

A Pathway Forward
By
Robert Rietschel September 19, 2024

It isn't news to anyone that Americans have been driven into warring camps. One red and the other blue. Both think the other to be antithetical to traditional American ideals. Both have taught that the other is toxic. It is the lust for power that has both camps in a class struggle. It is largely urban vs. rural, but not exclusively. The people seeking power see an advantage in casting their fellow citizens as the enemy. Make this about us vs. them. Everyone can understand that dynamic. It is what clans do. Rally the faithful to ensure the survival of our way of life.

Some think that the only way forward is to smash the opposition and impose right thinking on the folks who resist our ways. Does that sound American to you? Doesn't that sound like a dictatorship? Americans don't want to be told what to do. We have always insisted on freedom of choice. When did you let anyone seeking to lead our country tell you that people who aren't like "us" (without defining "us") need to be marginalized or even deported? They don't get to enjoy freedom of choice? Your fellow citizens can't be treated that way today and not have the tables turned on you tomorrow. Once the right to freedom of choice is taken from some, it is lost to all.

I don't see anyone who is rabidly attached to either camp giving an inch to the other. I don't propose that we try to convert either to a different point of view. I will suggest that we start to lift up a simple virtue as being the lifeblood of American exceptionalism. Tolerance.

Remember when it was commonly said that I don't like what you are saying, but I will defend to the death your right to say it? Remember that? It was a point of pride that Americans could hold in tension divergent beliefs and not seek to impose one on the other, but rather celebrate our tolerance of oddballs, kooks, and weirdos. We might laughingly dismiss people with extreme views as unlike anything we admire, but we let them have their say. As long as they didn't break any laws, they were free to promote their way of thinking. If we didn't agree, we were free to ignore them or engage them in debate.

A lesson from our recent past is worth remembering. Alcoholism was disturbingly common and distasteful to sufficient numbers that a

constitutional amendment was passed banning the sale of all alcoholic beverages. Prohibition. From 1920 to 1933 it was the law of the land. However, alcohol consumption increased under prohibition. Lawlessness increased and crime became organized. Those were not the goals of those who got the amendment passed, but they were the outcome. The group favoring legal alcohol prevailed.

Abortion created a similar fervor and when Roe vs. Wade made abortion legal, those of a different point of view began a long campaign to have that ruling overturned. That has come to pass. The early data show that the number of legal abortions has increased with the restrictions now in place. Does this have a familiar ring to it?

We aren't going to convince either side in the abortion debate that they are on the wrong side of the issue. Alcohol still leads to alcoholism, but we tolerate that and encourage responsible decision-making. Abortions will be done for many different reasons, and those opposed need to tolerate that as prohibition will not stop those who have chosen that option. A total ban would generate the type of organized crime that provided alcohol in the 1920s and fostered a cult of lawlessness. Encouraging others to your point of view is American. Imposing your point of view is not. Americans don't want to be told what they can or cannot do not just with their bodies, but also their property as well.

We have restrictions on property that still drive people to court to settle. We've come to tolerate many of those property restrictions. They grate against the grain of personal choice and absolute freedom, but they are the guardrails we've installed to further societal ends. We fight over these things, but we do so in the legislatures and courts. We don't assail each other just because we are on opposite sides of some issue. We may see eye to eye on many others.

Live and let live. I remember hearing that a lot growing up. I haven't heard it in quite a while. Where did that idea go? Tolerate your neighbor. They probably don't much care for you if you don't care for them. So what? It is more interesting to live in a world full of different ideas than it is to live in a world of conformity. You may feel more secure in a world of conformity, but your individuality will be lost. Divergent thinking may seem chaotic at times, but it opens up so many possibilities. Some are blind alleys, and some are

the pathway forward. And tolerance will give us a pathway forward. Intolerance leads to the destruction of individuality. Americans romanticize the rugged individual. Tolerance allows for such romanticization, intolerance imposes a singular form of thinking and behavior. We should promote tolerance as one of America's highest virtues.

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