

The American Civil War, Part II

The nation is deeply divided, with each side seeing the other as “the enemy.”

By Thomas L. Friedman, Opinion Columnist – October 2, 2018



Protesters in a hallway tried to disrupt a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing last week.

Damon Winter/The New York Times

I began my journalism career covering a civil war in Lebanon. I never thought I'd end my career covering a civil war in America.

We may not be there yet, but if we don't turn around now, we will surely get where we're going — which was best described by Senator Jeff Flake on Monday: “Tribalism is ruining us. It is tearing our country apart. It is no way for sane adults to act.”

Sure, we've experienced bouts of intense social strife since the American Civil War of 1861. I grew up with the assassination of Martin Luther King and raging street battles over civil rights and Vietnam. And yet this moment feels worse — much less violent, blessedly, but much more broadly divisive.

There is a deep breakdown happening between us, between us and our institutions and between us and our president.

We can't find common ground on which to respectfully disagree; the other side is "the enemy." We shout at each other on television, unfollow each other on Facebook and fire verbal mortars at each other on Twitter — and now everyone is on the digital battlefield, not just politicians.



Senator Jeff Flake this week said: "Tribalism is ruining us. It is tearing our country apart."

Erin Schaff for The New York Times

Across the land, before dinner parties or block parties, the refrain "*I hope none of them will be there*" is uttered with increasing frequency, referring no longer to people of another race or religion — bad enough — but to people from a different political party.

And nothing is sacred. Brett Kavanaugh defended himself the other day with the kind of nasty partisan attacks and ugly conspiracy theories that you'd expect only from a talk radio host — never from a would-be justice of the Supreme Court. Who can expect fairness from him now?

And this fracturing is all happening with a soaring stock market and falling unemployment. Can you imagine what it will be like when we face the next recession?

This also feels worse than the divisions over Vietnam and civil rights because there were three huge forces holding us together back then that are missing today: a growing middle class, the Cold War and a sane Republican Party.

For much of the period after World War II, most Americans were sure that they'd be in the middle class and that their kids would follow. Strong unions, a slower pace of technological change and only limited globalization meant an average worker, with middle skills, could be middle class. There was something called a "high-wage, middle-skilled job."

Also, the fact that the Soviets held a nuclear gun to our heads meant we had to stick together to some degree. It made compromise in Washington a necessity, not a luxury, on many issues.

But in the early 2000s, most high-wage, middle-skilled jobs disappeared. Now there is only a high-wage, high-skilled job and a low-wage, low-skilled job. And that has fractured the middle class and left a lot of people behind. The end of the Cold War has meant that no foreign enemy cements us together anymore, save for a brief period after 9/11. And the G.O.P. has lost its way.

That's why our generation's civil war is so hard to bring to a truce. There are so many fronts. There's the battle between those who feel the American dream has slipped from their grasp and those who can easily pass it on to their kids. There's the one between rural small-town Americans and "globalized" city slickers, who, the small-town folks are sure, look down upon them. There's the fight between the white working-class Americans who feel that their identities are being lost in an increasingly minority-majority country and the Americans who embrace multiculturalism. And there's the struggle between men who believe that their gender still confers certain powers and privileges and the women challenging that. There are so many fields of dispute.

And not only have we lost the buffers and cushions we once had, but a generation of leaders has come along, led by Donald Trump, who have made fueling our divisions their business model.

In essence, we've moved from "partisanship," which still allowed for political compromises in the end, "to tribalism," which does not, explained political scientist Norman Ornstein, co-author, with Thomas Mann, of the book "It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism." In a tribal world it's rule or die, compromise is a sin, enemies must be crushed and power must be held at all costs.

It would be easy to blame both sides equally for this shift, noted Ornstein, but it is just not true. After the end of the Cold War, he said, "tribal politics were introduced by Newt Gingrich when he came to Congress 40 years ago," and then perfected by Mitch McConnell during the Barack Obama presidency, when McConnell declared his intention to use his G.O.P. Senate caucus to make Obama fail as a strategy for getting Republicans back in power.

They did this even though that meant scuttling Obama's health care plan, which was based on Republican ideas, and even though that meant scuttling long-held G.O.P. principles — like fiscal discipline, a strong Atlantic alliance, distrust of Russian intentions and a balanced approach to immigration — to attract Trump's base.

Flake, the departing Arizona Republican, called this out this week: "We Republicans have given in to the terrible tribal impulse that first mistakes our opponents for our enemies. And then we become seized with the conviction that we must destroy that enemy."

The shift in the G.O.P. to tribalism culminated with McConnell denying Obama his constitutional right to appoint a Supreme Court justice with almost a year left in Obama's term. [As NPR reported:](#) "Supreme Court picks have often been controversial. There have been contentious hearings and floor

debates and contested votes. But to ignore the nominee entirely, as if no vacancy existed? There was no precedent for such an action since the period around the Civil War.”



Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, has been an opponent of bipartisan governance.

Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times

In a speech in August 2016, McConnell boasted: “One of my proudest moments was when I looked Barack Obama in the eye and I said, ‘Mr. President, you will not fill the Supreme Court vacancy.’”

That was a turning point. That was cheating. What McConnell did broke something very big. Now Democrats will surely be tempted to do the same when they get the power to do so, and that is how a great system of government, built on constitutional checks and balances, strong institutions and basic norms of decency, unravels.

My friend retired Marine Col. Mark Mykleby stopped by for a chat after the Kavanaugh hearing last week, and as we bemoaned this moment, he remarked: “When I walked out of the Pentagon after 28 years in uniform, I never thought I’d say this, but what is going on politically in America today is a far graver threat than any our nation faced during my career, including the Soviet Union. And it’s because this threat is here and now, right at home, and it’s coming from within us. I guess the irony of being a great nation is the only power who can bring you down is yourself.”

When I look at all the people today who are propelling their political careers and fattening their wallets by dividing us, I cannot help but wonder: Do these people go home at night to some offshore island where none of this matters? Do these people really think their kids aren’t going to pay for the

venom they sell and spread? Don't worry, I know the answer: They aren't thinking and they aren't going to stop it.

What stops it? When a majority of Americans, who are still center-left and center-right, come together and vote only for lawmakers who have the courage to demand a stop to it — now, right now, not just when they're leaving office or on their death beds.



Thomas L. Friedman is the foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist. He joined the paper in 1981, and has won three Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of seven books, including “From Beirut to Jerusalem,” which won the National Book Award.