

## No togetherness please, we're Americans

For the last four years the drumbeat of the media and of exasperated Democrats has been, "Trump is a divider; he's pushing America farther and farther apart. He must be stopped!" And now that good old amiable Joe Biden is the presumptive Dems' nominee for President, I fully expect that drumbeat to intensify. This is not to say that a win for Jokin' Joe will be a walk in the park. Not at all. His divisive baggage is laden with public pronouncements that challenge his *come togetherness* like his statements about being 'black enough' and lame jokes about Indian-owned 7-Elevens, to name just two.

The truth is that Joe Biden has flipped more than he's flopped on social issues, BUT he has always been forgiven because he's "such a nice guy" whereas the evil Donald Trump has always been viewed as the Devil incarnate who goes out of his way to break down America into 'them and us' groups. The 'us' are the conservative, patriotic supporters of an America first credo and the 'them' is, well, everyone else who doesn't agree with the 'us.'

If things were only that simple, folks, but they aren't. There is another more recent truth that has been apparent (to me at least) over the last nearly thirty years, starting with the election of Bill Clinton and continuing through the George Bush and Barack Obama administrations. That is, Americans don't really want to come together. Millions of us are quite happy not to have to deal with those on the other side of the political alley and would just as soon be left alone in our own protected enclaves where we don't have to mix with the other tribes of political opposites. We see these enclaves in many American cities. Matter of fact, I would say that the desire to come together politically is a recent social phenomenon and that it is a distinct departure from our basic tribal nature.

Let me explain. Man has always sought and found safety within the safety of the tribe. The common good was defined by common agreement within the tribe, and only in times of a common threat did tribes abandon their separation from other tribes and seek protection by joining with them against either a common foe or to combat a natural disaster. After the threat was over, each went back to their old ways, but sometimes a lesson was learned during their forced alliance that changed their outlook. History tends to change tribes incrementally until truly cataclysmic events like major wars make us realize that unless we form some more permanent alliances with one another we will keep repeating our mistakes. NATO, the EU and the United Nations are three such alliances.

In America, one of those turning points was our Civil War and the subsequent abolition of slavery. The lessons we learned led to our passage of sweeping civil rights legislation a century later that codified our commitment to our Black citizens. Social conflicts like the riots that followed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s killing and the unrest during the Vietnam War illustrated that our American tribe was questioning itself to a degree not done since the Civil War. Now, six decades later, younger members of the American tribe clad as social activist ninjas have risen up and are telling the rest of us that we need to come together or we will forever be torn apart by our intransigence and our ignorance of the injustice of the 'system.'

I can't help but feel that this is one of those seminal moments when the tribe's orthodoxy will be under such pressure to change that it will have no choice but to change and that the result will be a long period of self-doubt, insecurity and self-examination. Something else will happen, too (as it always does). The tribe will separate into two parts: those who willingly accept the new social order and a second part that is even more dedicated to the old order than ever before. This is human nature - the predictable result of human beings' search for the stability and permanence that exists in tradition and the known. While we may move one small step closer to togetherness, we will also take a giant step backwards into a historical tribal comfort zone.

During these next few months, we will most likely find ourselves embroiled in a debate that offers only a binary choice...either we vote Democratic to come together as one nation or we vote Republican and continue (as the protestors would have you believe) a policy of systemic social and economic injustice...and rampant racism. Both sides will use fear as the principal motivator. The Democrats will use the fear of the Republicans remaining in charge and maintaining their Right-wing authoritarian power to abuse minorities and feather their own nest of economic domination and prevent social change as the reason to vote for Joe Biden, the 'uniter'.

The Republicans will use the public's fear of the breakdown of law and order and a return to the failed economic policies of the Obama/Biden administration and a reversal of the gains that minorities have made under Donald Trump as the reason to vote for them. The weapon of fear has been used by just about every tribal chieftain in unifying his own tribe throughout recorded history. It is predictable AND tends to work more often than not, especially when the tribes are populated by older members with long memories.

That said, what we mustn't do going forward is allow the unrelenting noise of those drums to deafen our understanding of human nature, our inherent goodness and our collective memory.

*Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: [stephan@stephanhelgesen.com](mailto:stephan@stephanhelgesen.com)*