

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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July 29, 2017

How Americans Disagree in 2017

In mid-June, James Hodgkinson of Belleville, Ill., armed with a rifle, opened fire on a group of Republican members of Congress practicing for a baseball game in Alexandria, Virginia. Four victims were transferred to the hospital with gunshot injuries: Majority Whip Steve Scalise, a congressional staffer, a lobbyist and a Capitol Police officer. Another congressman and a second police officer also suffered minor injuries. In statements on social media and letters to a local newspaper, Hodgkinson expressed fervent opposition to the Republican Party and called for higher taxes on the rich. He also volunteered for the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. He was not a communist or an extremist member of some paramilitary group. He was an ordinary Midwestern Democrat who detested what was happening in his life and to his nation. Albeit mentally unstable, Hodgkinson was not a typical assassin in American history (e.g., Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, or John Hinckley). Hodgkinson represents something different about America in 2017. Ugly, bitter, deep-seated partisanship now characterizes our nation. Americans have always disagreed about politics, about the economy, about religious beliefs, but there is something much more pernicious about how Americas disagree. For many, disagreements over important issues have become very personal, attacking not only a person's beliefs about a particular issue but actually attacking the person! The sense is that "if you disagree with me you are pure evil." Columnist Frank Bruin correctly observes that "If not physically then civically, we're in a dangerous place when it comes to how we view, treat and talk about people we disagree with." Several thoughts:

- First of all, the Internet and the entire social media phenomenon have changed public discourse. Bruin: "They speed people to like-minded warriors and give them the impression of broader company and sturdier validation than really exist." David Simas, quoted in a recent *New Yorker* article by David Rimick, maintains that the web "creates a whole new permission structure, a sense of social affirmation for what was once unthinkable . . . The capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal—that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate." James Hodgkinson used social media both as a source of misinformation and as a forum to vent his anger and bitterness toward Donald Trump and the Republican Party. Therefore, Michael Gerson, after the Hodgkinson shootings, argued that today's partisans "have made anger into an industry—using it to run up the number of listeners, viewers and hits . . . If words can inspire, then they can also incite or debase."

- Second, the language used in public discourse is often laced with coarse and disgusting vulgarities that create images and distortions of those with whom we disagree. Consider these reprehensible examples: “Madonna fantasizes about blowing up the White House. Kathy Griffin displays a likeness of Trump’s severed head. Stephen Colbert uses a crude term to describe Trump as Putin’s sexual boy toy. Maher suggests that Trump and his daughter Ivanka have engaged in incest.” Our nation is now abandoning self-restraint and tact to win our arguments and paint our opponents as monstrously evil people. Bruni correctly concludes that “For more and more Americans, the other side isn’t merely misguided in the extreme. It’s evil in the absolute, and virtue is measured by the starkness with which that evil is labeled and reviled. There are emotional satisfactions to this. There is also a terrible price.” As American politics has become more and more polarized, the mindset on social media and on Cable News (e.g., Fox and MSNBC) is pugnacious, besieged, paranoid and determined to impose its own worldview on current events regardless of the facts (e.g., Alex Jones, Matt Drudge, etc.). Social media and Cable News are no longer sources of information about the world; rather, they are a validation of what we already believe. Therefore, there is little room for discourse, for reasoned debate or careful presentation of a well-thought out position on a specific issue. A democratic-republic cannot long endure under these circumstances.
- Third, a new phenomenon has emerged in American culture—what David Brooks calls the “politics of scandal.” Brooks makes three observations about this phenomenon:

 1. In the politics of scandal, you do not engage in persuasion or even talk about the issues. Political victories are won when you destroy your political opponents by catching them in some wrongdoing. You get seduced by the delightful possibility that your opponent will be eliminated. Politics is simply about moral superiority and personal destruction.
 2. The politics of scandal is delightful for cable news. It’s hard to build ratings arguing about health insurance legislation. But it is easy to build ratings if you are a glorified Court TV, if each whiff of scandal smoke generates hours of “Breaking News” intensity and a deluge of speculation from good-looking former prosecutors. “This kind of politics is great for those forces responsible for the lawyerization of American life. It takes power out of the hands of voters and elected officials and puts power in the hands of prosecutors and defense attorneys.”
 3. The politics of scandal drives a wedge through society. Political elites get swept up in the scandals. Most voters don’t really care. Brooks: “Donald Trump rose peddling the politics of scandal—oblivious to policy, spreading insane allegations about birth certificates and other things—so maybe it’s just that he gets swallowed by it.” Those who hype the politics of scandal do not improve the function of the American Republic: “They deserve some of the blame for an administration and

government too distracted to do its job, for a political culture that is both shallower and nastier, and for fostering a process that looks like an elite game of entrapment.”

- Finally, how then should Christians respond to this state of American public discourse? Truth and facts are important to God. It is wrong for Christians to get caught up in the hype and hyperbole of social media and Cable News. The Apostle Paul encourages Christ-followers to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Christians are part of the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), citizens of a new kingdom, transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13-14). Therefore, our behavior and our speech are different, for we are now the salt and light of Jesus’ kingdom; we are “in the world but not of the world” (Matthew 5:13-16; John 17:13-18). In Ephesians 4:24-32 (ESV), the Apostle Paul captures the essence of the New Creation virtues and behavior Christians are to manifest:

²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

In the church and in the broader culture, those who know Christ must show the larger culture how to disagree and speak the truth in love. If we cannot model this, we are failing as salt and light Christians. May God give us the enablement and determination to rise above the cesspool of the current American culture.

See Charles Sykes in the *New York Times* (18 June 2017); Joshua Green in the *New York Times* (16 July 2017); David Brooks in the *New York Times* (20 June 2017); Ross Douthat and Frank Bruni in the *New York Times* (18 June 2017).