

Partisan Hate in America – A Greater Threat Than Climate Change

A friend of mine once suggested that because we've become so polarized in this country, maybe we'd be better off if all the liberals just lived in Blue states and all the conservatives lived in Red states.

I can't say with certainty if he was kidding. He wasn't laughing. But I do think it was something akin to wishful thinking.

Someone else I know recently had dinner with a couple of liberal friends. After expressing their hatred of President Trump, my friend asked if they thought the president should be impeached. They said yes. No surprise there. Then he asked what he thought was a silly question. Do you wish President Trump were dead? The answer again from the two liberals: Yes!

I thought of these vignettes in the wake of a study by two political scientists (from LSU and the University of Maryland) entitled "Lethal Mass Partisanship," a report whose findings were disturbing, but given how polarized we've become in our country, I guess not too surprising.

According to the study, just over 42 percent of the people in each major political party view the opposition as "downright evil."

The study also found that nearly one out of five Republicans and the same percentage of Democrats agree with the statement that their political adversaries "lack the traits to be considered fully human – they behave like animals."

There's more. The political scientists asked, "Do you ever

think: 'We'd be better off as a country if large numbers of the opposing party in the public today just died'?"

About 20 percent of Democrats and 16 percent of Republicans do from time to time think that the country would be better off if large numbers of the opposition just dropped dead

That's the science behind the vignette I shared with you, about my conservative friend's dinner with two liberals who wanted to see Donald Trump not just impeached ... but in a coffin, in the ground. Apparently, they're not alone.

One more depressing tidbit: "What if the opposing party wins the 2020 presidential election," the researchers asked. "How much do you feel violence would be justified then?"

A little over 18 percent of Democrats and nearly 14 percent of Republicans said violence would be justified on a scale ranging from "a little" to "a lot."

Having passionate opinions is one thing; it's part of the American tradition. But seeing the other side as evil and wanting its adherents to die is quite another. Forgive the obvious, but this is not good. Not for us individually and not for us as a nation.

And it's a bigger threat to America (at least right now) than climate change.

Cable news didn't start this conflagration but every night, for money, it pours fuel on the fire. Being hard right or hard left is what brings the eyeballs to the TV screen. "Moderate" is a four letter word on cable TV. Compromise, in these precincts, is akin to treason.

But it's not only cable TV. It's the sheer ubiquity of political news. There's no shortage of partisans who want to go on TV and attach the worst motives to their political opponents. There's plenty to get us riled up – and we can get

it any hour of the day or night, on TV, radio, phones, Twitter, Facebook and a million other places.

And our divisive president isn't helping things, either. Sooner or later, I fear, someone is going to take more than a verbal shot at a reporter because Mr. Trump said, fake news is "the enemy of the American people." And progressives like Bernie Sanders aren't helping either when they vilify people with money. It's time for cooler heads to prevail but cooler heads these days are hard to find.

Sometimes the anger is coming from the fringes, from people who hate everyone that doesn't believe what they believe; but not all the time – not when 42 percent of people in both major political parties view the opposition as "downright evil."

This isn't simply about the kind of hatred that left scars in places like Charleston and Pittsburgh and Christchurch. This is about everyday polarization that drives us away from each other. Here's a line from the New York Times: "To a degree that is unique to this period and this president, disputes over politics have divided Americans' homes, strained marriages, ruined friendships and invaded the workplace."

We know the people we think are evil. We know their names. We work with them. They live in our neighborhoods. This is an American crisis. As David French succinctly put it in National Review: "Partisan hate is spiraling out of control."

The clock is ticking. We better figure out a way to tamp down the animosity before things go from bad to worse. A lot worse. But with the verbal artillery flying day and night in all directions, let's just say I'm not optimistic.