

The View

'THESE ATHLETES ARE WORKING TO MAKE AMERICA LIVE UP TO ITS STATED IDEALS.' —PAGE 34



A tattered flag flies in Youngstown, Ohio, where both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton rallied supporters

DIVIDED STATES

How we deserted common ground

By Nancy Gibbs

SPEND SOME TIME WITH POLLING conducted over the past six months and you could conclude that the U.S. is so deeply divided that our name is little more than wishful thinking.

The Pew Research Center found in October that across a range of issues—immigration, race, security, the environment—the partisan split is now greater than differences in age, race, gender and income. The center has all but vanished; in 1994, roughly half the country (49%) held an equal number of liberal and conservative positions. Now it's less than a third. The number of Democrats and Republicans who see the opposing party as “very unfavorable” has more than doubled. And while we did not get here overnight, 7 in 10 Americans say that we have reached

a dangerous new low point and are at least as divided as we were during the Vietnam War.

The first society in history to be forged more by thought and faith than threat and force seemed uniquely able to adapt to change. But we have entered a period of Category 5 disruption, with new challenges rising whose impact we just barely understand. What were once unifying institutions are declining—Rotary Clubs, churches, even malls. Unifying values, around speech and civility, freedom and fairness, are shredded by tribal furies. We have a President for whom division is not just a strategy but a skill. And we face enemies who are intent on dividing us further, weaponizing information and markets and new technologies in ways that

strengthen authoritarian systems and weaken democratic ones.

The divide reflects more than how you vote or whether you own a gun or a passport or a collection of Cat Stevens LPs. In the past generation, we have sorted ourselves into actual comfort zones. If the adage is true that you can't hate someone whose story you know, then it's a problem that a growing number of Americans can look around the coffee shop or playing field or congregation or PTA meeting and see mainly people who think and vote like them, and seldom encounter, much less hear the story of, those who see the world differently. Nate Silver's website FiveThirtyEight calculated after the 2016 election that of the nation's 3,113 counties, not even 1 in 10 was an actual battleground, decided by less than 10% of the vote; in 1992 there were more than 1,000 such counties. Meanwhile, the blowout counties, decided by more than 50 points, went from 93 to 1,196. The share of voters living in extreme landslide counties quintupled.

II.

America's virtual geography

THAT'S THE LITERAL GEOGRAPHY. NOW consider the virtual. The gatekeepers of the past, whether Walter Cronkite or Harry Reasoner, the *Times* or the *Journal*, represented different portals to the common ground, and how we entered mattered less than where we landed. Now the gatekeepers face competition from all the outlets that would usher us into a different reality. On one day Fox News says the allegation that the Clintons played a role in a uranium deal seven years ago is the most important story of the day; MSNBC says it is Senator Bob Corker's warning about the instability of the President. Axios finds that 83% of Democrats think Russia's exploitation of social media is a serious issue; 25% of Republicans agree.

We are only beginning to grasp the extent of that foreign exploitation. When Facebook finally admitted that there were ads bought by Russian agents in 2016, it said they mainly focused on "divisive social and political messages." They acted as amplifiers of outrage, gasoline on the fires burning around God, guns, race, LGBT rights, immigration. And the ads targeted both sides: the goal was not conversion so much as conflict as an end in itself.

Testifying before a belatedly interested

Civil
discourse
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which
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diverse
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ideas that
might
disturb
us in
healthy
ways

Congress, corporate representatives acknowledged that as many as 126 million Americans may have been exposed to Russian content on Facebook, including ads that were paid for in rubles; Twitter found more than 36,000 accounts linked to Russia. And Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Project found that Twitter users got just as much misinformation—polarizing and conspiratorial content as professionally produced news—and that average levels of misinformation were higher in swing states than in uncontested states.

Facebook's business model is echo-chamber construction. Its beams and struts are algorithms that favor news that will connect with us, ideas that affirm our own. Civil discourse suffers both from the echo, which amplifies even small, sordid sounds, and the chamber, which walls us off from diverse opinion, from ideas that might disturb us in healthy ways. The Axios poll found that a majority of Americans now see social media doing more to harm than help democracy and free speech. And many of those polled trust neither the government nor technology companies to prevent foreign interference in elections.

In a period of mesmerizing change, it is human nature to seek community and embrace a simple, soothing explanation for events we can't quite fathom. But the polarization of our discourse has an effect on our ability to make smart policy. Cultural-cognition research finds that people tend to be tribal when it comes to certain topics, like immigration or guns or climate change. "What people 'believe' about global warming doesn't reflect what they know," explains Yale Law professor Dan Kahan. "It expresses who they are." Likewise any debate over regulating guns has to acknowledge, as a southern Democratic Senator once put it, that the gun debate is "about values," "about who you are and who you aren't."

III.

America's ratings presidency

DURING THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, David Von Drehle traveled with Donald Trump between events, watching him watch himself on multiple cable networks. "You see what this is, right? It's ratings," the then candidate said. "I go on one of these shows and the ratings double.

They triple. And that gives you power. It's not the polls. It's the ratings."

That was Trump's insight—that in an attention economy, ratings are power, and not just from TV but also Facebook likes and Google searches and Twitter mentions.

"You have to keep people interested," Trump said, which boils down to this: conflict commands attention. And attention equals influence.

At a time of widespread disgust with the ways of Washington, Trump made incivility his brand of civil disobedience. On the day he was elected, exit polls found that a large majority of voters felt he was not qualified to be President (61%), did not have the temperament (63%) and was not honest or trustworthy (64%). But a similarly large majority thought the country was on the wrong track, and of the voters who cared most about change, 82% voted for Trump, who, if he had proved nothing else, successfully proved that he could change all the rules.

Ever since, love him or hate him, no Commander in Chief has ever commanded the news cycle like this one. In this he is a human algorithm, perfectly engineered to say or do whatever you are most likely to watch.

IV.

The challenge for America's press

HEREIN LIES ONE OF THE MANY CHALLENGES to my profession: Trump is not at war with the press, nor it with him. This is a complex and co-dependent relationship. His presidency has been great for ratings, even in ways that are bad for journalism and bad for the country. His attacks on news institutions have damaged the public trust they need to function: fully 46% of Americans believe reporters simply make things up about this President. In January and February of 2016, nearly the same share of Democrats (74%) and Republicans (77%) supported the press's role as a watchdog, holding leaders accountable. Now 89% of Democrats support that role, vs. only 42% of Republicans. That 47-point gap opened up in just a single year. When the press is derided and distrusted, it's easier to ignore whatever it is discovering, even at a time when the investigative prowess of our best reporters has been extraordinary.

Here's a second challenge: even as reporters

If we
don't
write
about
what is
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as what
isn't ...
then
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greatest
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our times

do the hard work of exposing incompetence and corruption and collusion wherever we find it, we also need to admit our own biases, and I don't just mean ideological ones. As a lifelong journalist, I'm concerned with the ways my profession can contribute to division, even in subtle ways that reflect our best intentions. Journalists are often drawn to the profession as a form of public service: afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted, expose incompetence and corruption wherever we find it.

It is easy in times like these to develop a bias against the positive: critical stories are journalism; anything else is just marketing. But a bias against the positive fuels cynicism in both public officials and voters. And it misses the story. You don't have to subscribe to the notion that these are the best of times to wonder why we often talk as if these are the worst of times. In the worst of times, we feel small and defensive and risk-averse and tribal. As opposed to the expansive, oxygenated opportunity of optimism.

If we don't write about what is working as well as what isn't, whether in state and local government; in the private sector; in the vibrant, entrepreneurial, immensely potent philanthropic arena; then we are missing one of the greatest stories of our times.

If we don't show how democracy can work, does work, if we don't model what civil discourse looks and sounds like and the progress it can yield, then we can hardly be surprised if people don't think they really matter.

And that concerns me especially when we are hurtling ahead so fast toward even more confounding technological, political, social and ethical challenges. We are going to face this challenge over and over as we wrestle collectively and individually with everything from the ethics around artificial intelligence and whether Alexa should be able to testify at a murder trial to bioengineering and CRISPR. What are the rules of robot war? Once your car drives better than you do, should you be required to turn over the keys?

A healthy democracy depends not just on armies but on arguments. We need to bring people to the table who would not otherwise be talking and ask the hardest questions we can, with nothing off-limits. The pace of change is accelerating: it is essential that we are nimble and fearless in keeping up to have any hope of finding a common ground, which honors common sense, in pursuit of the common good.

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