

Inquiring Minds Topic – 2 February 2018

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Can America Come Together?

The topic paper, below, by Nancy Gibbs was published in TIME 11 December 2017. Please read it to the end. Our discussion will bring forth ideas and strategies to surmount the divisiveness apparent in our society. What factors must be recognized? What are the strengths upon which to draw? Are honest disagreements healthy? Is accommodation of others' positions important? What will you do personally to effect tolerance, if not harmony?

How America Became So Divided

 time.com/5033395/nancy-gibbs-harvard-speech/

IDEAS

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This essay is adapted from the 2017 Theodore H. White Lecture, sponsored by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard on November 15.

I'm honored to deliver a lecture named for one of my heroes.

I came to see campaigns and candidates differently after reading Teddy White's dispatches. He inspected the American presidency as an outsider, who had lived and learned outside the country, seen the emergence of nations that were not democracies; it was the opposite of living and reporting from the Bubble.

Those of us who operate in a Bubble, whether journalistic or academic or ideological, can easily forget that bubbles don't conceal reality but they distort it, and it is so very easy to imagine they aren't there.

Bubbles can be delightful and diverting, except in times like these, when they can become dangerous.

For reasons cultural, economic, demographic, psychographic, we are divided as a country perhaps not *more*, but differently than ever before. What were once unifying institutions are declining—Rotary Clubs, churches, even malls. Unifying values, around speech and civility, freedom and fairness are shredded by rising tribal furies and passions. We have a president for whom division is not just a strategy, it's a skill.

We face enemies intent on dividing us more.

Faster than we can master their meaning, we embrace technologies making that easier.

Seven in ten Americans say we have reached a dangerous new low point, and are at least as divided as we were during the Vietnam war.

Every day, we learn something new about the ways we are doing this to ourselves, through the choices we make, the media we consume, the immensely powerful platforms we rely on whose impact we just barely understand.

And every day we learn more about the ways our adversaries are weaponizing information and markets and new

technologies, in ways that strengthen authoritarian systems and weaken democratic ones.

Power looks less like a fist, more like a fingertip.

So I want to use my time tonight exploring how we got here and what it means, because as far as I can see, where we are going, there are no maps.

Just How Divided Are We?

For years I used to argue that America is much more purple than it seems on cable news or talk radio. Yes, we are a fractious federation full of regional tastes and cultural contrasts and eternal disputes over the proper balance between individual freedom and the common good.

But I believed that the first society in history to be forged more by thought and faith than threat and force was uniquely able to adapt to change. That the core American ideas, enshrined in our Bill of Rights, written in the blood of patriots, embraced by generations of restless immigrants, honored by servants and statesmen, tried and tested by hucksters and zealots, were more powerful than any of the forces primed to divide us.

I'm no longer so sure. I still believe in those ideals and their cohering power; but we have entered a period of category five disruption, so I take nothing for granted any more.

Let's take as our baseline roughly 1990 onward—a single generation in which we've seen the end of the Cold War and rise of non-state threats; the dawn of the Information age and the deposit, into our hands, of hyperconnecting supercomputers; the decoding of the human genome, the approach of a majority-minority society, the explosion of wealth among the already wealthy, and of course, the swift and brutal deconsolidation of media.

Consider just a few trends that Bridgewater founder Ray Dalio, sees driving what he calls "[the two economies](#)."

— For the lower 60%, real incomes are flat to down since 1980, to the point that the average person in the top 40% has ten times the wealth of the average in the lower 60, two thirds of whom have no savings.

—The lower 60% spend 1/4 as much on education, which sets their children up to fall further behind. Families of those who have not gone to college are breaking up nearly twice the rate of those who have gone to college.

—Premature deaths are up by about 20% just since 2000, driven mainly by drugs and suicides, which sets America apart from nearly all industrialized countries. Nothing about current trends suggests this will change.

So what defines us? Our Age? Race? Gender? Education? None of the above. It's our enemies. According to polling that [Pew Research Center](#) has been doing since 1994, on ten different issues like immigration and poverty and the environment, we are now far more divided by our partisan identity than any other factor.

Geography is destiny

The divide reflects more than how you vote or whether you own a gun or passport or a collection of Cat Stevens LPs. In the past generation we have sorted ourselves into actual comfort zones. Almost [two thirds](#) (65%) of Republicans and right leaning independents prefer to live someplace where houses are bigger and further apart, and where schools and shopping are not nearby. Meanwhile six in ten Democrats (61%) prefer smaller houses in places where they can walk to schools and stores.

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 [FiveThirtyEight](#) calculated after the 2016 election that of the nation's 3,113 counties, not even one in ten were actual battlegrounds, decided by less than 10 percent; in 1992 there were more than 1,000.

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 has quintupled.

All politics has never been so local.

That's the literal geography. Now consider the Virtual.

My generation grew up at a time when the “press” was our portal to political understanding. Whether we got our news from TIME or *Newsweek*, Walter Cronkite or Harry Reasoner, the *Times* or the *Journal*, these were not existential choices. They represented different gates 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. We see what the algorithms think we want to see, or will want to click on. And here I am going to pause and offer a qualified defense of Kellyanne Conway. She used the phrase alternative facts on Meet the Press when discussing Sean Spicer's provably false assessment of the inaugural crowd size. So it became a sly synonym for bald faced lies.

But she later offered a different example: “Partly cloudy, partly sunny. Glass half full, glass half empty.” Those could also be called alternative facts— and this is where her insight is relevant. This is not just about information. It's about interpretation. About what weight and value we assign to different events.

So 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 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.

Social platforms have made polarization easier, but they get a lot of help. Activist groups have a financial interest in outrage, in portraying some policy or politician as a threat to civilization; Yale law professor Dan Kahan calls them “conflict entrepreneurs” intent on pathologizing our politics.

Likewise journalists are all too willing treat politics as sport. Covering polls is way easier than covering people, but you very quickly lapse into who's up, who's down, like it's a zero sum proposition. That's a harmless way to view football: Either the Patriots win this weekend, or the Raiders. Less so when covering democracy. Because it ignores even the possibility of an outcome in which, through conscious compromise, everyone wins. Where is the sport in that?

Finally, in a period of mesmerizing change, it is human nature to seek the stories, the storytellers, the shaman who affirm rather than confront, who offer a simple, soothing explanation for events we can't quite fathom. But this too has an actual effect on our ability to make smart policy. It's not enough to educate the public, give people better information.

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 Professor Dan Kahan. “It *expresses* who they *are*.” To conduct an informed public debate, he says, “you have to *change* the meaning of the climate change. You have to disentangle positions on it from opposing cultural identities.”

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.”

In other words, we stand little chance of addressing these questions wisely and well if we are circled around our separate campfires. Progress on crucial, complex issues will only come when people don't have to choose between freely appraising the evidence vs. being loyal to their tribe.

And then there's Donald Trump

So what happens when the single figure who is supposed represent the entire country, uphold the laws that bind us all, command the forces that protect us all, manage the executive that governs us all, seems to have very little interest, for neither practical political reasons nor high minded purposeful ones, in uniting the country?

Decades worth of economic, social and political trends were remapping our political landscape long before we saw Donald Trump coming. But it is hard to imagine a political leader more ideally suited to fueling the forces that divide us. And that is an unusual place to find ourselves as a country.

Back in 2004, Barack Obama shot into the political stratosphere with a convention speech asserting that “there’s not a liberal America and a conservative America. ... There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.” Four years later when he was campaigning for the White House, [two thirds of voters](#) thought he would unite the country rather than divide it.

That is not what happened. And in his final State of the Union, President Obama called it one of his few regrets, that the divisions deepened, the tenor of the conversation soured.

No president alone is responsible for the state of the our discourse or sense of common purpose. But they occupy our highest pulpit; the tone they use and example they set matter.

At 10 months in office, Donald Trump is already the most divisive president in modern history. More than twice as many people —[66% vs. 28%](#)—think the President is doing more to divide the country than to unite it.

We are watching something we have never seen before.

For one thing, it feels like we see *everything*. In covering him for the past two years and in my direct encounters with him, I’ve come to wonder if he may be both the most transactional and the most transparent president we have ever seen.

Teddy White once said there were so many reporters doing behind the scenes stories that there was no more room behind the scenes. What would he have made of a president so much the same in public and in private? No thought goes unspoken, no grudge forgiven, no reflex restrained; you won’t learn much by going behind the scenes, since the rifts and rivalries and tantrums and tweets are all right there in front of us. News organizations with a two source rule routinely publish stories that say “We spoke with 18 White House officials in constructing this account.”

And the accounts almost invariably have to do with a battle—internal, external, intramural, extraterrestrial. The long arc of this astonishingly short political rise to power—remember, no one has ever reached the White House with so little experience or exposure to the ways of Washington—has been like a boxer climbing the rankings to achieve the heavyweight title.

One after another Donald Trump picked a fight that should have flattened him: As his enemies list makes clear, these battles are often not driven by either politics or policy. They by all appearances are driven by rage, and ratings.

There were skirmishes with Not-a-war-hero John McCain, with Megyn Kelly and Malcolm Turnbull, Khizr Khan and Judge Gonzalo Curiel, Mitch McConnell and Jeff Sessions, with Mexico and the entire Muslim world. The mainstream media. The intelligence community. The “unelected” judiciary. The NFL. Kim Jong un.

Some part of this, I believe, reflects his wiring: more often than not, he starts the day picking a fight. As Newt Gingrich told the *Washington Post*’s Michael Scherer, with a certain grudging admiration, from a guy who used to be seen as bare knuckled: “He intuits how he can polarize.”

The visceral sense of grievance he projects is, I believe, sincerely felt: As it turned out, a small group of us had dinner with him at the White House the night before he fired James Comey; a considerable amount of time that evening was spent objecting to our coverage and everyone else’s, including the failure to accept the truth about his inaugural crowds. He feels he does not get credit for what he has achieved, does not get the loyalty he feels

he deserves. He deplored the tone of political coverage—“there’s a great meanness out there that I’m surprised at.”

But just because his serial hostility is sincere doesn’t mean it isn’t also strategic. During the primaries, David Von Drehle traveled with him between events, watching him watching himself on multiple cable networks. Everywhere he looked, it was all Trump, all the time.

“You see what this is, right? It’s ratings,” Candidate Trump 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 his insight—that in an attention economy, ratings are power, not just TV but [Facebook](#) likes and [Google](#) searches and Twitter mentions.

“You have to keep people interested,” Trump says, which boils down to this: Conflict commands attention. And attention equals influence.

Yes, he is indulging his core supporters, and their hostility to elites in Washington and media and this institution that have shaped a culture from which they feel alienated. But I would remind you that this includes millions of voters who are not economically marginalized, not uneducated or undereducated.

He is outrageous with purpose: On the day he was elected, exit polls found that a large majority of voters said he was not qualified to be president (61%), did not have the temperament (63%), was not honest and trustworthy (64%). But a similarly large majority thought the country was on the wrong track, and of voters who cared most about change, 82% voted for Donald Trump, who if he had proven nothing else, had successfully proven 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. At times this feels like a strange kind of fixation, a rubbernecking presidency. In this he is a human algorithm, perfectly engineered to say or do whatever you are most likely to watch.

Herein lies one of 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.

For one thing, his attacks on news institutions have damaged the public trust we 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’ role as a watchdog](#), holding leaders accountable. Now roughly nine in ten 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 discredited 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.

And what if they are investigating all the ways in which our adversaries are waging, literally, a war of words, driving our division, destabilizing our institutions in pursuit of their global agenda.

The Russia Invasion

We have barely begun to reckon with what we’ve learned about what happened last year and continues to this day.

Silicon Valley has delivered unto us astonishing tools, to share knowledge and solve problems and save lives but also, it turns out, change and control us in terrifying ways.

When Facebook finally admitted 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.

Remember, the ads targeted both sides: the goal was not conversion so much as conflict as an end in itself. Testifying before a belatedly interested Congress, corporate representatives acknowledged that 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.

Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Project found that Twitter users got 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. In September [ProPublica revealed](#) how Facebook allowed people to target ads to interest categories such as "Jew hater." The social network removed the categories when ProPublica asked about them, but these options are automatically generated from users' profiles, which is the kind of micro-targeting that Russian agents use.

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 startling ideas that might disturb us in healthy ways.

Google and Twitter and Facebook share enormous responsibilities, even if lawmakers appear at the moment overmatched by the sheer complexity and scope of the threat.

As Columbia University Law Professor Tim Wu argues, "no defensible free-speech tradition accepts harassment and threats as speech, treats foreign propaganda campaigns as legitimate debate or thinks that social-media bots ought to enjoy constitutional protection."

An [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 them trust neither the government nor the tech companies to prevent foreign interference in elections.

What Does This Mean for Us?

I believe the current division is a challenge beyond the wearying day-to-day partisan brawling. I fear it seeps deeper into us as individuals, and deeper into the seams of our society. In 1966, 65% of people trusted government to do the right thing. Now that number is 20%. The problem isn't any one party, one president, one set of policies; it is a dimming faith in liberal democracy itself, a pattern researchers see not just in the U.S. but in Britain, Sweden, Australia.

Openness to strong, even authoritarian rule is growing. Harvard's Yascha Mounk and University of Melbourne's Roberto Stefan Foa track the astonishing drop with each generation in the number of Americans who say it is essential to live in a democracy, especially among younger people. Right now only 30% of millennials feel that way, compared with 72% of those born before WWII.

As a journalist my whole life, 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.

But this impulse can foster a bias against the positive, a bias fueled by the fact that narrative runs on friction; a story without tension feels limp and bloodless. Other than a reporter who outright lies, there is no more derided reporter than the producer of a puff piece. They are accused of beat sweetening, of source development, of being in the tank. Critical stories are journalism. Anything else is just marketing.

But a bias against the positive fuels cynicism in both public officials and voters. Officials conclude they can do no right, which makes them even more likely to spin and stonewall. It fuels cynicism of voters as well, if by assuming the worst, our coverage brings out the worst, and weakens faith in institutions.

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 though 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, embracing, 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, 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, than we can hardly be surprised if people don't think they really matter.

Some politicians are clearly listening. Fifty freshman lawmakers in the 115th Congress, from both parties, signed a "Commitment to civility" pledge. It acknowledged the "increasing division in and coarsening of our culture fueled too often by the vitriol in our politics and public discourse." For all the differences in their beliefs, they promised to "set an example of statesmanship," and maintain "a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation."

More than 40 members of Congress, split equally between the two parties, have joined the congressional Problem-Solvers Caucus – agreeing to work toward compromise and vote together on a few of the biggest issues. White House veterans Bill Kristol and Bill Galston, who have never once voted for the same candidate, called for a New Center in American politics to defend basic principles of liberal democracy: "We stand together in defense of constitutional, orderly, and civil self-government that respects civil liberties and equal rights and the rule of law, and rejects bigotry of every kind." Its pillars? Opportunity, security, accountability, ingenuity.

This all sounds so non controversial, except when people talk about common ground like it's some endangered wetlands full of moist bureaucrats and passionless sellouts who don't know a revolution when they see it. Even at a great university, how regularly do you get to encounter people of high intellect and good will who ardently disagree about an issue and engage in a debate that does not involve challenging motives or checking privilege? I was walking across another Ivy League campus two weeks ago and saw a sign on a lamppost: End Free Speech. It was not at all clear whether that was meant to be ironic.

And that concerns me especially when we are hurtling ahead so fast towards even more confounding technological, political, social, 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 you to think boldly and creatively about how you dive in and reach out, put people around the table who would not otherwise be talking and ask the hardest questions you can; put nothing off limits. The pace of change is accelerating: it is essential you are nimble and fearless in keeping up, because the stakes could not be higher.

And to the students above all: we will very soon be in your hands. Mine is a transitional generation, raised in a period of historic peace and prosperity, with an easy faith that freedom will always win in the end. Yours is a serially disrupted one, you grew up with more data being created every two days than in all of history up to the day you were born; you've seen power shift from institutions to individuals at a rate never seen before; and you will be reckoning with new ideas and inventions that test everything about what it even means to be human.

We are living in large times. Nothing gives me more hope than the energy I see in students that I meet, who'd rather climb than coast, who are prepared to work hard not for the glory but for that greater good. You'll be the ones who restore to American politics the spirit Teddy White loved, as our binding secular faith and our noblest art.