

The Future of America's No-Middle Ground Cultural War

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No I don't have a 1-900-PSYCHIC hot-line. On the other hand, ignorance of where we are headed culturally and politically is no virtue either. Having spent 3 years in the Pentagon working next generation aircraft issues, I learned a lot about the value of building common ground. It was a very hard task, but the more common ground we built, the more people could join in the process. Finally, this approach helped everyone focus upon what was best for the military and the nation rather than what was best for a single service, organization or individual.

Generally, in Washington, everything is viewed as a win-lose proposition. The idea that we don't want a government of representatives who force solutions of "heads I win, tails you lose" seems to elude most politicians. We're on the road to a place we don't want to go and there are cultures and nations that shed light on this "no-middle ground" phenomenon.

I was a National Defense Fellow at Harvard a few years ago and because I had survived several terrorist attacks while Peace-keeping in Israel I decided to probe the subject in depth. I flew to Northern Ireland and met with people from both sides of the Belfast Wall (yes, they have a very tall wall surrounding the Catholic section of housing for their own safety). The members of Sinn Fein and once active IRA members were on one side and members of Protestant paramilitary elements on the other. As I listened to them and followed the peace talks going on at that time, it was quickly apparent the gulf between sides was very wide. Worse, the divide had become so violent that a chasm opened up between the warring parties and no one could bridge the gap without betraying their party/ideology/or religion. Consequently, anyone who proposed even a mutually beneficial idea was seen as a traitor to their side. Those labeled traitor tended to have short life spans. So, each side used all means to win their battles, and the animosity and violence continued to grow.

I earlier served as a Peacekeeper in Israel, Syria and Egypt for a year during the first Gulf War. I came to understand the depth of hatred transcended centuries of time. One man told me of a camel thief in his Bedouin tribe. When I asked more questions, the man finally admitted that he came from a long line of camel thieves—going back 800 years! The man in question had never stolen a camel, but he was labeled and that was the end of it. In the Middle-East, the past is present, and people regularly dig up the corpses of the past to rage against the injustice of the other side. In the "Middle" East there is no "Middle" ground. Collaborators are routinely put to death by their own people. Who wants to risk helping anyone else when you could be so labeled and fall under a death sentence?

In America, we are careening down this same divisive and deadly path. The chasm is growing and the middle ground is disappearing. If history has any fidelity and consistency, those who try to build a middle ground will first be outcasts from their party or interest group. As the chasm grows wider, there will be further disenfranchisement from the idea of the "United" States of America. We will become "dash-Americans"

whose only loyalty will be to a specific interest group or party. The concept of America will, for all practical purposes have no meaning.

Our leaders are sadly not helping. Listen to the talk shows with opposing views. No one bothers to even appear to listen to the other side. It's "get the most words out in the next 60 seconds and I win." If the other side displays cordiality and stops speaking for a moment, they are viewed as weaker by the viewing audience and inept by the position or group they represent.

Hatred knows no geography. The oceans were drained on 9-11 and now we know that terrorists are already making dry-runs for future terror attacks. We need leadership, now more than ever. We need leaders who are capable of taking "this house divided" and uniting us once again. We don't need cynical leaders who see this process as a stepping stone to the throne of power. A lot is at stake here, and I'm not sure Washington is able to grasp that what is happening in Iraq and Israel by terror cells could become common place here. At least if we are all willing to acknowledge our differences without adding bitter diatribe we'll take a giant step in stabilizing our own growing divide. Maybe one day, someone will actually build a bridge that everyone can safely cross. If not, watch your feet, because the chasm is getting wider.