

Trump-Era Reading for the Principled Soul

Last year, once primary voters from America's two major political parties had decided that our next president would be either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, a lot of people felt as though our country had very much lost its way.



National polling consistently showed that both nominees were deeply unpopular, and the anecdotal evidence could be found everywhere you looked. Conversations with friends and family from both sides of the political aisle were bleak over the prospects, and discussing the situation on social media felt like reviewing a loved one's funeral proceedings.

The discontent wasn't primarily over *issues*.

Sure, a lot of progressives were disappointed that Bernie Sanders (and his fantasy-genre promises of confiscated wealth from rich people solving all of society's problems) didn't become the Democratic Party's standard-bearer. Likewise, conservatives who believe in things like small government, personal responsibility, and individual freedom were also left without a voice.

But it wasn't the loss of ideas and policy positions that had crushed people's spirits. It was the loss of principles and personal character. Most Americans believed Clinton and Trump had neither, deeming them morally bankrupt and far more dishonest than what people were willing to accept from a politician.

That doesn't mean that there weren't lots of enthusiastic folks from both teams, convinced that their candidate was a stellar choice for the job. Political writers and commentators (including myself) heard from them on a daily basis – especially Trump fans who tend to be more defensive of their guy than I am of my own children. But such people were the exception, not the rule.

A large portion of the electorate held their noses on election day, faced with the daunting task of deciding which option would result in the least amount of damage caused not just to the nation, but also their souls.

In the end, voters mostly returned to their partisan areas of comfort, and the contest came down to turnout in a few key states. And when the unthinkable happened, and Donald Trump pulled out a surprise victory, things went a little nuts.

The Left disintegrated into full meltdown-mode, aggressively denying the election results, howling at the moon over the forthcoming apocalypse, and condemning the *racist, sexist, homophobic* Trump voters that had signed the world's death warrant.

The Right celebrated the lifting of a burden of eight years of progressive rule, signified by insatiable political correctness. They relished the Left's freak-out, taking guilty (and not so guilty) pleasure in witnessing liberals crumble under the same pain they had felt in 2008 and 2012.

Unlike in previous election years, however, Donald Trump's 18-month scorched-earth campaign and personal conduct were so incredibly abrasive and divisive that any hope of earning the public-at-large's good graces (and a shot at national unity) was doomed from the beginning. And with President Trump deciding to frame his critics and detractors as enemies of his administration, the situation will likely not get better.

Our political landscape has become increasingly tribalistic.

Each side has galvanized its base, drawn battle-lines, dug trenches, and is prepared for war. But what is being fought over, exactly? It doesn't seem to be as much about ideas and principles as it does an individual: Donald Trump. Either you're *with him* or you're *against him*. There is no wiggle room, and no obstacle will stand in the way – especially not self-reflection.

As a commenter on this website wrote the other day, “I’m glad to settle for making the other side as miserable as I’ve been for the past 8 years. He [Trump] could sit there and just pump middle fingers in the air for all I care. That’s the point we’re at.”

It doesn't have to be that way, of course, and it *shouldn't* be that way. Unconditional allegiance (or unconditional opposition) to a political leader corrodes one's soul and marginalizes independent thought. Reflexively attacking (or aligning with) a politician's critics runs the risk of causing great damage to a free society.

A couple of extremely well-written columns came out last week regarding this issue. They are must-reads for anyone who thinks they might be caught up in this tribalistic warfare.

The first one was by Jonathan Bethune, a young man I hadn't previously heard of. Judging by his double-digit Twitter following, few others had as well. But his excellent piece for *The Federalist* will likely change that.

“There can be no meaningful dialogue premised upon shared values if both sides only apply those values when it lets them score points,” Bethune writes. “The class of moderately intelligent politically aware people are those most affected by this trend. They have become partisan ideologues.”

Bethune goes on to describe what a *partisan ideologue* is:

An ideologue is at least consistent in his belief in specific policies. A partisan openly supports his gang above all else. But a partisan ideologue is worse than both. He is a Machiavellian creature: a supporter of "ends justify the means" approaches to pushing an agenda. The gang must be defended that the agenda might be defended, even when the gang violates core tenets of the agenda. Partisan ideologues are dishonest by nature. Worse still, they often cannot even tell when they are being dishonest.

It's these partisan ideologues, Bethune argues, that are making it nearly impossible to have a public debate in this country:

I have no energy to argue with these people because the charge of hypocrisy has lost all rhetorical power. No one expects any sort of integrity anymore. This signifies a societal breakdown. In an advanced society, fidelity to abstract principles is seen as important. We get offended when those in leadership roles disregard their values, and we disqualify them from positions of responsibility in the future. Credibility matters.

When we stop punishing hypocrisy, the most unscrupulous and amoral benefit. There is no longer any pretense of ideas mattering once you replace principles with people. All that remains is tribalism. All debate is reduced to "my gang good, your gang bad."

Hypocrisy, of course, has run rampant in the era of Trump...on both sides. The Left and the mainstream media flip their lids

over our president doing or saying the same types of things they ignored (and even hailed) from Obama when he was president. The Right has every right to point that out, and they certainly have been. The problem is that the Right now celebrates Trump doing and saying the same things that they and the conservative media excoriated Obama for.

It seems that people view hypocrisy the same way they view members of Congress: Everyone else's is awful, but they're pretty satisfied with their own.

On the point of replacing principles with people, Bethune says the end result is tyranny, and that holding fast to principles is "the only way we can get back to talking about ideas instead of personalities."

Amen.

The other column was by *National Review's* David French.

"Too many conservatives mistake the admission of inconvenient truths for weakness," writes French, arguing that "Trump feeds some of the worst impulses in the conservative movement, turning otherwise sane and smart people into Facebook commandos and Twitter SEALs."

French refers to these individuals as social media's "tough-guy Right." As an administrator for Bernie Goldberg's Facebook page, I'm quite familiar with the type.

Scratch all too many conservative keyboard warriors and you'll find that they pine for their own heroic moment – not Selma, but perhaps Omaha Beach or Fallujah. They wish they had been there fighting evil when the bullets flew, so they cast their present activism in the most dramatic terms. They're not just typing; they're "fixing bayonets." They're not just tweeting; they're "firing back."

French's metaphor is a good one, because these people truly believe they are on a noble mission against an enemy combatant, and that all is fair in war.

Express concern that, say, Trump's first national-security adviser lasted less than a month on the job before being fired, and you're "pearl-clutching." Call out lies on your own side and you're accused of angling for a gig at the New York Times, or of attempting to curry favor with the crowd that frequents those ubiquitous Beltway cocktail parties. Criticize these tough guys and they'll call you a mealy-mouthed "beta male," looking at the liberal elite and begging for love.

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None of this is honorable. It's low and partisan. I don't care how many war allusions you use, how insulting you are on Twitter, or how many times you accuse your opponents of "pearl-clutching" and "bed-wetting." Unless your argument is honest, principled, and consistently applicable to both sides, you're just being tribal.

French nails it. Unfortunately, a thoughtful column here and there about the importance of principles isn't going to do a whole lot to free people's minds from the hyper-partisan collectives they're quite comfortable dwelling in. Most tribalists wouldn't bother to read such pieces in the first place.

Hopefully, however, there are still enough open minds out there to recognize this growing problem and stop giving others a pass when they contribute to it. Societal expectations should be raised, not lowered. Everyday Americans can start

by reintroducing the stigma of *shame* back into our dialogue, and it will *have* to be those regular folks, because that shame is not going to come from media figures or the top tiers of American political leadership.

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