

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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LIFE | IDEAS | THE SATURDAY ESSAY

How to Get Beyond Our Tribal Politics

Whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump wins Tuesday, understanding the psychological causes of our national rift can help us bridge it



PHOTO: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

By **JONATHAN HAIDT** and **RAVI IYER**

Updated Nov. 4, 2016 11:05 a.m. ET

The most-watched made-for-TV movie in American history is “The Day After,” a 1983 portrayal of life in Kansas and Missouri in the days just before and after an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union. If you’ve had even fleeting thoughts that Tuesday’s election could bring about the end of the world or the destruction of the country, you might want to find “The Day After” on YouTube, scroll to minute 53 and watch the next six minutes. Now *that’s* an apocalypse.

It’s an absurd comparison, of course, but the absurdity is helpful. It reminds us that no matter how bad things seem, we have a lot to be grateful for. The Soviet Union is gone, and life in America has gotten much better since the 1980s by most objective measures. Crime is way down, prosperity and longevity are way up, and doors are open much more widely for talented people from just about any demographic group. Yes, we have new problems, and the benefits haven’t been spread evenly, but if you look at the big picture, we are making astonishing progress.

Watching “The Day After” also might help Americans to tone down the apocalyptic language that so many have used about the presidential race. On the right, some speak of this as the “Flight 93 election,” meaning that America has been hijacked by treasonous leftists who are trying to crash the plane, so electing Donald Trump to rush the cockpit is the only sane choice. On the left, some think that a Trump victory would lead to a constitutional crisis followed by a military coup, fascism and dictatorship.

Nearly half the country will therefore wake up deeply disappointed on the morning of Nov. 9, and many members of the losing side will think that America is doomed. Those on the winning side will feel relieved, but many will be shocked and disgusted that nearly half of their fellow citizens voted for the moral equivalent of the devil. The disgust expressed by both sides in this election is particularly worrisome because disgust dehumanizes its targets. That is why it is usually fostered by the perpetrators of genocide—disgust makes it easier for ordinary citizens to kill their neighbors.

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In short, the day after this election is likely to be darker and more foreboding than the day after just about any U.S. election since 1860. Is it possible for Americans to forgive,

accept and carry on working and living together?

We think that it is. After all, civility doesn't require consensus or the suspension of criticism. It is simply the ability to disagree productively with others while respecting their sincerity and decency. That can be hard to do when emotions run so high. But if we understand better the psychological causes of our current animosity, we can all take some simple steps to turn it down, free ourselves from hatred and make the next four years better for ourselves and the country. Three time-honored quotations can serve as guides.

“Me against my brother, my brothers and me against my cousins, then my cousins and me against strangers.” —*Bedouin saying*

Human nature is tribal. We form teams easily, most likely because we have evolved for violent intergroup conflict. Our minds take to it so readily that we invent myths, games and sports—including war games like paintball—that let us enjoy the pleasures of intergroup conflict without the horrors of actual war.

The tribal mind is adept at changing alliances to face shifting threats, as the Bedouin saying indicates. We see such shifts after party primaries, when those who backed a losing candidate swing around to support the nominee. And we saw it happen after the 9/11 attacks, when the country came together to support the president and the military in the invasion of Afghanistan.

But with the exception of the few months after 9/11, cross-partisan animosity has been rising steadily since the late 1990s. This year, for the first time since Pew Research began asking in 1994, majorities in both parties expressed not just “unfavorable” views of the other party but “very unfavorable” views. Those ratings were generally below 20% throughout the 1990s. And more than 40% in each party now see the policies of the other party as being “so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being.” Those numbers are up by about 10% in both parties just since 2014.

So what will happen the next time there is a major terrorist attack? Will we come together again? Or will the attack become a partisan football within hours, as happened after the various lone-wolf attacks of the past year? Something is broken in American tribalism. It is now “my brothers and me against my cousins” all the time, even when we are threatened by strangers and even when there is no threat at all.

Democracy requires trust and cooperation as well as competition. A healthy democracy features flexible and shifting coalitions. We must find a way to see citizens on the other side as cousins who are sometimes opponents but who share most of our values and interests and are never our mortal enemies.

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” —*Jesus, in Matthew 7:3-5*

Our tribal minds are equipped with a powerful tool: shameless and clueless hypocrisy. It is a general rule of psychology that “thinking is for doing”: We think with a particular purpose in mind, and often that purpose isn't to find the truth but to defend ourselves or attack our opponents.

Psychologists call this process “motivated reasoning.” It is found whenever self-interest is in play. When the interests of a group are added to the mix, this sort of biased, god-awful reasoning becomes positively virtuous—it signals your loyalty to the team. This is

why partisans find it so easy to dismiss scandalous revelations about their own candidate while focusing so intently on scandalous revelations about the other candidate.

Motivated reasoning has interacted with tribalism and new media technologies since the 1990s in unfortunate ways. Social media, hackers and Google searches now help us to find hundreds of specks in our opponents' eyes, but no technology can force us to acknowledge the logs in our own.

“Nature has so formed us that a certain tie unites us all, but...this tie becomes stronger from proximity.” —Cicero, *“On Friendship”*

Humans are tribal, but tribalism can be transcended. It exists in tension with our extraordinary ability to develop bonds with other human beings. Romeo and Juliet fell in love. French, British and German soldiers came out of their trenches in World War I to exchange food, cigarettes and Christmas greetings.

The key, as Cicero observed, is proximity, and a great deal of modern research backs him up. Students are more likely to become friends with the student whose dorm room is one door away than with the student whose room is four doors away. People who have at least one friend from the other political party are less likely to hate the supporters of that party.

But tragically, Americans are losing their proximity to those on the other side and are spending more time in politically purified settings. Since the 1980s, Democrats have been packing into the cities while the rural areas and exurbs have been getting more Republican. Institutions that used to bring people together—such as churches—are now splitting apart over culture war issues such as gay marriage.

Ever more of our social life is spent online, in virtual communities or networks that are politically homogeneous. When we do rub up against the other side online, relative anonymity often leads to stunning levels of incivility, including racist and sexist slurs and threats of violence.

So are we doomed? Will the polarizing trends identified by Pew just keep going until the country splits in two? Maybe John Adams was right in 1814 when he wrote, “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself.”

But we have lasted 240 years so far, and both sides agree that America is worth fighting for. We just have to see that the fight isn't always against each other; it is also a struggle to adapt our democracy and our habits for polarizing times and technologies.



ILLUSTRATION: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

Some of these adaptations will require changes to laws and institutions. Some will come from improving technology as we fine-tune social media to reward productive disagreement while filtering out trolling and intimidation.

And many of the changes must come from each of us, as individuals who have friends, co-workers and cousins who voted for the other side. How

will we treat them as customers, employees, students and neighbors? What will we say to them at Thanksgiving dinner?

If you would like to let go of anger on Nov. 9 without letting go of your moral and political principles, here is some advice, adapted from ancient wisdom and modern research.

First, separate your feelings about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton from your feelings

about their supporters. Political scientists report that since the 1980s, Americans have increasingly voted against the other side's candidate, rather than voting enthusiastically for their own, and that is especially true this time. So don't assume that most people on the other side like or even agree with their candidate on any particular issue. They may be voting out of fears and frustrations that you don't understand, but if you knew their stories, you might well empathize with them.

Second, step back and think about your goals. In the long run, would you rather change people or hate them? If you actually want to persuade or otherwise influence people, you should know that it is nearly impossible to change people's minds by arguing with them. When there is mutual antipathy, there is mutual motivated reasoning, defensiveness and hypocrisy.

But anything that opens the heart opens the mind as well, so do what you can to cultivate personal relationships with those on the other side. Spend time together, and let the proximity recommended by Cicero strengthen ties. Familiarity does not breed contempt. Research shows that as things or people become familiar, we like them more.

Emotions often drive reasoning, so as our hearts harden, our thinking also calcifies, and we become dogmatic. We are less able to think flexibly and address the social problems that we claim to care about. As John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859, "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." So cultivating a few cross-partisan friendships will make you smarter as well as calmer, even if polarization grows worse.

And if you do find a way to have a real conversation with someone on the other side, approach it skillfully. One powerful opener is to point to a log in your own eye—to admit right up front that you or your side were wrong about something. Doing this at the start of a conversation signals that you aren't in combat mode. If you are open, trusting and generous, your partner is likely to reciprocate.



Tom Lehane, left, a Trump supporter, has a disagreement with Clinton supporter Hila Minshen before a Trump rally on Sept. 9, 2016 in Pensacola, Fla. PHOTO: MARK WALLHEISER/GETTY IMAGES

Another powerful depolarizing move is praise, as we saw in the second Clinton-Trump debate. After more than 90 minutes of antagonism, a member of the town-hall audience brought the evening to a close with this question: "Would either of you name one positive thing that you respect in one another?"

Mrs. Clinton began with weak praise by saying that she respects Mr. Trump's children. But then she made it strong and generous by noting how "incredibly able" those children are and how devoted they are to their father, adding, "I think that says a lot about Donald." Mr. Trump responded in kind: "I will say this about Hillary. She doesn't quit, and she doesn't give up. I respect that."

That brief exchange was emotionally powerful—the only uplifting moment of the night for many viewers. Had it been the opening exchange, might the debate have been more elevated, more constructive?

This has been a frightening year for many Americans. Questions about the durability, legitimacy and wisdom of our democracy have been raised, both here and abroad. But the true test of our democracy—and our love of country—will come on the day after the election. Starting next Wednesday, each of us must decide what kind of person we want

to be and what kind of relationship we want to have with our politically estranged cousins.

Dr. Haidt is a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business, a fellow at the Martin Prosperity Institute and the author of "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion." Dr. Iyer is a social psychologist and data scientist at the website Ranker and the executive director of CivilPolitics.org.

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