Ideologies are closing American minds

Paul Haffner, MY LIFE

A disconcerting thought has been gnawing at me for a while now. I am now certain of its truth and it truly saddens me. As a society, we have slowly become incapable of civil discourse and would rather shield ourselves in ignorance than listen to an opposing point of view. I have not gleaned this from watching MSNBC or listening to Rush Limbaugh. That is too easy. No, I slowly found this by watching and listening to regular folks.

Two recent snippets of conversations really drove this point home. One was a colleague who expressed utter contempt for President George W. Bush. Another was an acquaintance who explained that he would rather have bamboo shoved under his fingernails (or something akin to that) than watch President Obama address the nation.

Now I know these people well enough to know they are educated and well-intentioned. And this is not about two isolated comments. This is about a national trend of intolerance I have witnessed in recent years. There have always been people on the fringes who assaulted “the other side” and made it their mission to lambaste or lampoon any idea generated from across the aisle. But this has somehow become the new normal. We have grown so distrustful of our perceived adversaries that we cannot even stop to listen (even critically) to their ideas.

Compromise is gone; leadership is a lost art. I am a Republican who often votes for Democrats. Yes – that is absolutely possible and the way it should be. I listen. I think. I vote. And if I cannot get enough education on a particular issue, I abstain. There are no party lines that mandate my voting record. And here is a real bombshell – I am perfectly willing to have my opinions on political and other “taboo” issues swayed by persuasive arguments from the other side. There are few, if any, absolutes in this world, and I have no fear of modifying my beliefs if a compelling argument is made.

This nation was founded on democratic principles of debate and discourse – not distrust and contempt. One of the greatest framers, Thomas Jefferson, said the following: “I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend.” Amen to that.

So why do we now look so hard to isolate ourselves in various ideological camps and refuse to even give grudging respect to the other point of view? I for one actually respect a politician whose voting record or other past acts show independent thought. Give me a “flip-flop” over a party-line automatism any day. In my opinion, this often shows an actual ability to think – to hear the other side, work to a resolution, and perhaps to do what is best in the end after serious soul-searching. It may also show personal growth over a long career – something laudable indeed.

My wife and I hate it when people assume they know the way we think because of some perceived stereotype. We are both free thinkers and are working diligently to raise two kids who will do the same.

I don’t do this for the sake of unpredictability. I do this because I seek personal growth which can only come through hearing and studying other points of view on important topics. I may stay right where I am, but I will listen, consider, and weigh the points offered by my friend or adversary. And though I may disagree, I will not disrespect. This applies to my friends, adversaries, and certainly the current or former president of the United States of America.

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