

Why Are We No Longer On The Same Page?
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I remember when more Americans shared core values than had contentious differences. We have always had both Republicans and Democrats who valued fiscal prudence and self-reliance and both believed in the value of government. Both shared the values of a society of law and order, of vigorous but courteous debate, and of winning or losing an argument with grace. The losers in a national election still treated the president of the winning party with respect, and worked with him even while disagreeing.

What has happened to us that our national parties have morphed into extreme versions, each supported by news sources that only support their political preferences? What has happened to the mainstream?

While there are plenty of differences of opinion, many of them reasonable, something new has emerged that pushes people into extreme positions that at the sacrifice of core values. How do we maintain a civil society with such rancor?

Human Rights. Most Americans value the human rights of all of us—at least in principle. Why, then, are only conservatives complaining about the lack of human rights in the Muslim world? This used to be a liberal issue! Those who protect the rights of women should be outspoken against such issues as honor killing and should support such women as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has left Islam because of its traditional abuse of women. Instead, she is attacked by liberal critics for being “too harsh” on Islam, and even liberal feminists are mum.

And why should conservatives who believe in equal individual human rights not support the long-delayed abandonment of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” which forces good soldiers to lie or leave the service? How can conservatives with their disdain for mob rule and group think be hostile to individuals who happen to be gay?

Government. Our government was founded by people who knew how bad oppressive government is. It was elite conservatives who believed that a republic was the way to go—but that it required an educated electorate and a system of divided power (president, congress, courts). Our public school system was designed to teach all of our young people how to be thinking and informed citizens. Later conservatives used government to establish railroad systems, roads, canals and bridges to serve our economic growth. Entrepreneurialism is conservative.

It was our liberals who saw to it that more people could vote by expanding the franchise. It was also liberals who pushed for values of fairness, cooperation, and the optimistic view that human beings could be improved. It was also liberals who believed that immigrants could be integrated into a unified America. And both parties loved their country.

How can the extreme fringes of both parties now trash their former views? Are the conservatives willing to give up Medicare or Social Security (for themselves)? And extreme liberals complain about government spying on “peace activists,” even though these peace activists are active supporters of that most unpeaceful terrorist group, Hamas.

Foreign Policy. Choices in this arena have always been contentious. Conservatives were traditionally isolationist and liberals interventionist in support of our values (to the point of war). They appear to have switched sides. Liberals who historically supported Israel, a country that shares their best values, are now supporting Palestinians, who have no liberal values, but are “underdogs” and “anti-colonial.” Is supporting the underdog better than supporting people with our values?

And what has happened to conservatives who used to be against foreign adventures? Why are they eager to support our conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, with their hopeless efforts to promote democracy? And why are liberals resentful of these wars that were trying to further our best ideals?

We really do have much more in common than we think today. Using the mantra of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” is not good enough. Furthermore, how can our own government be our enemy? And how can it be attacked (for different reasons) by both the far left and far right?

There is something wrong here.

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