



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on July 3, 2026

## 1976 vs. 2026: A Tale of Two Birthdays

A man may look back 50 years, at an old birthday picture, and lament lost innocence and youthful vigor. So can people look back a half-century on their land and wistfully observe what was and is no more. In America's case, on our 250th birthday, some may note that while we no longer call ourselves "these United States" but, rather, "this United States," we're now more divided than ever.

In fact, even patriotism itself now takes on the flavor of an ideological position, observers may say.



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American Thinker (AT) made this point Friday, contrasting the United States' bicentennial (1976) with her 250th birthday this year. The site [writes](#) that in

1976, America threw itself a birthday party unlike anything before or since. The Bicentennial was not just a commemoration of 200 years of independence — it was a coast-to-coast block party of red, white, and blue.

... As Operation Sail brought a parade of tall ships into New York Harbor, the largest flag ever made was unfurled from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to greet them only to be shredded by the wind ... 90 minutes later.

The flag unfurled across the harbor like a widescreen epic, a ribbon of red, white, and blue stitching Staten Island to Brooklyn in one long, heroic shot. It pulled the past into the present greeting every ship that sailed into the world's greatest city that was rolling out a patriotic red carpet.

It was the kind of moment that made you stop, breathe, and let the scene wash over you.

Photographed in that fleeting moment from the Brooklyn side, the image captured the Bicentennial. That photo was on display in my parents' home for the rest of their lives. It was a quiet reminder that what endures most isn't perfection, but something bold enough to try just like the American Republic it represents.

In 1976, families lined highways to watch wagon trains retrace colonial routes. Even amid a recession, Watergate's hangover and the long shadow of the Cold War, Americans found a way to feel like one people celebrating one story.

Fast-forward to 2026, and the mood is unmistakably different. The nation observes rather than celebrates its 250th year not with a unified drumbeat, but with a fractured soundtrack of competing narratives, grievances, and uncertainties.



## Fifty Summers and a Thousand Cultural Changes Ago

I remember the Bicentennial fairly well. I was 10 years old and, yes, everything suddenly was red, white, and blue. Commemorative quarters were issued, bearing a Colonial drummer in 18th-century attire. Most significantly, however, AT is correct: The celebration was universal. If anyone wasn't too enthusiastic about it, you didn't know it; party poopos weren't visible.

Yet schooling was different, too. Most of my elementary-years teachers were even older than the WWII generation, and they stuck to the three R's. The Founders were never portrayed negatively; they were rightly heroized, and we kids respected them. And while we weren't politically savvy, we also (and I do think I'm speaking for most of my classmates) knew enough to rightly fear communism. Related to this, you would never, ever hear *anyone* declaring himself a "socialist." Remember, too, this was in the Bronx, New York City.

Oh, I'm not whitewashing the era. Nineteen-seventy-six was three years after the unconstitutional *Roe v. Wade* decision. And cultural and moral decay was evident even to a child. (I saw graffiti and the security gates covering storefronts at nighttime). Looking back, there was, too, already some left-wing propaganda in school. (A feminist, girl-power portrayal of Pocahontas and incorrect information about evolution come to mind.) But we weren't nearly as far down the rabbit hole.

And assimilation was still the norm. My mother would joke that my 10th-birthday-party picture (it's still around) "looks like the United Nations." Present were a child of Spanish descent, one of Indian (from India) derivation, and a dark-complected Hispanic, among others. They *all* spoke typical American English — the only evident accent might be a NYC one — and embraced mainstream U.S. culture. The reason why was simple. Their "groups" existed in such small numbers, and they individually were so dispersed, that assimilation was as natural as breathing.

## The Depths of the Rabbit Hole

Returning to AT, it notes that patriotism has become point of contention. Yet it once was a "common language." This was partially because we had common information sources, the site correctly observes. Consider:

When man was tribal and stories were related orally around a fire, there were no "competing narratives." This wasn't the case in the '70s, of course. But we still read the same newspapers and magazines and watched the same news broadcasts. And entertainment was provided by seven TV stations. Today there are cable/satellite television channels and internet options that, collectively, are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Any particular bubble and confirmation-bias worldview you want, you can have.

Yet there's far more to it. First, we're not merely "divided," as many say. We're balkanized in manifold ways: racially, ethnically, culturally, ideologically, religiously, and philosophically (and even sexually). Providing just a few examples, between '76 and today we've gone from

- approximately 81-82 percent non-Hispanic white to around 57 percent;
- having "Little Italy" neighborhoods to [having "Little Mogadishu" ones](#);
- close to 90 percent Christian to about 65 percent;
- Presbyterians outnumbering Wiccans/pagans to the *reverse*; and
- approval of socialism being likely in the single digits to 39 percent today. (Note: Socialism was so despised in '76 that no one even thought to poll for approval.)



## Disparate Foundations Beget Different Goals

Now, many lament our disunity, and AT bemoans our lack of a “shared sense of purpose.” The site hopes we can regain it. The problem:

People can’t be united and share what’s secondary when disagreeing on what’s primary (e.g., faith, worldview, moral foundation).

To analogize it, a couple may disagree on how to best inculcate responsibility and masculine virtue in their son. Should they enroll him in scouting? Or should they have him spend that time helping Grandpa on the farm, hunting, and working a paper route? This is not an irreconcilable difference that would likely end in divorce.

It’s far different if dad wants to send son to scouting and mom wants son “to become daughter.”

We’ve heard about such cases, too — and they invariably are the stuff of toxic custody disputes.

And this, of course, reflects the wider “transgender” debate in society. Oh, ’76 wasn’t like medieval times, an aspect of which G.K. Chesterton longed for. To wit: It was an age, he said, when people agreed on the things “that really mattered.” But ’70s America was still far more united on fundamental issues than we are now.

Today we disagree on matters such as marriage, proper sexuality, and even, as just mentioned, “sex” itself. (Does the male-female binary carry the day, or is at issue more of a social construct?) If passionate disagreements over such can break up a marriage, what can they do to a country?

## What We Fought Wars Against Is Now Within

And regarding socialism, we now have actual communists in political office. When Americans were more traditional, they couldn’t unite with the Soviets overseas. So how can still-traditional Americans today unite with de facto Soviets within?

“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride,” the saying goes. Having *one* unitive sense of purpose is a byproduct of being *one* people. You can encourage multiculturalism, immigrationism, and the “whatever works for you” mentality — but only if what works for you is national dissolution and divorce.



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