

A Fake America: Cultural Fragmentation and Polarization

By Justin Curtis, a sophomore at Harvard College, in the Harvard Political Review, January 5, 2017

In his 1796 farewell address, President George Washington cautioned against the “baneful effects of the spirit of party,” warning that hyper-partisanship would lead to “permanent despotism.” This past Tuesday, departing President Barack Obama echoed his predecessor’s words of warning, emphasizing that the founders “knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity—the idea that for all our outward differences, we are all in this together; that we rise or fall as one.” In that vein, Obama called on Americans to come together in the wake of the divisive 2016 election and “restore the sense of common purpose that we so badly need right now.” This message of humility and mutual respect was fitting for Obama’s last speech. After all, Obama first burst onto the national stage at the 2004 Democratic Convention, memorably exclaiming, “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America.” Additionally, early on in his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama earned a reputation as the “conciliator,” as someone who builds bridges not only between races but between political identities as well.

Nonetheless, Obama’s grand invocations of bipartisanship have largely fallen on deaf ears. According to congressional voting patterns, Republican and Democratic policymakers have become more maximalist than ever before, leading to a corrosion of civil society as well. A recent Pew Research survey revealed that majorities in both parties see the opposing party “very unfavorably,” and think that members of the opposing party are more “close-minded” than other Americans. The ever-expanding political divide manifests itself in hateful tweets, heckles at Senate confirmation hearings, protests at a president’s farewell address, and a declining faith in American democratic institutions. On Tuesday, Obama himself conceded that society has become “so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are not just misguided, but somehow malevolent.”

These increasingly partisan attitudes are the culmination of a long-term trend towards polarization that began in the 1980s, coinciding with a concurrent proliferation of media outlets and a shift away from the “Big Three” television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). Network anchormen such as Walter Cronkite of CBS, once known as the “most trusted man in America,” gradually lost their audience to 24-hour news stations. The advent of the Internet landed another blow to institutional news outlets. Mainstream newspaper companies have been forced to cut staff and many local papers have shut down altogether. Moreover, as Obama recognized on Tuesday, online journalism has led to the “splintering of our media into a channel for every taste,” providing a forum for niche partisan publications and eroding a “common baseline of facts.” This factional free-for-all has turned political reporting into mere finger pointing and blame-games. Facebook and other social media outlets have exacerbated this trend, dividing America into “red news feeds” and “blue news feeds.” Those on the right latch onto the comical extremes of political correctness, while those on the left harp upon “deplorable” instances of racism and xenophobia. Likewise, the Internet has lent a veneer of credibility to click-bait, fake news, and fact-free reporting. On a Facebook newsfeed, there is little stylistic distinction between an article from the fringe outlet The Gateway Pundit and an exposition from the Wall Street Journal. However, the partisan slant is striking: the Journal described how “President Obama Surprises Joe Biden With Medal of Freedom,” whereas the Pundit scoffed at the “Liberal ‘Participation’ Awards Presented to Joe Biden and Angela Merkel.”

Admittedly, as Obama alluded to in his farewell speech, sensationalist journalism and partisan slanders have always been present in American politics. In the 1800 election, Federalist newspapers vilified Thomas Jefferson as a radical Jacobin atheist, and Republicans denounced John Adams as an aristocratic monarchist. Nonetheless, there has been a distinct

paradigm shift in both the size and scope of partisan norms. Perhaps most importantly, the founders' cultural glue of Enlightenment rationalism and republican "solidarity" has dried up. From Obama's perspective, absent this "willingness to admit new information, and concede that your opponent is making a fair point" Americans will simply "keep talking past each other" and "retreat into our own bubbles." Popping these "bubbles" will prove an especially challenging task in the age of online journalism. In theory, the Internet provides more access to a wider variety of information; in practice, Americans have secluded themselves in echo chambers, surrounded by like-minded individuals who reinforce partisan preconceptions.

This ongoing technological revolution has not only disrupted the field of journalism, but has also upended prevailing forms of entertainment. The network sitcoms of the 1960s and '70s promoted a sense of shared culture, as millions of Americans tuned into watch the same limited slate of programming. With the rise of cable TV and, more recently, online streaming sites, Americans can now turn to a myriad of different cultural platforms. This heterogeneity has improved the quality of entertainment, but it also has fragmented civil society, particularly amplifying the divide between rural and urban areas. "Modern Family," "Game of Thrones," and "The Daily Show" are widely popular in the college towns and coastal urban enclaves that voted for Hillary Clinton, but have limited appeal elsewhere. Likewise, whether a town watched "Duck Dynasty" was a stronger indicator of support for President-elect Trump than whether that town voted for his Republican predecessor George W. Bush. These TV viewing patterns elucidate that Americans inhabit drastically dissimilar cultural worlds that foster divergent sociopolitical values. The recent clash between Meryl Streep and Trump served as yet another reminder of this cultural contrast.

Overall, President Obama's election did not mark the "end of the culture wars," as some pundits had predicted. Rather, these wars are now waged on an even more expansive battlefield. Obama's calls for empathy and open-mindedness are certainly noble, but given today's media landscape, it is doubtful that they will substantially change partisan political norms. As Obama prepares to leave office, a unified United States of America is nowhere to be seen.

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