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Across the red-blue divide: How to start a conversation

Toning down our opinions will ratchet up our understanding - and the welfare of the nation.

By Daniel Yankelovich

LA JOLLA, CALIF. - **At a dinner party** for friends and business associates: The conversation turns to politics and to speculation about who will win the neck-and-neck race for president. The host makes a crack about putting an end to the administration's tactics of the "big lie" in its Iraq policy. One of the guests gets up from the table, barely able to contain his anger.

"I call that downright unpatriotic," he spits out between clenched teeth and leaves the room.

When seemingly irreconcilable differences split the nation down the middle, with each half accusing the other of bad faith, paralysis sets in. Polarization solidifies into gridlock, and gridlock blocks us from coping with our most urgent problems. When polarized, we cannot form the kind of consensus needed to take effective action. The glue that binds our diversity together dissolves. We are prevented from reaching truths we desperately need for our future safety and survival.

What strikes me most about "Talking With the Enemy," the series of commentaries starting today, is the tough-mindedness of the writers considering America's polarization. None of them argues against polarization merely because it is oppositional or rudely expressed. All of them recognize that democracy does not wear dainty white gloves and speak in polite murmurings. Yet, with only one exception in this eight-part series, America's current state of mind alarms them. They fear that stark and bitter polarization over issues such as the war in Iraq endangers our future - not because the polarization makes people angry, but because it makes us dysfunctional as a society.

Democracy requires space for compromise, and compromise is best won through acknowledging the legitimate concerns of the other. We need to bridge opposing positions, not accentuate differences.

A glance at the most divisive issue in America today - the war in Iraq - demonstrates the danger of failing to build these bridges. The differences between the two political parties are stark, but they aren't irreconcilable. Both have powerful arguments. Surely the Democrats have a point in their insistence that Saddam Hussein did not attack the US on 9/11 and that Al Qaeda did - thus, US efforts should be focused on attacking Al Qaeda, not Iraq. Surely the Republicans have a point in their insistence that the US needs a long-term strategy to counter the ideological appeal of the Islamist militants to the Arab/Muslim majority - and the best way to do so may be to promote democracy in the Middle East.

In the current climate of polarization, Americans find themselves fiercely embracing one side while contemptuously dismissing the other. Not only does this one-sidedness prevent them from arriving at consensus about what should be done, it creates a mood of corrosive bitterness and anger. Worst of all, it is a formula for losing the war on terror.

Each partial framing of an issue, taken alone, sheds an imperfect light on the larger picture. Only by approaching both with an open mind can we begin to understand what we must do. Serious consideration of both positions leads directly to the kinds of questions the nation should be pondering. For example: Who is our real enemy in the war on terror? Is it a nation-state? A terrorist group? A religion? A political/ideological movement in the Muslim world? Here, if anywhere, our need for clarity is greatest - how can we successfully wage a war if we can't even agree on the identity of the enemy?

A polarized, one-sided approach to this question will yield an answer that is dogmatic - and wrong - and will

keep us from understanding a truth about the war on terror that we need for our very survival.

Fortunately, most of the authors in this series of commentaries - aimed not at specific controversies, but at approaches to them - do more than point to the dangers of polarization; they also propose sensible solutions.

In their account of the 9/11 commission's work, Lee Hamilton and Thomas Kean show that the right kind of leadership can avoid polarization and bridge radically divergent frameworks even in a highly charged partisan environment. Deborah Tannen, the bestselling author of several books on language, argues powerfully that we need to replace reflexive antagonism with a more principled form of opposition, replacing dueling experts with new ways to open ourselves to the logic of varied positions.

This does not mean we must sacrifice our principles. Laura Chasin, an expert in facilitating constructive conversation, shows how people with strongly divergent views can find common ground and build stronger relationships - without compromising their core beliefs. Her list of do-it-yourself tips outlines simple things we all can do to strengthen the bonds that hold our society together. Other writers in the series show how they've personally experienced the transformative power of one-on-one conversations in which ideas are tested and assumptions are brought to the surface.

Gary Alan Fine, a sociologist who studies negative reputations, provides a timely warning against the seduction of absolutes. And William Schambra, a Hudson Institute scholar who questions the urgent concern expressed by others in this series, rightly urges us not to fear dissent but to embrace it as part of the boisterous vitality of American democracy.

Finally, from my own work, I offer a few additional recommendations. Sad to say, our culture favors debate, advocacy, and conflict over dialogue and deliberation. These adversarial forms of discourse have their uses - for example, arguing in the courtroom, attacking special interests, making TV's talking heads more entertaining. But they're the wrong way to cope with the gridlock issues that threaten to paralyze our society.

I've learned that dialogue rather than advocacy is the superior method for resolving gridlock. We need a large dose of dialogue to highlight our common ground rather than our differences, to help us reserve judgment until we have considered a variety of ways to approach controversial issues, and to motivate us to concede the merits of the other side even when it pains us to do so. We need a special kind of dialogue to bring hidden assumptions to the surface where they can be examined and questioned in the light of a changing world.

Dialogue forces participants to reconcile their views with their most basic values, it obliges them to confront their own wishful thinking, and it exposes them to a variety of ways of seeing and framing issues - an indispensable way to escape polarization and gridlock.

Unfortunately, we live in an age of strong opinions grounded on superficial understanding - a sure way to lose the respect of others. On the issues that most polarize us, maybe we can learn to tone down our opinions, and instead deepen our understanding.

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