

Only a United States Can Be Great

If America is to be great, it must be united. As the old (and ever true) adage declares, united we stand, divided we fall.

But how can we be united when we are being torn apart at the seams? How can we be united when we are polarizing more by the minute?

Think back to the Supreme Court confirmation votes of Harry Blackmun (1970, 94-0), John Paul Stevens (1975, 98-0), Sandra Day O'Connor (1981, 99-0), Antonin Scalia (1986, 98-0), Anthony Kennedy (1987, 97-0), David Souter (1990, 90-9) and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1993, 96-3).

Who can imagine a vote like this today? (Yes, remarkably, Justice Scalia was confirmed without a dissenting vote.)

Even the two nominees of President Obama made it through with relative ease, despite their extremely liberal views (Sonia Sotomayor in 2009, 68-31 and Elena Kagan in 2010, 63-35).

Compare that to Neil Gorsuch (2017, 54-45) and, worse still, to the circus-like hearings for Brett Kavanaugh, which illustrate just how debased our culture has become.

It's true, of course, that Clarence Thomas barely made it in (1991, 52-48), and Robert Bork was, well, borked (1987, 42-58). But what was the exception to the rule a few years ago is now the rule.

We are deeply divided as a nation, racially, ethnically, politically, spiritually and culturally. And while we will also have a left wing and a right wing, there can be at least a semblance of civility and respect in the midst of our differences. All of that seems lost today.

Obviously, it will take something massive to bring real unity to the nation—like a massive spiritual awakening or, God forbid, a massive national calamity, forcing us to stand together or die.

But that doesn't mean we can't do our part to be peacemakers rather than troublemakers.

So, let's start with each of us, with where we live and work and communicate.

It's one thing to speak the truth. It's another thing to be obnoxious. It's one thing to have an opinion. It's another thing to be arrogant.

Yet all too often, when we share our views, our goal is to sound good, to get attention, perhaps even to spark controversy, rather than to make a positive impact. And to what purpose?

So, we preach to the choir, we stir up the "haters" and we pat ourselves on the back. But have we done anything to advance our cause? Have we tried to influence those who differ with us? Have we been reasonable and rational and relevant?

There's an interesting text in the New Testament where Paul gave instructions to pastors. He wrote, "the servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but must be gentle toward all people, able to teach, patient, in gentleness instructing those in opposition. Perhaps God will grant them repentance to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Perhaps we can learn something from this for ourselves? Perhaps there are some principles all of us can apply?

There's a time for public rebuke. There's a place for biting sarcasm. But there's never a time or for self-righteous snobbery. There's never a place for small-minded insults.

Being petty will not elevate others. Being stupid will not dignify the debate.

Let others throw dirt. You reply with calmness and clarity, exposing their error, demolishing their lies and showing them a better way.

Our last president, Barack Obama, was a powerful orator who could rally his base to action. At the same time, his use of identity politics alienated masses of others, deepening our national divide.

Our current president, Donald Trump, stands as a champion for many Americans who feel they have lost their voice and their country. Yet his personality and his methods are terribly divisive, and so the rift grows wider.

In Washington, politicians on the left and the right lash out against each other, while our media has gone full-blown tabloid in their reporting. And so, it's up to you and me to make a positive difference.

I suggest you spend some time with an ideological opponent, asking them to share their viewpoint with you. (Sadly, to some, this is too risky; to others, it smacks of compromise or weakness; to others still, it's not worth their time.)

If you show genuine interest when you interact with your opponents, you'll accomplish two things. First, you'll better understand their position. Second, you earn an open door to share your views as well.

And before you post or comment or speak, I suggest you ask yourself if your words are calculated to inflame or to educate, to insult or to enlighten, to make you look good or to change the minds of others.

You might also ask yourself if you're treating others the way you would want them to treat you. (Didn't someone say

somewhere something like, “Love your neighbor as yourself”?)

I’m aware, of course, that writing an article like this might not get that many clicks. Not enough snark. Not enough bite. Too nice. Too polite.

But the goal of writing articles (at least for me) is not to get more clicks. It’s to make the maximum possible impact on the maximum number of people, believing that if we emphasize the former, the latter will take care of itself.

In that same spirit, I encourage you never to underestimate the power of your words and your life. No matter how dark it is, your light will make a difference.