

# Capitol mob was decades in the making

Last Wednesday's terrorist attack on our nation's capital was the tragic, but inevitable, culmination of four decades of growing division in our nation.

Beginning with Ronald Reagan's declaration that government was the problem, not the solution, a growing number of Americans have come to believe just that. They may have misread his intent, which might well have been to express that government is sometimes the problem and instead came to believe it is always the problem.

Regardless, accompanying that belief have been many negatives, including a growing attitude of "my president or your president," not "our president."

I'm not sure when I first heard the actual phrase "your president," but suspect it was during the Clinton years.

President Bill Clinton has been judged in hindsight as having done a competent job, but during his tenure, his personal moral failings were deemed repugnant by many Americans and provided ammunition for his critics. Back then, from Republican friends came, "Look what your president has done now."

During the George W. Bush years, it was Democrats' turn to declare, "Your president is determined to go to war." The anger associated with the Supreme Court ruling in Bush vs. Gore hardened the feelings of "your or mine" even more during Bush's second term.

And then came Barack Obama. The remarkable ascendancy to the presidency of a black American frightened and angered many white Americans. Rather than a "post racial" age, Obama's election pulled off the scab that covered the nation's racist sore and "your president, not mine" became

a battle cry.

All of which and more was preparation for Donald Trump, who ascended to office partially on the "birther" lie that his predecessor was not even a native American.

Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama had all professed to represent all Americans, and I believe that each of them meant it, even as the country was becoming more noticeably divided during their terms of office. Not so with President Trump. He has never pretended to represent all Americans. His public comments, both in social media and to adoring supporters during numerous rallies, has set the tone of friends and enemies, not fellow Americans.

And as the past four years have progressed, his followers have been encouraged to believe he is "my president," and his opponents have increasingly been convinced that he is "not mine."

That hardcore attitude enabled the defeated president

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to rally radical groups, including numerous Republicans in Congress, to join him in his effort to illegally overturn the November election. The result of their attempted coup was seen by a shocked nation last Wednesday.

Trump's efforts have failed and the rule of law has held, but just by the skin of our teeth, and the nation is now more divided than ever. President-elect Joe Biden will surely be "your president" in the eyes of a substantial minority of Americans.

And therein lies the root of much of our discontent.

Back during the Obama years, I often corrected Obama critics when they referred to "your president" by saying, "No, he's our president." And, as difficult as it has been, I have also consistently accepted Donald Trump as "our president."

The decades-old belief that government is inherently evil and the more recent conspiracy theory of an embedded "deep state" have provided good political theater that has helped shallow-minded men and women get elected to the very offices they have decried. Along the way, though, they have

seriously weakened this nation's underpinnings and ultimately encouraged the violent Jan. 6 assault on our Capitol.

Those who committed insurrection last Wednesday as well as those who encouraged it must be brought to justice, but beyond that, we must attempt the far more difficult task of healing the nation.

That's the challenge that Joe Biden will inherit when he is sworn in next Wednesday. The future of our country depends in no small measure on whether he can find enough Americans of differing political views who are willing to work together, both in Congress and across the nation.

We all need to put our shoulder to that wheel, because this republic desperately needs our attention. And a good place to start will be to once again acknowledge, if not embrace, occupants of the White House as "our president."

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# America has lost its sense of collective good

Post-World War II America was quite different than the country we inhabit today. Americans still had the “can do” attitude that defeated Nazi Germany, its Fascist ally Italy and the Japanese imperialists.

Gearing up for and shouldering the massive effort that was needed to become the world’s most powerful nation in war and later, in peace, required the active participation, or at least the acquiescence, of the vast majority of Americans. Whether it was the work by millions of Americans in assembly lines or the sacrifice made by troops on the battlefield, most of the nation was involved positively in the war effort.

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There were self-centered people back then, to be sure. Some skirted rationing rules, and others sold raw materials on the black market, thus made a financial killing while the war was killing their neighbors.

For the most part, though, Americans pulled together, and when the war ended, a spirit of optimism and patriotism prevailed.

That spirit included a willingness to work together in solving national issues, including efforts to eradicate communicable diseases. People had a sense of community, of wanting to help each other get through tough times and tough issues.

My generation well remembers lining up on Sunday after church to walk through a clinic sponsored by

the local Health Department and swallowing a sugar cube laced with polio vaccine. Polio vaccination was close to 100% in the U.S., and that deadly virus was essentially eradicated.

Many of us still carry tiny scars on our upper arms that were left by the live vaccine with which we were pricked — not shot — to protect against smallpox.

And when many of us joined, or were drafted into, the military, we were lined up to file through a large gymnasium where Navy Corpsmen and Army Medics stood waiting with shot “guns” to vaccinate us against multiple potential contagions. As we walked through, we were shot in both arms, often at the same time, and told to keep moving. There was no debate of individual rights. We were all in it together and expected

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to protect the community around us.

Throughout much of the past century, vaccinations have been required of children entering public school. They are aimed at protecting the children and, in some instances, their classmates, from diphtheria, meningitis, polio, measles and more.

During the last 40 years, Americans have become far more focused on their individual sensitivities, wants, likes and dislikes, and society has become accustomed to pandering to those who whine about their right to dissent.

Thus, here we are. A pandemic has “officially” taken the lives of more than 580,000 Americans, and quite probably has killed or contributed to the deaths of closer to a million, according to epidemiologists. Now, we are on the cusp of controlling, if not eliminating, the COVID-19 virus and its variants, and a significant portion of our population is whining that they don’t want to be vaccinated.

And in America today, there is no will to force

the issue. In fact, COVID vaccination has become, astonishingly, the latest cultural battleground, with a disturbing number of vaccination opponents openly defying the common sense of vaccinating the general public. It’s literally a battle over whether to protect our neighbors or not, with a significant number of people saying, no, they won’t.

The Republican-dominated Florida legislature even enacted a law that prohibits businesses, schools and governmental entities throughout that state from asking someone to provide proof of having been vaccinated. A parent living in Florida thus cannot determine whether their child is entering a school where teachers and staff have been vaccinated. Nor can an employer who has hundreds of employees working shoulder to shoulder in an assembly line even inquire whether those employees have been vaccinated.

Americans understandably take their individual liberty seriously, but up until now, we have always

taken protection of the community seriously as well. If a person wants to smoke, they are allowed to, but in most parts of the country today, they are expected to do it where their smoke doesn’t end up in the lungs of others. Not so with COVID. You want to be a carrier of this deadly disease? It seems you will be able to and those around you will be none the wiser, until they become infected.

While those who have been vaccinated seem to be quite safe even from COVID carriers, epidemiologists have said that unless we get 70% or more of the public vaccinated, even more dangerous variants of the virus have a better chance of getting a foothold. Why on earth would anyone want to leave themselves and their neighbors open to that prospect?

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# But for the shouting, we'd find some common ground

What we say, and how we say it, matters. Unfortunately, much of what we say today, especially in the public square, is intended to be derogatory, and you'd better believe it's taken that way.

The result is that we have become more and more divided in our views, and less and less likely to try to understand the views of others.

We don't agree on much in the United States these days, but we probably agree on more things than we want to admit. We just can't get past the shouting to talk rationally.

Much of our public language is shaped by our politics, and modern politics is just plain toxic. We can't be liberals or conservatives anymore. We are more apt to be labeled as radical left or radical right. There are indeed plenty of both, but

if you sat down and talked with most people and got past the labels, you'd probably find that deep down, they fall somewhere between the two. You'd just never know it to hear our national and state politicians — and pseudo cable TV journalists — talk.

Even our home states are labeled. We're either "red" or "blue," depending on what state we call home. How is that helpful in having a national dialogue about anything?

For example, the overwhelming majority of Americans today agree that global warming is not only occurring but is being hastened by the concentration of greenhouse gases placed in the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels. That's

about as sophisticated as most of us get with respect to the issue, but most of us do agree with that premise.

Try moving from there to solutions, though, and you

run head on into ideological conflict and name calling. And it's not a new phenomenon. Decades ago, those who were concerned about the environment were called "moose and goose people," a label intended to show they thought more of wildlife than of human life. Today, the terms include eco and green, and they're the kinder ones. Get anywhere close to either and you'll be labeled, this time for favoring the environment over a roaring stock market and traditional jobs that might be lost.

Job shifts and short-term economic turmoil are legitimate concerns, but arguments so often become personal and politically driven that rational debate is impossible. For example, we oppose wind turbines because they're unsightly, even if they are so far offshore as to be out of sight.

Vehicle manufacturers, including Ford Motor Co., are moving into the electric vehicle market, but critics

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are bemoaning the inability to “fill up” with electricity as quickly as you can with gasoline or diesel fuel. That will kill the innovation, they warn.

It may delay it, but it won't kill it. Electric charging stations will be developed that can keep up, but meanwhile, critics prefer to frighten people away from buying electric vehicles so they can then say the effort to convert failed.

There are many derogatory terms not related to the environment, of course. There are “snowflakes,” a pejorative used for people who have an inflated sense of their uniqueness — and entitlement — who can't deal with opposing views. Another is “woke,” a term originally used to describe an awareness of injustice, now used as a pejorative by those who say it's an oversensitivity to injustice. We certainly can't afford too much sensitivity.

Of course, there is misogyny, homophobia and, a new one for me — ableism. That's a prejudice against the disabled, for gosh sakes.

One of the most widely used derogatory phrases these days is cancel culture. I'm still trying to figure out exactly what it is, but basically it refers to ostracism because of one's views.

These terms and many more have a common thread. They are all negative. They are all meant to label and divide us. Not a one of them is intended to unite us.

There's a reason for that. We react to negativism. Many of us will even send money to persons who espouse our narrow views. And that, of course, helps fuel even more negativism.

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