

"Respectful Political Negotiations"

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Today we live in a highly charged and politically divisive nation. The strong emotions that drive this divisiveness will no doubt persist through the coming election, and likely grow more intense and acrimonious the closer we get to voting. Strong political disagreements are not new in America's history, yet lately it seems we have lost the ability to speak to one another in a respectful manner, one that helps suppress the more extreme among us from dominating the discussion.

Of great concern is the growing penchant for each side to affix negative labels to those with whom they disagree. This is particularly prevalent in the social media space. Such labels seem purposefully meant to demean, belittle, and demonize the other side. There seems to be a trend to use a broad brush to paint those we politically disagree with by characterizing them in highly derogatory terms. Such derogatory characterizations allow us to lump opponents together in a category that we can easily dismiss. This habit is most prevalent among the most ardent and emotionally aroused individuals on both sides. If you believe all Democrats are bad people, you likely use

terms like snowflake, libtard, socialist, or anarchist. If you believe all Republicans are bad people, you likely use the terms like misogynist, bigot, neo-nazi, gun nut, or others.

Clearly both conservatives and liberals have fringe elements that often behave in ways that subject them to valid criticism, yet do they really represent the mainstream of their respective parties? Interestingly, it seems that both sides of the political debate readily dismiss the influence of their party's own fringe elements, while fully embracing the belief that the other side is unified behind its fringe elements. Are all the people protesting against racial injustice part of ANTIFA? Do all police officers engage in excessive force against people of color? Are people concerned with border security all bigots? Is every supporter of gun ownership a nut who brandishes an assault weapon in public? The answer to these and other like questions is clearly no. Unfortunately, the use of such broad characterizations only blocks respectful discussion of the issues.

So how do we undertake efforts to lower inflammatory rhetoric and find ways to converse in a more civil manner, even if we remain far apart in our views and beliefs? The answer lies in thoughtful engagement with those with whom we disagree. We need to take the time to listen to the views of others, find agreement where we can, and if necessary agree to disagree in a respectful manner.

Most importantly, we need to stop applying broad derogatory labels to those with whom we disagree . In practice, neither all conservatives nor all liberals believe the same things or support the same activities, therefore, we should avoid lumping them together as a monolithic group. After all, one can support police reform without being anti-police. One can also criticize rioters and looters and still be sympathetic toward peaceful protestors. Issues are rarely black or white. Complex issues are almost always gray and nuanced.

During my FBI negotiation career there were two examples that particularly illustrate and support such an open minded approach. In 1996, three years after the tragic Waco incident, my team negotiated with the Freemen, an anti-government group in Montana who had committed various local, state, and federal felonies. For most of the 85 day siege, the Freemen refused to even speak directly with the FBI. They did not believe in our legal jurisdiction and were suspicious of our intent. In response, and with the negotiation team leading the strategy, we used trusted intermediaries to slowly open up a channel of direct communications with the Freemen. More than halfway through the siege we finally met the Freemen face to face. In that meeting our goal was simply to listen and seek to understand their beliefs and concerns without dictating to them what we wanted them to do. This helped create a respectful and positive engagement that eventually led to a peaceful outcome,

even though our beliefs and legal interpretations remained far apart.

In 2000, the FBI was asked to remove several groups of angry protestors who opposed the US Navy's continued use of Vieques Island in Puerto Rico as a bombing range. The Navy viewed the islands continuing use as having vital national security interests. Instead of proceeding in an aggressive clearing operation using the element of surprise and overwhelming force, we instead crafted a calmer peaceful negotiated approach. Spanish speaking negotiators on my team wearing casual street clothes rather than riot gear, calmly approached each group and engaged in a calm and thoughtful discussion about their concerns. FBI negotiators were able to voice legitimate safety concerns for the protestors who had occupied parts of the island where unexploded ordinance presented a significant safety hazard. Ultimately, this calm respectful approach gained their full compliance with no violent resistance and all protestors were safely removed without incident.

Like the Freeman, the Vieques protestors held very negative views about the authorities and disagreed with the governments goals, yet with thoughtful engagement, both groups appreciated the respectful manner in which they were listened to and how they were treated. This gained their full cooperation. Both incident examples, and there are many others from my negotiation career,

showcase the importance of lowering emotions, being willing to listen, being respectful, and seeking cooperation.

Some politicians may see benefit in dividing us and stirring up support amongst constituents that feel passionate about various issues. It is up to us as informed citizens not to let them use us as pawns they can manipulate to gain political power. We should not allow ourselves to be lured into attacking everyone and everything that is not in lock step with our own thinking.

Our great nation was conceived through compromise. We should value those politicians, and those individuals in our lives, who are willing to thoughtfully discuss and acknowledge different points of view. While such an approach does not guarantee agreement, it also does not equate to weakness or capitulation. It simply means we are mature enough to realize not everyone shares our strong beliefs, and that's okay. We should still seek common ground wherever we can. If we can avoid attacks and demonization we have the best chance to obtain understanding, and that is the pathway toward finding compromise where we work cooperatively to advance our democracy and build a better world.