

America's Politics of Division

By Scott Aiken

Anger, insults, tirades: This describes our political debate today. It would also describe the nature of American political discourse from this Republic's earliest days.

Our founders used political ... and personal ... invective as blunt weapons in their debates.

Remember ... George Washington's opponents called him a king and a dictator. Through their newspaper allies, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton hurled venomous barbs at one another.

I have my own first memory of our presidential politics.

It's 1944, in the midst of World War II.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt – FDR – and New York Governor Thomas Dewey are the candidates. Even in wartime ... as the Greatest Generation fought in Europe and from island to island in the Pacific ... partisan fervor was taking no holiday.

It's morning recess for the fourth grade in the small New England town of Southborough, Massachusetts.

You can visualize it: White clapboard Congregational church .. high on the hill ..., Revolutionary War cemetery

Recess is usually a pleasant moment. Yet, suddenly, one group of boys is chanting a bawdy refrain about FDR ...

... Other boys are lunging at them yelling just as rough insults about Dewey.

It's more pushing than punching, but that's my introduction to the roughhouse of American politics.

Then ... What's so different about today's discourse?

We are all very aware of how emotional, how contentious, our national debate has become.

The rhetoric burns like sulfuric acid. It is hot, searing, acutely painful.

Nothing new in that.

But there is something different. It is the lack of commonality of ideas. Our early ... first ... leaders disagreed, often vehemently and emotionally.

However ..., they shared an underlying agreement on principles of government.

That commonality of thought no longer exists.

Moreover, in the eighteenth and even the nineteenth centuries ... in fact up until TV news cameras found their way on to the battlefields of Vietnam just a few decades ago ... communications were much slower.

And slower communication helped create an environment for thoughtful discourse and thereby for reasoned compromise.

Today, in the age of tweets and blogs, and 24-hour cable talk shows, we've lost something valuable: Time to reflect, time to think through an issue, and time to respond with reason rather than reaction.

I have a thesis: We the people of the United States are at risk of finding ourselves irreconcilably divided.

We are at risk as a result of these two basic changes in our political discourse.

✓ First: The loss of a commonality of political ideas and philosophy.

✓ Second: The tornado of instantaneous communication is destroying reflective, reasoned argument...; ... it's overwhelming our capability to listen to a different point of view.

The house Lincoln saw threatened by division and failure, that same house is being buffeted by political tornados as vicious as any that devastated southern and Midwestern communities this spring.

We desperately need to find a new way to talk to each other so that we can reach a new political agreement ... on how this house ..., this Republic ..., can be rebuilt.

Still, many of us would take comfort in our nation's history of political compromise.

We would take comfort from our high school lessons in civics.

We would take comfort that our Republic has been built on the ability of reasonable women and men to find a middle ground, a meeting of minds, ... agreement putting the common good ... the welfare of our Union ... first

I submit to you ... that thinking is fuzzy, more hope than realistic understanding of our national history.

... A bit more of that history....

The founders of this nation really did share a common intellectual framework – that of the 18th century Enlightenment.

Enlightenment political philosophers believed in rational, scientific thought. They believed in the worth ... and the freedom ... of the individual.

They considered our individual reasoning ability to be the essence of our humanity.

These philosophers included John Locke and Adam Smith in Britain, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France, Immanuel Kant in Germany.

“All our knowledge ...” wrote Kant ... “begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason.”

The gritty sands of history have grated away that bond of common discourse.

Where is the intellectual common ground ... for instance ... between Christian fundamentalists and the mainstream Protestant churches ... between Christian fundamentalists and ... Unitarians?

Second, it happens, too, that this is the 150th anniversary of the Civil War....

Today ... in our minds ... the Blue and the Gray may represent ... an annual football game ...

... or stories of heroic characters like Stonewall Jackson ... and leaders like Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee ...

... and, of course, President Abraham Lincoln.

Even if you watched the recent reruns on public television of Ken Burns' dramatic programs on the Civil War ... it still is more a glorious yesterday than a gut-wrenching today.

I'm a historian by training. So, once again, indulge me.

I have some more political history ...,

... specifically ...our constitutional history began with compromise.

In 1787, our political leaders divided power ... as we all know ... amongst three branches of government – the executive, the congress, and the courts. And they drew a line between the powers of the federal government and the power of the states.

The men who drafted the Constitution argued passionately and stubbornly about rights and power. Eventually, they compromised.

Or when reasonable middle ground could not be found – as it could not on the issue of slavery – the compromise itself was to put off difficult decisions to a later time.

Thus did our founders work around slavery. They agreed that twenty years down the road we'd end the slave trade.

And in eighteenth century America ... many believed slavery would slowly, but surely decline. Eventually it would disappear.

The ideas of Adam Smith on economic freedom, Rousseau's arguments for the equality of all mankind... they contradicted the alleged social and economic value of slavery.

But insofar as the South was concerned ... the political and economic philosophers were wrong.

Over the next thirty years, North and South moved further apart.

So, there was another compromise. After years of debate political leaders agreed ... in order to preserve the Union ... on the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Simply put, it drew a line from east to west, from the Atlantic to the Pacific ... between free states and territories in the north ... and those in the South which had the right to practice slavery.

Still ... neither the South's peculiar institution nor the North's rejection of it was resolved.

So, we had the Compromise of 1850.

That set of laws threw open to slavery much of the territory acquired from Mexico in the war of 1848.

The blanket of compromise was fraying.

For waves of new European immigrants – the Germans, both Protestant and Catholic, and the Irish – had other, very practical as well as moral and political objections to slavery.

Our new citizens brought with them Enlightenment ideas of political and economic freedom

They wanted full, free access to the prairies, rivers, and mountains of the Midwest and beyond to the Pacific.

In the 1840s, a new political movement, dubbed “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men,” had come to life.

Free and willing labor ... the labor of Free Men ... not slave labor... would build farms and businesses.

Free Soil helped crystallized a truth. The slave economy and what we would today call the free-enterprise economy ... could not co-exist.

One or the other had to go.

Were we ..., to paraphrase Lincoln ..., to give priority to an economic and social system that made some of us the beneficiaries of American freedoms ... while eternally subjecting others to servitude?

Were some of us to be citizens with the full rights and protections of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, while others were denied these freedoms?

We know the answer: The Civil War, in which more Americans died than in any other war in our history.

It may seem to you that comparing the irreconcilable moral, political, and economic issues of slavery to today's clashes – however nasty they are – overstates our troubles.

Yet ... once you pull away the layers of rhetoric ... the differences are just as fundamental.

We are dealing with warring philosophies ... clashing ideologies.

On the issue of national debt, for instance:

The substance of that argument is whether we ... each and every one of us – as an individual citizen or as a corporate citizen –

The argument is whether we owe our primary responsibility to the Republic's general welfare.

... Or does this nation exist primarily to defend individual interests and corporate interests?

The answer depends on your priorities. Are they the promotion and support of the common good ... the commonweal...?

Or are they the promotion and protection of individual good?

Do we have a national responsibility to make healthcare both accessible and affordable to **all** citizens? Or is it the responsibility of the individual standing alone to manage his or her own health care?

This is a core issue of commonweal versus individual interest.

And ... these matters are as profoundly divisive as slavery.

Thus ... in my view ... we do seem to be nearing a junction much like that which led to the rupture of the Civil War.

(Or as a very dear friend of mine ... a retired professor of American diplomatic history and a native of Mississippi ... calls it ... "The recent unpleasantness.")

It is not given that we resolve our differences by political compromise.

It is not ordained that the marvelous solvent we have found in our commitment to the Union ... to the common good of the American people ... will dissolve our differences.

And this is not the late 18th century, or the mid-19th century.

Do we have three quarters of a century ... the stretch of 75 years from the compromises embodied in the U.S. Constitution in 1787 to 1861 ... when South Carolina fired upon the U.S. fort in the Charleston harbor... to work out one, two, three, or more compromises?

Not ... I fear ... in this 21st century.

In this age of Twitter, Facebook, the worldwide web ... where no one has to confront an idea she or he does not like ... it is not likely several generations will have the chance to resolve our differences.

Is there even a point of compromise between such uncompromising moral visions, such conflicting social and economic visions?

I certainly do not have THE answer. I'm not sure I'm asking the right questions.

But I am deeply concerned. Concerned about the ability of this people to reach reasoned .. and reasonable ... agreements on political, economic, and social policies.

While the populist leaders of the right ... Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Glen Beck, our own John Boehner ... will sneer ... we need to put our political leaders through a Harvard-MIT seminar on conflict resolution, including its lessons on building consensus.

And Senator Harry Reid, Representative Nancy Pelosi, and others on the left could benefit as well.

It is time to consider what the future political, social, and economic course of this Union is to be.

It is time to incorporate into your thought and action the risk that we will not find grounds of commonality.

What I ask you to do is this: Give serious consideration to the possibility that our conflicting ideologies, our vastly different views on rights and responsibilities, require something far more fundamental than political compromise.

Preserving the Union in the 21st century will require basic rethinking of how our Union functions and for what ends our Republic exists.

Just as Lincoln so clearly stated it 153 years ago: Our house is divided ... the foundations are splitting.

Such a disunited house is a pretty rickety abode in the storms of the 21st century.

The challenge I leave with you is this:

Start thinking through how can we rebuild this American house?