Are We Really the UNITED States of America Anymore?

☒ It shouldn't surprise anyone that liberals are blaming President George W. Bush for the chaos that is tearing Iraq apart while conservatives are blaming President Barack Obama, who they say inherited a fledgling democracy and did nothing while the country slid into a religious civil war.

They're both right.

President Bush started the fire by engaging the United States in a war that in retrospect was a big mistake. President Obama thought he could simply waltz out of the country with little risk or consequence. Apparently the militants who are on their way to Baghdad have different ideas.

But we shouldn't be surprised that liberals and conservatives are pointing to different bogeymen. Liberals and conservatives, after all, have different world- views on Iraq and a myriad of other issues. So it's only reasonable that the two sides would come to different conclusions. But something else is going on in America. More than ever we have chosen to live not in the *United* States of America, but in our own ideological silos. According to a new poll by the Pew organization, we Americans are more polarized than at any other time in recent history.

According to Pew, the percentage of Americans who hold either consistently conservative or consistently liberal views on the big issues of the day has doubled over the last decade.

This is how the Washington Post opened its story on the poll: "Conservatives and liberals don't just differ in their political views. They like to live in different places, associate with like-minded people, and have opposing views on the value of ethnic and religious diversity in their

neighborhoods."

To some extent, that makes sense. Why shouldn't we like to associate with like-minded people? Who wants to constantly argue with our neighbors about politics and social issues?

But more than in the past, each side sees the other as not just wrong, but as a threat to the nation's well-being. And even though most Americans place themselves somewhere in the middle, this kind of polarization can't be good for a country.

And the divisions extend to places you'd never think would be touched by politics. The pollster Frank Luntz did a Father's Day poll, asking Americans what Dads they admire the most. Bill Cosby, who played a lovable Dad on TV for many years, came in first, but he was the only father on the list who was not seen as overtly political. Barack Obama came in second — but here's the political breakdown of his supporters: 69 percent were Democrats but only 3 percent were Republican. Former President George H.W. Bush was also a favorite — but only 5 percent of his supporters were Democrats while 43 percent were Republicans.

So what's going on? I think talk radio and cable television news have a lot to do with the polarization in America. You don't get to be a guest on FOX or MSNBC if you tell the producer, "Well, I think both sides have a valid argument." Confrontation makes for good television. We like to watch two sides battle it out. It's great entertainment. We go to cable TV and talk radio not so we can be exposed to new ideas. We go there to get our old ideas — our biases — validated.   If you're a conservative do you really want to listen to Rachel Maddow? You think liberals want to spend two minutes, let alone an hour, with Sean Hannity?

And the divisions that have played out as a business model in the media have spread to the culture at large.

No, liberals and conservatives are not like the Sunnis and

Shiites killing each other in Iraq. But that's not saying much, is it? A friend had an idea: liberals should move to Blue States and conservatives should move to Red States. That way, he figured, we'd be with ideological soul mates and everyone would be happier.

We're not there — yet. But we're heading in that direction in the *United* States of America.