Children* to draw viewers away from previously established networks such as CBS, NBC, and ABC. Controversy helped FOX succeed as viewers tuned in to the fledgling network to see what the fuss was about, and criticism of *The Simpsons* fueled the fire (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 77-79). By 1990, there was a clear dividing line between people who liked the show and those who did not. Many critics believed that the show taught poor morals, disrespect of elders, and poor work ethic. One family only allowed their children to watch particular episodes, those they believed did not mock Christianity as they, like many parents, were worried that their children would emulate the sarcastic, satirical humor of *The Simpsons* and restricted their viewing accordingly (Alters 167-172). Once it was clear that the show was a success and the subsequent marketing boom began, the Simpson family became an even more visible portrayal of satirized American values as Bart Simpson's face graced posters, backpacks, and myriad Butterfingers commercials. One elementary school principal in Fremont, Ohio, asked that students not wear a popular t-shirt featuring Bart's face with a caption of "under-achiever and proud of it, man," arguing that this message taught students that they should be "proud of being an incompetent." While a spokeswoman for the show reminded the Associated Press that *The Simpsons* was a satirical cartoon and should not be taken too seriously, principals, parents, and concerned critics considered America's most popular cartoon family to be negative role models ("Principal"). These comments were echoed months later by Barbara Bush's opinion that the Simpsons was the dumbest thing she ever saw.

On the other hand, a large swathe of American families, par-

ents and children all, loved the show, and saw themselves represented within. When *The Simpsons* first aired in 1989, animation had been relegated to Saturday morning television with children as its ostensible demographic for viewership and marketing. It was therefore understood by television viewers that cartoons were meant for children. There had not been an animated series on primetime television since *The Flintstones*, which aired on ABC during the early 1960s (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 74-79). Since *The Simpsons* aired in the evenings, entire families watched the show all together, children included, on the reasonable assumption that since the show was animated, the show was therefore acceptable for children. The show was incredibly popular from the moment it aired. In June 1990, Bart Simpson was named *TV Guide's* runner-up for the "TV Person of the Year," and in December 1990, *Entertainment Weekly* decided him "Entertainer of the Year" ("TV Person"). In a July 1991 edition, Homer Simpson was named "TV Father of the Year" ("TV Father"). Few other series could make the same claims of popularity.

To the horror of critics and parental watchdog groups, children especially loved *The Simpsons*, regardless of whether the show's production team intended for them view it. As the show's popularity increased across the United States, children wore t-shirts and backpacks with Bart's face, and they munched on all manner of junk food peddled by the animated family. Additionally, children were not the only people who believed that *The Simpsons* was acceptable children's programming. In March of 1991, *TV Guide* polled adult television critics to see which shows ranked best and worst for children and amongst children. *The Simpsons* won best show for age groups six to eleven and twelve to sixteen. David Bianculli of the *New York Post* voted for *The Simpsons* as he argued viewers should "forget Bart being a bad role model; that's the

point, not the problem . . . [he] has a heart, a feistiness and an honesty of characterization missing from most 'real' TV families" ("Parents Guide"). In this argument, children loved Bart because Bart was really like one of them. Maybe his badness was not really all that bad. Most notably, children awarded *The Simpsons* with the title of "Best TV Show" during the Kids' Choice Awards on the children's television channel Nickelodeon in 1991. The event even included an animated Bart appearing during the broadcast, where he was "slimed" by the station's iconic green goo. It was clear by early 1992, therefore, that *The Simpsons* was popular with families, children, and the country at large, even if not all parents and television viewers believed it portrayed proper morals and values.

Parents and principals were not the only people who had problems with *The Simpsons* and its sardonic presentation of American family values—so too did the President of the United States, George H.W. Bush. While Barbara Bush's comment against *The Simpsons* was most likely off the cuff, George Bush's comments were an act of political pragmatism and an effort to place himself squarely within the culture wars of the 1990s. During his re-election campaign, Bush gave a speech at the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, a socially and politically conservative Christian organization interested in evangelizing through mass communication, on January 27, 1992. While trying to secure his position as presumptive Republican Party presidential nominee, Bush, himself an Episcopalian, spoke of what he perceived as the important tie between American values and Christian values. According to the president, the family unit played a large role in the creation of both American and Christian values, and Bush declared that "we need a Nation closer to 'The Waltons' than 'The Simpsons'" (Bush, "Remarks"). Naturally, the line got a laugh from the audi-

ence, but *The Simpsons* production team did not find it nearly as humorous. On January 30, three days after Bush's speech, the *Simpsons* team quickly wrote a new segment to air during a rerun of the third season episode "Stark Raving Dad" in rebuttal to Bush's comment. After showing the Simpson family watching the now-famous line from Bush's speech from their own famous red couch, Bart said, in an allusion to the nation's economic woes, "Hey, we're just like the Waltons; we're praying for an end to the depression, too" ("Stark Raving Dad"). The two sides of the Bush-Simpson culture battle were set.

Bush's comments about the Walton's family values being more venerable than the Simpsons's family values received little attention from the press and little of that attention was positive. The *New York Post* wrote that this speech was not the first time that a member of the Bush family had made negative statements about *The Simpsons*, referencing Barbara Bush's interview the year before (Brooke). *TV Guide* took it further, arguing that if President Bush really understood the show, he wouldn't have made the comments in the first place. Author Harry Stein wrote that Bush's statement showed "that he watches T-shirts, not the show itself." If Bush actually watched *The Simpsons*, "if he gave it a fair shot, he might be surprised—even amused." What Stein argued, therefore, was that there might not be that large of a divide between Simpson family values and American family values, or, as his article's title declared, "Bush Barks Up Wrong Tree When He Slams Simpsons."

While Bush's speech served as a laugh line for his National Religious Broadcasters audience and as a satirical goof for *The Simpsons*, it also showcased a growing divide amongst Americans. There was an ever-widening gulf between those who believed, like Bush, that then-current culture, symbolized

by *The Simpsons*, sent the American family down the road to moral ruin, and others who believed that liberalized social politics served to strengthen the family structure. Many social and political conservatives increasingly argued that popular culture and legislative politics worked hand-in-hand to benefit or bankrupt the American family. What became clear, though, at least beginning in 1992, was that segments of the population believed that the moral fate of the American family was up for grabs. On August 17, 1992, the Republican National Convention was held in Houston, Texas. There, the incumbent George Bush accepted the mantle of Republican Party nominee for President. At the same convention, Patrick Buchanan, who had only recently finished his failed bid to become the nominee, gave the most influential speech of his political career. Speaking to a crowd of like-minded social conservatives, Buchanan argued:

My friends, this election is about much more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe. It is about what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.

For those who subscribed to the same conservatism as Pat Buchanan, shows like *The Simpsons* were not just bad role models for children, they were some of the greatest weapons that the perceived secular humanist menace had at its disposal. If, as Buchanan declared, the “soul of America” was up for grabs in a massive “cultural war,” then it was up to socially conservative cultural soldiers to fight the good fight for the nation’s moral fate.

This series of speeches showed that public discourses over proper American culture and values, or the culture wars, directly linked to the state of American politics. George H.W. Bush, in his re-election bid, challenged the popularity of *The Simpsons* and called on Buchanan to speak on his behalf at the RNC to firm Bush's reputation as a conservative within the Republican Party. He used the budding venture of the culture wars of the 1990s to attempt to prove his socially conservative credentials, to argue that he was conservative enough to be the party's standard-bearer. In this way, Bush used criticism of the nation's most popular and most controversial show to prop himself up as a social conservative during a time he was believed to be anything but. This was especially critical in 1992, when growing minorities within the Republican Party decided that George H.W. Bush had done little to fill the void left by Ronald Reagan, and, therefore, should no longer serve as leader of the party as it moved farther to the political and social right.⁴

Accusations that Bush was a centrist had dogged him long before he became Ronald Reagan's Vice President in 1988. Bush's Yale degree linked him, at least tangentially, to the Eastern establishment wing of the Republican Party. Bush's first elected office was as a member of the House of Representatives for Texas's 7th District in 1966, and he lost a Senate election soon after. Between this electoral victory and winning the presidency in 1988, all of Bush's other offices were held by appointment. He served as UN Ambassador from 1971 to 1973, Chairman of the Republican National Convention from 1973 to 1974, Chief of the US Liaison Office in China during 1974 and 1975, and headed the Central Intelligence Agency from 1976 to 1977. Bush built himself a career and a name based on appointments, not on electoral victories. While he presented himself as a Texas conservative

deeply embedded in the right, other conservative Republicans argued that Bush was really a Yankee, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, who had never shed the Rockefeller Republicanism into which he was born (Wilentz 245-322).

Perceptions that Bush was a centrist hampered his presidential aspirations during the Republican primaries for the 1980 elections. In 1979, Bush seemed to be the likely nominee as he was supported by establishment Republicans and had received federal appointments by both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. However, Bush's connections to the CIA rankled some Republicans, especially those who were further to the political right, who distrusted his intelligence work and his upper-crust upbringing. They increasingly supported Ronald Reagan, the socially conservative former Governor of California, who had the political vision and charisma that the Republican Party desperately desired after the politically catastrophic Nixon and Ford administrations. While Bush seemed to be the frontrunner early on, even winning primary races in vital states such as Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, Reagan's personality and message quickly outshone Bush. Bush also showed that he was not nearly as conservative as Reagan. During the Pennsylvania primary, Bush called supply-side Reaganomics "voodoo economics," a moniker which stuck even after Bush became vice president. It also showed that Bush, as a politician "whose roots lay in the modern Republicanism that had made its peace with the New Deal," was not as conservative as Reagan (Wilentz 120-121). Despite his primary victories, Bush withdrew from the Republican primaries in May 1980 and soon was named as Reagan's Vice-Presidential candidate.

By 1988, once Reagan exhausted his two terms as president, it was not clear that Bush would be the next Republican nominee, even considering historical precedent that the

nomination went to the outgoing vice president. While the conservative credentials of such candidates as Jack Kemp, congressional representative from New York, and Bob Dole, senator from Kansas, were clear, many stalwart social conservatives were less convinced about George H.W. Bush. The same fears about Bush's lack of charisma, vision, and socially conservative positions led many to believe that he would not continue the Reagan Revolution into 1989 (Buckley, "George"). While Robert K. Dornan, representative from California, punnily opined that Bush had "the right stuff" and was necessary to the future of the Reagan Revolution, *National Review* editor Richard Brookhiser argued that Bush would not win the presidential nomination if he did not act more like Reagan and less like himself. In fact, historian Donald Critchlow argues that the only reason Bush won the nomination and the presidency in 1988 was the support of Ronald Reagan on his behalf.

Bush's nomination was also partially pragmatic, in that the Republican Party wanted to ensure their constituency stayed unified behind one candidate instead of splitting the ticket amongst many Republican Party presidential hopefuls. In a number of articles in the *National Review* between 1987 and 1988, famed conservative ideologue William F. Buckley argued that Bush probably was not conservative enough to succeed Reagan, and that Bush needed to reassert his conservatism and refuse to move to the political center to get more votes. Dornan agreed, asking "George Bush is not the ideal conservative candidate, but who out there is?" Dornan called for unity, writing "I believe George Bush represents the Republican Party's best hope for keeping the Reagan coalition together." It was understood, therefore, that if Bush did not become the next nominee, a Democratic candidate would likely become the next president.

George Bush accepted the Republican Party nomination at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in New Orleans on August 18, 1988. His acceptance speech showcased some of the problems about his perceived lack of conservatism previously noted by his critics. In it, Bush declared that he wanted a “kinder, gentler nation,” one where compassionate conservatism was embraced by the mainstream Republican Party. He imagined a nation with a message for the poor and dispossessed, one “of hope and growth for every American to every American.” He described his vision of the U.S. as “an endless, enduring dream and a thousand points of light.” But that was the extent of his vision, even though his lack of vision had been a source of political downfall for him since the 1980 presidential campaign. He asked Americans to “read my lips: no new taxes.” He professed his support for prayer in school, an end to legalized abortion, support of the Second Amendment, and protection of the legality of the death penalty. These were all standard conservative talking points and positions, and the most striking part of Bush’s speech was what he left out. Not once in his acceptance speech did he utter the word “conservatism” (Bush, “Address”).

Bush’s political allies and staff, at the time of his presidency and in interviews afterward, believed that he was a conservative, though not the same degree or type of conservative as Reagan. Chase Untermeyer, who served as Assistant to the President, believed that Bush was definitely a conservative, but was much more interested in issues than philosophy, which explains Bush’s insistence on being issues-based in his 1988 RNC speech. Untermeyer further argued that Reagan’s supporters “never ever believed that George Bush was one of them because he did not speak with the passion and speak in the same language that they used to emphasize how conservative they were” (Miller Center, “Untermeyer”). Basically,

Bush was not Ronald Reagan, so how could he ever carry on the mantle of the Reagan Revolution? Bush's Vice President Dan Quayle echoed these sentiments, stating that Bush felt that Reagan's supporters, especially at the grassroots, were mean-spirited, and would never hold President Bush in the same light as they held President Reagan. To Quayle, Bush's "instincts and his values were conservative. He didn't wear it on his sleeve. That's just the way he was raised and the way he thought. But he was never a movement conservative" (Miller Center, "Quayle"). However, those farther right on the political spectrum questioned whether Bush was truly the conservative they wanted on the presidential ticket.

Bush soundly defeated Democratic candidate Mike Dukakis, winning the electoral college with 426 votes to his opponent's 111. He also won the popular vote by an almost seven million vote majority. The question remained: Would President Bush continue on the conservative course begun by Ronald Reagan? The answer, unfortunately for Bush, was no. While Bush asked for a "kinder, gentler nation," he never defined what that meant for him. Without an explanation, conservatives who were farther to the political right worried that the phrase pointed to an interest in Democratic-style social welfare and that the economic burden would fall on the state and, therefore, the taxpayers (Johnson). As the nation's deficit grew during 1989 and 1990, and as the declining automotive industry caused an economic recession, it became ever more clear that taxes had to be raised in order to control the growing federal debt. In opposition to his RNC acceptance speech, Bush announced that "both the size of the deficit problem and the need for a package that can be enacted" demanded "tax revenue increases" (Wilentz 308). Conservatives farther to the right, especially Newt Gingrich and Patrick Buchanan, were concerned that this was a direct rollback

of Reagan era tax policy and a clear rejection of one of Bush's campaign promises, responded by shutting down the government for three days, beginning on October 1, 1990 (Wilentz 308-311). Coincidentally, this was the same day that Barbara Bush's *People* interview was released on newsstands.

As the 1992 election neared, conservatives became increasingly concerned about Bush's perceived lack of conservatism. The success of détente with the Soviet Union meant that Bush was left without the Cold War enemy that had helped Reagan's international leadership seem strong. Richard Viguerie, chair of the United Conservatives of America, argued in the *New York Times* that Bush had turned his back on so many conservative imperatives that it was probable that the right wing of the Republican Party would no longer have his back. Additionally, Bush seemed lukewarm about a proposed constitutional amendment that would have protected the American flag from desecration, and he had broken his campaign promise and raised taxes. Most problematically, though, Bush had lost the faith of evangelical conservatives. He said little about abortion and the pro-life movement, invited gay rights activists to the White House for legislation signings, and had allowed art that evangelicals deemed obscene to be funded through the National Endowment for the Arts. Since Bush did not seem like he would support evangelical political positions, three of the four evangelicals who served his administration resigned their posts by December of 1990. For conservatives, this was a political death knell, as evangelicals increasingly made up a large portion of the conservative constituent base. It was more important than ever, therefore, that Bush present himself as a strong conservative whenever he spoke or met with evangelical leaders or groups if he wanted to achieve electoral victory (Medhurst 19-36, 149-170).

In this way, Bush challenged the family values of *The Simpsons* in his January of 1992 speech to the National Religious Broadcasters was to put a halt to ideas that he would not support evangelical conservative values and, hopefully, shore up support for his presidential re-election campaign. This mattered because Bush was far from a popular president. His national approval rating in January of 1992 was 47% while his disapproval rating was 48%. This was far from the only indicator that Bush may lose the presidential election even though he was the incumbent. Pat Buchanan, much more socially conservative than Bush, chose to challenge him in the Republican primary and did remarkably well, scooping up 22.5% of all Republican primary votes. The writing on the wall was clear: not only was George Bush not Ronald Reagan, he also was not the social conservative that his party demanded him to be. Paired with Bill Clinton's electoral mantra of "It's the Economy, Stupid," indicating a focus on Bush's economic failures, it was unlikely that Bush would be a two-term president. It was no wonder, therefore, that he lost the presidential election in November of 1992 (Wilentz 317-321).

When George H.W. Bush asked in 1992 that American families be "closer to 'The Waltons' than 'The Simpsons,'" he was attempting to rally socially conservative support, to closet these worries that he was not nearly as charismatically conservative as Reagan, and to win re-election as a Republican President. He of course failed in this endeavor. While his attack on *The Simpsons* was certainly not the only effort Bush made in his attempt to shore up his social conservative credentials, it may not have even been a useful cultural battle to begin. Academics, television and cultural critics, and theologians have argued that *The Simpsons* was one of the most religious shows on television during the 1990s, during which time Bush challenged their construction of family values. In

fact, scholars argue that the show portrays Christianity and religious faith in a positive light, even when it satirized institutionalized religion.

Two of the most religious and Christian characters on the show are Ned Flanders, next-door neighbor to the Simpsons, and Reverend Lovejoy who is minister at the First Church of Springfield, which the Simpsons attend. Numerous episodes poke fun at the institutional hypocrisy of organized religion while still embracing the faith of individual Christians. For instance, in an episode titled "Hurricane Neddy," which aired in 1996, the Flanders' home is destroyed by a hurricane. Ned's faith is challenged when he learns that his family has to live in the church basement, the small business that he owns has been looted, and that his home, having been reconstructed by the community, has been so shoddily built that it collapses around him for a second time. Even though Ned believes that God has treated him unfairly and is challenging him as Job was challenged in the Bible, he sticks to his faith and the episode ends with him embracing his community and his God (Lewis).

No matter the tribulations they face, the Simpson family always turns to God for support and comfort. In fact, the Simpsons' insistence on strong family, community, and religious relationships is a hallmark of the show. Conan O'Brien, a *Simpsons* writer and producer from 1991 to 1993, noted that on his first day of working writing the show, the showrunners instructed him to always remember that no matter what, the Simpson family loved each other. Upon reading Barbara Bush's *People* comments and George Bush's many presidential speeches, it seems that the Simpson's family values and the Bushes' family values were not really that different after all.

While Bush attempted to utilize the culture wars for his own political gain to rally conservative support amongst his electoral base, *The Simpsons* was not about to give him the final word. On January 14, 1996, four years after Bush lost re-election, the show aired the eleventh episode of their seventh season titled "Two Bad Neighbors." In it, George and Barbara Bush move into a mansion across the street from the Simpsons on Evergreen Terrace, stating that they wanted to live in a town with "average people with no particular hopes and dreams." The episode quickly devolves into a feud between George Bush and Homer and Bart Simpson after Bart destroys Bush's only copy of his memoirs and Bush spanks Bart as punishment. A flurry of retribution follows, with Bush driving donuts into the Simpsons' front lawn and spray-painting a bedsheet with caricatures of the father and son with the declaration "Two Bad Neighbors." Homer and Bart, in turn, super glue a rainbow clown wig to Bush's head and try to release a swarm of locusts in his home, only to be caught by Bush, resulting in a fistfight in a sewer. Neither the Simpson males nor George Bush is portrayed in a positive light, owing both to the "Dennis the Menace" nature of the episode and to strengthen the idea that Bush and Homer Simpson were not really that different after all, just like the showrunners noted in their letter to Barbara Bush under the guise of Marge Simpson. In the end, the Bushes move out of their new home and leave Springfield entirely because, as Barbara Bush states, "George just felt this neighborhood brought out the worst in him."

The episode is widely heralded as one of the show's best episodes. Entertainment columnist John Ortved wrote in *Vanity Fair* that it was the series' fifth-best episode, and most other reviewers rank it highly. George Bush is portrayed as an old-timey patriarch, full of nostalgic one-liners a la Ned Flanders.

Bart Simpson is at his “Dennis the Menace” best, causing mischief simply for the sake of causing mischief, while Homer is a bumbling buffoon who is set on increasingly high-stakes revenge. While at first glance the episode seems to be a lampoon of Bush at the crudest level, there are numerous quips throughout that indicate that the show’s satirical take on Bush is more than meets the eye. Bush’s service as a one-term president is a consistent joke, as Bart openly asks, “How many times were you president, George?” Later, while writing his memoirs, Bush responds that “since I achieved all my goals as president in one term, there was no need for a second.” In this way, the episode is seemingly more a personal attack on George H.W. Bush than sophisticated political commentary on his successes or failures as president.

This idea, that the episode was more about making fun of Bush as a person rather than his politics, is partially supported by the series’ showrunners. Bill Oakley, a writer on *The Simpsons*, stressed that “it’s not a political attack, it’s a personal attack,” and instead of criticizing Bush for his policies, the episode instead pokes fun at his “crotchiness” and the showrunners’ perception that Bush was an “old grouch.” All of the pranks pulled on Bush by Homer and Bart were infantile, childish, and crude. The showrunners stated that Bush twice said that he had watched the episode. The first time he was asked, Bush responded that it seemed like the episode had been directed by Oliver Stone. None of the showrunners knew what that meant and claimed that it was Bush’s failed attempt at humor. The second time, Bush said that he thought he understood all of the jokes (*The Simpsons: Season 7 Commentary*).

When taken out of its historical context, the episode seems, as literary and media critic Paul A. Cantor wrote, “a gratu-

itously vicious portrayal of ex-President Bush.” When placed within its historical context, the episode was a light-hearted and satirical statement on the nature of family values within the culture wars of the 1990s. The episode can only be seen as gratuitous if one ignores Bush’s numerous speeches calling for a return to traditional family values and the subjective nature of such a call. Though the showrunners would disagree, the episode had political value in that it served as retribution to Bush’s earlier statement about the show’s lack of family values and further positioned television as one of the primary sites of culture war battles. This argument is further strengthened by the fight within the House and Senate to enact “Family Hour” throughout the latter half of the 1990s. Originally introduced in the house on July 18, 1996, seven months after “Two Bad Neighbors,” the failed bill called for the hour between eight and nine PM to be designated as “Family Hour,” to be reserved for family-oriented programming (H.Res. 484). This, one can imagine, would have meant that *The Simpsons* would have had to vacate its time slot on Sundays at eight PM. The call for “Family Hour” was repeated in the Senate in September 1996 (S.Res. 290) and again by the House in 1999 (H.Res. 346). Representative Mike Dewine (R-OH) made the need for family hour clear in a speech before President Bill Clinton when he asked, “Who among us—among all the parents in this country—has not been very worried about what their children might suddenly be exposed to on TV?” (US Congress, “Mike Dewine”).

For DeWine and the 119 cosponsors on the 1996 House and Senate resolutions, the worry was real, and shows like *The Simpsons* were part of the problem. In the battle over proper American culture and family values, shows like *The Simpsons* challenged social conservative morals and prompted verbal and legislative rebuttals. Case studies such as this can serve

to further illuminate the growing rift between the left and the right, both political and social, and the ever-increasing divide within the political right and the Republican Party over acceptable conceptions of family values. But perhaps, in this case, George H.W. Bush should have chosen a different way to promote his social conservatism and rally his base. In fact, he should have listened to his wife, Barbara Bush, who said *The Simpsons* was “a family thing.”

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NOTES

- 1 One of the first scholars of the “culture wars” concept was sociologist James D. Hunter in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Hunter argues that a cultural divide between “orthodox” and “progressive” political and social elites created greater sociocultural divides during the 1970s and 1980s. The elites’ views trickle down to the general populace, creating a cultural divide that has a direct effect on electoral politics. Other scholars challenge these views, particularly the extent to which the country is culturally divided. Morris P. Fiorina challenges Hunter’s idea that the populace follows the elite and instead posits that the populace is more centrist than those at the top of the sociopolitical hierarchy. In this way, he argues that the culture wars are only wars amongst the elite. Other scholars have supported Fiorina’s position, particularly Irene Taviss Thompson who argues that Hunter overstated the divisive nature of the culture wars and applied partisanship to more people than evidence proclaims. This essay tends to side more with Hunter and argues that the tribalism of the culture wars is strongest amongst the political elite but that this partisanship is increasingly visible in non-elites. For more on the culture wars discourse, see Fiorina; and Thompson.
- 2 Barbara Bush’s *People* magazine interview was published on October 1, 1990, while Marge Simpson’s letter is dated September 28, 1990. While it is reasonable to assume that the *Simpsons* production team received an advanced copy of Bush’s interview or somehow heard about it in passing, this is not verifiable.

- 3 Many historians and scholars have participated in the growing debate over the purpose and efficacy of “family values” rhetoric. For more, see May, *Homeward Bound*; Coontz; Heine-
mann; and May, “Family Values.”
- 4 As a relatively recent president, Bush has only begun to receive scholarly attention, especially from historians. They challenge the idea that Bush’s presidency was unremarkable, especially boxed in by the flashier Reagan and Clinton administrations. Presidential scholar John Robert Greene argued that Bush’s legacy lies in his foreign policy achievements, even if domestically Reagan shone brighter. In his comparative study of presidents who were less successful than their forebears, Donald A. Zinman argues that Bush inherited Reagan’s economic troubles and that this, paired with his lack of charisma, made it near impossible that Bush would be viewed as successful. Bush also wanted a quieter presidency and was more willing to embrace political centrists than Reagan, which made historians, and political pundits at the time, question Bush’s conservatism. For more, Critchlow; and Wilentz. Bush’s rhetoric is also a focus of study and scholars use it to explain his presidential failures. Martin Medhurst argues that Bush lacked vision and, therefore, could not have the same rhetorical impact as Ronald Regan. Lori Cox Han takes this idea further by including Bill Clinton and argues that Bush was sandwiched between two well-spoken presidents who presented clear visions for the country.