

Fanning the Political Fires at Home With War Abroad

Six months ago, the opening shots of the Russia-Ukraine conflict shook the world. Now, thousands of miles away from those of us in the United States, the two countries wage a vicious military, economic, and propaganda war over territories and populations which the region's power players have contested for centuries.

But that's not the impression you'd get reading the comments on any bit of news relating to the conflict. If anything, you'd think the fighting was happening right here at home, and that everyone was personally on the front line. Whipping themselves into a frenzy, people gloat over the propaganda which both sides have been pumping out, often without the flimsiest bit of sourcing.

How did Americans get to the point where they triumphantly wave the flags of foreign countries—or at least put them in their Twitter usernames—as a statement of their own political identity?

One possible reason is that we live in a society where politics seeps in and poisons every sphere of life. As a result, we look at any issue, regardless of its actual context, and try to place it within the ongoing broader political conflict. We also project our own agendas and fixations on the issue. This creates a toxic chain of thought: What's going on? Does it validate my personal feelings? And how can I use this to attack people I don't like?

Consider one of the common narratives used to explain the Russia-Ukraine conflict: Ukraine, a country which brands itself as a democracy and aims to join the liberal Western world, is up against Russia, which attempts to project

tradition, authority, and an old-fashioned conception of power. Most would likely agree with this assessment regardless of which side of the conflict they support.

But such a narrative conveniently matches the conflict within our own country. On one side, an emerging liberal majority wages a cultural war against traditional values in order to build a world free of hierarchies and distinctions. On the other, a conservative remnant fights to restore a society which values morality, order, and the strength of the nation.

In this way, faraway battles become a proxy for our domestic conflicts.

To a liberal, any critic of America's support for Ukraine becomes an insidious Russian propagandist. Add in the residual tension from the 2016 and 2020 elections, and the critic also becomes a treasonous insurrectionist.

Meanwhile, embattled opponents of America's military adventurism abroad, and its cultural agenda at home, risk becoming deaf to those who point out Russia's genuine problems. At worst, their ideology becomes a mirror image of the left's reflexive hatred of the West and its values. None of the factions gain anything from their online firefights with their opponents, emerging angrier, less rational, and more entrenched in their echo chambers.

I have no illusions that "finding common ground" or "listening to one another" will solve this problem. Our society is well past the point of allowing genuine, two-way reconciliation efforts between hostile factions.

But each of us as individuals can steel ourselves against a deteriorating political climate by not allowing a complex, distant conflict to impact our critical thinking abilities. It's good to be informed about world affairs, and it's fine to have an opinion on them—even a passionate one. But we should allow current events to affect our behavior and our state of

mind only when those events directly affect us, those close to us, and our communities.

After all, there is a nation that's having its sovereignty violated and its borders breached. There is brutal violence happening in cities across that nation. And there's a corrupt, increasingly authoritarian government allowing it all to happen—right here at home. Maybe that's the crisis we should truly be worked up about.

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