

# Understanding Our Partisan Divides

## Lessons from the Journey of a Sociologist/Documentary Filmmaker

*Draft – Not for Citation*

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The bitter divisions in American life weigh heavily on us all now, perhaps as never before. They have continued to deepen and grow nastier over the past generation, paralyzing our government, creating contradictory and even warring accounts of everyday events on our mainstream news channels, unleashing relentless death threats to public servants, and encouraging thousands of rioters to storm the nation's Capitol in hopes of overturning an election many believe was "stolen" from then President Trump . . . and from them. These threats to our civic life, to our very democracy, are so severe and alarming that they have inspired fellow citizens across the nation to create over [400 organizations](#) dedicated to bridging, or tamping down, these divisions. Yet, they show no signs of weakening, and cry out for better understandings among us.

As former President Trump's ongoing appeal to his base continues to hold much of the Republican Party its grip, it is important to remember that this base has been central to rebuilding the Republican Party's popular viability for over two generations now. So, it is not Trump or Republicans who are paralyzing our politics, but those longstanding and increasingly bitter divisions among us Americans, "we the people," that are doing so.

How can we better understand these divisions among us? My own journey in life gave me some unique insights into the underlying sources of these divisions. As a young sociologist and student of politics, a sixties radical involved in anti-war protests and the Women's Liberation movement, I embarked on an extensive research project doing close-up field work among conservative pro-family groups then fueling the emergence of our Culture Wars and the New Right in the 1980s. They included right-to-lifers, parents campaigning against sex education, home-schoolers and the members of a Jerry Falwell-inspired fundamentalist Baptist church then at the forefront of such movements, all within reach of my home in Western Massachusetts

at the time. That such social conservatives were from diverse religious backgrounds—Catholics, evangelicals, Jews, mainline Protestants, and even atheists—and that you could find their liberal opponents with all these same beliefs, pointed to the fact that something other than religion was at work in creating these divisions.

And the moment I first walked into that fundamentalist Baptist church one Sunday morning, I felt that there, as a community enterprise, one could see the social world in which such social conservatism was thriving and made sense. And, it was the social world I was also seeing among the diverse conservative “pro-family” groups I was then studying. For that reason, I felt this church, on the outskirts of Worcester, Massachusetts, would be an important subject for a documentary film for public broadcast. One thing led to another and I ended up making my first film, an intimate portrait of that church, which was broadcast as a national prime-time special on PBS, and around the world, and, most significantly, perhaps, was praised by figures on opposite sides of America’s political spectrum.

You might ask how the leaders of a Jerry Falwell-inspired Moral Majority church would allow a sociologist educated at Harvard and Brandeis universities—to them the temples of secular humanism at the time—to make an intimate documentary about them for public broadcast. The issue came up poignantly over lunch one Sunday after church with the pastor and his wife, Sharon, one of the church’s most politically committed leaders. I had just heard news that we received funding to produce the film after a year spending time with them while awaiting these results. In the midst of our conversation about moving forward with the film, Sharon paused, took a deep breath, and looking steadily at me, said quite matter-of-factly, “You know, I never know where you stand on things . . .” Not wanting to address the matter—I was a liberal atheist at the time—I was relieved when she closed by simply adding, “. . . but somehow I think you understand.” What did she feel I understood?

During and in the wake of producing our film [\*Born Again\*](#) basic failures of understanding helping fuel our increasingly bitter partisan divides kept coming into view. For example, when *Born Again* was broadcast in 1988, I remember liberal colleagues in academia and documentary filmmaking encouraging me to finish writing [my book](#) on that project. “We need that!” they would say with some urgency, recognizing how puzzling those conservative movements were to them. “But you’d better get it out quickly,” they would add—that is, they explained, before such conservatism would soon vanish from American life.

Yet, rather than vanishing, such conservative “pro-family” movements grew in strength, becoming a key force in remaking the popular base of the Republican Party in the 1990s, and enabling it to take over both Houses of Congress in 2004 for the first

time in forty-five years! And the second most powerful person shaping the Republican Party's platform that year was the conservative Catholic anti-feminist, Phyllis Schlafly, whose Eagle Forums women's groups were key to mobilizing and giving political direction to the conservative "pro-family" movements I had been studying.

Then, twenty years later, in the wake of Barack Obama's election as president in 2008, I watched liberal pundits in CNN's Situation Room actually discuss whether his victory might signal the disappearance of such conservatism from American politics altogether. Two years later the Tea Party's rise and Republican victories in the next mid-term elections brought them back to reality. And such recurring blindnesses remain evident in current studies trying to understand Trump's supporters, studies which tend to begin by assuming something must be seriously wrong with them—that they are primarily motivated, for example, by racism, economic distress, or social despair from family breakdown, drug addiction, etc. Yet, none of these things were generally true of the grass-roots social conservatives I got to know in the 1980s, or whom I have met since.

What is at the root of such persistent misunderstandings—even striking blindnesses—among the liberal intelligentsia looking out upon their fellow Americans? I came to see that it is rooted in assumptions and worldviews most deeply embedded in our consciousness—things we, therefore, take most for granted: that is, differences in our family lives, where we begin and end each day. The social conservatives I met in my field research, including members of that fundamentalist church, all lived within close-knit extended-family networks they relied upon day-in-day-out for help. The Shawmut River Valley Baptist Church, as I call it in my book on that project, *[Spirit and Flesh](#)*, grew by recruiting members mainly through their local extended-family ties, much like Jerry Falwell's own church in Lynchburg, Virginia, where early on, [he wrote](#), by the time "Pop" and Bertha Johnson's family" arrived, adding to his own, we had "a fairly good-sized congregation."

Such cross-generational extended-family networks typically involve separate worlds for women and men anchored in traditional gender roles. For example, Shawmut River's founding pastor would spend weekends in the early years of his marriage out fishing with his cousins or helping his father in his construction shop, while his wife relied on her mother and sister next door for whatever childcare, household help or companionship she needed. Unlike Women's Liberationists who formed "conscious-raising" or "support groups," to break the social isolation of their housewife/mother's role, these women, I came to see, had social support and even collective power in and through their traditional roles as housewives and mothers. Their collective power as women [became strikingly evident](#) in church conflicts I eventually witnessed in their

congregation. So why reject those roles, they felt. Their most common complaint about feminism at the time was that they felt it devalued their roles as housewives and mothers.

Some families migrating to the Worcester area for factory work—often in chain migration following their relatives, like one family from rural Maine—found support, with their relatives, in Shawmut River’s women’s and men’s fellowship groups, and in sharing the upbringing of their children in the church’s Christian school housed at the church. Shawmut River helped patch up things now missing from the more familial rural communities they had migrated from, like many new churches do, especially fundamentalist ones, in urban, industrializing areas. The congregation was made up mainly of working-class folks and those involved in local family-based businesses like construction and farming on the outskirts of Worcester—not unlike the rural and small-town communities where Trump’s support tends to be strongest. Indeed, it is important to recognize that in our last presidential election in 2020, of America’s three thousand-some counties, Donald Trump won 2,588 of them while Biden only 551. Yet, Biden’s 551 counties held 67 million more Americans than Trump’s, [striking evidence](#) of the demographics of our divisions.

During my fieldwork at Shawmut River, I remember noticing that virtually all its single men, if they remained unmarried even into their late thirties, still lived “at home”—that is, with their parents. This was worlds apart from the lives of profession-bound middle-class youth like me, who left home to attend college and then moved to wherever specific job opportunities were offered, mainly in America’s metropolitan areas. We embraced independence and it was among us that the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s arose. Without supportive extended-family networks around us, we needed new kinds of marriages and gender roles to make things work. Among other things, that involved greater partnership, cooperation and intimacy in our marriages, altering traditional gender roles and animating greater importance for romantic love and sex as vehicles for such intimacy, realities helping fuel the sexual revolution of the day.

By contrast, I remember one member of Shawmut River [telling me](#) that her attitude toward a husband when she first got married was “once you got one, see what you can get from him.” Other wives said they hardly ever talked with their husbands. “I did what I wanted whenever I wanted,” one said about the early years of her marriage. “I would never think of asking Dave to do anything! Good heavens!” As far as Shawmut River’s men go, their talk in Saturday morning men’s meetings often led to someone throwing up his hands in exasperation, exclaiming, “Women!. . . Go figure!” Everyone knew exactly what he meant; they expected women’s actions to be puzzling to them, things that required some figuring.

In these contexts, ongoing sexual intimacy with your spouse wasn't generally expected or seen as essential to marriage, let alone as something part of your very identity. When I once used the word "sexuality" in a question to a Right-to-Life activist I was interviewing at the time, she grimaced and exclaimed, "I hate that word!" After catching her breath, she explained, "It makes it seem more important than it is." In such a world, Donald Trump's infidelities, his sexual aggressiveness toward women, and the fact that he and his current wife, Melania, don't share the same bedroom, would be understandable and "not big deals."

Also, where sexual intimacy is not felt to be important in marriage and family life except for procreation, sex isn't felt to be part of your identity as the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" imply. Instead, sex can be seen as playful pleasure and fun, or, in some traditional male contexts, as acts of personal domination. In the gender-segregated world of Shawmut River and other communities built with extended-family ties, where men might spend the weekend out fishing with the guys and women and men tend to see each other as "other," the very idea of gay marriage—that you could just marry each another and not deal with "the other"—might well be seen to threaten family life as they know it. These tensions around homosexual identity and marriage, of course, tend to be even stronger in most areas of the "two-thirds world," like Africa, where extended-family ties and gender-segregated life are even stronger and more pervasive, causing some of the most challenging conflicts between those countries and the West around issues of gay rights.

Such changes in marriage carried by the expanding professional middle class in postwar America, changes requiring greater partnership and intimacy in marriage and giving greater importance to romantic love and sex, saw America's divorce rate skyrocket in the 1970s. And, even after that tsunami subsided, the United States still leads the world in divorce. These changes also found expression in the sudden and radical transformation of most single-sex colleges and universities into co-ed ones in the 1970s, breaking with age-old traditions of gender segregation in higher education. But all these changes did not greatly impact working-class Americans, and those involved in family-based businesses, like those I met in my field research, or in [present day America](#), where 37% of Americans have never lived outside their hometowns and 57% never outside their home state, and roughly [42% of working-parent households](#) rely on relatives to care for their preschool children rather than day-care centers or pre-schools, on which only 29% rely. That such realities do not generally appear in discussions about federal government funding for pre-school childcare is further evidence of prevalent blindnesses across such major differences in family life.

Another example of liberals' routine misunderstandings of their conservative neighbors is their puzzlement by the fact that social conservatives generally embrace both Pro-Life and Pro-War (or a positive valuation of military service), often concluding that such a pairing of seemingly contradictory enthusiasms bespeaks their hypocrisy and bad faith. For their part, conservatives would be flabbergasted by that view, since that pairing makes perfect sense to them. They see both representing the duty to sacrifice self for others, especially family, to pay back what's been given them. These virtues of reciprocal obligation are engrained in them as part of the traditional gender roles in which they were raised: for women to have and care for that child, or care for that elderly family member, even when it's burdensome or inconvenient, and for men to risk sacrificing their lives, as a fundamental requirement of male honor, to protect family and country. That Pro-Life activists I spent time with felt opposing abortion was part of defending broader duties to sacrifice for family was evident in the slogan they frequently touted at the time: "If life isn't safe in the womb," they would say, "it isn't safe in the nursing home."

Such moral requirements of duty to sacrifice for others you are bound in personal relations of reciprocal obligation, can also help us understand those longstanding Democratic counties who enthusiastically embraced Donald Trump's candidacy for president. In their [close-up ethnographic study](#) of three such counties in Rhode Island, Iowa and Kentucky, Jon Shields and Stephanie Muravchik found that Trump's appeal was best understood by recognizing that their longstanding local Democratic Party life was dominated by an honor culture requiring personal loyalties built on close-knit, often family-based, personal loyalties based on mutual obligation. In such honor cultures, the manly requirement to fight back at critics or opponents, and to honor personal loyalties even when overriding general rules of civic life, represent longstanding popular models of leadership, which animated their enthusiasm for Trump's fresh persona on the national political stage. Trump's emphasis on never conceding to critics, never showing weakness, always strength, and always honoring personal loyalties (at least in talk), appealed to these local grassroots Democrats. And when their normal news outlets began expressing criticisms, even disdain, for Trump and his ways, Shields and Muravchik found, many turned to watching Fox News, instead, leading it to overtake CNN as America's favorite cable channel.

But, another, deeper, lesson about cultural differences shaping our bitter partisan divides came up during my fieldwork in the Shawmut River church. One day I turned to a member with a question that had been puzzling me for some time. "Pastor Frank is always preaching 'God hates divorce!'" I pointed out, while he would cite biblical passages against it. Divorce rates were continuing to skyrocket in America and churches like Shawmut River were struggling to address that problem. So, I was

puzzled, then, when I watched Pastor Frank and his family, as well as other church members, help this or that woman divorce her husband. So, I asked my friend, “Why is Pastor Frank now helping Mary divorce Joe?”

He looked at me dumbfounded, as if I were crazy to ask. He seemed at a loss for words and, finally, in exasperation, spit out what he thought should be obvious: “Everyone knows,” he exclaimed, “he’s been pissing away the family’s income with his drugs and snowmobiles!” In time I realized how important “everyone knows” was in understanding the lives of church members and those in such close-knit local communities. His explanation didn’t rest on elaborating any explicit exceptions to the moral absolute that “God hates divorce”—like “except under this or that condition.” Instead, it rested on common knowledge of the concrete circumstances involved—on “common sense,” it might be said—something sensed but not articulated (and often difficult to articulate, as my friend’s dumbfounded, exasperated look suggested).

Of course, embedded in this “everyone knows” reality were collective taken-for-granted assumptions they shared—about the proper roles of husband and wife, for example, or about family life, in general—that is their culture, things they felt under attack by changing values championed by feminists and “counter-cultural” elites. “Everyone knows” routinely worked for Shawmut River’s members because their congregation was made up largely of extended families accustomed to sharing what was going on at home with other households bound together in daily helping relationships, along with fellow church members involved in such, as well. Their daily communications in and around their Christian academy based in their church building, and in their small, gender-based fellowship groups and other informal interactions all contributed to building this “everyone knows” world. And the fact that women were most involved in such dense, often family-based, communications, [I would see](#), was a major factor contributing to their power in church life.

Such an “everyone knows” world is much more prevalent in the two thousand-some counties voting for Trump in our past election. But it is worlds apart from the lives of most of my friends and colleagues, say, in academia and documentary filmmaking, as well as in the wider professional middle class, in general. We generally do not know one another’s families, or even the diverse branches of each other’s friends. “Everyone knows” could never guide our day-to-day moral decision-making. We need workable rules to guide us. But, at Shawmut River, “everyone knows” proved to be the basis of morally justified action. General rules less so. For them “God hates divorce,” and other “moral absolutes” they anchored in the Bible, were less hard-and-fast rules than moral exhortations, watchwords, sayings, the fundamental elements of an oral culture. Their ways of knowing, then, resided more in the specific and concrete, rather than in the general and abstract, which is why such people often don’t take to

higher education, which resides largely in the latter. And, it is also why intellectuals like me often aren't able to recognize their actual intelligence, another lesson I learned during my time at Shawmut River.

It came up one afternoon when I was playing golf with Pastor Frank. It was a sport he had just taken up, and since I had played only a little golf, he was giving me some tips. I soon saw, from my own experience teaching tennis, how good and insightful his lessons were. "Why hadn't I recognized his intelligence before?" I found myself asking. I realized it was because I wasn't good at recognizing the forms it took. In time I came to see its manifestations in the metaphors Pastor Frank used to express things effectively—that is, in the concrete rather than the abstract—and then, later on, after he left the ministry, in watching him become an internationally renowned inventor, whose inventions created a new family business now employing three generations of their family. A man who once confessed to me that he had never read a book through by the time he finished high school, was now routinely described by his grown grandchildren as "brilliant."

The realities surrounding Pastor Frank's and the church's handling of divorce calls into question liberals' tendency to dismiss fundamentalists and other social conservatives as unthinkingly "rigid" in proclaiming moral absolutes in black-and-white terms. The "everyone knows" fabric of their daily lives permits flexible adaptations to particular situations. It also permits gradual, if not unnoticeable, change over time, as "common sense," working with "tradition," can routinely change peoples' collective beliefs without explicit recognition. One example is how conservative evangelicals' support for racial segregation, citing Noah's curse on Ham's descendants in Genesis, quietly disappeared in the 1970s, as many accepted the legitimacy of racial integration. Another change currently at work is the growing acceptance of homosexuality, and even gay marriage, among wider sectors of the American public, including some conservative Christians. Recognizing these unspoken flexibilities might help liberals better understand social conservatives' commitments to "moral absolutes" and, perhaps from another angle, their tolerance for glaring contradictions often in Donald Trump's statements.

But, more important, perhaps, the "everyone knows" fabric of their lives clashes with the impersonal bureaucracies of "big government," that evil most commonly voiced by social conservatives. Such bureaucracies are of necessity run by general rules, not the common sense of what "everyone knows" about a person's specific circumstances. Anyone who has experienced the bureaucratic machinery of the federal food stamp program, or any branch of the American welfare state, will testify to how often their workings can appear irrational in terms of the actual concrete circumstances and needs of specific individuals and households being served. People routinely grounded



in the common sense of what “everyone knows,” are especially confounded by such irrationalities and struggle to deal with the abstract, legally framed rules of government services.

“Government regulations,” another dimension of “big government,” can be especially challenging to people running small, family-based businesses, compared to large corporations with legal departments handling such matters. This was evident when much of federal funding for the first Paycheck Protection Program loans to help small businesses during the COVID pandemic was quickly seized by large corporations. Perhaps the perceptions of federal government bureaucracies by many Americans running small businesses and living in supportive family-based networks—of its puzzling irrationalities and its inaccessibility to them—make describing it as “the swamp” so appealing, or even worse, as the “the deep state.” And, when former President Trump speaks to his base at his rallies he invariably includes his well-worn refrain about the values they share: “that faith and family,” [he repeatedly intones](#), “not government and bureaucracy, are the center of American life.” This harks back to Ronald Reagan’s similar incantations, for example in his [first Inaugural Address](#) when he declared that “government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem.”

Government bureaucracy is a powerfully divisive political issue in American life. Yet, what other mechanisms does anyone heading our federal government have to help Americans through times of crisis, other than large-scale bureaucracies run by general rules? President Obama was able to effectively appeal to small-town and working-class voters during his presidential campaign, to win states like Iowa, for example. In fact, many current Trump supporters testify they had voted for Obama. Yet, as a president facing the collapse of the nation’s economy with the Great Recession and the need to fix excessively expensive and unavailable healthcare, what tools did he have to address these problems other than federal government laws and bureaucracies?

Conservatives eventually slammed Obama as a “socialist” (as they now generally do to all progressive Democrats), a charge some view as racist, without recognizing that the same things were said about white liberals like Ted Kennedy in the Moral Majority era. “Ted Kennedy’s a communist,” conservatives would charge, and “communism is undermining the moral fiber of American life!” Yes, “moral fiber” is what they named and felt under attack by big government. If people rely on government to meet their needs—like paid childcare, for example—do they then not need reciprocal helping relations with their extended families? Might it then be felt to undermine the “moral fiber” of such lives?

Recognizing these different fabrics of our lives might also help conservatives understand liberals better: how liberals insist, for example, that moral absolutes be rejected as rigid and unworkable, and also have fewer problems with the workings of bureaucratic government. It might also help conservatives understand liberals' tendency toward secularism or atheism, something I myself experienced as a Methodist minister's son who at some point in life became an atheist, in what I came to eventually understand as a telling transformation. After growing up as a faithful, praying youth, in various loving Methodist congregations my parents served, sometime in my first or second year of college, I simply slipped into atheism without even noticing it. That such a profound change happened so unconsciously, without any urging, pressure, soul-searching or debate, I eventually realized, cries out for explanation.

I had begun moving forward to build my own life independently and there was no "everyone knows" among my disconnected networks of family and friends to anchor any moral decisions. So, I had to begin thinking through for myself what rules to go by in life. They had to be sensible, viable rules, since I didn't have "everyone knows" to guide me. And, much of the knowledge or thinking I drew on to shape those rules came from what I was learning in higher education. And those facts and ways of thinking were shaped mainly by the Post-Enlightenment outlook of the empirical sciences, which focus solely on empirical realities—that is, what you can see, feel and touch. For scientific purposes, the empirical sciences set aside as irrelevant any spiritual realities, whether of God or gods, or angels or demons. And so, the moral universe and worldview I was unconsciously building as a coming-of-age youth engaged in higher learning, put God and any spiritual realities out of sight and, ultimately, out of mind. This, I believe, is how I simply slipped into atheism without even noticing it, and it is a force, I believe, which helps us better understand the powerful tide toward atheism and disbelief in spiritual realities among so many geographically mobile educated professionals, as well as the dominance of that secular worldview in most academic institutions. A worldview built up mainly on the products of the empirical sciences has no place for spiritual realities or God.

To be clear, by setting God and any spiritual realities aside, the empirical sciences never disprove, or even address, spiritual realities. Many intellectuals building their worldviews in such contexts simply accept the assumption that God and other spiritual forces don't exist and are just creations of the human mind, as I once did. And, as someone who later went on to experience God's loving presence and returned to faith in a living God, I have continued to observe the tendency of intellectuals to look down upon those believing in God—or spiritual realities, in general—as ignorant or stupid. It is a prejudice I have sadly [witnessed time and again](#) among academics and those in the documentary film/public broadcasting world—from watching a group of

young Christian sociologists' gathering at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association share "war stories" of persecutions they experienced in their respective institutions across the country, to recently hearing a chaplain at a prestigious liberal arts college near me describe his being shunned from joining a lunch table by fellow faculty members because of his faith. (My experiences of such prejudices against religion in the public broadcasting world, given my documentary projects on matters of culture and faith, is a [much longer story](#).)

The presence of such Culture War prejudices explains how Trump gains traction by repeatedly affirming to his base that "faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, are the center of American life." One may wonder how a wealthy New Yorker like Donald Trump can effectively appeal in these ways to working-class and rural voters. We must note, however, how upper-class figures—like the Bushes, for example—have connected with, say, blue-collar conservatives around more traditional stands on "family-value" issues because their lives, too, are organized around extended-family ties. In the case of the propertied upper class, such extended-family ties congeal around family fortunes, and are lived out in family-based upper-class communities, family compounds and clubs, where traditional women's and men's worlds tend to hold value.

Looking at the forces shaping Donald Trump's own worldview, his formative years were spent in his family's expanding real estate business in metropolitan New York. As a youth he was already enmeshed in his father's sorting out which child was going to take what place in it. And Donald's father, Fred, already as a teenager, had begun helping his mother run the family business after his own father, the German immigrant who founded it, died from influenza in 1918. So, this was three generations of family-based business with common assumptions and cultural values about family and gender accumulating along the way.

So it is geographically mobile, educated professionals, not the wealthy, propertied upper class, who are the principal carriers and drivers of liberal, progressive, and, in many eyes, "radical" politics. Their politics and values are often in tension, or conflict with, much of the Democratic Party's working-class base, as contemporary political commentators like [David Shor](#) point out, as well as with African Americans and Hispanic Americans whose lives are also often shaped by extended families in which family duty, traditional gender roles and spiritual realities can be strong. As political scientist [Ruy Teixeira recently put it](#) to *New York Times* journalists interviewing him on his 2002 book predicting [The Emerging Democratic Majority](#), fueled largely by increases in voters of color, one thing he and his fellow author, John Judis, hadn't anticipated was that the "professional-class hegemony in the Democratic Party . . . would tilt the Democrats so far to the left on socio-cultural issues that it would

actually make the Democratic Party significantly unattractive to working-class voters”—and voters of color, we might add. The [recent electoral victory](#) to Congress of a far-right Latina Trump supporter, Mayra Flores, in a traditionally Democratic district in south Texas, whose campaign banner reads “God, Family, Country,” is a sign of such shifts of Hispanic voters to the Republican Party and those themes and issues driving it.

Though former President Trump may not always personally model certain values of his base, his ability to espouse and speak to them has certainly been effective in persuading them that he stands for who they are—that “faith and family,” for instance, “not government and bureaucracy, are the center of American life.” Even more important to his base, perhaps, is how he revels in relentlessly attacking perceived opponents of them and their values, in often entertaining, if at times distorted, ways. This is what also animated the career of the late conservative radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, who [recalled](#) being aggravated as a young man growing up in the small city of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, from a long line of local public figures and lawyers (like the family Phyllis Schlafly married into), by their being “inundated by the dominant media culture,” as Limbaugh once put it, where “what we believe in is made fun of, lampooned, impugned, and put down.” Trump’s own experiences navigating the world of metropolitan New York undoubtedly taught him much about such experiences of cultural difference, disapproval and felt disdain. Ridiculing the kinds of people who his base feel look down on them, dismissing their values as well as his, strengthens his political following immeasurably, while providing rich fodder for our warring news channels, and, as we have seen, helping ramp up hatreds to the point of encouraging politically motivated violence. Trump’s current tendency at his rallies to call liberal Democrats, or RINO Republicans, “vicious, evil people who hate our country” is further evidence of escalating hatreds in our partisan political divides.

And this is where we find ourselves today, a result not simply of the actions of any one person, but the accumulation of struggles over different moral visions of the world for generations now. The anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly, a prime architect in remaking the Republican Party in the 1980s and 1990s, made a point soon before she passed away in 2016 of endorsing Donald Trump’s run for the presidency. And one of the male militia groups active in the violent overrunning of the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, a group organized in the new suburbs of Dallas-Fort Worth, took pride in naming themselves [“The Deplorables,”](#) taking as their very identity the term used by Hillary Clinton to denigrate Trump supporters during her campaign. This suggests that such felt disdain is central to their identity, and perhaps even their mission.

And one of the first persons to be arrested after the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the Capitol was a [young man from West Virginia](#) who had just been elected the first Republican since 1922 to represent his rural county in their state legislature, demonstrating those tidal forces continually at work in transforming the Republican Party's base to make it popularly viable. He campaigned on a pro-life, pro-gun, pro-Christian values platform, citing as recent attacks on the latter "proposals for drag queen story hours" and "transgender bathrooms" in West Virginia's schools, pointing to issues that will certainly continue to challenge and divide Americans as such issues collide with lives founded in traditional men's and women's gender roles. He was arrested at his grandmother's home, significantly enough, near his own home in West Virginia, where her angry comment to reporters as he was taken into custody reveal the family foundations of his politics. "He's a fine man," his [grandmother stated](#) emphatically, "And thank you, Mr. Trump, for inviting a riot at the White House!" Such movements of more traditionally minded West Virginian Democrats to the Republican Party undoubtedly put pressure on their Democratic Senator, Joe Manchin, as he struggles to serve all the people he represents.

I hope these lessons from my own journey will help some of you take a new look at fellow Americans you deem enemies, people you might even dismiss as "deplorables," "dummies," or "communists." I hope they will encourage America's intelligentsia to look beyond their persistent blindnesses to realities shaping the lives of many of their fellow citizens, which differ so much from their own, and which have led them to often misread America's body politic.

And, above all, I hope these lessons will encourage all my fellow Americans to try to better understand what is important to their political opponents, given the different places they are coming from. I hope it will encourage some to open up conversations with their opponents—some their very neighbors--taking time to listen, to find common interests and concerns, realizing that it is probably as hard for them to understand you and where you are coming from, given the bubbles we often live in, as it is for you to understand them. Such understandings are desperately needed in leaders at all levels of our nation's life, so that in their words and deeds, all of us, given our different assumptions about life and the social realities on which they rest, feel we are recognized, understood, given respect and faithfully served. If you do not understand the American people across these longstanding divisions among us, you cannot lead them. Only by understanding each other better, can we come together to effectively address the problems we and our loved ones face as a nation.

### **Biographical note**

James Ault is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and author trained in sociology and politics at Harvard and Brandeis Universities. For more, visit [www.jamesault.com](http://www.jamesault.com).

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