Polarization Wins Elections … and Destroys the Country

No matter how hard I try, I can't come up with a single idea that would put even a tiny dent in the toxic polarization that is dividing Americans.

Frankly, I'm not sure anybody is taking these divisions seriously enough, including our current president who not long ago said that Republican governors who want to open up their states for business were guilty of "Neanderthal thinking." And just a few days ago called Georgia's new voting law "Jim Crow on steroids." So much for unity from the man who told us he wants to unite our country.

"One might have thought a viral pandemic would bring the country together. Not a chance." as Dan Henninger put it in the Wall Street Journal.

Everybody knows — or certainly should know — that having differences is one thing but hating the other side is something else altogether. I don't know how things will end but I do know they can't go on like this much longer. Something really bad is bound to happen.

An intelligent friend of mine floated the idea that we should divide the country — formally — into red states and blue states. Conservatives would live in the red states and liberals in the blue states. And I'm not at all sure he was kidding.

It started long before Donald Trump came onto the scene, but his combative nature poured gasoline on the fire. So did many in the news media who have become more and more blatantly partisan in recent years. Cable TV news is a major contributor to the problem.

Want proof? Consider this: For the next four years — or as long as Joe Biden is president — there's a near 100 percent chance that you won't hear one good word about him from conservative opinion hosts on Fox News. Not one good word! The business model forbids it. People don't tune in to Fox to hear anything good about Joe Biden or any other liberal Democrat. But let's be clear: It was no different for the past four years when liberal channels like CNN and MSNBC didn't have a kind word to offer about Donald Trump.

You might think that Joe Biden would do one thing in four years that conservatives on Fox could get behind — or that Donald Trump might have done something that progressives at MSNBC could have supported. But the bottom line for partisan media outlets is the bottom line — and dividing Americans is what brings in ratings, which in turn brings in money.

And the advent of social media only added to the divisions, suddenly making it easy for people hiding behind made up screen names, people both passionate and often angry, people who previously had no voice, to use their digital megaphone and join the give and take — frequently adding more polarizing heat than unifying light to the conversation. If you want to lose faith in humanity, read some of the comments posted beneath an online political column. Some of these screwballs should be committed.

And then there was the second Trump impeachment trial. GOP Senator Ben Sasse, one of seven Republicans who voted to convict former President Trump, said this after the trial: "But here's the sad reality: If we were talking about a Democratic president, most Republicans and most Democrats would simply swap sides. Tribalism is a hell of a drug."

He's right, of course. Imagine if Joe Biden were to deliver an incendiary speech to his most passionate left wing supporters, a speech that tears into Republicans for just about anything. And imagine if his loyal fans

rioted. Imagine if they broke windows, ransacked office, battled with police and said they wanted to hang some prominent Republican. You think a vast majority of Republicans would blame only the rioters but not the man who riled up the crowd? Or would they do what Senator Sasse said they'd do: impeach the Democrat and then vote to convict him, along party lines?

Tribalism really is a hell of a drug.

I've even tried to come up with crazy scenarios to see if there's anything that would bring the two sides together.

What if the North Koreans launch a missile that lands in California? Wouldn't that unite us like the 9/11 attacks did? Probably not.Democrats likely would blame Donald Trump for going easy on the North Korean dictator and Republicans would blame President Biden for being soft on communism.

I don't think it would be much different if we were attacked by aliens from outer space. That might unite us for about 10 minutes. But after that each side would find something to pin on the other side.

So that no one gets the wrong idea, I'm not arguing that we should surrender our deeply held beliefs or surrender our values for the sake of unity. But at the risk of sounding like Pollyanna, standing up for what we believe in is not the same thing as believing that we alone have access to "The Truth," that our side has a monopoly on what's right and that the other side is composed of deplorable morons.

Polarizing people may be a good way to win political points or make money in the media … but it's also a good way to destroy our country.

And if you think it can't happen, then you're the one who sounds like Pollyanna.