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Can we build bridges, and defeat polarisation?

Shortly after the 2016 election, an activist began inviting Trump voters for dinner to build bridges. Now, she wonders if the rifts aren't too deep

Shortly after the 2016 election, I began inviting Trump voters to my house for dinner. I wanted to understand why almost 63 million people voted for a man I found abhorrent and completely unsuited for public office. I wanted to have a conversation face-to-face that was not filtered through the media. Increasing polarisation threatened the very fabric of democracy. I believed that by bridging our divides, we could repair our democracy.

Since then, I have brought together hundreds of people from across the political spectrum to talk to each other over the last five years. Today, we are more polarised than ever in the US and around the world. Attacks on democracy and freedom have increased in non-military ways. Putin has launched an unprovoked and brutal land war against a democratically elected, sovereign people. I find myself questioning whether my attempts to bridge our divides have been worth the effort.

Those first meals around my small dining table eventually grew into a relational social sculpture, in the spirit of Joseph Beuys, called 'Looking For America'. I travelled around the country bringing strangers together to share a meal and to tell humanising stories about what it means to be American. By understanding the motivations and context that shape our beliefs, we would be better equipped to find solutions to our shared challenges. I also hoped folks would find common ground through respectful and compassionate dialogue in search of a shared American identity and that empathy would bridge our divides.

Building bridges isn't easy

I never had any difficulty finding liberals to accept my dinner invitation. By contrast, my invitations to conservative were usually met with resistance and scepticism. Many feared they would be ambushed by

morally self-righteous liberals who would call them stupid and evil. I didn't blame them. I assured them that the dinner's purpose was to understand each other and not to persuade, and there would be no name calling.

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During this time, I became acquainted with hundreds of bridge-building and depolarisation groups and individuals. And I started noticing a trend. The vast majority of bridge builders were left-leaning folks. A few organisations like 'Braver Angels' were led by a mix of right and left leaning folks, but even their events seemed to skew heavily to the left. I wondered why right leaving folks didn't seem as willing to reach across the divide. Right-leaning folks seemed less drawn to the deep personal narratives underlying typical left-leaning efforts at depolarisation, and seemed to prefer debate and conflict. Nevertheless, the lack of enthusiasm from the right did not deter me.

Many progressives criticised my work for similar reasons, calling it kumbaya hand waving. I started wondering if they were right after the 6 January insurrection, when rioters tried to stop the course of a free and fair election and a majority of Republicans supported their actions. What worried me most was that most of the rioters had not been radical far-right extremists. They had been 'normal' Trump voters, doctors, lawyers, business owners, real estate agents. They were some of the very same people I had been inviting to conversations over dinner. Maybe reaching across the divide had been futile. Maybe I should have been concentrating my efforts on fighting for issues I believed in, like voting rights and reducing vast economic inequality that threaten our democracy.

The danger of tribalism

I'd told my critics that the people who came to my house for dinner did not necessarily hold extreme views. The extreme right was a small percentage of folks who didn't seem at all interested in civil discourse and the media had overblown their voices. The media did not focus on the quieter, vast majority of Americans across the political spectrum who wanted the same things, secure jobs, safe neighbourhoods, and a future for their children. Most people in America were exhausted by vitriolic polarisation. We simply disagreed on the policies to achieve or shared goals.

However, when over half of Republicans described the events of 6 January as a patriotic fight for freedom and the Republican party officially called the riot 'legitimate political discourse,' it became clear that more than policy differences were at stake in this battle for our democracy. I began to wonder if bridging divides was even possible. Tribalism had hijacked our commonality and our shared humanity.

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I recall an image of two older white men at a Trump rally in 2018 wearing matching t-shirts that said, 'I'd rather be Russian than a Democrat.' I'd grown up in the 1980s during the last vestiges of the Cold War and had learned to hate Soviet, and then Russian, totalitarianism. I rejoiced when the USSR fell apart. Now, hating members of a political party had superseded dislike for an anti-democratic oligarchy.

There is no other way

That t-shirt image haunts me today as Putin relentlessly attacks Ukraine. Will Republicans hate Democrats so much that they will be unwilling to unite with us against a craven oligarch who threatens democracy? I'd once thought we would unite in response to a world pandemic. I'd once believed that we would unite in condemning the 6 January attack. Those moments of unity passed quickly. Would this moment pass, too?

I have been feeling modest optimism for unity when I hear conservatives condemning the war. Many Republican lawmakers applauded Biden's call for unity during the State of the Union address. Mike Pence said there was no room in the GOP for Putin apologists. Some believe that Trump's power and relevance are finally waning. My optimism is limited, though, by the reality that the GOP became the party of Trump and Trump refuses to condemn Putin. Would this moment be twisted and politicised like the facemask? Or can we finally break free of our blind hatred for one another to save democracy?

Despite everything, I continue to bridge divides because I can see no other way forward. The Polarisation Industrial Complex has been slowly tearing us apart for decades to gain power and profit and it will take decades to mend the vast social rifts they have manufactured. My protest and activism is not to hate, but to reach out even when the hand isn't offered to me first, even when I am disappointed. We must form relationships across our differences, because we cannot create a world in which all humans flourish and thrive without each other.



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