

A national crisis of values? One vast analysis finds that it exists, if at all, largely in perception.

This is the weekend when the nation, amid hot dogs and fireworks, congratulates itself on possessing values that the rest of the year are lamented as endangered.

Worries about the country's values frequently take three forms, and all are sure to be displayed (if not brayed) in the clashes over a successor to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

First, it is said that the country is losing its standards of right and wrong, its belief in God, respect for authority, taste for hard work, love of nation and dedication to family.

Second, it is said that America is falling behind other nations in regard to such traditional values, or even that the United States is at the forefront of undermining them.

Third, it is said that Americans are sharply divided over these values, engaged in a culture war between bitterly opposed camps hewing to irreconcilable moral visions.

Wayne E. Baker, a professor of sociology, management and organization at the University of Michigan, reviews the empirical evidence for these claims in a new book, "America's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception" (Princeton University Press, 2005).

His conclusion? None of them are true.

Professor Baker is one of the researchers who have devised and analyzed the World Values Surveys. Since 1981, these vast, highly respected surveys have been measuring cultural variation and change in a growing number of nations — now almost 80 of them — around the world.

These scholars have identified two key dimensions of shifting values. One is a move from traditional val-

ues, like the importance of religion and respect for authority, family and nation, to what are termed secular-rational values, like personal autonomy, political independence and ethical relativism on matters like abortion, divorce and euthanasia.

The other dimension is a shift from survival values, like assuring material well-being and physical safety, acceptance of hardship, political caution and wariness toward outsiders, to self-expression values, like political activism, personal fulfillment, intellectual and spiritual exploration, and tolerance of outsiders and cultural diversity.

As nations pass from agrarian to industrial societies, they undergo a shift from traditional to secular-rational values. As they grow still wealthier and the postindustrial service sector swells, values shift from survival to self-expression.

America is the great exception. Although it outstrips all but a few other nations in shifting from survival to self-expression values, it still "has one of the world's most traditional value systems," Professor Baker writes, "more traditional than other wealthy societies, with the exception of Ireland, as well as more traditional than almost all other societies covered in the World Values Surveys."

Not only do "Americans have some of the highest levels of religious beliefs, conservative family values, absolute moral standards, national pride and other traditional values," but these remained essentially constant from 1981 to 2000, while they continued to be abandoned in nations otherwise resembling the United States.

Nor does empirical research of the

kind Professor Baker favors support the idea that the crisis of American values consists of a fierce internal culture war between irreconcilable moral camps.

Professor Baker says empirical studies have actually found that "attitudes about race, gender, crime, liberals and conservatives, and sexual morality have become less polarized over time."

"Americans' opinions about these matters are converging, not separating," he says, adding only that the one exception is abortion.

One question in the World Values Surveys sought to distinguish "absolutists" from "relativists." It asked which of two statements came closer to the respondent's views on good and evil. Were there "absolutely clear guidelines" that "always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances"? Or can there "never be absolutely clear guidelines," since "what is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances"?

By this measure, Americans were evenly split between absolutists and relativists in 2000, a significant change from 1981, when 60 percent fell into the relativist category. (It was possible to disagree with both options, which surprisingly few Americans did.) Again, America had far more absolutists than all but 17 of the 79 nations surveyed, and those 17 were all low-income or developing countries.

This 50-50 split is at least one sign of polarization. Yet it turns out that the division between absolutists and relativists, while modestly linked to religion, is only loosely coupled to attitudes on concrete issues, apart from abortion.

That leaves Professor Baker with a puzzle. If the facts don't indicate that traditional values are declining or that the nation is deeply divided over them, why is there such a widespread impression to the contrary?

At this point, "America's Crisis of Values" jumps from the empirical to the speculative, from graphs and tables to discussions of Athenian democracy and historical cycles. The author tosses out a lot of ideas. As guides to personal conduct, for instance, the nation's traditional values in fact collide with its values of self-expression. The tension caused by this odd national mix of values seems to provoke a high incidence of pondering the meaning and purpose of life, which Americans, believe it or not, do at rates higher than the people of virtually all other nations. Hence, the atmosphere of crisis.

Then, too, the United States is a nation that, in G. K. Chesterton's phrase, was uniquely "founded on a creed" — the very principles celebrated this weekend — rather than on common ancestry, language, religion or history.

Thus, Professor Baker proposes, the country may have a special need for "crisis rhetoric." Constant alarms about fading values or cultural warfare actually function to affirm and reinforce the traditional "ideological core" that defines the national community.

"America's Crisis of Values" is hardly a page turner, except perhaps for people who regularly spend lunchtime chatting about stratified multistage random sampling. Those who are generally skeptical about opinion surveys and number-crunching can easily mount objections. And Professor Baker's research, focusing on the population at large, neglects the activists now gearing for battle over a new Supreme Court nominee.

Still, as they mark the nation's birthday, many Americans may find not only comfort but also some political wisdom in what this book argues: that America's crisis of values is far more a matter of perception than of reality.