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# Sources of Conflict in a Divided America

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## **Sources of Conflict in a Divided America** **By James R. Holbrook<sup>1</sup>**

The Sixties and early Seventies were a time of great conflict in America, including the assassinations of JFK, MLK, and RFK; the civil rights movement; the Vietnam War and our invasion of Cambodia; and Watergate and Nixon's forced resignation. Today we seem to be in another period of great conflict, including nationally about the 2016 presidential campaigns and election, and locally about our state's efforts to control federal public lands. This blog post discusses sources of current conflict in a divided America.

### **Differing Worldviews Are Factors<sup>2</sup>**

Liberals and conservatives do not just see things differently—they *are* different. Psychologists have found that conservatives are fundamentally more anxious than liberals, which may be why they typically desire stability, structure, and clear answers even to complicated questions. However, as anxiety swings up or down, political views can shift. When people feel safe and secure, they become more liberal; when they feel threatened, they become more conservative. Studies have shown, for example, that Americans of all political persuasions became more conservative in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Liberals value two ethical principles in politics: caring for people who are vulnerable and fairness. Fairness for liberals tends to mean sharing resources equally. Liberals value democracy and recognize that maintaining democracy requires ensuring that the rights of weaker members of society are respected and that government has an obligation to limit societal harm, such as that caused by pollution.

Conservatives value two different ethical principles in politics: loyalty and authority, which are values helpful for maintaining a stable society. Conservatives also care about fairness, but fairness to them means proportionality, i.e., people should get what they deserve based on the amount of effort they exert. Conservatives recognize that democracy is a huge achievement and that maintaining the social order requires laws, institutions, customs, and religion.

In a fair and stable society, both worldviews are valuable and necessary, because fairness promotes stability, and stability enables fairness. However, in our hyper-partisan society today, these worldviews seem very much at odds.

### **Confirmation Biases Are Factors**

“Confirmation biases” are our tendency to distort our perceptions of experience so that they are consistent with our worldview. We start with an attitude, e.g., a belief that young drivers are discourteous and dangerous. That becomes our worldview. Our brains then ignore information

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Emily Laber-Warren, *Unconscious Reactions Separate Liberals and Conservatives*, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN (September 1, 2012), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/calling-truce-political-wars/>.

that is inconsistent with our worldview and selectively attend to or notice only information which supports our beliefs. For example, my brain will notice or attend to instances of teens driving dangerously, while ignoring all other instances of safe driving practiced by young drivers.<sup>3</sup>

If I believe that conservatives want tax cuts for the rich at the expense of the working class, whereas liberals are compassionate problem solvers who care about working families, my brain will seek out congruent observations. I see what I believe. My brain automatically, independent of my intention, filters information to be consistent with my worldview. I compound my bias by restricting my sources of information, e.g., I am likely to get my political news by watching CNN and reading *The Washington Post*, rather than by watching Fox News and reading *The Wall Street Journal*.

Our confirmation biases result in “us” versus “them” tribalism which hardens our worldviews and diminishes our capacity and willingness to feel empathy for “Others.”

### **Unmitigated Adverse Consequences of Globalization and Deindustrialization Are Factors**

Globalization has increased cross-border travel and international wealth. However, globalization has failed to mitigate the disruptions for the losers from international trade. Larry Summers described globalization as a project “carried out by elites, for elites, with little consideration for the interests of ordinary people.”

International trade and investment agreements have made it easier for manufacturing firms to move production out of the U.S. This has decimated American manufacturing production in the past 20 years. More than 80,000 U.S. manufacturing plants were lost in the 15-year period from 1998 to 2013. These lost manufacturing jobs also paid much higher wages than most other jobs created since the Great Recession. For example, the United States exports large amounts of low-wage agricultural commodities to China, and we import enormous quantities of electronics, an industrial sector where U.S. wages once were much higher before those jobs were lost.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. economy lost 8.7 million jobs from the start of the Great Recession in December 2007 to early 2010. The unemployment rate did not fall back to 5.0 percent, where it was at the start of the recession, until late 2015. Long-term unemployment reached much higher levels and persisted much longer than in any previous period since the late 1940s. Growth in workers’ earnings has been modest. Over the course of the economic recovery, real (inflation-adjusted) wages have hardly grown and have failed to keep up with increases in workers’ productivity. The share of national income going to profits has increased relative to that going to wages.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Dr. John M. Seaman, *Recognize your confirmation biases, and we’ll all be better off*, THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE (January 1, 2017), <http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/4762180-155/op-ed-recognize-your-confirmation-biases-and>.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Robert E. Scott, *Are Trade Agreements Good for Americans?*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (March 17, 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/03/17/are-trade-agreements-good-for-americans>.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *Chart Book: The Legacy of the Great Recession*, CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES (December 7, 2016), <http://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/chart-book-the-legacy-of-the-great-recession>.

Nearly seventy percent of working-age Americans lack a college degree. Many of them feel the establishment elite in both political parties has failed to provide, or even offer, them the opportunity of having a life of meaning, respect, and self-worth. They live in a world in which no one seems to care whether they and their children and grandchildren will make it or not. They especially don't see how the Democratic Party has offered them anything to change their plight. They still believe in the American Dream, but they feel it is no longer within their reach.<sup>6</sup>

Drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicide are “diseases of despair.” They are symptoms of the social decay that has been caused by deindustrialization, especially in the Rust Belt and in New England. People often turn to pills, syringes, and the bottle when they lose hope, when they don't have the means to live without anxiety, or when they don't get the dignity that comes from meaningful work.<sup>7</sup>

A recent federal government report shows life expectancy fell for the U.S. white population, due to an increase in death rates from suicides, drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, and chronic liver disease. Such a decline in life expectancy is unusual for wealthy nations, where people tend to live longer with each successive generation, as health care and public safety improve and the standard of living rises. There also are wide disparities in life expectancy between poor and wealthy U.S. counties.<sup>8</sup>

Another economic consequence is Millennials are falling behind their Baby Boomer parents. A study conducted by economists and sociologists from Stanford, Harvard, and the University of California determined that in 1970, 92 percent of American 30-year-olds earned more than their parents did at a similar age. In 2014, that number had fallen to just 51 percent.<sup>9</sup> Millennials earn 20 percent less than Boomers did at the same age, despite being better educated.<sup>10</sup> Millennials have half the net worth of Boomers. Their home ownership is lower, and their student debt is drastically higher. White Millennials—who still earn much more than their black or Latino peers—have seen their incomes decline the most relative to Boomers. The upwardly-mobile possibilities of the American Dream are harder and harder to achieve for Millennials. In fact, some white Millennials appear stuck in a pattern of downward mobility, with their median income decreasing 21 percent.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Atul Gawande, *Health of the Nation*, THE NEW YORKER (November 21, 2016), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america#gawande>.

<sup>7</sup> James Hohmann, *Trump over performed the most in counties with the highest drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates*, THE WASHINGTON POST (December 9, 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm\\_term=.c2a612cc646a&wpisrc=nl\\_politics-pm&wpmm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm_term=.c2a612cc646a&wpisrc=nl_politics-pm&wpmm=1).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Betsy McKay, *Life Expectancy for White Americans Declines*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (April 20, 2016), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/life-expectancy-for-white-americans-declines-1461124861>.

<sup>9</sup> James Hohmann, *Trump over performed the most in counties with the highest drug, alcohol and suicide mortality rates*, THE WASHINGTON POST (December 9, 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm\\_term=.c2a612cc646a&wpisrc=nl\\_politics-pm&wpmm=1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2016/12/09/daily-202-trump-over-performed-the-most-in-counties-with-the-highest-drug-alcohol-and-suicide-mortality-rates/584a2a59e9b69b7e58e45f2e/?utm_term=.c2a612cc646a&wpisrc=nl_politics-pm&wpmm=1).

<sup>10</sup> See, *Millennials Are Falling Behind Their Boomer Parents*, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS (January 13, 2017), [http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US\\_MILLENNIALS\\_LAGGING\\_BOOMERS?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT](http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_MILLENNIALS_LAGGING_BOOMERS?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT).

U.S. Census Bureau data show these effects. In Utah, for example, more people are doubling up in housing to save money, there has been no increase of foreign-born residents as immigration decreases, and there is more poverty. Pam Perlich, director of demographics at the University of Utah's Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, said the data show that Utah and 16 of its counties had statistically significant increases in the size of households. Perlich noted that the increase came while births in the state were decreasing, which means "it's a multigenerational doubling-up in households," likely to save money. Perlich said, "About a third of young adults 18-34 are living with their parents." Our state also showed a statistically significant jump in the poverty rate, from 10.8 percent to 12.3 percent.<sup>11</sup>

### **Resentment and Despair in Rural America Are Factors**

Republicans have become increasingly less-educated and more rural. Democrats have become increasingly more educated and more urban. Whereas younger, better-educated Americans tend to live in major metropolitan areas that are increasingly diverse, white working-class Americans have been leaving those areas, either because they can't afford to live there or they don't want that kind of lifestyle. In 2014, Andrew Levison wrote in *The New Republic*, "Today, two-thirds of white workers live in small towns, the urban fringes around metropolitan areas or rural areas; only a third remain in central cities or suburbs.

Many rural Americans believe their traditional way of life is either lost or fast disappearing. *Washington Post* reporters have written a year-long series of articles called "Unnatural Causes: Sick and dying in small-town America," which set out to explore *why* death rates are rising so much for whites in midlife, especially for women. For millions of people, the American Dream continues to fade. Working hard and playing by the rules in this country no longer ensure that you'll get ahead. That social compact is broken. Downward mobility is too often the norm.

<sup>12</sup>

### **Racial Tensions Are Factors**

In 2008 Barack Obama released his short-form birth certificate from the Hawaii Department of Health. In 2011, Donald Trump in television interviews began to question President Obama's birthplace, saying "I'm starting to think that he was not born here." In 2012, Trump said on Twitter, "an 'extremely credible source'" had informed him that Obama's birth certificate was "a fraud." In 2014, Trump invited hackers to "please hack Obama's college records (destroyed?) and check 'place of birth.'" He kept this false story alive on social media and on TV, e.g., on ABC's *The View*, he asked "Why doesn't he show his birth certificate?" and he told Fox News' *On the Record*, "I want to see his birth certificate." Not until late in his presidential campaign did

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<sup>11</sup> Lee Davidson, *Census: Some recession effects still linger in Utah*, THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE (December 8, 2016), <http://www.sltrib.com/home/4685038-155/census-some-recession-effects-still-linger>.

<sup>12</sup> See Dan Balz, *Democrats search for a path back into rural America's good graces* THE WASHINGTON POST (December 10, 2016), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/democrats-search-for-a-path-back-into-rural-americas-good-graces/2016/12/10/8bc92fea-bef8-11e6-e79-bec72d34f8c9\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.198666a5e593](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/democrats-search-for-a-path-back-into-rural-americas-good-graces/2016/12/10/8bc92fea-bef8-11e6-e79-bec72d34f8c9_story.html?utm_term=.198666a5e593).

Trump say unapologetically, “President Obama was born in the United States—period.” But he added, falsely, that Hillary Clinton had started the birther myth.<sup>13</sup>

White Republican CNN analyst Jeffrey Lord contends, “There are no people of color in this country. There are only Americans.” He accused Democrats of engaging in “racist” identity politics, e.g., for supporting the Black Lives Matter movement rather than white police. He has repeatedly defended Donald Trump’s racist remarks, and Lord claims that the real bigots are people who criticize the president.<sup>14</sup>

In his book *Born Fighting*, author Jim Webb praises the independence and patriotism of the Scots-Irish who settled in the mountainous South. Webb emphasizes that these Scots-Irish were not slave owners and, although they fought for the Confederacy, they did not fight to preserve slavery. However, during and after Reconstruction, anti-populist Southern political leaders “knew full well that as long as poor whites and poor blacks were blaming each other for their misery, the prospects were small that they would join together and address their mutual plight along class lines, rather than racial lines.”<sup>15</sup> Thereafter, dirt-poor Scots-Irish farmers knew that, “no matter how poor one became, when he went into town at least he could drink out of a ‘Whites Only’ water fountain, use a ‘Whites Only’ urinal, and when traveling could sit in a ‘Whites Only’ railroad car.”<sup>16</sup> By pitting races against each other and destroying their combined political power, laws in America “allowed certain privileges to flow to a few dominant groups at the expense of the many.”<sup>17</sup> Civil rights legislation overturned legal segregation, but it has not changed persistent racial prejudice in America.

Recent Democratic focus on income equality for all middle-class Americans has awakened old white working-class resentments. The white working class understandably has lost faith with a government that refused to address the widening inequality in their lives, and in the policymakers and pundits who for decades have ignored their plight. In November 2016, they cast their votes for Donald Trump with passion and purpose. They also added weight to the American burden of old hatreds.<sup>18</sup>

For Democrats, class and race create a dilemma: if they talk about class, they risk seeming to focus only on whites. If they talk about race, they risk seeming to focus on white racism. President Obama said of this dilemma, “when there is a conversation about the police and African-Americans, and conflict between those two, everybody goes to their respective corners. That is an area that just triggers the deepest stereotypes and assumptions—on both sides. ... [I]n

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<sup>13</sup> See Michael Barbaro, *Donald Trump Clung to ‘Birther’ Lie for Years, and Still Isn’t Apologetic*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (September 16, 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/us/politics/donald-trump-obama-birther.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Alana Horowitz Satlin, *Jeffrey Lord Actually Said ‘There Are No People Of Color In This Country’*, THE HUFFINGTON POST (December 7, 2016), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jeffrey-lord-the-worst\\_us\\_5847e1a5e4b0b9feb0da47ff](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jeffrey-lord-the-worst_us_5847e1a5e4b0b9feb0da47ff).

<sup>15</sup> Jim Webb, *BORN FIGHTING: HOW THE SCOTS-IRISH SHAPED AMERICA* (Broadway Books, 2004), at 246-47.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 246.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 247.

<sup>18</sup> See Jill Lepore, *Wars Within*, THE NEW YORKER (November 21, 2016), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america#lepore..>

talking about racial issues, particularly when it pertains to the criminal-justice system, the people just shut down. They don't listen."<sup>19</sup>

White male Trump Democrats are upset about lost jobs and declining incomes. They resent their shrinking social status. They feel embittered by the opportunities offered to minorities, immigrants, and women, but not to them.<sup>20</sup> Their real antagonists, however, are the forces of economics and class which they cannot change: a deindustrializing society and a downwardly mobile workforce, the collapse of lifetime corporate employment and middle-class security, and ever increasing economic inequality between the rich and everyone else.

On February 4, 1968, two months before he was murdered, Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed the issue of America's racial divide in his "Drum Major Instinct" sermon.<sup>21</sup> The drum major instinct, according to King, is the all-too-human "desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first. And it is something that runs the whole gamut of life," including in racial prejudice. When he was in jail in Birmingham, he told his white jailers, "You ought to be marching with us. You're just as poor as Negroes. ... You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor, because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, ... [while] you're so poor you can't send your children to school. You ought to be out here marching with every one of us every time we have a march."

## Conclusion

The physicist David Bohm, in his book *On Dialogue*, describes our current hyper-partisan inability to communicate with one another about the conflicts we face:<sup>22</sup>

Different groups ... are not actually able to listen to each other. As a result, the very attempt to improve communication leads frequently to yet more confusion, and the consequent sense of frustration inclines people ever further toward aggression and violence, rather than toward mutual understanding and trust. ...

[C]ommunication can lead to the creation of something new only if people are able freely to listen to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other. Each has to be interested primarily in truth and coherence, so that he is ready to drop his old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different, when this is called for.

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<sup>19</sup> David Remnick, *It Happened Here*, THE NEW YORKER (November 28, 2016), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/28/obama-reckons-with-a-trump-presidency>.

<sup>20</sup> See Susan Faludi, *Trumped and Abandoned: The Angry White Male in the Political Wilderness*, THE BAFFLER, [http://thebaffler.com/salvos/trumped-abandoned-faludi?utm\\_source=hs\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=38743906&\\_hsenc=p2ANqtz--rxnBCP1LVngsC1cY9zLkCpNb32DtouMfX2PR-Lg8Pm1YDLBo6-BwubsjhEWbxHC6dUxO80VnkOnp1zryGV92OdKCSWw&\\_hsmi=38743906](http://thebaffler.com/salvos/trumped-abandoned-faludi?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=38743906&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--rxnBCP1LVngsC1cY9zLkCpNb32DtouMfX2PR-Lg8Pm1YDLBo6-BwubsjhEWbxHC6dUxO80VnkOnp1zryGV92OdKCSWw&_hsmi=38743906).

<sup>21</sup> [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_the\\_drum\\_major\\_instinct/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/).

<sup>22</sup> David Bohm, *ON DIALOGUE* (Routledge, 1996).

Those of us who have dedicated our lives to the work of conflict resolution must find the willingness in ourselves to listen to and understand those with whom we strongly disagree. This may lead to creative interpersonal dialogue and perhaps to positive societal change. At a minimum, we will have newfound respect and empathy for “Others” who are our fellow passengers during our short time on Spaceship Earth.