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America's Civic War

By Matt A. Mayer

America is engaged in a Civic War. I don't casually conflate this war with the Civil War fought to save the union and end slavery. Yet many fear that our current crisis could spiral out-of-control in the coming years, resulting in as grave a threat to our union as the Civil War. America has overcome previous periods of protest and unrest, but the ever-increasing unraveling of the last few decades has no modern parallel.

As with many Americans, I first became uneasy with the tenor of our national debate during George W. Bush's presidency when the left ceaselessly attacked him over the Iraq War and enhanced interrogation techniques. The right took its turn during Barack Obama's presidency with constant assaults on his birth, Benghazi and use of executive power. Our unraveling, however, predates both presidencies. Some cite the 1960s, some Watergate, and others point to Bill Clinton's presidency.

For me, the spiral really began with the left's "borking" of Supreme Court candidate Robert Bork. The shrillness of that episode when the left went after his person not so much his jurisprudence launched the era of zero-sum politics in Washington. What began in Washington slowly spread to the rest of the country over the subsequent 30 years via 24-hour news channels, talk radio and the internet.

Donald Trump's election may be merely another chapter in this ongoing fight, but the sheer non-stop level of opposition beginning before the election and accelerating each passing week portends a deepening of the crisis. Four weeks in, the left talks incessantly about impeachment and secession, with some even publicly mentioning assassination and a coup. Such talk used to be confined solely to the dark corners of our fringes.

Traditional areas where restraint was deployed such as the inauguration, the appointment of Cabinet nominees and the White House Correspondents' Dinner have become hotly contested battlefields on which to draw blood. Every action, no matter how small, is vigorously opposed and magnified far beyond reason. We have entered the era of inch-by-inch trench warfare.

As Doris Kearns Goodwin vividly described in her book "Team of Rivals," the 30 or so years preceding the Civil War involved a growing separation and looming clash between the North and the South. Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 merely served as the catalyst for the South to "fire the first shot." The fight's geography today isn't so neatly divisible; rather, it pits the densely populated major cities and coasts against the suburban and rural masses.

Unlike in 1860, the media today isn't aligned by geography. The mainstream media clearly has become part of the left, with nontraditional entities serving as news sources for each side's partisan points of view. Instead of making us more social, the increased use of social media has torn us further apart, as, what we dare not say to our neighbor's face in our backyards, we aggressively type or endorse casually with a click on our smartphones.

Our trust in government, media and each other declines precipitously each passing year. Facts have become, like beauty, something in the brains of the beholders from both sides. Facing the reality of Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump, we like to claim we'd theoretically support a presidential candidate from the other side, but who on the right would the left really support and vice-versa? We are, in fact, a red America and a blue America.

All signs point to it getting much worse. We exited our past crises united once again and stronger for it in the long term. We may not be as fortunate this time, as each side becomes more entrenched and convinced of its righteousness.

The Pied Pipers of today who preach Rodney King's "can't we all just get along" plea are sorely out-of-step with large segments of America. The path they want to lead us down is little more than the same well-trod trail full of the very failed appeasement politics that have fueled the anger and apartness. It will take more than recycling cliches to change the course we are on. Talk isn't just cheap, it is utterly ineffective.

Lincoln fundamentally understood that a united America required the North to thoroughly defeat the South. The surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox largely ended the Civil War, but true victory did not come for another 100 years. Even if one side can win our Civic War, what will the settled peace look like, will it hold and how long until final victory will be achieved?

Ultimately, can there be clear victory in a Civic War based upon ideologies that all fall within the four corners of a democratic free society? The very tenants of liberalism and progressivism have always been the antithesis of the principals of conservatism and libertarianism and vice-versa. Elections used to determine which ideology prevailed for four-to-eight years, with opposition being civilly exercised in Congress or from statehouses. Now, each side vigorously opposes and demonizes action before they even know what exactly it is they are opposing in a "they're for it, we're against it" automaton fashion.

Obama wasn't just wrong. He was a closeted Muslim seeking to supplant our Constitution with Sharia law. Trump isn't just misguided. He is the next Adolph Hitler rapidly laying the groundwork for the next Holocaust. Western civilization is tragically losing its civility.

The unfortunate reality is that it may take an existential external threat to truly bring us together, as occurred during World War II. Given the rising instability in hot spots around the world, perhaps a global crisis will peel us away from our partisan tribes and spur us to once again rally around the flag as lovers of freedom. The enemy at our gate may be the only force that can push us to stop seeing our enemies across the aisle.

As Lincoln warned, "A house divided cannot stand." The question isn't whether we are divided. We most certainly are; rather, it is how long can our house stand if our division persists?

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