

## BY OTHER MEANS

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Earlier this year, Jim VandeHei and Mike Allen, former Politico journalists and cofounders of the digital media company Axios, wrote an article suggesting that our nation isn't as divided as we may think. There's compelling evidence, they say, that we've been trapped in a reality distortion bubble generated by social media, cable TV, and tribal political wars. They agree that deep divisions exist on some topics. But when it comes to the outrage of the month, they insist, it's mostly caused by political views at the fringe amplified by the loudest voices on social media.

For example, they point out that:

- Most Christians aren't white Christian nationalists who see Donald Trump as a God-like figure. Most ignore politics and wrestle with their faith.
- Most college professors aren't trying to silence conservatives or turn kids into liberal activists. Most are teaching math, or physics, or biology.
- Most kids don't hate Israel and run around chanting, "From the river to the sea." On most campuses, most of the time, students are doing what students have always done.
- Most Republicans don't want to ban all abortions starting at conception. Most Democrats don't want to allow them until birth.

- Immigrants who are here illegally aren't rushing to vote and commit crimes. Actual data show both rarely happen — even amid a genuine crisis at the border.
- Most people aren't fighting on X. Turns out, the vast majority of Americans never tweet at all.
- Most people aren't cheering insults on Fox News and MSNBC in the evening. Turns out, less than 2 percent of Americans are even watching.

Most normal people, they conclude, are too busy shopping, watching football, and drinking beer to care much about politics at all. Even so, they acknowledge, the political nonsense at the fringe that dominates the social media bubble eventually oozes into our lives.

VandeHei and Allen are certainly right about the oozing — though my own concern is what happens if the distorted reality bubble does more than ooze. What happens if it bursts?

Earlier this week, the Public Religion Research Institute published the results of its recent survey of 5,000 randomly selected Americans to examine the relationship between authoritarianism and Christian nationalism. It turns out the correlation isn't as strong as one might think. About 10% of the respondents strongly adhere to the tenants of Christian nationalism, and another 20% are somewhat sympathetic to Christian nationalist views. About half of those in each category also hold right wing authoritarian views. In other words, about 15% of survey respondents support an authoritarian political approach to achieving Christian nationalism.

This finding correlates almost precisely with the percentage of respondents who would sanction violence to achieve political

ends. The survey found that 16% of the respondents agree that “patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” and 16% also agree that “if the 2024 presidential election is compromised by voter fraud, everyday Americans will need to ensure the rightful leader takes office, even if it requires taking violent actions.”

Here’s the wrinkle in these findings. Robert Pape is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago and director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats. He’s been studying political violence for the past three decades and has closely tracked violent attitudes and actions in the US over the past four years.

His latest assessment, released in mid-July, shows that about 7% of a random sample of Americans — the percentage represents 18 million adults — believe the use of force is justified to restore Trump to the presidency. At the same time, about 10% — 26 million adults — believe the use of force is justified to prevent Trump from becoming president. Subtleties aside, only about half of each of these two cohorts own guns, and roughly half of the gunowners are Republicans and half are Democrats.

While the absolute number of gun owners who believe in political violence is relatively small and politically somewhat balanced, the potential for catastrophic harm to our nation remains. As Pape pointed out to CBS News, our nation has long been a majority white nation, and it has been transitioning over the past several decades into a minority white nation. These changes will continue for at least another decade or two. But some parts of the country don’t want to change, Pape observes, which has precipitated a crisis in our democracy and an increase in political violence.

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian general and military theorist Karl Von Clausewitz famously observed that war is the continuation of politics by other means. When diplomatic overtures and political negotiations between adversaries break down, the conflict continues – with weapons instead of words. The two realms – the political realm and the military realm – are different in degree but not in kind.

One can certainly point to many historical instances that prove this point. My interest this morning, however, is the extent to which the corollary of Von Clausewitz’s dictum is also true – that politics is the waging of war by other means. The problem is that our democratic political system wasn’t designed, either by the ancient Greeks who invented it or the US founders who implemented it, to accommodate diversity, much less foster it. It was designed to enable the few – educated, landowning men from a relatively homogenous dominant culture – to share equally among themselves the privilege of ruling the many. The idea that a sprawling nation like ours, its land stolen from native inhabitants and its economy made prosperous by the labor of enslaved people, and now populated by diverse populations from around the globe, each with their own histories, their own cultural traditions, their own religious traditions, and their own political proclivities – the idea that such a nation could become really and fully a democracy is an extraordinarily ambitious goal.

For good reason, the attempt to establish a democracy in the United States has often been dubbed “The Great Experiment.” The term originated as a mistranslation of a passage in the book *Democracy in America* by the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville. He visited the U.S. in 1831 to assess the promises and pitfalls of democracy. While he didn’t describe democracy in America as the great experiment, he did say that it was an attempt

to construct society upon a new basis, one that had before been deemed impractical, for which the world had not been prepared by the history of the past.

However new, however unprecedented, however impractical this new form of governance may be, we've made progress. Look back 154 years to 1870, when the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted all male persons the right to vote. Look back 104 years to 1920, when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granted women the right to vote. Look back 60 years to 1964, when the Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, which was extended to include sexual orientation four years ago. Look back nine years to 2015, when gay marriage was legalized in all 50 states. The progress we have made toward fulfilling our nation's promise of equal freedom and equal dignity has been astounding.

It's true that there have been setbacks in the past, and there will be setbacks in the future. There will always be those who oppose freedom's march — and by whatever means necessary. Even so, the progress we have already made should renew our commitment to someday, somehow, someday fulfilling our promise as a nation. No one is truly free until everyone is free.

My question for us this morning concerns not our political role as citizens but rather our political role as people of faith. By what means can we help move our nation forward?

In de Tocqueville's report on his visit to the US, he wrote: "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in the fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits, aflame with righteousness, did I understand the secret of

her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

De Tocqueville’s principal claim in this passage is that America’s political greatness derived from its commitment to the human good as fostered by religion. In more general terms, he was saying that public policies express fundamental values that come from somewhere else. But the basic headline was that America’s political values, which were great, depended upon America’s religious commitments, which were good.

While de Tocqueville correctly observes that democracy at its best serves more fundamental moral or religious values, he’s off the mark in assuming that America’s preachers have always made moral goodness the touchstone of their values. The legacy religious traditions of this nation have a decidedly mixed record when it comes to all sorts of moral issues — slavery, women’s rights, civil rights, gay rights, environmental justice, and so on. Even so, de Tocqueville’s point remains valid: political values express moral values that come from somewhere else.

In our current cultural environment, the market and the media play an outsized role in establishing what Americans value — individual autonomy and collective consumerism. To counter these threats to a shared sense of well-being, I believe that enlightened communities of faith remain essential to democracy. We need communities of spiritual practice to demonstrate ways of living in which each element of creation exists in a beneficial relationship with everything else. The genius of America is that we aspire as a nation to harness the individual freedom that democracy brings to the commitment to the common good that faith and spirituality bring.

In the oldest and best sense of the word, politics is the commitment to seek what’s best — best for individuals and best for

others. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato puts it this way: politics is the art of caring for souls. Given the vicissitudes of life and the constant presence of various physical dangers and risks to well-being, Plato insists that the basis of legitimate political authority is a commitment to care for citizens — promote their good and meet their most important needs.

In this sense, our work as a community of faith is to remind ourselves and our society of this fundamental reality. The care of souls isn't mere spiritual icing atop a political cake made of something else. It's the substance of the cake itself. It's what legitimates political authority in the first place.

Not everyone agrees, of course, which is why we debate policies and hold elections and engage in political struggles. My hope and prayer is that the struggles will remain relatively peaceful — hope that's been bolstered by Susan Katz Keating, the new editor and publisher of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, the magazine for mercenaries. You may have read a recent profile of her in the *New Yorker*.

In the aftermath of the attempted assassination of Trump, the *New Yorker* reports that Keating's violence forecast is remarkably sanguine. "There have not been any follow-on attacks or counterattacks, which I think would have happened by now if this had been an Archduke Ferdinand moment," she says. "I see the hit on Trump as another iteration of the school-shooter, mall-shooter phenomenon, and not as a political flash point. We are not headed for a civil war." Then she adds, "Of course, I could be wrong."

I hope she's not wrong. Even so, the days and weeks and years ahead will be a battle — a battle by other means for the soul of our nation. This battle will take all the energy and focus and determination we can muster — especially those of us who realize

we are not fighting for only half of our nation's citizens, but for everyone. I implore you to fight the good fight.

In so doing, remember always to embody the values we champion — freedom, fairness, dignity, and justice. Our nation will only be great as its citizens exemplify the good. Our mission and our calling is to serve as the vanguard of our nation's best.