

Our Culture of Contempt

The problem in America today is not incivility or intolerance. It's something far worse.

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By Arthur C. Brooks
Mr. Brooks is a scholar of public policy and the president of the American Enterprise Institute.

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I live and work in Washington. But I'm not a politics junkie. To me, politics is like the weather — it changes a lot, people drone on about it constantly, and “good” is mostly subjective. I like winter, you like summer; you're a liberal, I'm a conservative. In the 2012 presidential election season, my wife and I had a bumper sticker custom-made for our Volvo that read “Vegans for Romney” just to see the reaction of other Washington drivers.

My passion is ideas, especially policy ideas. While politics is like the weather, ideas are like the climate. Climate has an impact on weather, but they're different things. Similarly, ideas affect politics, but they aren't the same. When done right, policy analysis, like climate science, favors nerds with Ph.D.s. And that's me. For 20 years, I've been a professor of public policy and president of a think tank in Washington. (For a decade before that I made my living as a musician, but not the cool kind — I played in a symphony orchestra.)

But even a climatologist has to think about the weather when a hurricane comes ashore. And that's what's happening today. Political differences are ripping our country apart, swamping my big, fancy policy ideas. Political scientists have found that our nation is more polarized than it has been at any time since the Civil War. One in six Americans has stopped talking to a family member or close friend because of the 2016 election. Millions of people organize their social lives and their news exposure along ideological lines to avoid people with opposing viewpoints. What's our problem?

A 2014 article in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on “motive attribution asymmetry” — the assumption that your ideology is based in love, while your opponent's is based in hate — suggests an answer. The researchers found that the average Republican and the average Democrat today suffer from a level of motive attribution asymmetry that is comparable with that of Palestinians and Israelis. Each side thinks it is driven by benevolence, while the other is evil and motivated by hatred — and is therefore an enemy with whom one cannot negotiate or compromise.

People often say that our problem in America today is incivility or intolerance. This is incorrect. Motive attribution asymmetry leads to something far worse: contempt, which is a noxious brew of anger and disgust. And not just contempt for other people's ideas, but also for other people. In the words of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, contempt is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.”

The sources of motive attribution asymmetry are easy to identify: divisive politicians, screaming heads on television, hateful columnists, angry campus activists and seemingly everything on the contempt machines of social media. This “outrage industrial complex” works by catering to just one ideological side, creating a species of addiction by feeding our desire to believe that we are completely right and that the other side is made up of knaves and fools. It strokes our own biases while affirming our worst assumptions about those who disagree with us.

Contempt makes political compromise and progress impossible. It also makes us unhappy as people. According to the American Psychological Association, the feeling of rejection, so often experienced after being treated with contempt, increases anxiety, depression and sadness. It also damages the contemptuous person by stimulating two stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline. In ways both public and personal, contempt causes us deep harm.

While we are addicted to contempt, we at the same time hate it, just as addicts hate the drugs that are ruining their lives. In an important study of political attitudes, the nonprofit More in Common found in 2018 that 93 percent of Americans say they are tired of how divided we have become as a country. Large majorities say privately that they believe in the importance of compromise, reject the absolutism of the extreme wings of both parties and are not motivated by partisan loyalty.

So what can each of us do to make things better? You might be tempted to say we need to find ways to disagree less, but that is incorrect. Disagreement is good because competition is good. Competition lies behind democracy in politics and markets in the economy, which — bounded by the rule of law and morality — bring about excellence. Just as in politics and economics, we need a robust “competition of ideas” — a.k.a. disagreement. Disagreement helps us innovate, improve and find the truth.

What we need is not to disagree less, but to disagree better. And that starts when you turn away the rhetorical dope peddlers — the powerful people on your own side who are profiting from the culture of contempt. As satisfying as it can feel to hear that your foes are irredeemable, stupid and deviant, remember: When you find yourself hating something, someone is making money or winning elections or getting more famous and powerful. Unless a leader is actually teaching you something you didn't know or expanding your worldview and moral outlook, you are being used.

Next, each of us can make a commitment never to treat others with contempt, even if we believe they deserve it. This might sound like a call for magnanimity, but it is just as much an appeal to self-interest. Contempt makes persuasion impossible — no one has ever been hated into agreement, after all — so its expression is either petty self-indulgence or cheap virtue signaling, neither of which wins converts.

What if you have been guilty of saying contemptuous things about or to others? Perhaps you have hurt someone with your harsh words, mockery or dismissiveness. I have, and I'm not proud of it. Start the road to recovery from this harmful addiction, and make amends wherever possible. It will set you free.

Finally, we should see the contempt around us as what it truly is: an opportunity, not a threat. If you are on social media, on a college campus or in any place other than a cave by yourself, you will be treated with contempt very soon. This is a chance to change at least one heart — yours. Respond with warmheartedness and good humor. You are guaranteed to be happier. If that also affects the contemptuous person (or bystanders), it will be to the good.

It is easy to feel helpless in the current political environment, but I believe that is unwarranted. While we might not like the current weather, together we can change the climate to reward leaders — and be the leaders — who uplift and unite, not denigrate and divide. Watch: The weather will start to improve, and that will make America greater. I am dedicating the rest of my professional life to this task.

Mr. Brooks is president of the American Enterprise Institute and author of the forthcoming book “Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America From the Culture of Contempt,” from which this essay is adapted.

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