

Antidote lies in a nation's multiracial melding

Misplaced fury will end

By Stephanie Mumford Brown

The late 1960s were the last time people saw a cleaving of American society with such depth, breadth and hostility. That era and this one share some matchbook issues — race and gender rights — and don't share others — war, communism, religion, climate change. But one thing hasn't changed: Less educated whites gaze across the abyss with hatred of the snobs on the other side. This underlying issue stokes every surface conflagration, and explains why roughly 40 percent of the voting-age population hews unshakably to an unruly icon of a president.

These are not my people, but I grew up with them. Thanks to Facebook, they remain my high school classmates until the end of time, either theirs or mine. I return to my high school years in the Southern Tier to interpret what's going on now.

Angry-white-male identity sprouted during my 1960s adolescence in the face of burning ghettos, bra-burning feminists and flag-burning hippies. In particular, industrial unions, those bastions of working class masculinity, shifted from left to right wing.

Division waned when the Vietnam War ended and a lot of ex-hippies decided business was kinda cool during the Reagan era. Then information technology goosed prosperity in the Clinton years, and 9/11 led to a halcyon spring of sorrowful unity.

Along the way, the Tea Party stockpiled conservative ire. But it wasn't until Obama utopianism truly got in white men's faces that their backs went up. The candidate who seemed the inevitable follow-up to Obama — a woman whose degrees and career happened to exemplify the American elite — got trumped by a president who's beyond ideology.

Why do these guys hate elites? Because they take stuff from you: plastic bags, gun shows, helmet-free motorcycling, mask-free shopping.

If nothing else, elites steal your self-regard. They think they know better than you. They have more education, more culture, more confidence. They do *not* necessarily have more money.

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oppressed by a new mainstream that's both more controlling (face masks, firearms laws, politically correct language) and more permissive (gay marriage, abortion rights, DACA) than the America in which they used to manspread contentedly.

So what about the white privilege these guys own? Pretty abstract, for an out-of-work coal miner who hunts deer for food, not fun.

But what about the McMansion-dwelling owner of an HVAC firm who's got the same set of gripes as the deer hunter? This prosperous plumber did fine under Clinton, Bush and Obama —

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so why does he get such a kick out of the burrs Trump sticks under his saddle?

Because Americans love loudmouths. We put up with stupid if it's funny. We put up with mean if it satisfies our inner 8-year-old.

And another thing: Americans love success but hate overt ambition. We accept rich people because we believe deep down there's a chance we'll join them. Yet we're uneasy with people who declare they're *trying* to move on up.

Too many Americans fear that larger slices of the pie for new folk will cut into their own. Our national pie is actually four times larger per person than it was in 1947, on a real GDP per

capita basis. Yet the white middle class is correct, their share of pie has shrunk — they just blame the wrong diner.

The portion of U.S. household income swallowed by the top 1 percent has ballooned to nearly one-quarter in 2018, from less than 10 percent in 1980. The top 1 percent share of wealth is even worse — more than 40 percent. That's who's grabbing the pie and stealing the bacon, not the strivers who are making the American middle class more colorful.

At least this defensive misperception is historically consistent. What's weird is the contrast between the 1960s Cold Warrior worldview and that of today's selectively angry white men. Their topsy-turvy right-wing stance gives Russia a pass and disses the FBI. Say what?

Well, who's yo' anti-elitist daddy? There's your answer — and it's a scary one, because this sort of conspiracy-fueled thinking can ignite authoritarian firestorms. With no commonly accepted fact base, millions place their lazy faith in an entertaining avatar. They like how what he says sounds. They don't seem to care about his actual content, truth or consequences.

Our national cacophony may mute somewhat with a change of administration, but the long-term antidote lies in our population's inevitable melding into a multiracial blend. All this misplaced fury will die out someday. Literally. My high school classmates are already 20 percent gone, regardless of their politics.

The white male minority, angry or not, will shrink to a niche in a few generations. In the meantime— since that's all the time I have — some of the angry guys may see the light. And the rest of us need to keep our high beams on.

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Sharknado goes off to Washington

When I was growing up, my brother Michael took me to see old movies at the American Film Institute.

"An American in Paris." "Shane." "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." "Casablanca."

The films shaped my image of America. We were Gene Kelly, the exuberant hooper who could dance and romance better than the French.

We were Shane, the laconic gunfighter who never used his gun unless he had to. We were Jimmy Stewart, the idealistic senator who fought the corrupt forces in our government. We were Humphrey Bogart, who pretended to be cynical when he was really a lovesick patriot.

We were the winners, the good guys.

America wasn't perfect, but our aim was to brashly move forward toward a more perfect union. All that rhetoric about us being a mosaic and a quilt and a shining city on a hill and a beacon for the world? I bought it.

I went to the Lincoln Memorial at dawn the day after Barack Obama's inauguration. After living through the '68 assassinations and riots, Watergate, Vietnam and the Iraq War, I wanted to celebrate the idea that our sense of possibility was back, that we could be proud, smart and respected again in the world.

I imagined traveling to France on President Obama's press plane and watching him come down the stairs, with his cool sunglasses and graceful lope, showing the French, who had correctly scorned our stupidity on Iraq: Never mind Gene Kelly. Look what we've got now.

I often wonder how we got from that moment in only a dozen years, from my little Champagne celebration at the Lincoln Memorial to a state of such despair and jitters that we don't even know if the president will use the Supreme Court to purloin the election.

The most bizarre fact that sticks in my head is this: In 2015, Donald Trump was agonizing over whether to go for the role as the president in "Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No!" or to run for the actual presidency.

How did we go from Abraham Lincoln to a "Sharknado" reject?

I have seen a lot of Republicans use bigotry to lure racists, scare Americans and win the White House. But with Trump, it is more blatant. He has relentlessly tried to obscure our ability to tell the true from the false.

Walter Isaacson, the historian, observed, "What we have lost is the sense that we are one nation, all in this together. Donald Trump is the first president in our history who has sought to divide us rather than unite us. We will heal once he leaves, but the scar will endure."

I know, because of my family, that all Trump supporters are not cult members or racists. But our conversations are harder. They see Trump as a man who has kept his promises, with a playful sense of humor.

But liberals feel that Trump has no humor and that they have lost their own. It's exhausting to be this outraged all the time.

I checked back with Jon Meacham, the presidential historian, who marveled to me in 2016 that it was "as though Trump blew up the science lab, exposing the raw nerve of America's stream of consciousness." He told me about a lunch in the early Clinton years with his old boss, the legendary liberal editor of Washington Monthly, Charlie Peters.

"Charlie Peters defined intellectual honesty as the ability to say something good about the bad guys and bad about the good guys — to call them, in other words, as you saw them," Meacham said. "Trump blew that up, and part of the restoration drama we need is a return to a semblance of this kind of reason-based politics."

"The Republican Party chose to abandon the entire Enlightenment project of evidence-driven reality sometime between the escalator and COVID, choosing a kind of Hobbesian total war of partisan, even cultish, passions rather than an ethos that would have been recognizable, at least in outline, by every president from FDR to Obama. A Biden presidency won't bring the Kingdom of Heaven to pass, but it could, at its best, make America remotely rational again."

Even if Joe Biden wins, it's not going to be easy to restore what has been lost.

"It's going to take a hell of a lot of work, not just by Biden but by all of us, to put our country back together," said Leon Panetta, the former Obama defense secretary. "The only pillar of our democracy I haven't wavered on is our sense of trust in the American people. Tuesday is going to tell me a hell of a lot about whether that sense is well placed."

He muttered, "Dammit, I hope we never make that mistake again."

But we might.

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Photo illustration by Jeff Boyer / Times Union

Oh, chute, beware: Here comes the candy

I'm finding it hard to look on the lighter side of things these days. That's probably because I spend a lot of time doom scrolling through social media searching for



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concrete answers about what will happen in the coming week. Unfortunately, all I come across is endless speculation and bitter divisiveness. I'm talking, of course, about how to handle trick-or-treaters this year.

What? Was there some other pressing issue that has consumed our every waking thought and vivid nightmare for the past few months?

By any objective measure, this

should have been a banner year for Halloween. Falling on a Saturday and with a full moon on a night when we set our clocks back an hour, the conditions were perfect for record numbers of kids to be out.

But with COVID-19 creating a global pandemic, it was unclear whether parents would feel safe about letting their children go door to door, or whether people would feel safe about opening those doors. And if the last 27 months of 2020 have taught us anything, it's that if you're only expecting the worst possible outcome to any given situation, you haven't set the bar low enough. It's one of the main reasons community Halloween celebrations have been cancelled. If there were a 2020 Halloween Parade, no doubt the grand marshals would be the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

In a normal, non-2020 year, I would

have purchased, eaten, and restocked my Halloween candy many times over by now. But this year, thanks to all the uncertainty, I only managed to buy and eat one bag. There had to be a way I could continue supporting the candy industry, make trick-or-treaters happy and not spread disease. Looking online, I found there were lots of creative people who had come up with innovative ways to safely distribute Halloween candy. I decided I could be creative and innovative, too, if I copied one of their ideas exactly.

My favorite idea was a candy chute constructed from PVC pipes and joints that allows you to stand on your porch and send candy down the tube to a waiting trick-or-treater on the sidewalk. There are lots of different ways to make one, apparently, judging by the number of YouTube videos. But they

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