

The Frederick News-Post

The sounds of silence

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July 30th, 2020

In this summer of America's discontent, the country can be likened to a huge cauldron of bubbling acrimony. This unsettling phenomenon pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic, crushing economic decline, nationwide social upheaval and even the Trump presidency, although these four epochs have coalesced to accelerate and dramatically exacerbate the country's anxiety quotient.

Irrespective of how we got here, 330 million sets of jaws and 660 million fists seem constantly clenched and primed for ... what, exactly? Certainly not to make nice-nice, as evidenced by scanning the front page of any newspaper or watching five minutes of television news.

The conventional wisdom is that everyone is itching to have a go at everyone else and, based on cable TV gab fests, talk radio and social media, it does seem average Americans are incessantly up in each other's face, giving the "other guy" unsolicited tutorials on how things should be. A recent nationwide survey by the Cato Institute, however, found that while Americans may indeed be a bit testy these days, we're not nearly as outspoken as conventional wisdom suggests. Cato found that almost two-thirds (62 percent) of Americans think today's political atmosphere is so incendiary that they self-censor their true beliefs or opinions so as to not incite others who might find those views offensive.

The survey also found that self censoring transcends party affiliation. The break down is particularly interesting to note. Democrats (52 percent), independents (59 percent) and Republicans (77 percent) all report they harbor political views they are reluctant to share. The survey identified five degrees of political intensity: Strong Liberals, Liberals, Moderates, Conservatives and Strong Conservatives. Fifty-eight percent of Strong Liberals reported they feel no need to self censor, while a minority (48 percent) of centrist liberals share this view. Just 36 percent of moderates and 23 percent of both conservatives and strong conservatives reported they feel comfortable expressing their views.

As with any research, the Cato data can be sliced, diced and massaged to validate a variety of theories and points of view — even opposing ones. The survey does, however, make one important point that is difficult to refute: the cancel culture oozing through the fabric of American society is having a disturbing impact. Americans of all stripes are looking over their shoulders and holding their tongues when it comes to voicing their views — and understandably so. Cato also found that 32 percent of employed Americans report they worry that their career opportunities and even their employment status can be jeopardized by expressing their personal beliefs.

As the most vociferous component of the electorate, strong liberals are also the most comfortable pushing their agenda. It's not unreasonable to posit that this squeaky wheel is oiled by widespread, favorable news coverage by an essentially compliant and supportive mainstream

media. It's also reasonable to suggest that the obstreperous left wing of the Democratic Party can be given credit for instigating and nurturing several contentious socio-political movements: the so-called cancel culture; nationwide social justice "peaceful protesting" resulting in hundreds of injuries and several deaths as well as billions of dollars of damage to private and public property; a controversial criminal justice reform effort that regularly returns dangerous criminals to the streets as it strives to defund and neutralize police forces; and an ongoing crusade to delegitimize and suppress the expression of moderate and conservative points of view.

These are hot-button issues for huge chunks of America's politically moderate and conservative electorate and the boisterous and well organized far left's support of them is viewed by many as a case of the tail attempting to wag the dog.

Currently, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden leads Donald Trump in all major polls by anywhere from 8 to 10 percentage points. The Cato survey results suggest, however, that there could well be a self censoring, silent component of the electorate that constitutes an electoral wild card. These stealth voters either quietly but strongly support Trump, or quietly but greatly fear Biden because of his vulnerability to being co-opted and exploited by the intransigent left wing of the Democratic Party. This reticent amalgam of diverse political leanings might be quietly hiding in plain sight within the liberal, moderate and independent camps as well as in the never-Trump nooks and crannies within the conservative and strongly conservative Republican camps. The odds for such a scenario playing out are not high, but they are reasonable and have an eerily familiar, 2016 ring.

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