

THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

A house divided against itself cannot stand.

—Jesus of Nazareth
and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois

On November 9, 2016, three hundred million Americans absorbed what we had done the day before. “We the people” had elected Donald J. Trump to be our forty-fifth president. The campaign that led up to that moment was the most divisive and rhetorically violent in generations. Debates became a farcical race to the bottom. Campaigns went very negative very early, and the ugliness escalated to the bitter end, so that, by Election Day, the two candi-

dates were the least favored pair of party nominees in recorded US history. When news of Donald Trump's victory broke, half of the country could not fathom what the other half had done. Violent protests erupted in cities, while farm towns and outer-ring suburbs rejoiced. Left-wingers mourned the end of civilization as we know it, while many right-wingers celebrated the coming freedom of the market and a train of conservative Supreme Court justices to come. Families split and friendships broke as an already-divided nation had a historically divided day.

Some blamed Trump for causing the division that flared up during the campaign. But anyone who has been watching American politics and culture over the last quarter century should know otherwise: that deep fault lines had begun to divide our nation long before Donald Trump launched his campaign for president, or even his first "Birther" claims against President Obama's legitimate citizenship in 2011. We had seen the polarization statistics rise, had experienced the disintegration of bipartisanship in government and of common-good collaboration in culture. Some analysts had even begun to compare the America they saw around them to the one that had taken up arms to settle the slavery dispute fifteen decades earlier.

A HOUSE UNITED

In June of 1858, the United States of America were not very united at all. The union held seventeen free states and fifteen slave states, and the political chasm between the two Americas was widening. In that charged context, Abraham Lincoln found himself in the middle of a campaign for a US Senate seat in Illinois. As he looked out over the people gathered for that state's Republican Party convention, his eyes scanned beyond that room to the nation surrounding it. His speech became famous. The words he reached for were first uttered by Jesus: "A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free."¹

Abraham Lincoln's prophecy came true three years later, and for the first time in our four-score-and seven-year history, American soldiers took to the battlefield against one another.

A SECOND CIVIL WAR?

Just more than 150 years after the last shots were fired at Appomattox, Americans find ourselves again battling one another. Our warriors don't normally carry rifles with bayonets, and our warfare does not pit neatly uniformed soldiers against one another. We don't wage the battles of this war in grassy fields and

forests, as when the two sides scrimmaged at Gettysburg and Richmond and Bull Run. Though some experienced American diplomats even forecast actual armed civil war to come,² and political violence has erupted more frequently of late, we currently fight this war mostly on cable news sets and college campuses, on Twitter feeds and Facebook pages, in churches and Congress and classrooms, and anywhere else Americans disagree on things we're passionate about. This war's opposing colors aren't gray and blue, but red and blue in each state, city, town, neighborhood, and even family.

We called the beginning of our battles "Culture Wars." In his 1991 book of that title, James Davison Hunter named our primary points of conflict—abortion, gun politics, separation of church and state, privacy, recreational drug use, and homosexuality—the frontline issues of our time.³ A quarter century later, we might add immigration, healthcare, gender identity, and the size and role of government, among others. On these matters, Americans have advanced beyond mere disagreement to a whole new level of enmity. In fact, Hunter summarized the state of American culture at the end of the 2016 political campaigns: "This election brings into relief that America is in some ways two nations within a nation. Each nation has its own values and visions of

what the country represents. ‘Trump’ and ‘Clinton’ are highly symbolic, like flags around which each nation, or tribe, mobilizes.”⁴

Calling these political, racial, and religious disagreements a war may seem overdramatic. After all, people who hope to end poverty, illiteracy, and drugs have called their righteous causes “war” in order to raise the stakes and attract dollars, and in our hype-hungry time, “The War on the Shore” described a Ryder Cup golf match, and the “Cola Wars” pitted Coke versus Pepsi. We overuse that term, so calling the political, religious, and cultural conflicts of our time “war” could be an exaggeration.

That depends on how you define war. The arch-conservative US Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia died suddenly and unexpectedly in February 2016. Appointed by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, Scalia—famously or infamously, depending on your perspective—spent his three decades on the bench thundering from the Right on decisions about abortion, same-sex marriage, health care, immigration, campaign finance, and a host of other issues that divide our land. Scalia became a controversial figure, and his decisions evoked vehement response from ideological opponents.

All of this may have looked like politics as usual. But it was not. When people heard of Scalia’s death,

things got ugly across the aisle. “Dancing on his grave” understates the size and shape of the celebration. In fact, a Twitter meme in the days following his death featured people imagining much more disgusting things to do on that grave.⁵ And the partiers were not just extreme, crackpot voices. Prominent public people with many social-media followers—even editors and columnists from mainstream media outlets, including the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vocativ*, *Salon*, and *Rolling Stone*—publicly celebrated with hats and horns.

Similar nastiness naturally comes from the Right, too. At a 2016 campaign rally, conservative commentator Wayne Allyn Root introduced candidate Donald Trump by fantasizing a new made-for-TV movie about Hillary Clinton and her controversial aide, Huma Abedin. Having described a plot in which these two female political renegades drive together across the land spreading mayhem, he painted a gruesome ideal culmination of the plot: “We all get our wish. The ending is like ‘Thelma and Louise.’”⁶ In other words, a conservative supporter of a Republican presidential candidate publicly relishes the prospect of his Democratic opponent driving off a cliff to her death.

Such unabashed joy at a human death, real or prospective, transported me to other dark historical

memories: to May 2, 2011, when Americans danced in the streets after hearing that Osama bin Laden had been killed; and to September 11, 2001, when people danced in Middle Eastern streets as the Twin Towers burned.

The point is, we usually only celebrate the untimely death of a person when she or he is on the opposite side in a war.⁷

BIGOTRY

Let's not stumble on semantics, though. If you don't like the term *war* to describe American polarization, let's use another ugly word: *bigotry*.

In the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy play white parents whose daughter has decided to marry a black man, played by Sidney Poitier. Coincidentally, the film appeared the same year that the US Supreme Court struck down anti-miscegenation laws with its decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. American parents were honestly asking, along with Hepburn and Tracy's characters, what they would do if their daughter or son proposed to marry across racial lines.

Sociologists are a clever breed. They probe for social data indirectly, in order not to alarm their subjects into consciousness and a defensive or

propriety-focused posture. They won't ask, "Do you hate Muslims?" or "Do you loathe gay people?" or "Do you discriminate against African American people or Mexicans?" People don't answer yes to questions like that. Instead, sociologists might ask a *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* question: What would you do if your child wanted to marry "one of them"? Now that question no longer works effectively across racial lines. While it sometimes may seem like our culture has not progressed since Tracy and Hepburn posed the question, parents today are much less willing to admit that they'd resist their child's wish to marry across racial lines. "Of course it would be OK!" says even the racist.

Fortunately for sociologists seeking honest answers about American political attitudes, what American legal scholar Cass Sunstein calls "party-ism" carries no such stigma. He cites a Stanford-Princeton study titled "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines," which observes, "Americans increasingly dislike people and groups on the other side of the political divide and *face no social repercussions for the open expression of these attitudes.*"⁸ For almost six decades, pollsters have been asking Americans, "Would you be displeased if your son or daughter married someone from the opposite political party?" In 1960, on the back end of the 1950s, wearing Donna

Reed sweaters and gray flannel suits and worried about Sputnik, Americans didn't fret much over party lines: 4.5 percent of American respondents answered, "Yes." Five decades later, though, in 2010, when researchers asked Democratic and Republican parents to imagine their offspring's cross-party marriage, that number had risen to 43 percent.⁹ We'll explore the reasons for that startling jump later. For now, let's just absorb it: almost half of our nation's parents get the willies when they imagine raising a glass to toast their child's wedded bliss if it means having Damned Democrats or Repulsive Republicans as in-laws.

This may sound absurd, but even amid a resurgence of overt racial hate speech and the alt-right in the US, partyism has surpassed racism among our prejudices. Two Stanford social scientists presented two thousand research subjects with word-association options to reveal their attitude toward people in their own political party versus people from the other. The results indicate strong partisan identity and even stronger suspicion of political opposites. Conservatives couldn't bear to hold "joy" and "Democrat" in their mind at the same time, and progressives balked when asked to let "happy" share their frontal lobe with "Republican."

These prejudiced attitudes will eventually out in

behaviors, such as hiring employees. Companies naturally set out to choose the most qualified candidate to fill every position. So when the Stanford team asked over a thousand subjects to act as employers and weigh two candidates for a job opening, the researchers gave the fictional applicants equivalent skills and qualifications for the positions. But they also snuck subtle clues into the candidates' résumés that would hint at racial identity or political affiliation. As the subjects evaluated candidates, it turned out that race mattered (60 percent of the subjects chose candidates who were from their own race), but politics mattered even more (would-be employers chose their in-party applicant 80 percent of the time).¹⁰ We hire our own, and in the United States right now, political identity has surpassed even race to become the primary definer of "our people."¹¹ Americans' identities are increasingly tied to our political beliefs.¹²

I'll let you sort out whether it constitutes bigotry to fear that your daughter will marry a certain sort of person, to be unable to hold a specific group and a positive thought on the same frontal lobe, or to be unwilling to hire "one of them" to work at your company.

SEGREGATION

In his book, *The Big Sort*, former *Austin American-Statesman* columnist Bill Bishop reports that Americans increasingly choose to live among our own political tribes. Bishop has scoured census reports and other evidence describing American relocation habits, and it turns out that blue seeks blue and red seeks red: “The Big Sort . . . is the way Americans have chosen to live, an unconscious decision to cluster in communities of like-mindedness.”¹³

The US political map increasingly features not just blue and red states, but blue and red neighborhoods. In 1976, less than a quarter (23 percent) of all Americans lived in voting districts where the presidential election was won by a landslide. By 2004, that number had risen to nearly half (47 percent), and the trend has continued. Some will attribute this to partisan gerrymandering, but the book makes it clear that our house-hunting habits have made that grab easier. The Big Sort has a natural logic to it. Bishop writes, “As people seek out the social settings they prefer . . . the nation grows more politically segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogeneous

groups.”¹⁴ The title of Bishop’s first chapter captures the ethos: “The Age of Political Segregation.”

The word *segregation* immediately summons for many of us black-and-white Jim Crow images—separate-but-equal days of yore, with Whites Only signs on drinking fountains and at lunch counters, and National Guardsmen escorting black students into previously all-white Little Rock schools. African Americans certainly didn’t choose that kind of segregation. They had little choice. But in our time, at least for those whose means allow them to choose where they live, political segregation is an option, and Americans are choosing it.

Some analysts have updated Mr. Bishop’s claims in light of the 2016 presidential election, tracking rural-suburban versus urban voting patterns. They observe that “the widening political divergence between cities and small-town America also reflects a growing alienation between the two groups, and a sense—perhaps accurate—that their fates are not connected.” Rural interviewees perceive considerable urban bigotry toward them. A woman from rural Wisconsin says, “The real kicker is that people in the city don’t understand us. . . . They don’t understand what rural life is like, what’s important to us and what challenges that we’re facing. They think we’re a bunch of redneck racists.”¹⁵ For their

part, urbanites also feel misunderstood and resent being depicted by their rural counterparts as either corporate elites or the undeserving poor. Ethnic minorities especially perceive a double standard and feel misunderstood in the widespread white, rural distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. For example, during the 2016 election season, “almost two-thirds of Trump voters said that average Americans aren’t getting as much as they deserve; only 12 percent of Trump supporters said blacks have gotten less than they deserve.”¹⁶ These judgments, launched from a distance, widen the chasm.

The rural-versus-urban divide is growing. In one of his first post-election columns in November of 2016, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow said of the rural-urban divide, “We are living in two diverging Americas at odds and at battle.”¹⁷ This sort of segregation builds on itself. Our politics influence our choice of neighborhood, and then our experience of our neighbors affects our choice of politics.¹⁸ And so the cycle continues.

THE DYNAMICS OF POLARIZATION

In the spring of 2016, as North Carolina passed a law that required transgender persons to use bathrooms of the gender assigned to them at birth, pro-

testors from around the nation boycotted the state. Musical artists including Pearl Jam, Bruce Springsteen, and Ringo Starr canceled concerts in North Carolina. Businesses including Deutsche Bank and PayPal put corporate expansion plans on hold. And other state governments prohibited the schools they fund from playing in national championships held in North Carolina.¹⁹

As that drama played out, a woman's car broke down near Asheville, North Carolina, so she called Shupee Max Towing. When the tow-truck driver arrived, he refused to offer her his service because her car sported a bumper sticker supporting Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders. "I couldn't tow her car because she was obviously a socialist," Mr. Shupe reported. "And when I got in my truck, you know, I was so proud, because I felt like I finally drew a line in the sand and stood up for what I believed."²⁰

Progressive America won't play with (or for) Conservative America, and Conservative America won't tow Progressive America. Republican leadership won't fill a Supreme Court seat for a Democratic president, and Democratic representatives in Congress resort to a sit-in on the floor of the House. Polarization stops us in our tracks. It tears the fabric of community, curtailing and even eliminating collaboration and community across difference. Gone

are the days of Lincoln's "Team of Rivals," which brought disparate voices into conversation for the country's good, or even the days when Republican president Ronald Reagan and Democratic congressman Tip O'Neill struck deals across the aisle. Across this present divide, compromise is anathema.

Abraham Lincoln looked out at the United States in 1858 and saw "a house divided," and that phrase surely captures our current political culture. The depth of our division is increasing. We have adjusted to a perpetual state of division, and the escalating cruelty of that concession is something our culture has absorbed over time. If the 2016 election season woke many to the extent of it, that new awareness has not turned Americans toward one another. In fact, the political aisle keeps getting wider.

Sociologists who have researched American polarization have also ruminated on its cultural impact. Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood demonstrate how the increasing vitriol and open expression of hatred between Left and Right on a popular level (partisans) that we've chronicled in this chapter is a disincentive for cooperation among our government officials (elites). On an elite level, this cycle leads to a government paralyzed by its polarization. The Republican Tea Party that began during

Barack Obama's presidency gave way to a Democratic "Resistance" during Donald Trump's time in office. With little incentive to collaborate, legislators hurl opposition across the aisle, and not much governing is accomplished.

This influence also runs in the opposite direction. "If anything," Iyengar and Westwood write, "the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable, even appropriate."²¹ So it's come to this: as the venerable chambers of the US Congress look every day more like a middle-school lunchroom, the people Congress governs follow suit. The people's crass partisan resistance then, in turn, emboldens leaders to refuse to cooperate in ways that license the people to increase their mutual disdain for one another, and so on. Caught in the vicious cycle, relationships across difference spiral downward into increasingly heated confrontation and opposition. It's no wonder that one in ten divorces in the months after the 2016 election stemmed from how each member of the couple had voted.²²