

The Wrong Narrative in Charlottesville

The political violence in Charlottesville yesterday was as predictable as it was futile. One person was killed and dozens badly injured, marking a new low in the political and cultural wars that are as heated as any time since in America since the 1960s.

This relentless politicization of American culture has eroded goodwill and inflamed the worst impulses in society. Antifa and the alt-right may represent simple-minded expressions of hatred and fear, but both groups are animated entirely by politics: the perception that others can impose their will on us politically. The only lasting solution to political violence is to make politics matter less.

We've allowed politics to invade every aspect of American life, from religion and family life to sex and sexuality, from bathrooms to ball fields to the workplace. But what has it gotten us besides identity politics on steroids? The "personal is political" is hardly the rallying cry of a free and confident nation. Even as we enjoy historically unparalleled material prosperity, we are dispirited by the 2016 election hangover and looking for scapegoats to explain the American malaise.

It's easy to decry Antifa and its violent leftwing rhetoric. It's easy to decry the alt-Right, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and fascists. It's more important to understand them as exemplars of a new political age. Progressives demanded permanent revolution; conservatives responded by becoming permanent reactionaries. And the media bias (overwhelmingly anti-right) makes things worse: one "side" becomes convinced of its moral superiority, while the other becomes convinced the fix is in.

We suspect, without knowing, that a Hillary voter is just a step or two removed from a bandanna-clad Antifa, while a Mitt Romney voter is but a few degrees removed from an alt-Right nationalist marching in the streets. This may seem farcical, but the political society promoted by Clinton and Romney encourages it. Everyone must take a side, and live with the excesses.

What we saw this weekend was a demonstration of the horseshoe effect, where both groups begin to sound and act like the other— both illiberal, both demanding omnipotent state solutions to problems mostly created by government in the first place.

To be sure, Antifa and the alt-right represent only a tiny fraction of the population and have little economic, social, or political power. But they serve as perfect fodder for a media narrative that benefits from a sky-is-falling narrative to ratchet up viewership. The narrative is fed by our vanity and desire to imagine easy solutions to complex problems (e.g. more “education,” hate speech laws, welfarism, etc.) And we play along, assuming the worst of others and issuing smug affirmations of our own superiority on Facebook and Twitter.

In 2018 we will suffer through a round of mid-term congressional elections which will only intensify the political and cultural divide. Both political parties will use events like Charlottesville to serve their shameful partisan goals. The need for each side to vanquish the other, to punish and repudiate the other’s existence, demonstrates why politics is termed war by other means. It’s not a peaceable process. Yet underneath it all the “policy” differences between Democrats and Republicans are laughably small. Theirs is a turf battle, nothing more.

In a winner takes all political world, elections are weapons. Unless and until we learn to reject politics as the overarching method for organizing society, hatred and fear of

“the other” will remain pervasive. Americans understand viscerally that government has far too much power over who wins and loses in our society, but haven’t fully grasped the degree to which the political class benefits from division. We still want to believe in grade-school notions of democracy and voting.

People of goodwill don’t impose themselves on others politically any more than they do militarily. Libertarianism, with its goal of radically diminishing the scope of government and politics in our lives, offers a path to a more peaceful future. Only libertarians can claim the mantle of anti-authoritarianism, because only libertarians would deny government the power and size to become authoritarian. The political world isn’t working, so why do we insist on more politics to fix it?

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