

# 'Coming Apart' offers insight on dealing with civil unrest

"American exceptionalism is not just something that Americans claim for themselves. Historically, Americans have been different as a people, even peculiar, and everyone around the world has recognized it."

So writes Charles Murray in his new best-seller, "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010." And even though the title of the book will no doubt put off some readers, it should be stated upfront that "Coming Apart" is not really about race. While the focus is implicitly on "white" America, the essence of Murray's thesis is about the socioeconomic divide that has come to characterize America over the course of the last half century.

"We are divisible in terms of class," Murray explains. "The coming apart at the seams has not been confined to whites, nor will its evil effects be confined to whites."

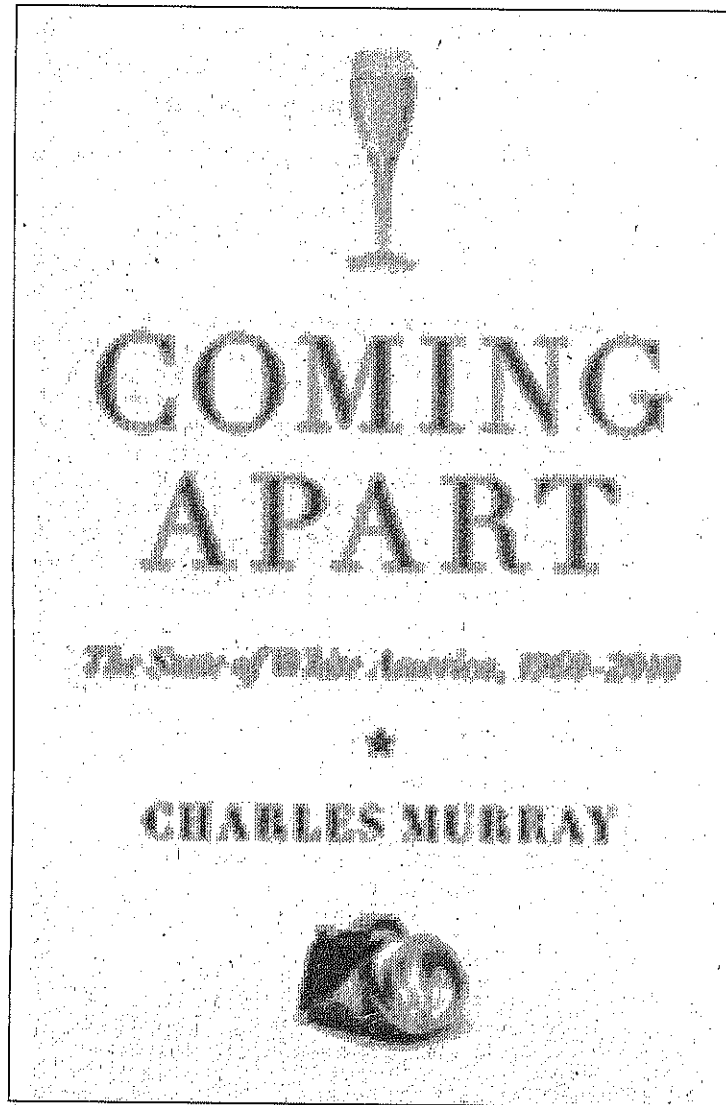
Murray's relatively in-depth analysis of how our country has evolved over the last 50 years is both insightful and disturbing. Note how he explains why the more affluent have slowly but resolutely endeavored to insulate themselves from their less fortunate counterparts:

"The human impulse behind the isolation of the new upper class is as basic as impulses get: People like to be around other people who understand them and to whom they can talk," Murray observes. "Cognitive segregation was bound to start developing as soon as unusually smart people began to have the opportunity to hang out with other unusually smart people."

At the other end of the spectrum, Murray paints a fairly demoralizing portrait of how the work ethic in America has deteriorated over time: "Until recently, healthy men in the prime of life who did not work were scorned as bums. Even when the man was jobless through no fault of his own, America's deeply rooted stigma against idleness persisted—witness the sense of guilt that gripped many men who were unemployed during the Great Depression even though they knew it wasn't their fault they were unemployed."

For the record, Murray is the W.H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. His previous books include "Losing Ground"; "In Pursuit"; "The Bell Curve" with Richard J. Herrnstein; "What It Means to Be a Libertarian"; "Human Accomplishment"; "In Our Hands"; and "Real Education." He has also written extensively for The New Republic, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, National Review and The Washington Post. Murray has a bachelor's degree in history from Harvard and a Ph.D. in political science from Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"Coming Apart" is constructed in three major sections. Part 1, "The Formation of a New Upper Class," is composed of five chapters in which Murray explains how those in the top economic tier of our society achieved their sta-



"Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010" by Charles Murray. New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2012. 416 pages, \$27.

tus. Part 2, "The Formation of a New Lower Class," is made up of eight chapters in which the author outlines, in considerable detail, how an alarming percentage of our citizens descended into poverty over the last five decades. In Part 3, "Why It Matters," Murray clarifies why the current trend, if allowed to proceed unchecked, will have dire consequences for everyone.

Murray uses two fictional municipalities, Belmont and Fishtown, to bring his subject matter to life in a manner that is both effective and appealing to the reader. Belmont represents those within our society who have done well since 1960. Its inhabitants are white, 30 to 49 years old, with college degrees, who work in managerial jobs or the professions. The inhabitants of Fishtown are also white and of the same age, but in stark contrast to their counterparts, these people have only acquired a high school education and work in blue-collar (or low-level, white-collar) jobs and in the service industries.

Murray is not a racist. He seems genuinely empathetic to the plight of all Americans—a point he emphasizes throughout the book: "We are one nation, indivisible, in terms of whites and people of color. Differences in the fortunes of different ethnic groups persist, but white America is not headed in one direction and nonwhite America in another."

After describing how America has become increasingly polarized in recent decades, he makes it clear this is not healthy for our

country and the trend needs to be reversed as soon as possible. A segregated society—by either race or socioeconomic status—is threatening our way of life domestically as well as our status as leaders in the global community.

"Age-old human wisdom has understood that a life well lived requires engagement with those around us," he explains.

As has been the case with most of Murray's previous books, "Coming Apart" is extensively researched, with seven appendices, 30 pages of chapter notes and a 10-page bibliography at the conclusion of the main text. As has also been the case with his previous books, "Coming Apart" has a liberal number of charts and graphs, all designed to help the reader make sense of the primary arguments being made.

In the final analysis, Murray is guardedly optimistic about our prospects for a brighter future: "The United States has a history of confounding pessimists," Murray concludes. "Whenever the American project has suffered a wounding blow or taken a wrong turn that looked as if it might be fatal, things have eventually worked out, more or less."

"Coming Apart" was a very eye-opening book for me. If you want a more realistic understanding of how we can better deal with the civil unrest that has permeated the news lately, I recommend it highly as a good place to start.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.