

Rooting For Laundry

I reluctantly have come to believe that most Americans – whether they're members of the chattering class in the media or your next-door neighbor – have lost the ability, and sometimes even the desire, to persuade anyone to change his or her mind on just about any important issue. Too many of us have put a “Do Not Disturb” sign around our necks and don't want to be exposed to any ideas that we don't already hold.

If you think the AR-15 is a weapon that should remain legal, there's nothing anyone on the other side can say that will convince you to change your mind. If you think late-term abortion should be legal, no one on the other side is going to convince you otherwise.

Having strong beliefs and hanging on to your principles is a good thing. But as a friend puts it, it's not beliefs we're hanging on to, it's identity that we cling to; what matters most now is what team we play for.

Take cable TV. We don't watch opinion shows to consider what the other side is saying. We watch to get our own biases validated. If we're on the red team we want conservative opinion. And if we're on the blue team we look for liberal echo chambers that will confirm our progressive ideas. No one is watching the other side to learn something they hadn't already thought of.

And then there are those online videos where an interviewer asks college kids what they think of something President Trump supposedly said. Almost all of them, of course, hate it. But then they're told it wasn't really Donald Trump who made the statement – it was President Obama. Suddenly they don't hate the very same observation anymore. Now that they know it was their team captain who said it, they embrace the remark – usually without even a hint of embarrassment.

And remember when in 2012 at that presidential debate Mitt Romney said that Russia was America's "number one political foe" and President Obama got snarky and said, "The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because the Cold War's been over for 20 years."

When liberals weren't cheering for Mr. Obama they were laughing at Mr. Romney. Now, it's progressives who think Russia is a dangerous threat to our democracy and it's our Republican President who downplays Russia's interference in our presidential election. Here's a man who knows how to be angry but hasn't shown any public anger toward the Russians.

Who cares? Not the liberals who were on Mr. Obama's team and not the conservatives who are on Mr. Trump's.

At least people of deep faith have principles, right? You tell me. Evangelicals would never support a liberal presidential candidate who bragged about grabbing women in a sexual way. But millions of them were more than willing to look the other way when it was someone on their team who made the crude remark.

Liberals are suddenly concerned about the national debt. But when the debt doubled in 8 years under President Obama they yawned. Trump supporters couldn't stop talking about the debt when Mr. Obama was president. Now that their team is loading up on debt, it's Trump acolytes who are yawning.

You can try to run away from this unprincipled nonsense but there aren't a lot of safe havens anymore.

Once upon a time we could escape into the world of entertainment. But try watching one of those awards shows coming out of Hollywood. The glitterati talk a good game about diversity, but it's not diversity of opinion they want. Their minds are made up and nothing anyone on the other team can say or do will make one bit of difference.

As for Mr. Trump's most passionate supporters: They didn't flinch when their hero, rocker and gun enthusiast Ted Nugent told Barack Obama to "suck on my machine gun" or when he said, Mr. Obama and Hillary Clinton "should be tried for treason and hung,"

But when Kathy Griffin showed off a mask depicting a bloody and severed head of Donald Trump, the same hard right that cheered Ted Nugent demanded that Kathy Griffin be banished from civilized society.

Sports used to be another place where a lot of us went to escape the daily barrage of partisan politics. It's one thing for athletes to use their platforms to fight for worthy causes like civil rights. That's a good thing. But saying President Trump "doesn't give a f*** about the people" and calling him a "bum," as LeBron James did, crosses a line for me. So we get Fox host Laura Ingraham, who wrote a book called "Shut up and Sing" telling LeBron to "shut up and dribble" and then being attacked as a racist. And while we're here, just imagine if a white conservative athlete called Barack Obama a bum and said he didn't give a f*** about the people. Our outrage depends on what team we're rooting for.

Sports fans cheer for the star player who wears their team's uniform until he decides to put on another uniform and play for a rival that's offering him more money. Then they boo the very same guy. As Jerry Seinfeld said, fans are just cheering for clothes; they're rooting for laundry.

That's what a lot of us are doing – rooting for laundry. So tell me how this is good.

An Open Letter to the Ayatollahs

✘ No, not the ayatollahs in Tehran. This is a letter to *you*, the conservative American ayatollahs who demand purity, just like the ones over there. I'm not talking about all of you, of course. But this open letter is for many of you; maybe even most of you – the ones who say you agree with what I write on this Web site and what I say on the O'Reilly Factor almost all of the time, but as soon as I fall out of lock step with you ... you vow to never listen or read another word I say or write. You are the ayatollahs this letter is aimed at.

The last two columns I wrote – one about whether Christian small business owners can refuse to do business with gays, the other about the civil war raging in the Republican Party – have drawn a ton of negative reaction. In both cases I wasn't pure enough for many of you. Let me be clear: dissent is welcome. Unlike many of you, I don't believe I have a monopoly on Truth. Do I like comments that say, "Bernie, right on, we love you"? Sure. But those of you who disagree are free to state your opinions just as I'm free to state mine.

But what I've learned is that while many of you *claim* to respect people in the public eye who stand up for their views, no matter how unpopular, what you really mean is you respect people in the public eye who stand up for *your* views. What I've learned reading your comments over several years now is that many of you only want your views validated. Nothing else is good enough. You don't simply disagree with the other guy. You don't want to even hear the other guy. You want the other guy dead (in some cases, I suspect, literally dead!). So this feel-good nonsense that you spout – that you admire people who stand on principle – is just something you say to make yourself feel good – about yourself. But you don't mean it. Like the other ayatollahs, reasoned dissent scares you. You

talk tough. But you're weak.

In my particular case, I have never written or uttered a word on TV that I didn't honestly believe. Those views often offend liberals who read or listen to me. Understood. And every now and then those views rub my hard right friends the wrong way. But despite what you say, you don't really respect independence. You only want to hear from people who agree with you. You rightly deride liberal colleges for not welcoming diverse opinions. You rightly wonder what they're afraid of. You, my conservative ayatollahs ... are them.

You know how many of you (again, rightly) condemn liberals who attack black conservatives for straying from the liberal plantation? You ayatollahs are no better. You condemn me for straying from the conservative plantation. And even if you agree with me most of the time, one false move and I'm dead to you. Think I'm exaggerating? Try this sampling (with bad spelling and bad grammar left intact) from those of you angry conservatives who are no better than angry closed-minded liberals:

From Leisa: "I can no longer listen to you. How disrespectful and foolish can you be. I will stop watching O'Riley in fear I might possibly see or hear from you again."

From Wade: "Followed you for years and bought [your] book. Never again Go to Hell."

From Vicki: "Bernie. you have now lost me. wow. you missed the point entirely. You and O'Reilly are done."

From Conservative Citizen: I will never watch them [Goldberg and O'Reilly] again. Just like MSNBC.

From Mal: "last time I'll bother reading Bernie!"

From LaMont: "Been a long time follower of yours Bernie, but after seeing youR comments on Ted Cruz and Eric Bolling, it

seems that you are just another Karl Rove ASS KISSER. YOU establishment GOP guys suck – our only chance is if the likes of Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Eric Bolling can get rid of you, Rove, McConnell, and Boehner. Go screw Pelosi you traitor – I AM DONE LISTENING TO PHONIES LIKE YOU!”

There are many more just like that.

When I wrote about liberal bias while I was still a CBS News correspondent, conservatives applauded me. But some of my liberal CBS News colleagues called me a “traitor” because I didn’t toe the party line. They were afraid of dissent. Dissent would force them to consider another point of view, and that’s the last thing they wanted to do. Now I’m called a traitor again – this time by you conservative ayatollahs, for expressing a few opinions you don’t want to hear. Once again, you are what you condemn in liberals.

There is little difference between the authoritarians on the hard left and those of you ayatollahs on the hard right. You’re both closed-minded. You both demand ideological purity.

The ayatollahs in Tehran survive because they will not tolerate dissent. This is all the proof you need regarding their insecurity. You, my American ayatollah friends, are no different. You don’t simply dislike opinions that don’t mesh with yours. You don’t ever want to be exposed to them. At some level you see opinions you don’t share as viruses that may do you in. That’s why, like the ayatollahs over there, you too want to shut down dissent. You too are insecure.

I know, as I said at the outset, that some of you reading this – whether you agree with my views on various subjects or not – are open-minded enough to hear me out. That’s all I ask. It would be nice if more of you took on the ayatollahs with strong comments on my Web site, but that’s up to you. As for the right wing authoritarians who have threatened to never

read another word I write, or listen to another word I say, do what you have to do.

The good people in Tehran will not miss their ayatollahs when they finally go. And we won't miss you, either.