

Unfriending in real time

It's happening everywhere. The country is rapidly moving towards a no-friends land. I need to say right up front that this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Our political estrangement goes back a long way, but since the election of Barack Obama and Donald Trump and now the (apparent) election of Joe Biden, we're entering a new and dangerous phase of self-imposed relationship lockdowns in which we're jettisoning old friendships and staking out tougher qualifications for those we're admitting into our *bubbles*.

In order to understand this trend towards purging ourselves of good people we used to call 'friends' but who now just don't measure up to our standards of political thought, we're going to have to return to more relaxed times for inspiration. When were those times you say? Good question. We may have to reach way back to when we weren't involved in foreign wars, when we didn't have race riots, when crime was lower, when free speech mattered and when religion and family played a key role in our lives.

As I write this, I'm trying hard to think of a specific period of time when we *weren't* experiencing these challenges and problems. We may have to look at the fifties and the Eisenhower Administration to find THAT America. To be sure, we had to deal with a growing 'Soviet menace,' the Korean conflict and racial unrest in the South, but we seemed somehow happier and more content, then. The Second World War was in our rear view mirror and Americans were grateful that we weren't losing hundreds thousands of our young men in Europe or in the Pacific. Granted, we had to deal with the 'commies' who, according to HUAC (the House Un-American Activities Committee) were everywhere in the early-to-mid-fifties, but despite that we seemed at one with ourselves.

Staying with HUAC for a minute, there was a nagging worry that the advances of Communism were real and that 'ism' was infiltrating American society. Hollywood was suspect. Labor unions were suspect. The military establishment was suspect and the government was suspect. Looking back and reading the literature it appears that there were actual subversives within the ranks of those groups, but that many of them were *theoretical non-practicing* Communists and not rabble-rousing cells of discontents bent on destroying the country. They only wanted to 'build back better' in a completely different way.

Fast forwarding to today, you can see that those groups didn't have to wait long to experience a resurgence of unrest. It only took five or six decades, before our country was willing to listen to new voices that decried our American way of life. Those voices are telling us that America is racist and America is unjust and too religious and that we cling senselessly to our guns and God. These groups are advocating for a combined thought and action revolution. While there was racial strife and race protests in the fifties, we were coming to grips with the inequality in our society. And while we had white-hooded extremists in our ranks, we weren't seeing black clad terrorists setting fire to our buildings, justifying it with claims that they are 'burning for equality.' The *destroy America to save it* chant is their battle cry. So far, the destruction they've wrought is now in the hundreds of millions if not billions of dollars. But they have destroyed something even more valuable than our shops and businesses...they have robbed us of our belief in ourselves and our ideals.

When American servicemen came back to us in 1945, they brought with them three big things: gratitude for being alive, a strong sense of pride in our nation, and a willingness to put divisiveness aside. We honored their service; we respected them; we marched with them in parades and most importantly, we learned from them. We learned about the horrific downside of putting too much stock in a perverse idea (Aryan Supremacy and National Socialism) and we were reminded that a "house divided against itself cannot stand." Belief in our democracy and our economic system was necessary if we were really interested in 'lifting all boats' in American society. We knew that shouting at each other wasn't going to accomplish our goal of making America more equal for everyone - or stronger or more resilient.

We knew that the only way to solve our problems was to learn about them and to discuss them, openly, and often. Post-WWII university enrolment shot up as thousands of returning GIs put away their uniforms in their cedar chests and traded them in for a mortarboard and sheepskin. America was getting smarter. Self-confidence and hard work were rewarded, making good on the promise in our founding documents. President Eisenhower was a wise man, a leader of men and a student of humanity. He applied the lessons of his military service to running the country. He knew Americans needed a long 'weekend pass' from the nearly four long years of the war and that they also needed to refocus their efforts on winning the peace. Liberty, democracy and opportunity were the tools we would use. Together, with openness and dialogue, they would return us to our rightful place in the world...as a thought leader and role model.

Back then, politics wasn't the alpha-omega of our lives. We were in relative agreement about the directions our country needed to take to achieve prosperity. Those directions were free-market Capitalism, not Socialism and certainly not Communism. We were still able to carry on a decent conversation with those who disagreed with us. Our detractors didn't pull our hats from our heads and sucker punch us or rip the American flag from our hands. Yes, there was social unrest in the fifties, but for the most part we were still able to make friends with people whose views were different from our own. We understood that by refusing to discuss our problems we would only add to them so we engaged our institutions in dialogue. Think tanks and new non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were formed. Conversation became the new coin of the American realm.

This was a time when the media was relatively objective. The industry was divided into reporters and commentators. Reporters reported without editorializing and commentators made it clear that their own opinions were just that...opinions. You could take them or leave them, but you knew the difference between the two worlds of journalism. Today, those lines are hopelessly blurred. Opinion has become fact and true facts are nothing more than amusing anecdotes. The major media and social media have become the new peacetime censors, eclipsing the power of the censors of WWII.

The result of all the media's efforts to propagandize opinion and create false narratives that fit their own political ideologies has been devastating on our relationships with one another. Way too many people have been influenced by the steady barrage of 'fake news'. Whether we understand the full measure of the issues at hand or not, we all seem to have an opinion, and we are only too willing to let that opinion decide whether we will retain our friendships with those who disagree with us or not. It is a national tragedy that we have forgotten how blessed we are for living in a country that countenances freedom of expression and has not forgotten the sacrifices made to safeguard that freedom.

This contentious Presidential election may have pushed us over the edge to the point where we may soon see the wholesale disintegration of more personal relationships. If that happens, we will have lost the battle for American exceptionalism that was based on openness, fairness and tolerance. As we approach our cherished national holiday of Thanksgiving, we ought to take stock of the importance of preserving our relationships with one another. The American experiment should not become a casualty of intellectual intransigence.

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