

One Nation, Very Divisible

"Anger Defines 2016 Electorate." That headline runs above a new NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, which finds that nearly two-thirds of Americans believe the USA is headed in the wrong direction. And that was before Russia's Putin doffed his shirt, flexed his pecs, and thumbed his nose at us in Syria.

Another headline: "Biden Would Enter 2016 Race As Most Popular Candidate." Are you getting this? The same pollsters who find an "angry" America also discover that Vice President Joe Biden, acolyte of the president and the ultimate status quo candidate, defeats every Republican in a hypothetical matchup.

Among others, our good friend Charles Krauthammer points out that Biden's numbers will almost surely plummet the moment he enters the race. A theoretical candidate always looks better than a real one, and right now the VP is on the fence, doing his best Mario Cuomo impression.

Getting back to that anger, it is every bit as polarized as our nation. Many Republicans are ticked off over America's declining status in the world, political correctness run amok, Islamic-based terrorism, the sale of fetal tissue, the assault on religious freedom, and mayhem in our cities. That's just for starters. These are the folks attending rallies for Trump, Carson, Fiorina, and Cruz. Anger is not nearly as apparent at Jeb Bush events.

On the other side, many Democrats are peeved at an entirely different set of issues. Their fury stems from wealth disparity, the supposed scourge of 'climate change,' and racial animus. Again, that's just for starters. Ticked-off progressives are flocking to hear wild-eyed Bernie Sanders, who has now caught up with Hillary Clinton in the fundraising category. Hey, even socialists need lots of dough to run a campaign.

So there's no doubt that plenty of people in today's America are steaming. The 'hope and change' mantra of eight years ago has been transformed into Howard Beale's 'I'm mad as hell' rant.

That's not necessarily a bad thing if it is channeled into policy prescriptions and makes America a better place. Righteous anger over genuine racial injustice in the '50s and '60s was nearly universal and made the USA a more perfect union.

But today's rage is not nearly as focused, and it comes from vastly different places for conservatives and liberals. If Donald Trump or Carly Fiorina is nominated, it's not just that half the country will politely disagree with them. So-called progressives will actively hate them, much as they hated George W. Bush.

Similarly, if Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders is the Democratic nominee, millions of right-wingers will despise them. Much as they loathe President Obama.

So anger can have its benefits, such as when it is channeled into effort and energy on the football field. But when we are infected with hate, fights break out, penalty flags are thrown, and people get hurt.

Right now there is no candidate who can soothe the restive electorate. The calm Jeb Bush is losing ground, while the happy warrior John Kasich trails his more belligerent rivals. Ben Carson is a likeable guy, but leftists will never, ever forgive him for being a black conservative and for criticizing Islam. By breaking those two left-wing taboos, the doctor is considered guilty of malpractice.

As for Democrats, Joe Biden is much liked and rarely loathed, but even he would have a hard time bringing Americans together. Good ol' Joe has a lot of baggage after carrying Barack Obama's suitcase for eight years.

There are plenty of reasons for conservative Americans to be fuming. The economy is stagnant, with wages for working men and women on the decline. Religious Americans have been diminished, while the country seems to be more impotent than ever overseas.

Liberals also have reasons to be in a foul mood. The rich are indeed getting richer, their beloved Planned Parenthood is under assault, they see Islamophobia and racism around every corner, and President Obama has not lived up to their grandiose hopes.

Sure, America has been divided and irate in the past, but people can now spread the hatred with 140 characters and the touch of a button. That may be helpful if your name is Trump or Sanders, but it is not good for we the people.

Want to hear something amazing? In January of 2009, just after President Obama was sworn in for the first time, 69% of Americans approved of the young and promising commander-in-chief. We may never see a number like that again, which is truly regrettable. Both for the incoming president, whomever that might be, and for the United States of America.